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Inside Jacob's story: Exploring counsellor contribution to  
narrative co-construction using imaginary dialogues with a  
Biblical character

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## DECLARATION

This thesis has been composed by me, is my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed: .....

Date: .....

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.....

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## ABSTRACT

Psychotherapeutic practice often involves the telling and retelling of a client's stories of life in collaborative, meaning-making dialogue with a counsellor. This study demonstrates and explores the dynamics of counsellor contribution to this narrative co-construction, particularly the ways in which the counsellor's inner conversations, reflexivity and interpretive style may emerge in practice and have an influence on the client's understanding, re-evaluation and cohering of his or her own story. The multi-voiced, multi-layered intersubjective space and time in which this kind of narrative collaboration takes place is a difficult area to access for study but one whose potential impact on the client should make it the focus of respectful, ethical monitoring and careful reflective practice. Using phenomenological theories of reader-response and dialogical play, my research sets up an analogy between the way a reader might reflexively interact with life story episodes in a written text and the ways a counsellor might listen to and interpret a client's stories of life over the course of a counselling contract. My project uses a comprehensive and episode-rich story of a life, the iconic 'womb to tomb' story of Jacob in the book of *Genesis*. My own hearer/reader response to the story gives rise to the creation of a set of imaginary dialogues between two interlocutors, Jacob as an elderly client reviewing his life story and myself as counsellor, listening to his stories of life. This methodology is used as a means to access an *in vivo* lived experience, as it might unfold in practice, of my counsellor contribution to Jacob's story and the interplay of voices and standpoints which characterise it. Attention is drawn to the inchoate, but deeply



human, intersubjective aspects of narrative co-construction as a process and the value of this form of reflective practice to surface actual praxis experience for analysis. Insights surfaced by this reader-response methodology point to the significant extent to which the hermeneutical standpoints and dialogical voices of a counsellor are actively involved and implicated in narrative co-construction.

**Key Words:** phenomenological hermeneutics, Biblical hermeneutics, Gadamer, Ricoeur, interdisciplinary research, narrative gerontology

## LAY SUMMARY

Something deeply collaborative happens when a client and counsellor work together on what are perceived by the client as problematic parts of his or her life story. New understandings, re-evaluations, alterations and re-storying of significant life episodes are often the result of clients telling their stories and counsellors hearing and responding to them in new ways. What the counsellor's contributions to this process are and how these spoken or unspoken responses manifest themselves are important to investigate for the impact they may have on a client's experience of therapy, particularly on how she or he chooses to understand and narrate her or his own stories of life. My research provides an active model for exploring the counsellor's side of this collaborative conversation; first, by using the more familiar relationship between a reader and a text as a means to simulate what it is like to be 'inside' another's life story, listening to its themes and episodes as they unfold over time. The story chosen for this kind of readerly attention is the life of Jacob as recorded in the ancient book of *Genesis*. This story is a comprehensive account of a life, from 'womb to tomb,' full of the kind of familial, environmental, social and cultural issues that, though distanced by antiquity, still resonate with the kind of struggles any client may experience and bring to therapy. The second way in which this research seeks to evoke the counsellor's side of this joint collaborative process is to use the creation of imaginary dialogues between myself as a counsellor and Jacob as an elderly client engaging in a review of his life. Using what Jacob's story elicits for me as a reader and my own experience of counselling practice, these imaginary dialogues and my analyses of them give insight into the ways a counsellor may contribute to this profoundly human process of being inside a client's story of life.

*The-story-of-a-life as told  
to a particular person  
is in some deep sense  
a joint product  
of the teller and the told.*

Jerome Bruner (1990:124)

## Introduction

Something deeply collaborative happens when human beings meet as teller and told in the stories of life. My title for this research investigation implies an intention to be the ‘particular person’ who goes inside the story-of-a-life, hears it ‘as told’ and engages with it from a counsellor’s praxis-based point of view. My chosen teller of the tale is a Biblical character named Jacob, whose long and eventful life story is drawn from the book of *Genesis*. Engaging with his story throughout this project is characterised not just by hearing, reading and interpreting the textual world in which Jacob lives but also by actively responding and imaginatively dialoguing with him as he tells his own stories of life. The purpose for creating such a conversational journey is to investigate how a counsellor in active dialogue with a client over time may contribute to the shape his or her story takes. My project sets up an exploratory time and space that asks the questions: What is it like to be the ‘particular person’ who hears, co-hears and helps to cohere the stories of a life? What is it like to be

‘inside the story’ or more correctly, inside the multiple cascade of stories which present themselves each time a counsellor makes some attempt to listen and enter into what a client is saying? If the resulting narrative ‘is in some deep sense a joint product’ as Bruner claims, then it can be asked: What is this place of juncture between client ‘telling’ and counsellor ‘hearing’ like? What possible stories can be told about how and when counsellor contribution manifests its presence and influence, therapeutically or otherwise, into the way the client understands and owns his or her own story? More specifically for the aims of this research: How may the counsellor’s own idiosyncratic processes of interpretation and reflexive response<sup>1</sup> to client narrative unfold and contribute to the ‘jointly produced’ story of a life?

The fertile medium for this collaborative outcome is the counselling dialogue. This very specialised form of conversation is replete with voices both intersubjective and intra-subjective, which wield a discursive, rhetorical, and powerful influence over how any story unfolds, what flows into it and what flows out of it (Shotter, 1999). Client tales grow and evolve into what Bruner calls, a ‘joint product,’ because they are dialogically derived from a myriad of interactions and an often unacknowledged chorus of authorial voices (Bruner, 1990:124; Bakhtin, 1984; Hermans, 1999; Hermans and Dimaggio, 2004). These intimate juxtapositions of human beings in dialogue ‘can always “call out” utterly unique, unpredictable, never-before-performed responses from both client and counsellor’ (Shotter and Billig, 1998: 23).

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<sup>1</sup> I am making a distinction between interpretive and reflexive responses here: the former being the processes by which I make meaning and configure the relationships between the parts and whole of any narrative text, including the client’s stories of life, and the latter as a considered awareness and ongoing reflexive use of my own affective, personal positioning and experience-based responses to the text.

Thus Rober (2005: 478) argues that expertise for the therapist ‘lies in the construction of a dialogic frame in which new meanings can emerge.’

With these dialogical dynamics in play and given their impact on how the client understands and tells his story, my research focuses on a virtual space of narrative co-construction that springs into plurivocal and generative life when client and counsellor, as the ‘teller’ and the ‘told,’ meet in the stories of life.<sup>2</sup> Here in this collaborative space understanding is construed not as

a passive process in which meanings are conveyed by the client and received by the therapist. Rather, understanding becomes an active, creative process in which the meanings of the client make contact with the meanings of the therapist. In this process, new meanings emerge... (Rober, 2005:481).

This kind of storied intersubjectivity between a reflexive teller and a reflexive listener has a long history; but it is only in the last century that psychotherapy has arisen as a specialist site for this kind of co-constructionist endeavour. McAdams and Janis (2004:167) point to the ways in which counsellors fill roles in modern society as sources of ‘support and guidance’ for this very human project of ‘life narration.’ Counsellors are often the ‘particular person/s’ to whom a problematic or difficult set of stories are brought. Ordinary, every day practice for most counsellors will include significant amounts of time when they find themselves seeking to enter in, to explore and to understand the storied elements their clients bring (or in some

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<sup>2</sup> A one-to-one client/counsellor relationship does not represent all forms of therapeutic conversation. Couples therapy, family systems therapy and some versions of narrative therapy include others, in the form of multiple clients, outside witnesses, co-counsellors or reflecting teams. However, this research focuses on a one-to-one format to limit the complexity of voices in an already crowded field and because dyadic client/counsellor dialogue still represents a wide swathe of every day therapeutic practice.

cases, find it difficult or impossible to bring). Different models of talking therapy construe these narrative processes differently, but all seek in some way to use the insights and relational connections that emerge, ‘inside the story,’ for the benefit of clients. Surveying this field, McLeod (2004) concludes emphatically that, ‘It is impossible to imagine a form of psychotherapy that [does not] involve the telling and retelling of stories.’ Schiff (2012:44) describes the function of this kind of narrative storytelling as ‘an expressive act in which life experiences and understandings of life are articulated and made meaningful through their declaration in our present circumstances and in collaborating with co-actors.’<sup>3</sup> What the counsellor brings to this intersubjective space and how her or his idiosyncratic contributions influence the joint story that is then told, heard, reheard and retold are issues which should be subjected to careful, reflective practice (McLeod and Lynch, 2000; Christopher, 1996; Rober, 2005). Avdi and Georgaca (2007:172) argue that the individual counsellor should become ‘more attentive to the therapeutic and social discourses’ he or she draws upon’ and that ‘cultivating these forms of reflexivity can form an important part of clinical practice.’

As a counsellor, I am the ‘told,’ the privileged hearer of my clients’ tales. To enter the story of a life in this role carries with it considerable ethical responsibility, not only to do no harm but also to cultivate a deeper awareness of how I may contribute to this ‘joint product.’ There is an ongoing necessity to examine my way of being in the client’s life story landscape and to identify the marks, for good or ill, my presence

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Most health researchers see narrative as verbalised, storied text concerning someone’s experiences, either from fiction or from real life,’ and this is the sense in which I will use it here when referring to the presence of narrative texts in the psychotherapy setting (Alsaker, Bongaardt and Josephsson, 2009:1156).

there may leave upon it. Working in this virtual space of co-construction requires awareness of my own intersubjective and intra-subjective voices and discursive influences, as well as an enhanced capacity for narrative engagement, understanding and interpretation. There is also an ethical imperative to monitor my habits and to improve my skills as a co-constructor who is both mindful and deeply respectful of the client's authorial autonomy and yet also carefully conscious of my own contributions to how the story is understood. As Anderson asserts,

A therapist cannot be a blank screen, void of ideas, opinions, and prejudices . . . we each take who we are, and all that entails, personal and professional experiences, values, biases, and convictions with us in the therapy room (1997, cited in Rober, 2005: 478).

Informed by the theorists cited above as well as my own experiences as a counselling practitioner, I began my research with the premise that there is no such thing as a 'blank screen.' There is an entailed, multi-voiced entourage of influences that precede, crowd around and pervade the counsellor's every thought, word, feeling, and gesture as she sits before her client. The presence of such a crowded set of variables begged the question, how might such an inchoate, reflexively layered, and deeply dialogical process be investigated? If we each 'take who we are' into the therapy room as Anderson argues, then it seemed to me it would also follow that to investigate counsellor contribution to co-construction, it would be necessary to take 'who I am' into my research as well.<sup>4</sup> My assumption at the outset was that a personal, rigorous, readerly engagement with this ancient life story and the voice of its iconic, main character, Jacob, would set up an active 'dialogic frame' within

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<sup>4</sup> Researchers from multiple disciplines in the social sciences, including psychotherapy, acknowledge reflexivity and the researcher's use of self as meaningful tools in qualitative, phenomenological approaches (Reinharz, 1997; Etherington, 2007).

which I would have freedom to demonstrate, explore, reflect upon and authentically embody the counsellor's side of this joint venture. In doing so it offered the potential to experiment with a format for 'scientific reflection ...on psychotherapy [in which] the search is not so much for new truths or new discoveries as it is for useful ways to understand and talk about' those things I have already seen and heard in my own experience of practice (Rober, 2004:484).

Using my own counsellor reflexivity and Jacob's voice in this way also clearly reflect McLeod's (2001b:8) views on the values that should undergird qualitative counselling research: 'collaborative and dialogical forms of meaning making, the importance of feeling and emotion, the role of language in constructing realities, the capacity for reflexive self-monitoring, [and] the validity of sacred experience.' All of these values are deeply relevant to the kind of co-constructive space between client and counsellor I wanted to explore. These values also reflect in a wider, interdisciplinary way what happens between human beings whenever they attempt to make meaning together inside a story of any kind. Reflexive interpretation also characterises the reader/text relationship. As the literary theorist, Culler (1997:62) concludes, 'To interpret a work is to tell a story of reading.' My research is a story of a particular, time-limited, praxis-driven reading of Jacob's life story in *Genesis*, but it also adds the further dimension of transforming this narrative, interpretive engagement into a counselling dialogue. This gives rise to a series of fictive, imaginary conversations between Jacob and myself that are deeply rooted in my own experience of practice and the ways in which I have 'read' and responded to stories of life as told by real clients. Stories heard in this way, Bruner says, in some 'deep



sense' become a joint product of teller and told. It is the mystery of what this deep sense might be and the potential to plumb its depths that motivate this inquiry.

## Chapter 1

### Background and Ethos for the Research Approach

Origins: How did I find my way to this research?

Unlike the creation event famously chronicled in *Genesis*, no research idea emerges *ex nihilo* from a shapeless, formless void. It arises in the mind of the researcher out of an already existing matrix of ideas and experiences. The most salient and immediate impetus for my choice to use dialogues with Jacob and his story grew out of my previous Masters research which used a narrative dialogical approach to investigate the impact of trauma on counsellor and client (Talbert, 2010).

To establish a more practice-near approach in that research I experimented with the use of imaginary dialogues with two trauma sufferers. My research ‘participants’ were two literary characters, one drawn from an ancient Biblical text, the *Book of Job*, and the other from a modern novel, *The Shack*. I used the intersubjectivity of a three-way conversation between us (i.e. these two characters and myself as counsellor researcher) not only to explore their trauma experience with them but also my own clinical experiences with trauma clients. The result was a containing narrative that surfaced useful knowledge about working with trauma, but also gave me an experiential appreciation for the value of creative, counsellor-generated dialogues as sources of knowledge in counselling research, generally.

By ranging across the interdisciplinary territories of counselling practice, literature, and Biblical text, my Masters research also revealed my own tendency to bring ‘who

I am' to the research task. All three of these disciplines involve deep engagement with human stories and relate to my lifelong fascination with the kinds of meetings that shared stories may generate between human beings. This triad also replicates three significant spheres of professional vocation and personal interest in my own life. I did my undergraduate degree in English literature, and at various points in my career have taught both literary texts and creative writing. In looking back, I can see how my teaching style has always been characterised by an admonition to students to 'Engage with the text,' and then to bring their own creative response to it. In my over four decades as a Christian pastoral carer and counsellor, I am also a lover of Biblical text and deeply conversant with its stories and characters. These stories are in the landscape and value system of my life and are important, frequently read and re-read landmarks in my own spiritual understandings and those of many of my clients. Even given this background, I was still surprised by the quality of relational responsiveness that emerged from my conversations with literary and Biblical characters in my study of trauma, both for myself and more surprisingly (for me), other readers of the research. In one case I had the opportunity to share a portion of these trauma dialogues with a group of student researchers. As my arts-based approach and methodology were slightly unorthodox, I expected a polite hearing but perhaps some misgivings about the validity of such a subjective, simulated data source. Although this may have been the case for some, it was not voiced in the feedback afterward. Two responses stood out for me. One listener, who was also a counselling practitioner, responded enthusiastically by saying, 'I felt like I was inside a story,' and another reflected, 'Somehow I felt this man come alive, there was flesh and blood in this paper.'

This suggestion of a ‘flesh and blood’ embodiment, that the literary characters I had positioned in the dialogue as trauma sufferers, were somehow coming to life as clients and attaining a semblance of practice-like reality was an intriguing outcome for me. It encouraged me that the use of counsellor-created, fictive dialogues could yield research knowledge that bore an authentic resemblance to how counsellors themselves might experience their practice. The phrase ‘inside a story’ embedded itself in my imagination as a seed and eventually germinated into the idea of creating dialogues with another Biblical character, Jacob, as a means to explore counsellor contribution to narrative co-construction.

## Essential Emphases

My account of the origins of my research approach also points to some of the emphases that inform and colour its particular ethos. These include the importance of counsellor reflexivity, dialogically-derived forms of knowledge, narrative storytelling, interdisciplinary connections, reader-response interface with literary and Biblical texts, and the creation of imaginary conversations as a means to evoke the ‘flesh and blood’ reality of human beings relating in the counselling space. All these emphases fuelled my determination to follow McLeod’s (2001) maxim that knowledge in counselling research should replicate or accord as much as possible with what it is like for real counsellors in everyday practice to engage with client concerns. Counselling, as a social science discipline, has at times suffered from a gap between the content and forms of knowledge its researchers generate and the ways in which this information is recognised and used by its primary target audience of counselling practitioners (McLeod, 1994; 2001; Moodley, 2001). The use of more

practice-near, qualitative and mixed methods approaches has increased over the last two decades and made some headway toward bridging this gap. I was particularly concerned to pursue a form of research that did not atomise bits of practice, but represented its messy, meandering, dialogical, co-constructive processes and its arbitrary, contingent human actors in a holistic, inside-the-experience way. Goss and Mearns (1997:190) point to the ‘extremely varied and variable processes’ of therapeutic counselling and the importance of seeing it as a whole process, that is far more than the sum of its parts. They also suggest a kind of research approach that models a ‘setting out to explore the nature of what is going on, rather than attempting to encapsulate it in finite terms.’

Thus an important first principle for me was to find an epistemological ground and a methodological means that would simulate the embodying of this experience of co-construction as it might unfold in actual practice. Rather than talking *about* what happens in such a space, I wanted to enter *into* the space, as a situated, embodied practitioner, in order to demonstrate and explore what happens there (Sela-Smith, 2002). I made a choice to foreground this virtual space in my research by setting up an analogy between the dynamics of counsellor/client intersubjectivity and the corresponding dynamics of reader/text encounter. Both as a counsellor listening to client story and as a reader engaging with a narrative text, I bring my own interiority and multiple dialogical selves to the experience (Slatoff, 1970; Hermans, 1999, 2004; Holland, 1975). Both the client’s stories of life and a literary work’s depiction of human beings in the world of a text bring a similar, dialogical complexity to the encounter. The attentive counsellor and the speaking client, the avid reader and the

evocative text, though worlds apart in terms of purpose and context, do share this entry into a space-time world full of voices, standpoints and stories. Often, though not always, they can emerge from such a space having engaged in some ‘deep sense’ with the creation of a new ‘joint product’ that has the potential to be transformative. At the outset of my research project, the counsellor-is-to-client as reader-is-to-text analogy seemed to offer access to an empirically elusive space by an innovative and alternative route. It was a route which seemed to hold the potential to wend its way through fields of authentic, praxis-based experience and produce a form of knowledge in which counsellors might also recognise themselves, join in the interpretive process and use the research to reflect on their own practice. The application of this analogy in the course of pursuing my research aims eventually resulted in the creation of a set of imaginary<sup>5</sup> dialogues between two interlocutors: Jacob as a first-person voiced character telling his stories of life and my own voice as counsellor-researcher.

## Ethical Concerns

As highlighted above a preeminent factor in my choice to use fictive conversations with a literary character was the way in which they seemed to evoke some of the ‘flesh and blood’ human DNA of the counselling encounter. However, other

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<sup>5</sup> Hermans, Rijks and Kempen (1993), key writers on the presence of dialogical voices both in the self and in the intersubjectivity of the counselling setting, have used the adjective ‘imaginal’ to describe the nature of these kind of dialogues. I have made the choice to describe my research dialogues as ‘imaginary’ because this etymological inflection carries a connotation of process as well as content. Although my dialogues with Jacob are closely aligned to the plot content and direct speech of the *Genesis* text and also include my own experiences of practice with real clients, they are entirely fictive, creative constructions of my own making.

counselling researchers, also seeking to emulate practice more authentically, have chosen to use real clients and transcripts of actual counselling sessions rather than create composite versions or invent imaginary dialogues (Levitt and Rennie, 2004; Etherington, 2001, White, 2004). Although early on I considered this as an option, my choice *not* to use my own clients' stories of life was influenced primarily by the serious ethical issues it raised for me.<sup>6</sup> While modern psychotherapy research from its earliest examples in the case studies of Freud has made use of real clients' stories, there is now, quite rightly, considerably more concern for client confidentiality and the ethical implications of using this kind of material (Bond, 2004). Permission from clients may be sought by the researcher and granted but even the negotiation of the request itself raises significant and ethically fraught concerns (Clark and Sharf, 2007; Etherington, 2001). Both client and researcher may be adversely affected by boundaries that become diffuse and more difficult to draw with clarity outside the carefully contained environs of the original counselling contract. How the research may be shared and publicly disseminated is also often impacted by these ongoing issues of confidentiality (Polden, 1998).

For me, these ethical concerns raised issues at odds with the kind of research I wanted to do and the ways in which I wanted to explore my own responses to client narrative material. Creating fictive dialogues with Jacob's text allowed me to draw deeply from my own clinical experience without jeopardising the sacrosanct confidentiality of my own clients' stories. It offered a means to interact with the deeply personal aspects of Jacob's story as I might do in practice without the

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<sup>6</sup> These ethical concerns will be addressed again as part of praxis in the Pre-research Iteration.

necessity to disguise or alter these details in order to share them publicly. I could disclose, react to and use sensitive client information in ways that might not be appropriate or possible in a conventional research context.<sup>7</sup> Going inside Jacob's story in this imaginary way opened up a time and space, not generally available in ordinary practice or even in supervisory contexts, to follow the trail of my own attending and responding. I could give free rein to my own inner conversations with case material without risk of harm to former clients. Issues arising from my own inner conversations that would be irrelevant and even unhelpful to a client could be pursued and explored in detail without affecting the flow of the counselling dialogue or having an adverse impact on the client's experience of our work together.

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<sup>7</sup> While I have chosen to employ fictive means to access client stories, it should be noted that many counsellor researchers choose to involve their own clients in highly collaborative research projects. In these kind of research designs, difficult, ethical issues are given careful and sensitive consideration and resolved in ways that allow useful knowledge sharing (Etherington, 2001; Speedy, 2008)



## Chapter 2

### Locating the Research in an Interdisciplinary Landscape

Having introduced the aims, format and background for my research idea, this section will locate it more specifically in the broader range of diverse literatures I surveyed in order to formulate it. These key conceptual contexts include: related research attempts to access the co-constructed space, interdisciplinary connections, examples of other fictive approaches and finally, the contribution of narrative gerontological studies to an understanding of the therapeutic rationale for the life review Jacob and I will be co-constructing in this research.

### Counselling Research Context: Where does it fit?

Narrative inquiry and narrative therapy with their emphases on the ways storytelling functions and unfolds in client/counsellor relationship, represent the broader research and practice arena in which my dialogical engagement with Jacob and his story can be placed (White and Epston, 1990; McAdams, 1993; Riessman, 1993; Anderson, 2004; Payne, 2006; McLeod, 2000; Angus and McLeod, 2004; Speedy, 2000, 2008; Bond, 2002). While I am drawing on a broad range of narrative ideas, theories and practices from this model of psychotherapeutic practice, it should be acknowledged from the outset, that my own counselling model uses these insights in integrative and eclectic ways rather than positioning me as a purist narrative therapy practitioner, if

indeed such a category exists.<sup>8</sup> Speedy (2000: 361) describes her use of narrative ideas as a ‘way of working that tries not to privilege specific models, theories or taken-for-granted assumptions about human nature.’ She describes this narrative mindset as a stance that ‘remains curious and questioning about how people construct their lives and tell their life stories.’ McLeod (2000:331-332) suggests there are ‘many strands of narrative-informed counselling and psychotherapy’ that offer avenues for practitioners from various theoretical positions to reflect upon and extend their own approach. In his view ‘a narrative-informed approach...refers to a willingness to learn from and apply narrative theory and research, appreciation of storytelling modes and traditions, and sensitivity to language, rhetoric and discourse.’ McLeod’s categories here speak more of attitudes and interests than sectarian adherence to a set of practice protocols or techniques. Both Speedy’s and McLeod’s descriptions of a narrative-informed approach accord very well with my own background and inclinations as well as the framework of my clinical practice model. On a theoretical level I could describe my own counselling model as a narrative-informed, integrative dialogue between psychodynamic ideas, humanistic ways of being, and cognitive insights and tools (Fear and Woolfe, 2000; Horton, 2000). It is a model developed over time in a still evolving process informed by many hours of relational-responsive encounters with clients and a reflexive sifting of the same range of personal, discursive, plurivocal influences I am seeking to engage with in this research. What this eclectic mix looks like in practice will be more evident in the

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<sup>8</sup> There are significant sectarian debates in counselling between those who advocate purist adherence to theoretical models and positions and those who adopt more integrative or eclectic models of practice. The issues are complex and outside the domains of this research but for an excellent overview, see Palmer and Woolfe (2000).

imaginary dialogues with Jacob that form the main corpus of this thesis. McLeod (2004: 356) points to the need for research to address 'how the complexity of co-constructed narrative action in therapy can be investigated in a respectful way.' With this research gap and goal in view he has championed 'the development of a set of strategies for carrying out qualitative, hermeneutic, narrative analyses of single cases.' One key focus of his work has been on the ways counsellor and client assumptions of what 'makes life worth living' have an impact on the co-creation of narrative in therapy (McLeod and Lynch, 2000). Speedy (2000:365) also highlights the significance of research into counsellor contribution to narrative co-construction by pointing to the risks and inconsistencies involved 'when therapeutic conversations are undertaken with scant acknowledgement of the therapist's part in the co-construction of such a dialogue.'

### Accessing the Co-Constructed Space

That the counsellor's contribution to this virtual, co-constructed space should be accessed and researched in respectful and considered ways is apparent from the preceding. I now turn to some of the various ways this kind of investigative exploration has already been attempted. Levitt and Rennie (2004: 299-300) observe that 'Most of the research on narrative in psychotherapy has been directed to the spoken discourse between the client and the therapist, with a focus on the client's contribution to it.' They point to a research gap in studying 'clients' and therapists' self-reflections on their experiences of narrative communication.' These authors refer to the value of exploring 'the inner intentions, purposes, and motives guiding the production of narrative from moment to moment' in the therapy setting. Their

ideal is for research which meaningfully links the spoken discourse with the unspoken discourse.

This unspoken dialogue, as Levitt and Rennie acknowledge, is a difficult discourse to access. They have devised a method which uses post-session reporting by both client and counsellor. There are obvious limitations to this in that it is not immediate, it requires a process of delayed recall, and can only include those responses of which participants have memory and awareness. Thus, Levitt and Rennie argue for the importance of ongoing research aimed at authentic and useful ways to access client and counsellor reflexivity and inner dialogue.

Rober (2005) in the context of family therapy describes a similar method of accessing the therapist's 'inner conversations'<sup>9</sup> using videotaping. Key or significant interactions on the tape are identified by the therapist and attempts made to reconstruct the content of her or his own inner conversations at the time. As Rober admits, these recollections can only ever rise to the level of approximations and are subject to many other influences 'too chaotic and complex' to delineate (2005:488). There are also barriers in terms of the distance between a therapist's or client's consciously reported accounts of what was happening in the moment and the layers of unconscious factors which may also be influencing the dialogue, not least the very natural, human propensity to represent our own supposed motives in the best possible light (Levitt and Rennie, 2004). However, these reported responses are not so utterly

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<sup>9</sup> By 'inner conversations' Rober (2005) refers to those thoughts, feelings, and other perceptions which the therapist entertains at particular moments in the session but does not share, at least at that point, with the client. He compares this form of inner dialogue to Bakhtin's (1984) concept of a polyphony of voices.

inscrutable, suspiciously disingenuous or deluded that they cannot be usefully revelatory when subjected to some form of reflective process. These kind of reflections, Rober claims, can enrich the study of clinical cases in significant ways. Both Levitt and Rennie's and Rober's approaches take seriously the way client stories may take shape in the counsellor's mind and they encourage ongoing research efforts to gain access to and explore this phenomenon. Their studies represent a more technical and textual analysis of actual therapy sessions with real clients. However, as discussed above, this kind of research data, its methods of collection and the extent to which its findings may subsequently be shared, are also made significantly more complex by the ethical issues of confidentiality which attend any use of transcripts from real therapy sessions (Bond, 2004; Clark and Sharf, 2007; Polden, 1998).

### **Fictive, Narrative Means to Co-constructive Research Ends**

However, as my research seeks to show, gaining access to the lived experience of a counsellor's inner conversations and interpretive frameworks may be demonstrated and explored by other, less ethically fraught, more dynamically creative, fictive, narrative means. Bond (2002) makes clear that narrative creation is not a conventional or normative way of conducting research into difficult to access areas or processes of psychotherapeutic practice; but that it does offer a means of connecting with lived experience in more authentic, holistic and practice-near ways. In particular, research which uses the writing of creative, counsellor-generated narrative critically addresses, both in content and process, the compelling importance of therapist subjective awareness (as far as that is possible) in psychotherapeutic

dialogue. These fictive narratives are able to re-create aspects of the counselling setting, by animating them in time, space and story worlds. In doing so they avoid atomising phenomena in psychotherapy practice into discrete ‘objects’ for study, isolated from the very contexts which may generate and profoundly contribute to how they are understood. Hermans, Kempen and van Loon (1992:26), drawing on Bruner (1986), stress the value of narrative modes of exploration into human domains because of their capacity to ‘put the general human condition into the particulars of experience and ... locate experience in time and space.’ Bond (2002:134) foregrounds the possibilities and value for therapist/researchers of taking a more subjective, narratively creative approach by suggesting ‘Lived experience is, by its very nature, both immediate and subjective and therefore most directly accessed for study by turning our gaze on our selves.’ The creative, imaginary dialogues I have produced in the course of engaging with Jacob’s life story are an attempt at just such an alternative *in vivo* access into the lived, time and space experience of how a counsellor may contribute to co-construction. These conversations with Jacob, along with their accompanying introductions and reflective commentaries, ‘turn my gaze’ on my own experience of contributing to therapeutic dialogue and in so doing, attempt to make creative, narrative, descriptive sense of what this phenomenon is like. The milieu in which all of this takes place is the fertile environs of the single case study, a format for understanding which has characterised psychotherapy research from its earliest days to the present (e.g. Freud, 1909; Axline, 1964/1990; Yalom, 1989).

## Cross-disciplinary Context: Connections and Examples

Storytelling and creative, narrative approaches to research have proliferated in the wake of what McLeod (2004: ix) calls the ‘narrative turn’ in psychotherapy. To assess how my use of them compares and contrasts with other similar research, a representative overview of examples will be given below. This overview will not be exhaustive due to the sheer range and volume of texts involved but will give a flavour for how other literary, archival texts and Bible stories, including Jacob’s, have been used in narrative ways in psychotherapy research. In doing so, I highlight the interdisciplinary nature of my research linking literature and literary theory, psychology, psychotherapy and Biblical text while also demonstrating how my use of creative, narrative methods both fits into and differs from what others have done.

The use of literary texts across a range of disciplines in the social sciences is well attested. Flyvbjerg (2001:18), a researcher strongly committed to ‘making social science matter,’ argues the unique efficacy of literary texts when he observes, ‘Where science does not reach, art, literature and narrative often help us comprehend the reality in which we live.’ Harding (1962:147), from the standpoint of literary theory argues that the ‘mode of response made by the reader of a novel’ can be compared to the ‘mode of response made by an onlooker at actual events’ and thus provides an ‘imaginative or empathic insight’ into other people and aspects of life in the real world. Booth (1984) and Poulet (1986) suggest the powerful associations with ‘real’ life that reading a literary text can engender. Booth (1984:xv) observes, somewhat wryly, that ‘as soon as you *name* a character and allow even one *event*, readers will, in truculent naiveté, treat them like people in human situations.’ Iser (1986), Mink

(1970) and others have referred to the way in which reading, a form of being inside another's story, blurs the boundaries of consciousness, our own with another's.

When we read any narrative which seeks to recreate a time and space world, we have the unusual experience of being inside a virtual sphere, a way of being inside another's viewfinder, another's horizon, not only that of the author, but the narrator, characters, plots, setting and action he creates. We have a dialogue with another consciousness, besides our own. In some strange way, as Iser (1986) points out, a self/subject is called out who thinks the thoughts of the story as she or he reads.

Kidd and Costano (2013:1) link this empathic characteristic of literary fiction directly to theory of mind and the empathic ability to 'identify and understand' accurately, the subjective states of others, a valuable asset in counselling.

## Links Between Literature and Psychology

Literature and psychological studies although seemingly planted and growing within the neat hedgerows of their own discrete disciplinary fields, share significant pollination across their borders. Both 'focus, as one of their main aims, on a better perception of individuals' personal and social behaviour' (Barani, Wan Yahya, and Talif, 2014: 756). Building on Sarbin's (1986) coinage of narrative as a 'root metaphor' for psychology, Polkinghorne (1988:71) supports the utility of an interdisciplinary literary approach as a valid strand of research in the human sciences when he writes,

Although literary theorists approach narrative as a literary expression, their insights into narrative form and meaning can be applied by the human sciences in their investigations of human experience and understanding.



Moral philosophers and bio-ethicists such as Nelson (1997), Nussbaum (1990) and Charon (1997) have used the novels of Henry James and other classic literary texts to argue for the value of readerly engagement with literary narrative as a means to ‘moral knowledge’ and a keener perception into the particularities of interpersonal processes. Writing from a Biblical narrative perspective, Wenham (2000b:13-14) expands on Nussbaum’s views of fiction’s capacity to provide ‘moral knowledge.’ He claims an Aristotelean *phronesis* element for it as well. In his view, ‘Fiction allows the reader to develop perception into the salient features of situations and develop an ethic that is not based exclusively on general rules, but one that is responsive to concrete situations.’

The role of literature and classic texts of fiction as a companion and ally in researching human domains and their capacity to illuminate ‘interpersonal processes’ is well attested in psychotherapy, particularly in psychodynamic traditions (Holland, 1990). Freud’s use of the Oedipal myth and Jung’s fascination with archetypal stories and the symbols embedded in them are early examples. In fact according to Hall (1963:156),

the greatest writers [i.e. those who have created widely read and critically acclaimed fictive narrative worlds] have also been among many other things intuitive psychologists....The insights of Dostoevsky...anticipated so many of Freud’s that one could almost construct Freudian theories from this one novelist alone.

The polyphonic novels of Dostoevsky are also the spawning grounds for Bakhtin’s (1984) understandings of how selves interact in dialogical relationship, a

philosophical understanding now central to many versions of narrative therapy and its emphasis on the social construction of the self (McLeod, 2004). Erikson (1958, 1969), a psychoanalyst who expanded on Freudian ideas to encompass the social as well as the psychic in human identity, initiated a whole genre of psycho-biography using the life stories of famous historical characters such as Gandhi and Luther. Through creative narrative engagement with published biographical material and other historical documentation, he explored his own theories of developmental transitions across the life course (Pietikainen and Ihanus, 2003; Gross, 1987, Stevens, 1983).<sup>10</sup> Drawing from this Eriksonian tradition of psycho-biography, Peterson and Stewart (1990) have more recently used the novels and adult diaries of the British feminist, Vera Brittain, to explore how developmental themes, particularly of generativity in mid-life, are manifest in her writings. Bridges, Speedy and Kemp (2012) writing from a feminist, narrative inquiry perspective have used memoirs and historical documents from a notorious nineteenth century murder case to explore gendered spaces, trauma and unheard women's voices. Their work holds a salutary place in this review of relevant research for their unconventional but effective use of explicit, fictive recreations of voices to support their theses. Other researchers have used classic novels as a means to explore specific theoretical or contextual issues in counselling such as Bedford and Meekums' (2010) use of characters from Dickens to explore the influence of early attachment in adult life and Goyal and Charon's (2011) use of Virginia Woolf's, *The Waves*, to explore the enigmatic experience of time from the vantage point of old age. From a more didactic, training perspective Jacobs

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<sup>10</sup> See Iteration Two, Introduction for a further elaboration with accompanying caveats for Erikson's use of this genre.

(1988) has used iconic Dickens' characters, creating his own modernised versions of them, to illustrate and embody aspects of psychodynamic practice. Specific presenting issues or neurotic pathologies have been helpfully explored by the use of fictional characters, for example Watts' (2005) elegant use of troubled protagonists from Flannery O'Connor's novels to explore ethical approaches to clients who self-harm.

It is rarer to find examples in the psychotherapy literature which feature the creation of imaginary client/counsellor dialogues with characters from literary texts, biographies or archival documents. Jacobs (1988) in the psychodynamic training text mentioned above, does engage in therapeutic conversation with two of Dickens' characters whom he imaginatively brings to life. Using plot content and personality traits drawn from their fictive worlds, Jacobs constructs dialogues which illustrate his own clinical understanding of psychodynamic ways of working with clients. Irving Yalom (1989, 1992) stands out as the preeminent example of this kind of counsellor generated narrative creation of dialogue. Working from a more existential therapy perspective, Yalom, like Jacobs (1988), often employs his narrative art for pedagogical purposes. He uses imaginary conversations with carefully disguised composites of his own clients in *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy* and weaves these together, as the first person narrator, with his own inner conversations, dilemmas and formulations. Orbach (1999) also uses disguised composites in her work, particularly in *The Impossibility of Sex*, but her narratives have less percentage of space given to imaginary spoken dialogue between herself

and her clients, focusing instead on extended prose accounts of her own inner deliberations.

Yalom's full-length novel, *When Nietzsche Wept*, uses a third person omniscient narrator to extend his use of imaginary dialogues to the persona, life, work and writings of the formidable nineteenth century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche.

Yalom brings this complex, brilliant and troubled man to life as the fictive client and Joseph Breuer, also an actual historical figure, the friend and early mentor of Freud, as the fictive counsellor. Artfully drawing on the early history of psychotherapy in Vienna, known biographical facts about his main characters, and ideas and direct quotes from Nietzsche's writings, Yalom sets up multiple imaginary client/counsellor exchanges between Nietzsche and Breuer. In my view, what he achieves through the use of such creative narratives is a kind of 'knowing' about the psychotherapeutic dialogue which could never be put into propositional academic prose. Among other things, his unique epistemology in both these dialogical texts addresses more nuanced power imbalances between client and counsellor of a kind which may often be overlooked or remain inaccessible to more empirical forms of research. By fleshing out the flawed, fallible humanity of the psychotherapist and placing a high value on the autonomy of the client, Yalom's creative dialogues are able to dispel the myth of the counsellor as the supposed mental health expert who has all the right techniques, theories and protocols at the ready. The result is a demystifying and democratising of the psychotherapeutic encounter that highlights this unique alliance as a meeting of 'all too human'<sup>11</sup> selves. With tongue-in-cheek precision, Yalom

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<sup>11</sup> 'All too human' is a phrase in the title of Nietzsche's book, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, published in 1878.

(1992:7) summarises the nature of this relationship as ‘a discussion of personal issues between two people, one of them more anxious than the other.’<sup>12</sup> Counsellor-generated, ethically reflective, dialogically creative narratives such as Yalom’s, thus have the capacity to open up a space of helpful verisimilitude for exploring what it is like for the counsellor to be inside a client’s stories of life. In the midst of all the sometimes confusing and conflicting theorising and sectarian debates about how to help another person in mental pain, such creative narratives and their accompanying life-like dialogues are usefully elaborative in giving instances and context for what are very complex issues. Without carrying any weight as predictive, explanatory proofs, they are able to reveal aspects of the storytelling/story-hearing relationship in psychotherapy, not just as the exercise of professional skill it should be, but also as the deeply human encounter it actually is. In this respect, Yalom’s work pointed the way for me to consider how the creation of imaginary dialogues within a narrative frame might be expanded beyond their utility for training purposes to their suitability as a vehicle for research into the very human process of narrative co-construction in counselling practice.

## Links Between Biblical Text, Literature and Psychotherapy

The third disciplinary field in this research, Biblical text (specifically *Genesis*), and the whole panoply of scholarly hermeneutic work which surrounds it, also add another set of interdisciplinary connections and cross pollinations to this investigation of co-construction. The Bible, and in this part of the discussion I

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<sup>12</sup> This definition, quoted here in Yalom’s (1992) own words is from ‘On Writing a Teaching Novel,’ one of the appendices to *When Nietzsche Wept*. However, Yalom attributes the definition to the eminent American psychiatrist, Henry Stack Sullivan.

include both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament, has unique, resonant and foundational connections both with literature and psychotherapy. Alter (1981:157) argues that ‘the biblical authors were among the pioneers of prose fiction in the Western tradition...because of the kind of knowledge [their narrative art] could make possible.’ Prickett (1996) goes even further to suggest that the origins of Western expectations of what narrative fiction does and how it is read can be traced back to the Bible’s seminal influence. There is little doubt about the Bible’s place *in* literature, particularly in the Western world. Its words, themes, symbols, plots, and characters find their way into a very wide and very deep set of literary works, art of all kinds, and even into the every day language we speak (Frye, 1982; Alter and Kermode, 1987; Prickett, 1996; Jack, 2012; Marx, 2000). Besides its obvious relationship with both literature and literary criticism, the Bible generates an equally cross-disciplinary synergy with psychotherapy. Rollins (1999:4) traces even the coining of the term ‘psychology’ itself from its origins in the early work of Biblical scholars studying and reflecting on the ‘nature, habits, and powers of the human psyche, anima or soul.’ The ‘cure of the soul’ and an unrelenting focus on both the flawed vulnerability and the *imago Dei* potential of human beings characterise the Biblical narratives from *Genesis* to *Revelation*. Within its avowedly sacred framework, the Bible’s use and efficacy as a resource for human change, cognitive restructuring, recovery from trauma, support in grief and insight into self-understanding, all goals familiar to psychotherapy, have been attested to by many voices across cultures for generations (Rollins, 1999). The Bible itself bears witness through multiple human authors of its capacity for deep, illuminating and life-

changing contribution to human insight and flourishing (*Deuteronomy* 8:3; *Psalms* 119; *Isaiah* 55:11; *Matthew* 4:4; *John* 17:17; *Hebrews* 4:12).

The Bible shares with both literature and psychotherapy a concern for and focus on the vicissitudes, vagaries, beauties and truths of human behaviour, who we are and who we are in relation with one another.<sup>13</sup> Jacob's story, as well as many others in the Bible reflect a world that is 'ordinary, everyday and familiar, filled with the surprises and joys, the sufferings and the troubles, the complexities and ambiguities known to every community' (Fretheim, 1994:323). While, as Sternberg (1985) makes clear, the Bible's literary style in telling its stories is often aesthetically pleasing and artfully constructed, its purpose in doing so is always expressly theological. This purpose, to know who God is and what it means to live in relationship with Him, is everywhere self-evident and pervasive in its textual world. Lewis cited this sacred purpose as so manifest in the Biblical text that it actively challenges readings from a 'merely aesthetic approach...[and] demands incessantly to be taken on its own terms' (Lewis 1950, cited in Jack, 2012: 26). Yet this unwavering theological aim is woven into the fabric of a narrative style that succeeds in revealing the human condition in universally recognisable ways. Alter (1981:176) describes this revelatory skill as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> These significant interdisciplinary connections between psychotherapy, literature and forms of spirituality are represented and valued in the integrative work of various research bodies. The Trialogue Conference, first held in the United Kingdom in 1997, brings together academics, practitioners and others interested in the intersections of these three disciplines to explore the fruitful similarities and synergies between them. Another example of interest and focused academic research across disciplines is represented in the multiple interdisciplinary programme units of the Society for Biblical Literature, the oldest and largest scholarly organisation devoted to study of the Bible. These units include 'Biblical Criticism and Literary Criticism' and 'Psychology and Biblical Studies.'

The Biblical writers seek to know through their art, [what it is like] to be a human being with a divided consciousness-intermittently loving your brother but hating him even more; resentful or perhaps contemptuous of your father but also capable of the deepest filial regard:... fiercely asserting your own independence but caught in a tissue of events divinely contrived; outwardly a definite character and inwardly an unstable vortex of greed, ambition, jealousy, lust, piety, courage, compassion, and much more...[The result of the Biblical writer's art yields] an instrument of fine insight into these abiding perplexities of man's [sic, humankind's] creaturely condition. That may explain why these ancient Hebrew stories still seem so intensely alive today...'

Jacob's story in *Genesis*, as well as many other Biblical narratives, also share with literature and psychotherapy a unique and fertile use of dialogue, what human beings say, whether as Biblical actors, literary characters or living clients, as a window to understanding who they are and what matters to them. Alter (1981) and Sternberg (1985) outline and give examples of the way Jacob's story weaves back and forth between narrative and dialogue, exposition of plot and expression of voice. Frequently prioritising conversations between characters and making these exchanges the main driver of the story, the Biblical writer characteristically limits scenes to two interlocutors on stage at a time.<sup>14</sup> These dialogical exchanges use the direct speech of each character and what happens between them to communicate what is most significant both in the personality, intentions and actions of each and what is essential in the ongoing plot. Narrative, voice, dialogical exchange between interlocutors and the insights these give into the co-construction of human identity make Jacob's story and the text of which it is a part, a fruitful, layered and rich life story source to go 'inside' for my purposes in this research.

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<sup>14</sup> See particularly *Genesis* 27:1-28:5 for an instance of this.



As with the use of classic novels and other literary works cited above, psychotherapy research using the Bible has early connections with psychodynamic traditions and the ‘founding fathers’ of talking therapy, specifically Freud and Jung. Rollins (1999) presents a comprehensive historical survey of Biblical influences in psychotherapy research beginning with the lives, correspondence and major works of both these renowned psychoanalysts. Rollins argues that Freud, the scion of an Austrian Jewish family, while famously dismissive of religion as an ‘obsessional neurosis,’ was still deeply drawn to the Bible’s rich symbols and compelling characters.<sup>15</sup> One of Freud’s (1939/1964) last major works was, *Moses and Monotheism*, which he himself referred to as a personal instance of the ‘return of the repressed.’ According to Rollins, Freud’s analysis of Moses has been widely criticised for its rather spurious, blatantly defeasible historical and theoretical assumptions. However, it does point to Freud’s lifelong fascination with the iconic figure of Moses, not only as he was portrayed in the Bible but also as he was depicted by Michelangelo in a famous sculpture that Freud found particularly compelling (Mahony, 2006). Despite its obvious analytical overreach, *Moses and Monotheism* provides an early example of a psychotherapist using a Biblical character and his story to explore his own theories.

The influence of the Bible as a source book for understanding psychic life is also evident in the life, correspondence and work of Carl Jung (Miller, 1995). The son of a Swiss Reformed Protestant pastor and embedded in a tradition of clergymen on

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<sup>15</sup> Rollins (1999: 35) refers to Théo Pfrimmer’s thesis which ‘notes at least 488 Biblical references in Freud’s correspondence and writing.’ The reference made to Freud’s statement of religion as an ‘obsessional neurosis’ is from *The Future of an Illusion* (Freud, 1928/1962).

both sides of his family tree, Jung from earliest days ‘was initiated into a lifelong relationship and dialogue with the Bible’ (Rollins, 1999:47). Rollins has compiled an impressive set of indices to quantify his claim that Jung draws on Biblical images, symbols and characters more than any other archetypal tradition in his work. Notable among his writings is *Answer to Job*, in which Jung explicitly uses a wide range of Biblical characters to embody and explore his own theories of the development of the Self (Spiegelman, 2006).

Beyond these early examples, Rollins (1999), Rollins and Kille (2007), and Ellens and Rollins (2004) offer a representative sampling of the ways in which psychotherapeutic perspectives have intersected with Biblical themes and characters in scholarly writing and research from the past century and a half to modern times. While acknowledging the psychotherapeutic rather than psychological flavour of these examples, Collicutt (2012)<sup>16</sup> adds the caveat that most of Ellens and Rollins’ contemporary research samples are written from the perspective of the depth psychologies of Freud, Jung, Erikson, Winnicott and Kohut. This is certainly the case with the studies I found that specifically referenced Jacob’s story. Sanford (1974:4), a Jungian therapist and Episcopalian priest, uses the stories of major Bible characters (including Jacob) to elucidate Jung’s theories of ‘individuation’ which Sanford summarises as,

the most important and fundamental process which goes on in human life: the transformation of human beings from ego-centric,

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<sup>16</sup> Writing from a clinical psychology perspective, as well as within her role as an associate Anglican priest, Collicutt argues a greater use of empirical psychology approaches rather than just psychotherapeutic ones, in research using the Bible.

unconscious persons to persons of wholeness, breadth of vision and spiritual awareness.

His use of Jacob's story involves retelling and analysing it through the lens of his practice understanding of how individuation takes place. Kille (1995) also looks at the cycle of Jacob stories in *Genesis* in terms of Jungian ideas about individuation but does so using the archetypal model of the hero's journey. Like Sanford, he also retells the story but intersperses each significant episode with how it may illumine the process of moving toward what he terms 'full consciousness' and the capacity for genuine relatedness. Zeligs(1974), another psychoanalyst, includes Jacob's story in her in-depth study of seven major Biblical leaders, a research work which Rollins (1999: 69) characterises as a 'balanced historical-, literary-, and psychological-critical reading,' thus foregrounding its interdisciplinary accomplishment. Other examples I found using Jacob's life story text were written for a more populist audience and included, Elie Wiesel's *Messengers of God* and Naomi Rosenblatt's, *Wrestling with Angels*. While all of the texts I have reviewed used Jacob's story or selected parts of it in innovative and narratively-informed ways, none demonstrated the level of counsellor-generated, fictive, practice-near therapeutic dialogue I wanted to model in my research. With rare exceptions (i.e. Bridges, Speedy and Kemp, 2012; Jacobs, 1988 and Yalom, 1989, 1992) this dialogical deficit was also true of the intersections between non-Biblical, literary and psychotherapy approaches I surveyed above.

However, my research investigation does share with both the literary and Bible-sourced research examples listed in my review, an active and careful textual reading

of Jacob's story and an intentional, interdisciplinary perspective. Using fictive session transcripts rather than real ones, it also replicates Levitt and Rennie's and Rober's attempts to excise and examine the counsellor's in-session, inner conversations and her post-session recollections of them. However, it differs from most of the research examples I have reviewed in its focus on imaginary, counsellor-generated dialogues as the primary source material for analysis.

### **Therapeutic Practice Context: What am I doing with Jacob and his story?**

Before moving on to review the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of my research, there is one further set of narrative voices that contribute to locating it in its research context. The core analogy I have proposed for this case study sets up a series of imaginary dialogues between me as counsellor researcher, listening and responding to my text-derived client, Jacob, as he shares his stories of life. Even in such a fictive relationship, it is necessary to clarify a therapeutic rationale for what I think I am doing with Jacob and the stories he tells. The first dialogue with him which I have called the Pre-Research Iteration will treat the ethical imperatives and layered nuances of our counselling research relationship in greater detail. However, I want to set out two important perspectives that inform my approach to Jacob as my imaginary client and co-participant in this research. The first is the relationship between life narrative creation and identity formation and second, the contribution of the field of narrative gerontology to understanding the value of life review for older persons.

Narratives shared in therapy give rise to a three fold way of working. First, I *hear* the story as the client relates it. At the same time the client and I *co-hear* the story as it becomes a kind of text-in-the-air. My subsequent reflections of it, my retellings of it in my own words, mean the client hears it again in a new way (Hermans, 2004). Over the course of therapy, these tellings and retellings are subject to a process of *cohering*, bringing together and linking the stories into a new, more integrated whole, a more coherent story to live by. Building on Erikson's developmental theory of identity formation over the life course, McAdams (1993:33) argues 'Some psychological problems and a great deal of emotional suffering stem from our failures to make sense of our lives through stories.' He cites the therapist's collaborative role in helping clients to revise their life narratives. Baddeley and Singer (2007:177) credit both Erikson and McAdams with a 'life story theory of identity' that puts the 'coherent, albeit often complex narrative that we forge of our life experiences' as the actual substance of our identity. McAdams (2008:20) defines this kind of life story as an 'internalised and evolving narrative of the self that provides a life with some degree of coherence and purpose.' He borrows the literary genre of myth to describe the creative process involved when human beings engage in telling the stories of life that they believe have made them or define them in some way. For McAdams (1993:12) this process of emplotment entails, 'an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future.' Ricoeur (1984) has famously termed this imaginative ability to weave life and narrative together as a way of making the inscrutable experience of living in the tick-tock of temporal reality into what he calls 'human time.' We humanise time by using our imaginations to story ourselves in and through it.

Strawson (2007) provides a dissenting voice to this emphasis, arguing that there is no intrinsic or psycho/social necessity for understanding and cohering one's life story through time. However, his view is significantly challenged by research findings on the use of narrative in everyday life. Bruner's (1991:9) compelling overview of psychological studies gives prominence to narrative comprehension as one of the earliest and 'most widely used forms of organising human experience.'

Drawing deeply on Erikson's and McAdams' theories of 'life story identity,' Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall (2011) introduce an emerging field of scholarly research, *narrative gerontology*, which also provides evidence for the ways in which telling stories about who we are powerfully shapes the life course and culminates in the reminiscence processes of old age. This narrative gerontological perspective is particularly important to my work with Jacob, as the conversations I have created with him take place when he is nearing the end of a very long life and facing a particularly difficult set of transitions. The therapeutic rationale for the work Jacob and I are doing together is situated in these reminiscence processes and in their meaning to him as part of a life review. Further relevant research insights into the value of these processes, the positive indications for their use and the scope for their therapeutic implementation are set out below. All of these perspectives contributed to my choice of life review as an appropriate therapeutic aim and framework for enacting and voicing my relationship with Jacob and his story.

## Reminiscence and Life Review

Randall (2011:29) argues that ‘narrative development knows no bounds’ throughout life but becomes especially important in old age. Reminiscence in old age is the means by which this evolving narrative, in its whole and in its parts, may be set out once again and then, by ongoing ‘acts of imagination,’ be revised and drawn together along familiar, alternative or wholly different lines. According to Cappeliez and Webster (2011), reminiscence draws from a store of personal memories which are strongly linked to self concept and imbued with emotional impact. What is particularly remembered by older persons like Jacob may be those stories which contribute most vividly and affectively to their understanding of who they are. These kind of memories, Randall (2011:22-23) argues, become ‘textual entities...[not] straight recordings of actual occurrences...[but rather] stories...that we weave (and reweave) around original occurrences to invest them with personal significance.’ They become stories which are internalised over time,

based on biographical facts... [but going beyond the facts] as people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories...that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful (McAdams and Janis, 2004: 160).

These constructions are not so much what actually happened, the raw data of experience arranged in plot sequence, as they are ‘how [those life events are] interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold’ (Pillemer, 2001:130). This aspect of the older person’s use of reminiscence is particularly relevant to my exploration of

co-construction as it points to the iterative role of telling and retelling, interpreting and reinterpreting that often take place in the counselling dialogue.

Besides the contribution reminiscence makes to ongoing personal myth creation, memory weaving and meaning making, Cappeliez and Webster also emphasise the 'evaluative' nature of reminiscence. The majority of older persons' memories they studied 'appeared to be the product of an appraisal or evaluation.... The participants... appeared to engage in reminiscing for the very purpose of reaching the conclusion that their life had been well-lived' (2011:182-183). This fits with Erikson's eighth stage of development in which he posits that proximity to the end of life 'presses the issue of personal integrity upon individuals' (Hearn, Saulnier, Strayer, et al. 2012:1). According to Erikson's original theory and McAdams' subsequent elaboration of it, this elicits a need in the older person to resolve or in some way formulate answers, even maladaptive ones, to existential questions such as Who am I? What has happened to me? What does it all mean? Has it been a good life that leaves a worthwhile legacy for others? This suggests that narrative coherence, an important aspect of my research inquiry, may be at the heart of this process. Specifically in relation to Jacob's life review, there may be parts of his story not adequately integrated into the whole that could contribute to a sense of fragmentation and despair. Ideally, according to Erikson and McAdams, the older person engages in a more balanced stock-taking and integration of the highs and lows, failures and successes, which appear most saliently in his or her life story. There is also much contemporary research evidence to indicate that reminiscence in old age 'fulfils a positive function by helping people come to terms with unresolved conflicts from



their past in the face of approaching vulnerability and death' (Bohlmeijer and Westerhof, 2011: 273). Randall (2011:24) suggests that old age rather than attenuating this narrative evaluation, actually intensifies the need for it. He argues that 'the older we get, the more meaning we require in order to cope with, and grow through, the losses and challenges (physical, financial, emotional) that later life can bring.' Randall (2011:30) cites research to support an 'autobiographical drive' for many older people when they finally have enough time, space and detachment from activity to engage in 'stepping back and taking stock; reviewing ...life and (ideally) valuing it, overall as meaningful.' Rather than the inevitable atrophies of old age shutting down this narrative propensity, they may actually fuel it. There is even some evidence that these atrophies, stark and real as they are, may not exercise as pervasive an assault on the brain as they do on the body. The gerontologist, Gene Cohen (2005:23), argues that with the notable exception of dementia, there are some natural neurological changes in the brain of the older person that may actually aid this autobiographical drive. There is, he claims, a 'rearrangement of brain functions that makes it easier to merge the speech, language, and sequential thinking typical of the left hemisphere with the creative, synthesising right hemisphere.' Thus there may even be a neurological contribution to the kind of integrating work that the older person may be engaged in through reminiscence. Singer and Messier (2011: 229) argue that this is an important reality for the therapist to hold in mind in work with older people. Their case study research 'argues that older individuals may indeed display some memory advantages over younger individuals in their capacity to distill the most meaningful essences from a lifetime of recollections.' These findings formed an important perspective in my approach to Jacob's advanced age and how

this might affect his capacity for narrative engagement. It contributed to my voicing him in the dialogues in a way that reflected this enhanced capacity to distill meaning from a 'lifetime of recollections' rather than positioning him in the loss deficit model of old age that is often characteristic of modern, Western society.

Bohlmeijer and Westerhof (2011: 276-277) put the positive functions of reminiscence interventions and 'storying later life' in three categories: *Simple reminiscence* is directed at the reasonably healthy older adult with a goal to 'enhance positive feelings and happiness;' the *Life review* is indicated for older adults who are overwhelmed by difficult transitions and has a goal of improving 'self-acceptance, mastery, and meaning in life;' and finally *Life review therapy* is applied to those who are experiencing depression, anxiety or other significant mental health problems with the therapeutic aim of reducing 'bitterness and boredom' and 'inducing self-change.'<sup>17</sup> These functional versions of reminiscence are not necessarily wholly discrete categories and in practice may overlap but whether delivered in concert or as separate interventions, these forms of life review have 'been linked with physical and psychological well-being' (Cappeliez and Webster, 2011:183) and 'increasing overall satisfaction with life' (Bohlmeijer and Westerhof, 2011: 286). McAdams (2013: 285) cites research by Landau, Greenberg, and Sullivan (2009) to argue 'that

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<sup>17</sup> The three categories (in italics) are the particular nomenclature used by Bohlmeijer and Westerhof to differentiate the functions of reminiscence interventions in their scheme. To avoid confusion with my more generic use of the term life review, the second category might be more helpfully labelled, *guided reminiscence* and the third category, *therapeutic reminiscence*. Whatever terms are used, the second and third categories represent, in different degrees, some kind of corrective repair of deficit, not just an enhancing of already positive feelings.

maintaining a temporally coherent biography of the self reinforces self-continuity, imbues experience with order and meaning, and helps to insulate the individual from mortality concerns.’ However, this is not to say that all older adults benefit from life review or want to engage in it (Tromp, 2011:267). DeLange, while arguing an important role for helpers in encouraging narrative identity construction in older adults, cautions it may not be suitable for everyone, because as he says, ‘Not everyone embodies an enterprising self and has the assembling imaginative power to compose a life story’ (DeLange, 2011: 62). This caveat alerted me to the importance of the ethical, practical and procedural aspects of what is entailed in any process of life review. It influenced the way in which I managed my fictive therapeutic relationship with Jacob, explained its boundaries to him and tried to monitor his ongoing participation to insure it remained open, voluntary and subject to his choices. My five dialogues with Jacob will show aspects of all three of the life review functions suggested by Bohlmeijer and Westerhof, but in keeping with my focus and aim to simulate counselling practice as much as possible in this research, the latter two, more therapeutically oriented versions, will predominate.

## Chapter 3:

### Establishing the Epistemological/Methodological Ground

After reviewing the range of literatures I used to locate and formulate my research, this section seeks to establish the philosophical ground for its interpretivist, narrative-based epistemology and methodology. I summarise the contributions of phenomenological hermeneutics, particularly as developed by Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Iser. I then link these narrative, hermeneutic and reader response insights to the dialogical perspectives of Bakhtin and Buber. This section will be followed by a chapter that sets out the specific methodological choices and practices that grew out of and were consistent with this epistemological ground.

### Phenomenological Hermeneutics

My choice to use an analogical relationship between a counsellor listening to a client and a reader engaging with a text as the central metaphor for my research is rooted in a set of ideas drawn from the phenomenological tradition in the human sciences, pioneered by Husserl (1913/2001) and Heidegger (1962), but refined in the latter half of the twentieth century by Gadamer (1975) and Ricoeur (1981a). Iser's (1974, 1978, 1986) theory of reader response and the many ways that the phenomenological experience of reading has been elaborated by others also owe their nurture to these philosophical, hermeneutic perspectives on how human beings living in time seek to understand their worlds, themselves and one another through the stories they tell. Husserl first 'envisaged phenomenology' as a model of science which held out the

possibility of an ‘accurate and neutral description of the essence of our experience as it appears to us’ (Stiver, 2001:37). Heidegger (1962), beginning with this focus on the essence of lived experience in its appearing, developed Husserl’s ideas further to include a more existential understanding of human beings living in time, an embodied situatedness of vantage point which he called *Da-sein*. Heidegger argued that it was not possible to approach and attempt to describe any experience as a ‘thing in itself’ without a whole set of presuppositions shaping perception and profoundly influencing what is seen. The semantic intricacies and philosophical depth and breadth of Heidegger’s inquiries into the nature of Being are well beyond my own field of study but I introduce him here for the hermeneutic imperative he brought to phenomenological research. This is a perspective that argues any description of lived experience must be accompanied by an exploration of the context in which it takes place. Heidegger’s concept of *Da-sein* fits well with my epistemological focus on particularised experience and that human beings, including client and counsellor in dialogue or a reader engaging with a story text, are always seeking to understand one another, from inside particular contexts. These contexts, Heidegger says, are worlds into which human beings are ‘thrown’ from the very start, worlds in which the stories we hear and even the words we learn to speak come ready-made and with long histories of their own (Stiver, 2001; McLean, 2012; Davey, 2008). We are not thrown into these worlds like goldfish into a bowl as if they were receptacles in which we swim but rather they are ontologically ‘interwoven into the very structure of [our own] existence’ (McLean, 2012 :105). Stiver (2001:39-40) links this concept of *thrown-ness* directly to the human project of life story creation and its origins, when he writes:

At the dawn of consciousness, we find ourselves already with a story and an interpretation. Our conscious attempts to interpret ourselves are not free creations but rewriting of a story that already contains many chapters...our experience is inherently and unavoidably hermeneutical.

As will be seen in the imaginary dialogues which follow, this perspective accords poignantly and literally with Jacob's story as it is set out in *Genesis*. The first twenty-five chapters of this ancient text artfully create and people a world, filling it with teeming life and stories, communities and culture, language and family lore, all flourishing long before Jacob is 'thrown' into the mix (*Genesis* 25:19). In fact it is salutary that the introduction of Jacob's family origins, the account of his grandfather, Abraham, does not begin until chapter twelve of *Genesis*. It follows immediately after the story of the Tower of Babel in chapter eleven, a story which foregrounds the role of language, the importance of its face to face negotiation in community and its relationship to identity formation.<sup>18</sup> All of which contribute to the lifeworld in which Jacob's story finds itself embedded and where Jacob himself, in the guise of my fictive client and research co-participant, must set about the hermeneutic project of telling his own story. It is this emphasis on the hermeneutical nature of being, narrative, time and language that both Gadamer and Ricoeur build upon in their efforts to *understand* the nature of how *understanding* between persons takes place.

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<sup>18</sup> One of the stated purposes for building the tower out of bricks and mortar was a desire on the part of the builders to form an identity, 'to make a name for themselves' (*Genesis* 11:4). The failure of this technological project is contrasted sharply with the way in which Abraham's family subsequently 'made a name for themselves,' using the organic and profoundly more effective building materials of storytelling (*Genesis* 12-50).

## Gadamer

Gadamer's (1975) project in his signature work, *Truth and Method*, sees the task of hermeneutics in the human sciences, not as a grasping for some kind of reliable and infallible method which leads to inviolate truth, but rather a means to 'clarify the conditions in which understanding occurs' (Bruns, 1990:189). Gadamer's development of a phenomenological hermeneutic for the human sciences insists on

the limited role of method and the priority of understanding as a dialogic, practical, situated activity... [in which] our finitude, that is, our prior involvement and partiality, ...[is not] a barrier to understanding, but rather ... its enabling condition (Malpas, 2009:2.3).

Rather than eschewing human subjectivity as an obfuscating presence to be overcome with pristine (and impossible to achieve) objectivity, the researcher's biases and prior involvement become an 'enabling condition' for the process of understanding. Gadamer (1986) also elaborated the aesthetic experience an observer might have with a work of art and developed these insights into a sophisticated analysis which he called 'spiel' or in English, 'play.' Gadamer's study of the Platonic dialogues and his use of Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, gave rise to his emphasis on a purposeful dialogic engagement with texts, an entering into the to and fro, dialectical 'play' of the text as part of the attempt to understand it (Malpas, 2009). Engaging with any work, whether painting, sculpture or literary text invites a 'playing along,' a cooperative participation in the construction of meaning, as Gadamer (1986:26) claims, 'Every work leaves the person who responds to it a certain leeway, a space to be filled in by himself.' Clearly the client's sharing of his stories of life is not a work of art, or a literary text

in any intentional aesthetic sense, but it is an artful text-in-the-air in the sense of being an embodied, constructed presentation in language, posture and gesture which 'intends' something and addresses an other or others in ways that leave significant gaps to be filled by the hearer. What the counsellor hearing this text-in-the-air brings from his or her vantage point and how that 'plays out' over the course of the alliance contributes significantly to the meaning that is made. Gadamer's (1986:29) philosophical hermeneutics have famously construed this gap filling in any kind of conversation as a 'free play between the faculties of imagination and conceptual understanding' which results in a co-mingling or 'fusion of horizons' between persons. These horizons in Gadamer (1975) refer to the limitations on any interpreter of any text, whose field of view is constrained by the 'traditions' of culture, language, and historical embeddedness which inhere in his or her own particular vantage point and setting in time. Gadamer's unique contribution is to value these differences in horizons and to suggest the spaces where they meet may open up or reveal new vistas of meaning, that are not infallible, propositional truths, but better, more enhanced meanings of use to human beings. It is not a matter of 'once-and-for-all getting it right' but a process of disclosing a 'world in ways that are more original, more authentic, more illuminating, or just plain deeper, than our scientific understanding of the same' (Ingram, 2003:231). Describing this fusion of horizons, Stiver (2001:45) writes,

interpretation is always a creative rendering of the text...in understanding, we are always connecting our horizon of assumptions, culture, and traditions to the horizon of the text, it always involves a creative synthesis...Learning does not occur when the teacher has conveyed the material, nor when the learner can parrot the material,



but only when the learner has been able to relate it to his or her own “horizon.”

Applied to the counselling dialogue, Gadamer’s insights reflect the importance of the counsellor learning to hear on multiple levels and striving to cultivate an attentive awareness of different horizons, the critical assonances and dissonances of the way the words and the story may sound in the client’s world and the way they sound in the counsellor’s world. Often something reaches out from the client’s horizon-limited expression of his or her story which may nudge, move, shove or shake something in the counsellor’s equally horizon-limited world and this co-mingling of horizons results in new, creative and transformative insights for the client and often for both participants in the dialogue. Davey (2008:705) summarises the achievement of twentieth century phenomenological hermeneutics as shifting attention to the ways ‘in which dialogical encounter with a text changed the self-understanding and hence the being of those who engaged with it.’ Of course, these kind of dialogically-derived insights need always to be subject to critique and evaluation (an ethical imperative in the therapeutic setting), but even if this leads to them being discarded, their presence according to Gadamer still serves to enhance rather than limit understanding. The potential for demonstrating and exploring the presence of these kind of horizon-stretching, co-creative moments in therapy contributed significantly to my choice to use narrative creation of imaginary dialogues as an epistemological source and methodological means for my research. Ingram (2003:226) summarises what may be the value of Gadamer’s dialogical perspectives to an investigation of counsellor contribution to co-construction: communication with others through dialogue ‘is central to achieving critical insight into one’s biases.’ Ingram further

interprets Gadamer as setting up the kind of interlocutory conversation with a text that I am seeking to explore and demonstrate in this research. A kind of co-questioning ‘game’ or ‘play’ is enacted by this whereby my prejudices and assumptions as counsellor are elicited and expressed and the text itself, through Jacob as a voiced character in it, also questions and responds to me. Gadamer, and subsequently Ricoeur (1973), developed this idea further as ‘distanciation,’<sup>19</sup> a concept which accords well with my contrastive use of an ancient text to speak to the issues of co-construction in a modern counselling setting. The huge gulf between ancient and modern, the difference of horizon or background between Jacob and me would in Gadamer and Ricoeur’s concept of ‘distanciation,’ *add* rather than detract from the potential for insight. Ingram (2003:229) summarises the function of this kind of distance,

Indeed the greater the temporal and geographic distance separating interpreter and text, the greater the potential for critical dialogue. Unfamiliar (ancient or foreign) texts check the interpreter’s natural inclination to project judgments uncritically, thereby enabling the extraction of timeless and universal meaning from otherwise parochial contents.

Besides greater insight into my own biases, and the potential to surface ‘timeless and universal meaning,’ Davey (2008: 704) adds an intersubjective and transformational value to the use of this kind of temporal and geographic distance,

Heightening the contrast between positions... becomes a midwife to otherness. Enhancing the voice of the other occasions the possibility of becoming other to our own previously held assumptions... We learn

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<sup>19</sup> My use of the term here selects an aspect of the concept of *distanciation* and adapts it in a way that is relevant to my research. However this use is highly reductive of the complexity of Ricoeur’s analysis. See Ricoeur (1973) *The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation* for a more comprehensive elaboration of this concept. For a more systematic, practical application of *distanciation* in narrative research, see Dreyer and Pedersen (2009).

through difference and, through such learning, become different to ourselves....

## Ricoeur

Ricoeur (1984), following Gadamer, also locates his work in the ‘intersection where hermeneutics and phenomenology meet’ and in the meaning-rich worlds of narrative and time (Stiver, 2001:40). Like Gadamer he asserts the dialogical nature of classic texts and encourages a conversational approach to them that places understanding of an ‘other’ as reliant not on ‘methods of decipherment but upon dialogical processes of engagement’ (Davey, 2008:705). His broad corpus of work, as well as how it has been responded to by others, are particularly relevant as an epistemological source for my research as Ricoeur (1970) actively argued for hermeneutics to be conducted in full conversation with a range of social science disciplines including philosophy, history of religions, anthropology and psychoanalysis (Rollins, 1999). Besides this interdisciplinary inclusivity, Ricoeur (1975a, 1975b, 1980) is also relevant because he was, throughout his career, highly conversant with Biblical texts, ‘revealing a level of expertise rare to philosophers’ and making significant ‘original contributions ...to exegesis and biblical hermeneutics’ (Stiver, 2001:3). He also engaged deeply with the tenets of psychoanalysis and articulated its complex and narrative-informed relationship to epistemological truth claims (Ricoeur, 1970, 1981b). Like Gadamer, he has contributed key concepts to a more reader-response oriented approach to textual meaning. Most pertinent for my research, he has elaborated the link between the ways we read and understand texts and the ways in which we seek to understand human action (Ricoeur, 1981a; Langdrige, 2008). Several of his most widely

disseminated textual principles are relevant to my use of reader/text relationship as an analogy for the client/counsellor dialogue.

Central to Ricoeur's (1976) thinking is the 'surplus of meaning' which he argues overflows in any written text but particularly in classic texts of antiquity like Jacob's story. In his view, texts always carry with them (as does language itself) the potential for more meaning than authors or original receptive communities could possibly be aware of or intend. He posits a fecund world in front of the text, as well as in it and behind it, which continues to generate, in collaboration with new readers and re-readers, a 'surplus of meaning.' Although every reading 'occurs in a certain spot to a certain person in a certain historical, personal, institutional and political situation, ... it always exceeds what was predictable from those circumstances' (Miller, 1990 cited in Bennett, 1995: 11). It was in attempting to understand 'the worlds, actual and possible, opened by language' that Ricoeur (1991:490) believed it was possible to 'arrive at a better understanding of ourselves' and others.

Ricoeur (1970) also coined the terms 'hermeneutic of suspicion' and 'conflict of interpretations' to account for not only the surplus of meaning in any text but the variety of different, sometimes overtly conflicting interpretive accounts that may be devised by successive readers in response to it. The need to read with 'suspicion' came from his analysis of what he called the three great 'masters of suspicion,' of the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. Nietzsche's will to power, Marx's historical determinism, and Freud's repressed unconscious were all factors which Ricoeur (1974) thought could be inscribed and operating in texts in ways that covertly manipulate meaning (Rollins, 1999; Langdridge, 2008). These specific

aspects of his argument will not be addressed in my research. However, his emphasis on the ways in which a range of covert, author, text and reader factors may influence interpretive response is directly relevant to my research purposes. Most counsellors will recognise in any client's verbal presentations and in their own therapeutic responses to them, a demonstration of Ricoeur's 'suspicion' that the words that are said do not always reflect what is meant and often mean much more than that which was consciously intended. His 'conflict of interpretations' also points to the ways in which the same client's presentation, issues and stories of life can be 'read,' interpreted and responded to, very differently, by different counsellors. Unlike the more radical deconstructionists, Ricoeur(1976) maintains a balanced view toward the construction of meaning. Mediating between a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of empathy, he does not suggest a text can be made to mean anything the reader wants it to mean (Langdrige, 2008; Stiver, 2001; McLean, 2012). Instead he argues for a negotiation of meaning which attends carefully to the constraints and directives that speak behind the text and within it, while at the same time being open to the 'play' of the text and what it creates in the space before or in front of it. The result should not be an absolute or finalised construction of meaning but the potential for more comprehensive, nuanced and context-relevant meanings. Applying this perspective to the counselling context, a client's presentation of self and story should not be made to mean whatever the counsellor's frameworks and most cherished praxis insights construe it to mean. Any and all interpretations are not equally valid, some are patently misguided, and some are arguably better than others. As Ricoeur (1981a:211) argues, all interpretations of texts, whoever makes them and however erudite the rationale, are in the end, only 'guesses.' In the field of

literary criticism and in Biblical hermeneutics, this conflict of interpretations is cause for much ink to be spilled. However, in the counselling context, a too rigidly theoretical, ideological or personal construal of meaning imposed on a client by the counsellor is a cause for concern and has the potential to harm vulnerable human beings. Thus finding alternative, creative ways for the individual counsellor to engage with and reflect responsibly on his or her characteristic responses to a client's multi-voiced, multi-layered narrative text is crucial to ethical practice. Uncovering how these often unacknowledged, interpretive frameworks and habits may manifest themselves in practice for good or ill are an important, ongoing aim in this inquiry.

Ricoeur is also deeply relevant to my research in his lifelong quest to engage with two fundamental and familiar philosophical questions, 'Who am I?' and 'How should I live?' (Atkins, 2015). These two questions are central to the narrative creation of identity and although often sublimated or disguised may be at the core of what many clients are seeking in coming to a counsellor. Ricoeur saw the construction of narrative both as a way to 'humanise' the inscrutability of living in time and a means to know who we are and how we should live. Human beings as well as communities are formed by the stories they tell and Ricoeur cites the story of Jacob and his long line of Semitic descendants as a profound example of this. In Ricoeur's view, 'no other people has been so overwhelmingly impassioned by the narratives it has told about itself' (1984, cited in Stiver, 2001: 172).

Ricoeur's work also relates directly to my core analogy in this project, which I have posited as the correspondences between the phenomenology of a reader's active engagement with a text and a counsellor's attentive listening to a client's stories of

life. Collicutt (2012:3) refers to the way Ricoeur makes a direct link between the psychotherapeutic task of interpreting a client's stories and the 'reading' of a text, describing 'the psychoanalyst's "reading of her patient" as a systematic act of interpretation of the symbol-ridden text he [or she] brings to the encounter.'<sup>20</sup> In developing a psychic link between narrative creation and the human experience of living in time, Ricoeur provides an in depth analysis of the reader/text encounter and the spaces opened up by it. He elaborates extensively the idea of 'the hermeneutic circle' which both the process of reading and interpretation of any kind sets in motion. Ricoeur (1984) also used the term 'hermeneutic spiral' to emphasise the ongoing openness of an iterative process that involves back and forth movement between parts and whole, the progressive selection and gathering of salient parts as we read or hear a story and the anticipatory/retrospective contemplating of them in relation to the whole (Dreyer and Pedersen, 2008).

## Iser and Reader Response Theory

Iser (1978:108-109), a literary theorist and key contributor to reader-response criticism, refers to the necessity for this kind of anticipation and retrospection in the reading process because the object of our gaze, 'the whole text can never be perceived at any one time.' He concludes,

The relation between text and reader is therefore quite different from that between object and observer: instead of a subject-object relationship, there is a moving viewpoint which travels along inside that which it has to apprehend.

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<sup>20</sup> Rashkow (1993), writing from a feminist perspective, also makes this link between interpretive reading of the Bible and a psychoanalyst's 'reading' of an analysand's presentation.

This 'travelling along inside' via 'a moving viewpoint' is the hermeneutic journey with a text and with a client's story that my research seeks to simulate. Just as no text can ever be perceived as a whole, no client's story and certainly the client himself or herself can ever be viewed as a whole, as a totalised object. While this idea of 'travelling along inside' Jacob's story is an argument for the verisimilitude of my core analogy, it also points to its limitations. My engagement with Jacob's text is clearly and patently not the same as the living, dynamic vitality of the face to face spoken dialogue in the counselling setting. Here meaning can be questioned and clarified by a speaking/hearing client and counsellor who are both 'present' to each other in the elusive transiency of the 'now,' as words and stories stream into the space between them. This space is imbued, not just with the echoes of spoken words, but also the vibrancy of non-verbal communication. The words spoken out by the client create a text-in-the-air, but it is also, always, an embodied text. The non-verbal messages emanate from the awe-inspiring mutability of the human face, body posture, gesture, tone, inflection, volume, pace and more. The raising of an eyebrow, the flaring of a nostril, the shaking of a head, all contribute to what is heard. This kind of living event when compared to a reader's responsive conversation with a written text renders the latter as a pale reflection at best. However, my analogy is not utterly spurious as there are other parallels between counsellor to client dialogue and reader to text encounter which do carry sufficient authenticity to make it useful. Some of these parallels have already surfaced in my survey of the philosophical contributions of Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur to phenomenology.



Iser's ideas and the influence of other reader response literary critics add further support to the utility of these parallels for my research purposes (Bennett, 1995; Suleiman and Crossman, 1980; Tompkins, 1980; Freund 1987/2003). Reader response is not a monolithic theory so much as a set of ideas that grew out of a challenge to entrenched positions in literary criticism about where and how the construction of meaning takes place in relation to texts. It gained traction in challenging the 'intentional fallacy,' which put the whole weight of meaning construction on an archaeological dig into uncovering the author's original intention in inscribing the text. Reader response also posed a challenge to New Criticism which shifted meaning construction from authorial intention to an enshrinement of the text as a distinct, discrete object in the world that required no other interpretive key but its own presence (Bennett and Royle, 1995). Iser and other reader response critics shifted the interpretive gaze from the author and the text itself to what happens between reader and text in the virtual space between them. The idea of the fertility and dialogical intimacy of this virtual space gave rise to my use of Jacob as my conversational partner and co-participant in this investigation into co-construction. Slatoff (1970:6-7) describes the dynamism of this space in language that speaks directly to the kinds of parallels that may exist between the experience of reading and the counsellor's attentive listening to a client's stories.

Reading ... is first of all an action. ... the work is not an object, flat on the table, ready for examination, but rather a territory, ... to journey into and explore. As one reads one has the feeling ...[of] moving into and through something and that there is movement within oneself- a succession of varied, complex and rich mental and emotional states ... expectancy, tensions and releases, sensations of anxiety, fear, and discovery, sadness, sudden excitement, spurts of hope, warmth, or affection, feelings of distance and closeness, and a

multitude of motor and sensory responses to the movement, rhythm, and imagery of the work as well as a variety of activities and responses - recognition, comparison, classification, judgment, association, reflection.... Very few experiences engage one's consciousness in so many ways and give ... such a sense that something is going on within oneself.

Slatoff, in effect, seeks to narrate the experience of reading, by telling a story of what it is like, rather than empirically defining its components. His emphases on action, movement, affective and relational responsiveness, reflective analysis, profound engagement of consciousness and the opening up of and entering into another world all suggest parallels to the counselling setting. They accord significantly with the kind of knowledge I think this analogy may make possible, particularly in relation to counsellor contribution to co-construction. Of course relating to a character in a story is not the same as relating to a real client in the counselling setting but Slatoff (1970:16) argues there is less difference in qualitative terms than is usually supposed. He claims, 'Real people are not quite so real and verifiable as we pretend for most practical purposes.' Even with those we know very well, and often within our own understandings of ourselves, there are spaces left 'unverifiable, even unknowable.... Essentially our sense of a real person, like our sense of a fictional one, is a construction from a relatively limited number of observations of what he says and does.' My 'construction' of Jacob as client and co-participant in this research is based on what he says and does inside his story, but also on what others have said about him, what I bring to the relationship, who I imagine him to be, and how my reader response fashions him. It is a fictive construction that involves considerable gap filling, but an instructive one in terms of how I may bring the same 'reading' strategies to real clients, who I also can only 'know' through a 'relatively limited

number of observations' of what they say and do but for whom I have the gravest responsibility not to mould in my own image.

Another way in which reader response perspectives suggest parallels to the client/counsellor interpretive relationship lies in their conceptualisations of the strata of voices operating in any reader/text relationship. Iser (1986:377) coined the term 'implied reader,' as a counterpart to Booth's (1983) 'implied author,' to describe a more nuanced understanding of the layered personas which may tell and hear a narrative. He uses these terms to describe the ways he thinks authors of texts presuppose an audience and adopt rhetorical positions and literary styles to address these imagined readers (Booth, 1983). Readers engage in similar processes with the author, narrators and characters they perceive in the text. Other reader response critics posit their own versions of these personas, labelling readers in a variety of ways including, the super reader, the mock reader, the model reader, the actual reader, the informed reader and a collective version, the interpretive community reader (Freund, 1987/2003).

### **Bakhtin and Buber: Voices in Dialogue**

These layered personas and how they may manifest themselves in texts and in therapeutic conversations point to another set of ideas that also inform my use of dialogical perspectives in my research. Coming from very different perspectives, the Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin and the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber contributed greatly to understandings of the dialogical dynamics of human beings in

conversation with others and with themselves (Friedman, 2002).<sup>21</sup> Buber's 'I-Thou' relationship is an often cited articulation of the primacy of meeting the 'other' in a relation that is 'direct, present, mutual and open' (Friedman, 2002:354). Such a relationship invites and gives space to the other's uniqueness and wholeness. Buber (1937/1958) differentiated this kind of dialogical relating from a monological, 'I-It' way of conversing with others that sees them only as the content of one's own experience. He differentiates the two by emphasising the 'in between' space opened up by the 'I-Thou' relation which transcends the binaries of subject-object and produces a more flesh and blood kind of knowing and relating. By delving deeply into the novels of Dostoyevsky, Bakhtin echoes and expands Buber's dialogical understanding,

At the center of Dostoyevsky's artistic world must lie dialogue, and dialogue not as a means but as an end in itself...in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is...not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically....Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence (Bakhtin, 1984 cited in Friedman, 2002:355).

Bakhtin saw human personality, who we are and how we should live, as not deriving from some inner Cartesian core but outside in the 'addressivity to a thou,' another subjective presence, whether that 'thou' existed in the flesh as a real person or in the ether of multiple imaginary addressees. Bakhtin also articulated a philosophy of the 'polyphony of voices' that precedes, propels and pervades any human utterance. In

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<sup>21</sup> Friedman (2002) points out Bakhtin's stated indebtedness to Buber's work and argues the level of influence between them is under-recognised in the literature on Bakhtin. He then provides an elegant integration of both their understandings of dialogical dynamics. See also Newsom (1996) for a discussion of Bakhtinian ideas applied to engagement with Biblical texts.

this view of plurivocality he provides fertile support for Gadamer's (1975: 385) emphasis on the fluidity and dynamism of dialogue between persons, 'that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and ... the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it... it allows something to "emerge" which henceforth exists.'

In the field of psychotherapy, Hubert Hermans (2004:176-177) has drawn from both Bakhtin's and Buber's understandings to elaborate his conception of a dialogical self. In his view the polyphony of voices is intra-subjective as well as intersubjective and forms a model for understanding the much contested meaning of what it is to be a self in the world. He describes the dialogical self as

a dynamic multiplicity of voiced positions in the landscape of the mind, intertwined as this mind is with the minds of other people...[It consists] of a number of relatively autonomous spatial positions (actual, remembered, or imagined)... with the possibility of moving from one position to another. These movements can lead to dialogical relationships among positions in terms of question and answer or agreement and disagreement...the different I positions are embodied as voices who entertain dialogical relationships, both internal and external, with other voices.

This dynamic movement between standpoints and voices bears some similarities to a reader's ongoing relationship with a story text, a counsellor's experience of her own polyphony of voices in response to a client's stories, and a client's new and sometimes uncomfortable awareness of his or her own range of activated, dominant, suppressed or long unheard, internal and external voices. These voices, both imaginary and actual, may surface as stories are told, heard, co-heard and re-told in the counselling space. Buber's, Bakhtin's and Hermans' dialogical emphases all contribute to the priority my research gives to the kind of knowledge that may be

obtained through the co-mingling of multiple voices, multiple standpoints and multiple selves. Combined with the perspectives of phenomenological hermeneutics outlined above, I am drawing on a way of knowing that values context, who we are and where we are as part of how understanding between persons takes place. It gives epistemological weight to what can be learned through dialogical play and the 'surplus of meaning' to be found in the fecund space between reader and text. It supports a methodology that uses reader response to go inside the experience of co-construction, to investigate it while it is happening through a praxis-based, creative voicing of imaginary counselling dialogues. It hints at the possibility that the distance between a modern counsellor's experience of practice and an ancient patriarch's story of life may act as a 'midwife to otherness,' adding to rather than detracting from a research inquiry into co-construction.

## Chapter 4: Methods in Practice

The first and most obvious, methodological decision I made in this research was to select Jacob as my fellow interlocutor in the dialogues I wanted to create. Choosing a suitable participant for a phenomenological form of research requires matching up the topic of the inquiry with a person who can potentially provide authentic and rich experience of it (Valle and King, 1978). In my discussion of the set up and context for this research so far, reasons for Jacob's suitability have surfaced already.

However, on a practical level the choice may seem counter-intuitive, perhaps even anachronistically ridiculous. Jacob has never been involved in a modern version of a counselling conversation. Yet for thousands of years his story has been heard, shared, interpreted and dialogued with by individuals and culturally diverse communities from around the globe. It is a life story that has been 'entered' by many different routes and mined for meaning by many different readers. Centuries have passed, civilisations have risen and fallen, yet it still remains extant, an enduring textual survival that gives credence to its authenticity and vitality in revealing what human beings are like. Jacob's story is rich in narrative events and dialogue exchanges, spanning recognisably key moments of a life from birth pangs to death throes. It is embedded in a larger narrative which offers not only significant clues to Jacob's world view but also detailed specifics of his family history. It combines the mundane and the momentous 'stuff' of a very human life with all the interpersonal, cultural, environmental, and existential dilemmas that might surface for any twenty-first century client. This provides ample case material to simulate practice and

personifies a client who can and will speak about the story of his life in the counselling research conversation to which I have invited him. On a personal level, my choice was also motivated by a desire to give his ancient and chequered story an airing, a new audience, and another way of being in the world. Dialoguing with Jacob in this way reflects both an expectation and an expression of faith on my part that the unique authenticity of this ancient story would evoke and echo some semblance of what it is like for a counsellor to enter into a co-constructive space with a client. I respect and trust Jacob and his story to open up that 'between' world, where teller and told meet to hear, co-hear and cohere the stories of life.

To encounter the text in this way, I used several currently extant, canonical versions of Jacob's life story, translated from the original Hebrew into English. Hebrew is a richly contextual language in which word play and repetitions of similar sounds have a significant impact on meaning. Because I am not an Hebraist, most of this richness was not accessible to me. Here Jacob's lengthy parade of dialogical readers was again valuable as it provided an almost limitless supply of hermeneutic resources for exploring linguistic and cultural nuances embedded in his story. My primary or dominant textual source became the Jewish Publication Society's, *Jewish Study Bible* (Berlin, Brettler and Fishbane, 2004) because of its reputation as a respected, scholarly translation from the traditional, Hebrew, Masoretic text and its excellent and accessible annotations and appendices. It also provided an element of freshness and originality as I had not ever read the story in this particular translation and I found its word choice, syntax, and point of view helpful in bracketing my previous familiarity with the text. It also acted as a counterpoint to my previous readings from



a Christian standpoint, by foregrounding and reminding me of Jacob's embeddedness in an ancient Hebrew culture, language and worldview.

However, I also used, at times, a variety of other translations to provide alternative linguistic associations, as well as commentaries and lexical aids to explore words, phrases, historical or cultural allusions of particular or contested interest. This use of alternative translations applied also to my choice of an auditory text. I used the corresponding audio version of the Jewish Publication Society translation (Bernstein, Bikel et.al., 2009) and after surveying what was available, also chose the *Listener's Bible New International Version* (McLean, 2011).<sup>22</sup> These audio versions were vital to my methodology as I wanted to *hear* the text first, as a separate experience from my subsequent readings of it. This accorded with practice in that it is the story in the airwaves, so to speak, which constitutes the first entry of the client's story into the counselling space and its first mingling with my own very different horizons.

I also set up a sessional relationship throughout the data collection phase of my research. This corresponded in principle, rather than exact replication, to the bounded time and space of the therapy relationship. To maintain the imaginary link to practice, each time I engaged with hearing Jacob's text via the audio tape, I sat in the same chair in a room where I have met with clients before and tried to envision Jacob as a flesh and blood client seated in the room with me. In a typical 'session,' I first heard the story or parts of the story as it was read out in the audio version, stopping the tape at intervals to make notes, and then adding further notes at the end

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<sup>22</sup> References to The Jewish Publication Society Bible translation will be abbreviated as *JPSB* and the New International Version as *NIV* in subsequent text.

of the audio version. This was followed by a careful reading of the same written text I had just listened to and the making of a further set of reflexive notes. This spontaneous and highly idiosyncratic selection often included key words, phrases, questions, affective responses, summaries, guesses, theoretical formulations, parallels and identification of gaps or disparities. These hearings, readings, and sets of notes then became the springboard for writing the imaginary dialogues. Most of these were written as close to the time of hearing and reading the relevant episodes as possible. All of the dialogues were subsequently edited to improve accuracy and readability, one was rewritten to alter the register or tone<sup>23</sup> but none of the imaginary dialogues, even in their revised, edited form were altered substantially from the content of their original, more spontaneous creation.

My research, using Jacob's story, does not intend any claim to produce a definitive or exhaustive interpretation of his story. The range of interpretations in the literature for even a single episode of his story, indeed even a single sentence or word, is so extensive that even a brief overview of these would proliferate into a weighty tome, certainly validating Ricoeur's 'conflict of interpretations.' All I can claim for this limited and context-dependent interpretation is a thorough, dialogical investigation of what went on in the virtual space between me and the text. This space was created by my hearer/reader response to it, at a particular point in time and within the specific research parameters I constructed for it. My engagement involved both idiosyncratic extractions from the text and idiosyncratic projections into it, those

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<sup>23</sup> This refers to the Iteration Two dialogue. The circumstances, rationale, process and learning from this rewriting are discussed more fully in the introduction and commentary for Iteration Two.

aspects that struck me in the moment during the time-bounded sessions of hearing or reading and those which occurred later in reflection upon those engagements with the text. What I attempted to bracket or put to one side were my previous readings of this text. While I do not believe it is possible to achieve any form of bracketing which erases these prior influences, I do argue my approach opened up a new space or standpoint that nurtured a fresh and innovative reading of the text, highly relevant to my research aim.

The research also does not make any claim to creating an authentic Bronze Age voice or persona for Jacob. While I often quoted his speeches from the text of *Genesis* word for word, made every effort to contextualise and gain understanding of his very different world and to be faithful to his history, I could not avoid anachronistic flaws and projections of my own horizons into his. He is not an independent voice in the research dialogues, free of my co-constructive influence, anymore than he is an independent voice in his own text, free of the narrator's influence. In fact the narrator's influence is the first obstacle I faced in my early attempts to voice Jacob as my client and co-participant. His story as told in *Genesis* is not a first person account of his life. In literary terms, he is a character in a story whose speech is reported, selected and shaped through the point of view of an omniscient and reliable narrator (Alter, 1981; Sternberg, 1985). To achieve a more practice-near authenticity and to hear Jacob as a first person teller of his life story, I extracted all the direct speech attributed to him in the *Genesis* account and set this out as a separate document. This meant I had a narrator-excised, exposition-free 'transcript' of the quotes attributed to him in the text. This was a useful way of retelling the story and hearing it in new

ways. The impact of this document on the dialogues will be discussed further in Iteration One.

Another early methodological decision was to select and catalogue in chronological order the episodes in Jacob's life as they are set out in the text. Besides writing these out as a list and titling each episode, I also represented it as a diagram with episodic balloons hovering above a straight line, punctuated by the known diachronic points (See Appendix Two and Three). Because of the narrative historicity of the patriarchal stories in *Genesis*, this time line of Jacob's life could be plotted with enough significant detail to simulate the kinds of time line or life map a client might produce in therapy. Although I knew the story and had read it many times, this gave me a different overview of Jacob's life story and the kinds of issues and case material it might provide for counselling practice. Further specifics of the actual processes I used to establish a relationship with Jacob as a voiced character in the text, to select the episodes for each imaginary conversation with him, and to move through his story as a whole will be included in the introductions to each of the five imaginary dialogues. In this way these methodological choices are explained and applied closer to the context and point in the research where they are most relevant. How and why I selected the episodes for each dialogue became important elements in exploring my own inner conversations and the contributions they made to narrative co-construction. Throughout the entire process the key contributor to gathering material for analysis was my own, idiosyncratic engagement with the text as a hearer-reader, as an interpretive-reflexive responder and as a joint interlocutor of the story of Jacob's life.

There are aspects of my methods in practice that suggest the role of bricoleur, a researcher who engages in a pragmatic gathering together of a range of tools and processes to get the job done. As McLeod (2011:82) suggests, this kind of method ‘emerges in response to the task of conducting a study.’ Just as in the counselling process, where I often experience creative interventions growing out of the need of the moment, I expected this same kind of emergence of tools and practices in the research process. In fact a variety of creative ways to engage in dialogical play with Jacob’s story did arise in response to needs that surfaced along the way. These are explained and demonstrated more fully in the iterations but a representative sample would include, lexical and cross cultural explorations, literary and poetic reflections, counselling theory applications, creative retellings in different genres, and ordinary practice simulations such as letter writing, case notes, supervision and personal processing. Denzin and Lincoln (1998:4) refer to the process of qualitative research as ‘a bricolage, a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like creation that represents the researcher’s images, understandings, and interpretations of ... the phenomenon under analysis.’ This is an apt description for the kind of tools and processes this methodology brought to the fore and the collage-like nature of interpretations and understandings which were its outcome.

## Chapter 5: Introductory Orientation to the Iterations

My research conversations with Jacob are contained in five separate iterations.<sup>24</sup> The first of these I have labelled a Pre-research Iteration as it deals with the setting up and negotiation of the research relationship with Jacob before it begins. Even in this fictional scenario, the Pre-research Iteration represents the important ethical process of pursuing and establishing informed consent with a prospective research participant. Four iterations will follow this initial pre-research negotiation and these represent my counsellor/researcher engagement with hearing, co-hearing and cohering the episodes of Jacob's life story. Iterations One through Four represent an engagement with selected episodes from Jacob's story and are intended to illustrate not only the content but also the process of entering into the teller's tales and the issues of co-construction this raises.

This engagement, or as my overall title suggests, this going 'inside' Jacob's story flows along two separate but often confluent streams. The first is the content and progression of Jacob's life story as he relates its episodes to me and we co-construct it in conversation. The material for this is drawn directly from the text of *Genesis* and often uses Jacob's and other characters' own words in that text. The second stream is the research story, also a joint product constructed in concert with Jacob

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<sup>24</sup> I am using 'iteration' to describe these discrete units of data collection, not in the technical sense of being repetitive utterances but in a more colloquial sense as 'versions' of the story, to which I have applied the same or similar methodological process. It is not so much the content of the story that is being 'iterated' as the method of producing the content.

and his text, but aimed at how I as a practitioner respond to, work with and contribute to this co-construction. In terms of the first stream, the actual life story being told, each of Iterations One through Four deals with its own cluster of episodes drawn from different points on Jacob's time line in *Genesis* (See Appendix Two and Three). The order in which I chose to present them grew out of the ways in which I engaged with the text. Eventually, the choices I made resulted in a chronology which corresponds roughly to the life course in retrospect: the venerable patriarch in Iteration One, the middle life adult in Iteration Two, the young man leaving home in Iteration Three and finally, early days and family history in Iteration Four. The content of these four sessions, while displaying the multi-layered complexity characteristic of co-construction in the counselling setting, coalesces around four basic life story concerns. The following questions represent some key compass points to orient passage through Jacob's life review:

How old are you? (Iteration One)

What is your name? (Iteration Two)

Who are you? (Iteration Three)

Where did you come from? (Iteration Four)

Thus, Iteration One concerns itself primarily with the issues of the older person and his retrospective relationship with his life story. Iteration Two and Three form bookend accounts which explore further the dynamics of adolescent and early adulthood identity formation and the signature events which contribute to it. Finally, Iteration Four explores early family history, attachment bonds, and the 'unfinished

business' which often accompanies another strange confluence in life and in therapy, the meeting up of endings and beginnings.

Although the iterations vary in how they approach, use and reflexively interact with the episodes, their presentation will follow a similar format. This format is designed to facilitate the interweaving of the two streams mentioned above. Each iteration, including the Pre-research Iteration, comprises three parts: an introduction, an imaginary dialogue and a reflective commentary.

Each introduction provides necessary background context and set-up for its imaginary dialogue as well as a discussion of the methodological processes and factors leading to the selection of the episodes. Dealing in depth with the selection of episodes is important to the process of cohering the life story but even more essential to the overall research story because it foregrounds issues of counsellor contribution, how and what I bring to the text from my own horizons. Since my research stance is intentionally interdisciplinary, the introductions vary from one another in the kinds of information they foreground. Their differences represent a wide range of pre-intentions, assumptions, formulations and concerns that I brought to Jacob's story at that point in time.

The imaginary dialogues immediately follow each introduction and are presented as written transcripts that record the flow of conversation between Jacob and me as interlocutors. The dialogue is set out in script form and makes some accommodations to a more vernacular, conversational pacing by the use of ellipses to



indicate pauses or hesitations. Parentheses are used within the dialogues to present nonverbal elements such as gestures, posture, facial expressions or affect. At times, they may also indicate my internal responses to something Jacob has said. In the ongoing fictive recreation of the co-constructive process, the dialogues represent extensive but still only partial transcripts of my conversations with Jacob. Other aspects of his story, gleaned from my hearing and reading of the full story in *Genesis* but not specifically referenced in the dialogue transcripts, will also at times be included as part of the source material.

Each imaginary transcript will be followed by a reflective commentary, which picks up issues relevant to co-construction that have been highlighted or enacted in that dialogue. The commentaries in each iteration function too as an ongoing analysis of the nature and dynamics of the interpretive process set in motion for me when I engaged with Jacob's story. Like the introductions their variations provide a snapshot of the issues that surfaced for me at the time of that particular engagement with the text. They differ from the usual format of a counselling commentary in that they are not limited to the clinical issues that arise in the 'he said,' then 'she said' flow of the transcript. My therapeutic relationship with Jacob remains the paramount focus but, in keeping with the interdisciplinary framework of this inquiry, the commentaries also range across issues of linguistic meaning, literary style, narrative structure and specific features of Biblical textual hermeneutics, such as its cultural and historical contexts. Rather than just an analysis of the way I related to Jacob as client, the commentaries are a means also to evaluate the inchoate, layered and often highly random flow of my inner conversations. As a character in a textual world and

a fictive client in my research, Jacob and I co-constructed meaning from many sources and this too, reflects the multi-layered, highly dialogical reality of counselling practice.

To aid the reader, the transcripts are numbered. Where reference is made in the commentary to a moment or specific utterance in the dialogue, an approximate line or lines notation will be included in parentheses e.g. (35-39). When reference is made to another episode in *Genesis* not specifically addressed in the dialogue but germane to the discussion, a chapter and verse notation will be given. As a further aid to following a story that often includes a complicated mix of Jacob's ancestors, relations and descendants, an abbreviated family tree is provided in Appendix One.

Given the heuristic nature of this research and its attempt to capture some elements of the lived experience of entering into client stories, the presentation of results are inherently *not* linear. The research story being told in these iterations arises from a more organic and fluid distillation of the kind of attending, reflecting, linking up and analysing which characterises the inner dialogue of a reader engaging with a text or a counsellor listening to a client. This basic analogy comparing the flow of meanings between client and counsellor in conversation and the flow of meanings between reader and text in the reading process informs all five of the iterations.

## Chapter 6: Pre-research Iteration

### Introduction

Under the terms of the analogy I have described above, the text of *Genesis* chapters twenty-five through fifty and Jacob, himself, as a character in that text, constitute my principal research participants. There are ethical issues involved in using the stories of any research participant, including the stories of the researcher, herself. Varying levels of reflexivity are now routinely employed in research in the human sciences and especially in the use of life story narratives. Whatever the nature and degree of reflexivity, the use of life story material requires a careful thinking through of ethics. Etherington (2007, 2009) has written of the ways in which research into life stories can blur the lines for participants between therapy and research. She also references studies which indicate a participant's experience of sharing his or her life story in the context of a research project can have a therapeutic benefit. McAdams (1993:252-253) recounts how telling stories of life to an engaged and nonjudgmental listener, even in the context of research, can surface significant emotional intimacy between teller and told and engender 'satisfying...enjoyable ...and enlightening' outcomes. However, it is equally possible that this process of life-story-telling may also trigger difficult memories and surface painful issues for which the research context does not or cannot provide an appropriate context. Frank (2002:16) emphasises the relational intimacy of such work,

Narrative analysis entails extensive ethical obligations. The researcher who solicits people's stories does not simply collect data but assents to enter into a relationship with the respondent and become part of that person's on-going struggle...toward a moral life.

All of which points to the deeply personal aspects of any such engagements with life story material and the importance of constructing a research agreement and context that can contain these fraught potentials. If Jacob and his story are co-participants with me in this project, there is a need to consider: To whom does Jacob's story belong, how am I using it and for what purpose, what possible consequences are there of that use and for whom? Most importantly, does Jacob understand and agree to the therapeutic implications of the dialogue I am setting up with him and his story? This level of informed consent is often difficult or impossible to achieve in conventional, real-life research encounters. The advantage of the imaginary dialogues used here gives greater scope, freedom and ethical flexibility to construct containers which can display, hold and make use of personal life story material and the dynamics it engenders between teller and told.

There are multiple voices in Jacob's text, and various spiritual communities, not least my own, for whom this text is not just a literary narrative, or fictionalised history but a sacred story of immense significance. There is a necessity at the outset to negotiate the terms of my research engagement in ways that will address this issue. I want to begin by negotiating a research relationship with Jacob that takes note of important ethical issues, such as autonomy, justice, and beneficence, which are relevant to both counselling and counselling research (Etherington, 2007; Bond, 2004). For Jacob and me: what are the terms of our relationship, the roles we each will take and how do I safeguard the integrity, dignity, health and safety of my principal co-participant? All of this requires an environment and an ethos that exercise due consideration and

respect for the cultural, religious, gender and other significant differences and similarities between us (University of Edinburgh, 2009-2010).

As would be true for any flesh and blood participant, I am inviting Jacob to take part in this research, not co-opting him. Such an invitation and enlisting of a participant involves informed consent. Not all consequences of any research can ever be definitively known beforehand or perfectly controlled afterward but ethics require that enough relevant information be shared, discussed and agreed so that the prospective participant can make an informed choice. Thus I want Jacob, even the Jacob of my imagination, to understand what he is being invited to do. My meetings with Jacob take place in my own contemporary setting, a counselling space where I have also met with clients in the past. Given the massive temporal, cultural, geographical divide between us, I am choosing my own setting, rather than his as the site for our meeting. Although I will do all I can to negotiate and understand the impact of the differences and distances between us, it is appropriate that I meet him in my contemporary context as this is where I want his text to speak.

As I argued earlier, his text speaks beyond its original audiences and it is here in the twenty-first century Western context of counselling research that I want to meet him. In this setting his story meets up with my clinical experience and my research into the ways counsellors co-construct the life stories of clients. A new joint product, in the form of dialogues with Jacob, as a character in his text, opens up a new horizon. It is the horizon that can be viewed from a particular vantage point — the encounter and exchange between a counsellor/researcher working in a modern day counselling

setting and the life story of a Bronze Age patriarch, inscribed in the pages of an ancient, iconic text. It is a construct, a virtual space and time, but configured in such a way that Jacob and I can carry on a meaningful dialogue with one another.

As a counselling setting it is also appropriate as the voices of my clients and my conversations with their stories will also inform the encounter. These stories will not enter in any explicit or identifiable way but may be part of what I bring to Jacob's story and what his story brings to me. Within the fictive context of this research setting, my first meeting with Jacob takes place when he is an old man. At the point when I have imagined him walking into my research, his text puts his age at one hundred and thirty. The interview takes place a few months after he has made an epic journey, moving his entire household of seventy persons from his home in Canaan to Egypt.

The imaginary dialogue below presupposes that I have sent him a letter outlining my research intentions and inviting him to participate. His son, Joseph, has helped him to read and understand my letter and to send a reply. As a result we have agreed to meet today in my office to explore further what is involved and to inform him more specifically of the purposes and aims of the research. This will involve clarifying both our roles and how we will relate to one another, as well as how the information will most likely be used and disseminated. I want to address any questions or concerns he might have, particularly any consequences he feels the research might have for him or others close to him. At the conclusion of the interview, I hope to enlist his participation and informed consent for the research to take place in this

way. A commentary on some of the issues raised by this dialogue, in reference to my research aims will follow the transcript.

## Pre-research Iteration: Imaginary Dialogue

1. Linda: Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me today and for your willingness to consider participating in this research. I have to say I'm very honoured to meet you in person. I have heard a great deal about you... I mean... I've heard and read your story many times.
2. Jacob: (He bows his head and nods in a way which I experience as a kind of courtly deference) I am pleased to find favour in your eyes. It is God who gives success and I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness He has shown me. But now, *hineni*, Here I am... an old man, with an old man's memories. The time is approaching when I will be gathered to my fathers. My son tells me you want to hear about my life.
3. Linda: Yes...yes, I do. My work for many years has involved listening to people's stories about their lives, what they remember about what has happened to them, how they think and feel about those events now, what meanings they give to the episodes in their lives, and what kind of story that leads them to tell about who they are.
4. Jacob: (His dark eyes flash a look of keen but not unkind scrutiny) Why...why do you do this?



5. Linda: Because I think stories matter. I think the story of anyone's life is sacred, it belongs to a person in a unique way. Sometimes people struggle to make sense of their stories, what happens to them is often painful, difficult, confusing.
6. Jacob: (He nods slowly and deliberately) Alas it is so. I know what it is to be bereft and ponder what cannot be changed.
7. Linda: (Leaning forward) Yes, those things come into all human stories, don't they? But because of that, sometimes people need help to put together what has happened in their lives and answer the questions, What is this part of my story telling me about who I am? How does it link up with the rest of my life? What does it say about what I think or want my life to mean?
8. Jacob: Ah! I see you are an interpreter...these people you speak of...they come to you with their stories...and their dreams?
9. Linda: Well...sometimes dreams do come into it.
10. Jacob: These people may tell you, thus and so happened. You hold these matters in mind for them...like a dream in the night. You *derash*, you search out the messages. In this way, could it be? (he pauses as if gathering his thoughts) ... you may help a man know his name, what his name means, both the name he is given and the name he becomes. Surely then, this is *berakah*, that is to say, a way of blessing him?

11. Linda: Mmm... well... interesting question...Most counsellors might not put it that way...I mean... use a word like 'blessing' to describe what might happen in therapy. A person's name is a very important part of his or her story, for both men and women. We all want to know who we are. Now that I think about it... clients, a few at least, might use that word 'blessing' or something very like it to describe the benefits, what they gain from their stories being heard and knit together differently...and the knowledge this gives them about who they are. *Be-  
ra- kah*, is that how to say it?

12. Jacob: (He nods, smiling at my attempt to pronounce the Hebrew word he has used).

13. Linda: I'm sure *berakah* has special meanings for you that are lost to me in translation...That's the sort of thing I hope we'll be able to talk about later as part of this research project, but for now, just on the face of it, to answer your question. I guess I could say that the idea of 'blessing,' ...hmm...actually, my code of ethics might call it beneficence, is very important. It means to do good and not harm, to work in a way that is in the best interests of the person you are helping. Counsellors have an aim to improve the way in which others experience their life and relationships. In that way I want to be a 'blessing' to my clients, that they end their time with me knowing I have tried to walk with them and that something is better or has grown more bearable because of that relationship, because of the ways we have met one another inside their stories. And I believe

any research in counselling should reflect that same value, it should in some way contribute to the benefit of clients.

14. Jacob: To do good and not harm to the flock you care for. This is the way of *El Shaddai*, the God of my fathers. How will you use my story in this?

15. Linda: Many wise people have studied the way stories are told, what human beings use them for, one idea is that we tell stories as much *for* one another as *to* one another. Stories of life don't just live inside people's heads or exist as unchangeable objects. When they are shared something happens between the teller and the told, this between place is what I want to understand better, especially how I, as the listener, contribute to what goes on there.

16. Jacob: In this *derash* you are doing, this searching...you desire to be a sojourner in the land which lies between us... with me and my story on one side of the boundary stones and you and all your stories on the other?

17. Linda: Mmm...yes... I really like that way of picturing it...and it does get at what I mean. I want to be a kind of resident alien in the valley between us, scout it out, walk its contours, breathe its air...for a while, for a designated period of time. I'm hoping that what we can learn there, together, will help me, and others like me, to be more aware of how we hear others' stories, what we need to be careful about, how we contribute to the new story that takes shape in the space between us.

18. Jacob: A new story? It will be different... a retelling?

19. Linda: Yes, in a way...yes...it will.

20. Jacob: This new story. Whose story is it then? Yours or mine?

21. Linda: I'm glad you asked that. It's an important question. The retelling, whatever shape it eventually takes will come from both of us and belong to both of us. Before you agree to take part I want to make sure you understand what I plan to do with this story and who will read it. As I said, I am looking into what happens when a counsellor listens to a client tell his or her stories, particularly the role the counsellor plays in responding to this narrative, reflecting it back and participating in some level of change in how it is understood and constructed. There is a need for counsellors to examine and become aware of their own interpretive strategies, tendencies and presuppositions...those are rather grand words for the fact they need to know what they are bringing to the table and when and how that affects what they hear... I want this new story, this joint retelling to be useful to counsellors who have an ethical responsibility to listen well... but also it may help all those others in daily life and work who open their ears to the stories of others and want to be better at it...

22. Jacob: (He looks puzzled and perhaps overwhelmed by the amount of information and jargon I have unloaded on him).

23. Linda: I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm talking quite a lot. Do you have questions about what I've said?

24. Jacob: It has made me think...of the ways my story is not just mine. It has never been just mine. There are many ancestral voices that speak in it and to it. My grandfather believed that *El Shaddai* had chosen him to be a blessing, not just to his own family but to all the families of the earth. My Grandfather Abraham was a generous man, a gift-giver. He took great care to instruct his children and his household to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right. It is his story too and I think he would want to share it, as he did everything else in his life.

25. Linda: I hope I will hear more about your relationship with your grandfather. Clearly, he meant a great deal to you...and certainly those values you draw from him, accord very well with my aims in this project. I want to respond to the stories of my clients in ways that are 'just and right' ... for me that means respecting you and your text, being appropriately aware of the many kinds of differences between us, safeguarding your dignity and freedom to make your own choices.

26. Jacob: There are dangers then... in research of this kind?

27. Linda: There are...actually for both of us. There is a level of vulnerability that needs to be understood and negotiated. That's why it's so important for you to be informed about the potential consequences to you and others, for example your friends and family, before agreeing to take part in it. Are there any other concerns you have for yourself or anyone else who might be affected by this research?

28. Jacob: My father was buried long ago ...my Rachel (his voice breaks) is no more... and Leah too is buried, and in any event, the stories of my household are widely known. We have few secrets left and it is better they are told and retold, than hidden. I have had enough of disguises. I am ready. What is to be done? How will you proceed?

29. Linda: The actual method I will use involves listening very carefully to what you say, to how you tell the stories of your life. I will observe and describe how I respond to what I hear, what insights, questions come up for me. I will try to listen to your stories as if you were a client in my counselling practice, the conversations between us will be drawn from your story, even your own words, but they will also at times demonstrate some of the ways I have responded or might respond, if one of my own clients were to tell me something similar. I want to hear and co-hear your story with you but also explore how I cohere it, how I fit the parts of it together as a whole...and how my response might influence you (and by analogy my clients) in how you bring the parts of your story together.

30. Jacob: Taking apart and putting back together. Parts and whole. It seems you want to listen carefully but also ‘play’ with my story.
31. Linda: Mmhmm...that’s exactly what I’m hoping to do, there are others who have written about the ways we understand one another and the value of this kind of play in helping to understand human experience, but it doesn’t mean a kind of free-for-all, anything goes approach, it is a temporary experimenting or ‘playing’ with something, enough like the real thing to yield insights, to ground new understandings but without doing harm.
32. Jacob: Your words are strange to me but this ‘play,’ it seems it might be a kind of vision... like a fire that can be felt and understood in the spirit of a man but will not burn his flesh. I am beginning to see...Yes...I will let my story enter this place you speak of. You may ‘play’ with it, not as a toy or trifle (here his gaze shifts as though surveying some inner landscape) but as the firelight plays against the dark sky, or the sunlight plays on the water...dancing to and fro, revealing and concealing moments of radiance and shadow, (he lifts his head, his eyes narrow as he meets my gaze ) perhaps your eyes will see things I cannot, but my story is my legacy, it is who I am. The text in which I live and move and have my being is not a plaything.
33. Linda: No, no...it isn’t. I want you to know the deep respect I have for it, not just as an ancient story, created and sustained by thousands of voices, over

centuries of time, but also for the faith it points to, the belief in a God who speaks the world of your story into being, who cares for it, sustains it, and yet also appears as a character in it.

34. Jacob: Indeed! *El Shaddai*. You know Him?

35. Linda: Although I do not know Him by the same name as you, and names, as we've already agreed, are very important, ... I think we do share a knowledge, an understanding of Him, as a Person who is with us and for us.

36. Jacob: He is beyond all understanding. No nets can capture Him. My fathers called Him *El Shaddai* because He is mighty as the mountains, the keeper of the starry heavens ...the Rock who has sheltered me wherever I have lain my head... and above all the Shepherd who has guided my steps.

37. Linda: I have never had the experience of caring for sheep out in the open fields in the way you have, and I lack the deep connection that's given you with the natural world, but what I do think I might share more closely with you is that sense of God's presence in your story, perhaps in a similar way to your experience of Him as a Shepherd. For me it might be described as the meeting of my 'I' with His 'Thou,' a relationship which is 'direct, present, mutual and open' ...



38. Jacob: I and Thou... We cannot always expect to know God's name in the way He knows ours. It is a mystery when we meet face to face and it is a long journey to know what is in a name and much struggle on the way. We can be more than one name. We can live in two camps, holding onto old names and yet still grasping at new ones. I am comforted by what you have said and feel more at peace... that my story, its origins and its legacy, will be in safe hands.

39. Linda: Thank you for that. Your trust is really important to me. It makes solid bedrock for the kind of research story we construct together.

40. Jacob: (smiling) Ah...you know already...my history with beds and rocks.

41. Linda: (laughing) Yes, that famous stone pillow of yours has found its way into lots of places, but there is one more aspect of our working together in this way... and we ought to talk about it before I give you the consent form to sign. You've already talked a bit about the multitude of voices in your story and certainly I want to be sensitive to those. There are also a multitude of voices in my story that I want to be aware of too. The inner conversations I have with these voices and positions are very important in how I understand my clients' stories. I want to know more about how these voices and positions operate, influence one another, and most importantly, have an impact on how I listen to you.

42. Jacob: You say 'inner conversations'... To think is to speak to one's self. Is this your meaning?

43.Linda: It's certainly part of it. I'm saying something more than that though... about making sure you understand what roles we both inhabit in this research... how we are positioned in relation to one another. Again making sure the terms of the boundaries we set up are acceptable to you and you understand what consequences they may have. I've already mentioned how at times your voice, parts of your story may sound similar or mingle with other client stories and voices I have known...as much as possible I want to encourage flexibility and spontaneity in how these emerge... not impose them artificially... to have freedom within the structure...

44.Jacob: More of this 'play'

45.Linda: Yes, that's right. It also means I will inhabit different roles and use multiple voices too, my main role will be as a listener to your memories, helping to facilitate a review of your life but that may also include relating to you as a counsellor, helping you with a difficult part of your story as I would with a client or even consulting a supervisor or other sources about how best to do this. I need to check out that you are okay with me relating to you and your story in all these different ways and with those different voices over the course of the research. You need to know you are free to withdraw or change your mind at any time.

46.Jacob: I can see...you do not want me to be deceived about what you intend and how you will use what I ...if I open my story to your *derash*, you are telling me

how you will behave, all the different clothes you will wear. My voice, the voice of Jacob at times may speak for others who desire not to be seen...you want me to be prepared for this...what I hear behind your words is that you do not always know where it may lead. Thus we must set stones in place across our borders and trust one another... make a covenant.

47.Linda: Exactly... something very like that. Is it okay to ...to review what we are agreeing?

48.Jacob: (He folds his hands in his lap and nods, a crisp, polite dip of his chin).

49.Linda: You have offered your story to me and yourself as a voice in it. We have talked through some of the consequences there might be of that for yourself and others. You have agreed to speak and allow me to hear you in a meeting place between us for a finite period of time, according to the methods I have outlined and for the purposes of this research and its prospective readers. I have explained that I will relate to and respond to your voice and your story in a variety of ways, including consulting a supervisor. I have agreed that the values of beneficence, justice, and respect for your culture, religion and other differences between us will guide my use of your story, my retellings of it, and my sharing of that knowledge with others in the future. Do these make good boundary stones we can agree on?

50. Jacob: They are as you have said. May the Lord watch between you and me across these boundary stones we have piled here. I will sign your form...and then we must begin...*bereishit*...at the beginning.

## Pre-research Iteration: Commentary

*Thus the substance of experience is  
what we bring to what we see,  
without our own contribution  
we see nothing.*

Marion Milner (1950:27)

The preceding dialogue introduces, in an inchoate but embodied way, the terms of the conversational play which will characterise Jacob, his text and me as co-participants in this research. In facilitating this introduction, it also brings into play the key elements, that make up the ‘substance of the [lived] experience’ of this research: a ‘between’ place and time of meeting, a negotiated, bounded relationship, a polyphonic dialogue between interlocutors and the narrative dynamics of life story as told to an other. This first dialogue is a praxis-grounded attempt to enter Jacob’s story and his being in that story, respectfully, genuinely and authentically. It is also a way of getting at ‘what I bring to what I see,’ the counsellor’s contribution to co-construction. All of this accords with Stedmon and Dallos’ (2009:4) prescription for good reflective practice which they claim,

is best seen as a successive process of analysing and reanalysing important episodes of activity, drawing on multiple levels of representation. This includes propositional, autobiographical and ethical knowledge yet does not squeeze out the serendipitous and playful potential for learning from our very personal experiences.

However useful this ‘serendipitous and playful’ conversational method may turn out to be, any strengths it has as an embodiment of co-construction must be balanced by

its weakness as a contrivance of my own idiosyncratic construction. This leads to two important caveats for these created conversations with Jacob, which should be acknowledged at the start. The first is the potential of any qualitative research approach, but especially an heuristic, creative one, to stray too close to the borders of solipsism and self-indulgence and in so doing, merit the dismissive indictment feared by all storytellers— ‘So what?’ (Culler, 1997:92). The second weakness may be found in the distance between my researcher-created conversations and those real life-generated conversations that characterise the counselling context.

I will address the issue of solipsism first. As a form of reflective practice, my research is also subject to the same critique which Stedmon and Dallos (2009:1) point out is often levelled at counsellors engaging in reflexive observations on their work with clients. These observations can become ‘narcissistic navel-gazing’ if ‘too inwardly focused’ and too ‘confessional’ in narrative style. Finding the right voice for exploring, disclosing, and communicating the lived experience of being ‘inside Jacob’s story’ has been as much a part of the research process as engaging with the content of his text. In keeping with my emphasis on the dialogical multiplicities present in any intersubjective encounter, it would be more accurate to say the task has been one of finding the right voices, and the appropriate ways to juxtapose and intermingle them with Jacob and his story. This accounts for my concerns about this in the preceding dialogue and my efforts to inform and negotiate with Jacob how I plan to ‘be’ with him in his story, the different roles and positions I may inhabit (43-45). Most importantly it involves gaining his understanding and permission for relating to him as a counsellor to client as well as a researcher to a co-participant

(46-50). Without this, my freedom to bring in my own practice voice/s and the composite echoes of former clients' voices could not be ethically justified.

My presentation and management of all these voices also reflect what Stedmon and Dallos (2009:5) argue is appropriate subjectivity in reflective practice by focusing on the ways in which my 'own agendas, experiences, motivations and political stance contribute to what goes on in work with clients.' Rather than overheated, confessional subjectivity, the focus is on a form of 'meta-cognition...the capacity to think about thinking,' an active and reflective considering of what I am doing and why I am doing it. This cannot be a wholly 'rational, dispassionate affair but involves the clinician both as a professional and a person with her own unique emotional history and experiences which influence the process of formulation' (2009:11). Rober (2005:478) references Anderson's (1997) understanding of reflective practice which stresses the importance for therapists not only of cultivating awareness that leaves their work 'open to question' but also eventually 'consider[ing] going public or sharing out loud aspects of their private inner conversation.'

Bond (2002:133) has written of the importance of bringing subjective awareness into counselling and psychotherapy research in ways that accord with and are able to 'convey the lived experience of this type of work.' He also references the multiple levels of vulnerability to which research of this kind (i.e. that involves narrative creation), can expose the researcher. As I suggested to Jacob in this dialogue there is a level of vulnerability for both of us in allowing our multiple voices to co-construct

this narrative account (25-28). To position myself in an academic prose account, setting out what the phenomenon of co-construction is like, would be more straightforward and safer but it would not, in my view, open up the world of this phenomenon in the same way. This is not to valorise this kind of creative personal engagement or to diminish the validity of other ways of yielding knowledge about co-construction. However, it is to affirm and state clearly my research choice and intention, to make researcher subjectivity, that is both responsive and responsible, imbue and inform how I voice and work with Jacob's story. Thus, it represents an attempt not so much to explain the influence of researcher subjectivity on co-construction as to embody this influence in dialogue.

The second caveat relevant to the creation and use of these dialogues is not a question of their subjectivity and 'who' has written them but rather how far removed they are from the realities of spontaneous co-creation in the therapy setting. Berg (1980:38) has set out the challenges inherent in trying to reproduce the vitality and dynamics of the psychotherapeutic dialogue. He writes,

...in psychotherapy the dialogue between therapist and patient is sinuous, tangential, far from clear, ... the conversation has a divergent course, and it is therefore difficult, at times even impossible to reproduce it, not even with aid of a tape recorder, not even with that of a motion picture (as the latter also discards much of the divergence).

Even accurate audio and cinematic means fail to capture the animated, divergent flow of the experience of live dialogue in the therapy session. It will not wholly yield the quiddity of its unfolding rhythms to sound waves or pixels and even less to



transcription. The preceding dialogue with Jacob draws on his speech and actions in the *Genesis* text, and on my clinical experience of the divergence of counselling conversations but it does not reproduce the reality of two living, spontaneously speaking interlocutors. It is also the case that my enlisting him for research collaboration through dialogue is a completely fictive creation. In the purely etymological sense, fiction refers to a ‘made thing.’ To borrow a trope from poetry, what I am doing in fashioning these dialogues has some of the nature of a poetic ‘conceit,’ which Gardner (1961: xxiii) defines as ‘...a comparison whose ingenuity [may be] more striking than its justness’ and where the reader may ‘concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness.’

Thus at the outset I invite the reader also to enter this dialogical ‘fiction,’ this ‘made thing’ with a sense of the literary license of the poetic ‘conceit’ and in the spirit of Gadamer’s ‘play.’ My dialogues with Jacob are not the real thing, but enough like the real thing in significant respects that accommodations may be made, *mutatis mutandis*, to the significant differences. This sifting of likeness and unlikeness may yield new insights. However, I acknowledge these accommodations may be more awkward for some readers than others. There is often unease, as many trainee counsellors will acknowledge, when encountering some of the artificiality and distance from life inherent in the use of role play as an experiential technique. There is a resistance to the seeming falseness of scripting one’s self into imagined scenarios, but many will concede afterwards, often with surprise, that the outcomes of such a process do produce learning of benefit to practice.

## A 'Playful' Aside to the Reader

The reader, actually that is *you*, the second-person addressee of my research, you are certainly not a generic third-person mass of faceless counselling practitioners. You are the one whose eyes right now are moving left to right across the page and turning these black squiggles on a white background into recognisable words and meanings. You, the 'one' I think I am addressing in all of this, you will have to judge whether 'playful' ingenuity trumps 'justness' in the use of these dialogues, whether they mimic reality well enough to produce a contribution to your knowledge. Though you cannot see my face and I cannot see yours, we are every moment in our writing/reading relationship projecting, introjecting and implying things about each other. As I did with Jacob I am seeking to enlist your participation in this research by explaining its terms and inviting you to engage with these imaginary dialogues and to 'bring what you see' to them. The meaning that matters is the meaning you make, out there in the space between you and this text, whether it reflects my authorial intentions or not. My intentions, conscious and unconscious, will play a part of course, research is always rhetorical. However, the real 'substance of the experience,' what is seen, does not inhere in my authorial intentions but rather in what you, as an active and collaborative reader also bring to the table. I am saying all this because (and here you see how easy it is for an author to 'state' an intention) like Jacob, you are also a co-participant in this research. You are entering with me into a field of 'play' which for a period of time and a duration of words will hopefully show us both something about counsellor contribution to co-construction.

I want you to know what you are agreeing to and that you are free to withdraw at any time.

### More of this 'play'

It is in understanding this very idea of 'play,' a key precept in Gadamer's (1975) philosophical hermeneutics, that Jacob and I have begun the process of co-construction in this dialogue. Attempting to put myself in Jacob's frame of reference, while bringing him and his text into mine, have generated a conversational exchange that has already moved me to a different perception of what Gadamer means by 'play.' Gadamer's complex understandings of hermeneutics put forth in *Truth and Method* are far removed from Jacob's Bronze Age realities. In spite of this distance, Jacob's responses in the dialogue construct or more accurately, co-construct with me, an understanding of another meaning of 'play' which comes from his own embeddedness in the natural world. His insights, drawn from his nomadic, outdoor world of fire and water, sun and sky, which he inhabits more elementally than I do, surface the to and fro, concealing-revealing dynamics which also live and dance in the word 'play' (30-32).

Jacob's way of seeing and my attempt to 'breathe the air' of this virtual space between us open up new perspectives and bring to the foreground the ways in which a dancing fire against a dark sky and the sparkle of the sun on the waves picture and add insight to Gadamer's rather abstract concept of hermeneutical play (17). Jacob brings the firelight and sunlight from the horizons of his world to shine on my

understandings of ‘play’ and those new lights reflect things in it I had not seen before (31-32). In a sense we have co-constructed a new understanding of what ‘play’ might mean in the intersubjective space between us, co-mingling the earthy, geographical features of Jacob’s world and the more abstract, research perspectives of my own. Jacob’s description of what this idea of ‘play’ might evoke for him surfaces meanings for me of an experience akin to fascination, the same fascination that attends my own experiences of gazing into a campfire or surveying a sun-sparkled sea. I am drawn to looking at the concept anew in ways that ignite and inspire reflective thinking. Weinsheimer and Marshall in their preface to *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1975:xvi) argue that Gadamer’s ‘fusion’ or co-mingling of horizons take place in conversations in which the participants ‘“belong” to and with each other, “belong” to and with the subject of their discussion, and mutually participate in the process which brings out the nature of that subject.’

Even as I write this, there is a ‘flash upon my inward eye’ heralding the sudden, unexpected arrival of another visual/textual image, a vision of Wordsworth’s ‘host of golden daffodils...tossing their heads in sprightly dance’ (Wordsworth, 1804/1968). Jacob’s ‘lights’ have conjured up or as it were, ‘lit up’ for me something from my own horizon of meanings— the dancing yellow light of Wordsworth’s *Daffodils* and my own hours spent walking in the Lake District. This experience of the world of Wordsworth’s poetic text and the world of dancing daffodils on the shores of Ullswater also join what I bring to Jacob’s and my mutually constructed understanding of ‘play.’ This points to the serendipity and spontaneity of these imaginary dialogues. Like their real life counterparts in counselling practice,

narratively created, conversational dialogues have an inherent capacity to draw in other experiences, other ‘texts,’ and to put them in ‘play.’ My relationship with other texts and the experiences of life that are intertwined with them are an easily triggered part of what I bring to what I see. This early instance ‘playfully’ revealed for me, how easily intertextuality<sup>25</sup> of this kind can enter the space between counsellor and client. It is a natural, if often uninvited walking companion for the intersubjectivity of conversation. Davey (2008: 721) references the unpredictability of these dynamics of dialogue when he claims ‘Insights emerge in conversational exchanges that interlocutors neither expect nor necessarily want.’ In this instance these insights arose naturally and unexpectedly from my own set of life experiences and texts. As clear examples of my own inner conversation, they are an early reminder in my encounters with Jacob of how suddenly my own horizons can ‘flash upon the inward eye’ and co-mingle with his. Gazing at daffodils, while replete with associations for me, could be an irritating distraction for you, and irrelevant to Jacob and the task at hand. For me as the therapist, the challenge is not to continue ‘wander[ing] lonely as a cloud’ but to heed and manage these unsought images and voices, the visions of the ‘inward eye’ and the voices of the inward ear, and to determine, both in the immediacy of the session and in contemplation afterward, if they are relevant, useful, or in any way germane to the client’s concerns (Wordsworth, 1804/1968:146-147). Rober (2005:492) puts the skill of managing these inner conversations in the context of the dialogical self and not-knowing and concludes, ‘The essential and unavoidable

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<sup>25</sup> According to Moyise (2009), the term ‘intertextuality’ was first used by Julia Kristeva to describe a theory of meaning production in literary works based on the dialogical intersection of texts with each other. The term has been appropriated and used in multiple ways, but here I use it to refer to the way in which my own store of textual references often enters the co-constructive space and exerts an influence on what I hear and how I interpret it.

question for the practicing therapist, then, is, how to use his or her inner voices in a responsible way as a starting point for dialogue, mutual exploration, and joint understanding.'

The preceding discussion will have already introduced some of the ways in which these inner voices may influence co-construction and contribute to the ongoing dialogue between researcher and participant. The focus in this pre-research iteration has been on ethics, negotiation of roles and setting out the appropriate and agreed boundaries for the research relationship. I have been careful to negotiate with Jacob a relationship which permits me to engage with him as counsellor to client (29, 43-46). This creates a space in which his textual voice and the world of his text surface my own inner conversations and allow me to engage with the polyphony of voices and play of perspectives I might encounter in counselling practice. The following iteration begins the actual engagement with Jacob's life story by entering into specific episodes as he looks back on and talks about his life. The ethical necessity of seeking Jacob's permission and willingness for me to relate to him as a counsellor to client in a therapeutic relationship will become apparent in the iterations which follow. It will also become apparent how telling stories of life to an attentive and empathic hearer in a bounded, safe space of almost any kind, shape or size, even a virtual one, can with imperceptible alacrity move both speaker and listener into very human and deeply intimate realms of therapeutic connection.

## Chapter 7: Iteration One

### Introduction

*The sixth age shifts*

*Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon...*

*His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide*

*For his shrunk shank, ... Last scene of all,*

*That ends this strange eventful history...*

Shakespeare (AYL 1969, 2.7. 157-164)

All of Jacob's 'strange eventful history' is chronicled in *Genesis* 25:19 through 49:33. These passages form the primary subject matter and raw material for Jacob's reminiscences which contribute to my ongoing experience of co-constructing with him a narrative of his life story. The dialogue which follows will focus on the immediacy of Jacob's current situation, as he finds himself adjusting to his new life in a new land. A desperate famine and the hope of reunion with his long-lost son have compelled him at the age of one hundred and thirty to leave his ancestral home in Canaan for the grazing pastures of Goshen in Egypt (*Genesis* 45:9-47:11). This set of circumstances marks the point where his story, at least within the paradigm of this research story we are constructing together, begins to unfold. From this presenting context, as is often the case in the therapeutic setting, connections with

other earlier stories will be made, revealing gaps and even fractures which may require re-storying.

### What does it mean to begin?

Very few clients, if any, in the counselling setting, begin their stories of life with 'once upon a time' or 'It all started when I was born in a tent in 2000 BC.' More usually, they begin with the exigencies of their present situation and follow the trail from there. This often leads to a highly discursive surfacing of memories, which are evoked both by the spontaneous, involuntary Proustian route and the more purposely, voluntarily recalled, direct route. Throughout my reading and research engagement, I wanted to keep some semblance of Jacob's story emerging from the text in an intuitive and heuristic way in keeping with the kind of meeting in story that takes place in counselling practice. Given this key research aim of simulating counselling practice as much as possible, I chose not to approach Jacob's life story and his store of memories in a straightforward chronological manner or to interview him using structured questions. Although initially, I read the story straight through and divided it into discrete scenic episodes which unfolded more or less on a linear time line from birth to death, I was more interested in the relationships between themes and episodes and the way moments become momentous in Jacob's presentation of himself and his story rather than keeping to a strict chronology. McAdams (1993: 296; 2001) points to the interplay of two time frames, the synchronic and diachronic, in the narrative work of self-understanding and identity formation. Human beings construct identity, narratively, in psychosocial milieus through and across time but there are key, synchronic moments on the time line which McAdams designates as



‘nuclear episodes.’ These represent ‘subjective memories of particular events, in particular times and places, which have assumed especially prominent positions in our understanding of who we were and...who we are.’ They are not so much points on the time line as salient balloons which may constitute, ‘high points, low points, and turning points in our narrative accounts of the past.’ Singer and Salovey (1993) convey a similar emphasis on synchronic moments in the life story and use the term, ‘self-defining memories’ to characterise reminiscences which are ‘vivid, affectively charged, repetitive, linked to other similar memories, and related to an important unresolved theme or enduring concern in an individual’s life’ (cited in Singer and Blagov, 2004:232). Early in the process of engaging with Jacob’s story for this research, a particular scenic tableau emerged from the time line and configured in a way which clearly resonates with both McAdams’ and Singer and Salovey’s conceptual categories. How this happened for me as a reader and hearer of Jacob’s story will be discussed in the next section.

### Selection of Episode

My choice of episode for my first encounter with Jacob’s story rose directly out of my early experiment of ‘playing’ with the text by extracting all of Jacob’s direct speech from it, beginning with his first words in *Genesis* 25:31 and ending with his last death bed speech in *Genesis* 39:42. In reading through this narrator-excised version for the first time, I had a sense of Jacob’s voice emerging in a more immediate, authentic way, less as a literary construction and more as a person with feelings and perspectives on his own story. Jacob’s voice rather than its textual

chronology seemed to be propelling the story and this gave rise to a fresh, new reading and a meeting with Jacob in it, in a way I had not done before.

My attention was drawn to Jacob's words in response to Pharaoh's question, 'How old are you?' in *Genesis* 47:7-10. This speech is delivered in a momentous scene which takes place, soon after Jacob arrives in Goshen, seventeen years before his death. His son, Joseph, who has carefully negotiated and staged his family's move to Egypt, brings his father before Pharaoh to present him to the monarch. At that early point in my reading of the story I was using the *NIV* translation of the Hebrew text (Barker, 1985). In that translation Jacob responds to Pharaoh by saying 'The years of my *pilgrimage* are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the *pilgrimage* of my fathers (Emphasis mine).'<sup>26</sup> I was drawn to these two sentences in the text; but that is perhaps too mild a word to describe the way in which this particular statement, made by the elderly Jacob looking back on his life, *pulled* me into the story. With a sudden pathos and reality Jacob himself, leapt out of the text in a new way, with an intimate immediacy which none of my many previous readings had surfaced.

I experienced in that moment some of what Frank (2000) has suggested is a story's propensity and power to call out for relationship, to invoke, evoke, or provoke a response. Those two sentences, read in that context, gave rise to strong affect, meaning and a standpoint from which to view the story. There is an interdisciplinary

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<sup>26</sup> In the *JPSB* (Berlin, Brettler, and Fishbane, 2004) translation of this verse, 'pilgrimage' is translated as 'sojourn,' a subtle difference in connotation that will be explored more in the commentary that follows the dialogue.

connection here which connects McAdams' 'nuclear episodes' and Singer and Salovey's 'self-defining memories' to the powerful poetics and narrative art of the Biblical text. Alter (1981:63) speaks of the ways in which a Biblical narrative may create what he terms a 'narrative event.' This occurs,

... when the narrative tempo slows down enough...to discriminate a particular scene; to have the illusion of the scene's "presence" as it unfolds; to be able to imagine the interaction of personages...together with the freight of motivations, ulterior aims, character traits, political, social, or religious constraints, moral and theological meanings, borne by their speech, gestures, and acts.

This scene in *Genesis 47* took on some of this kind of dramatic 'presence' for me. I had a sense of taking up an observation position in the throne room and viewing this scene as through a proscenium arch. The scene's action moved from the past to the present tense, perhaps highlighting the shift from *when* this happened (its diachronic moment) in Jacob's past, to its momentousness, *how* it happened and what it has come to mean for him since (its synchronous significance). In that moment of being present in Jacob's story, I watch as Alter says, 'the illusion of the scene's "presence" as it unfolds.' I see Jacob's grey head, his slumped shoulders, his wrinkled hands clutching his walking stick, a slight tremor in his gait as he shuffles across the elaborately ornamented floor. Joseph supports him tenderly and solicitously, helping him up the marble steps to where Pharaoh sits in splendour upon his golden throne. Jacob nods and bows, and pronounces his double blessing upon Pharaoh. I see the look of bemused interest on the face of Pharaoh as he asks the polite question often asked of the very young and the very old, 'How old are you?' From my vantage point at this moment, I imagine the scene 'as if' I can see, hear and feel Jacob's inner responses. My sense (and it is very much my own sense) is that for Jacob it is as if

Pharaoh's question comes from a very long way away. There is a moment, a long pause as the question hangs in the air. Jacob's eyes, always clear and sharp, turn glassy and seer like. His body turns slightly as if he has caught sight of a long corridor into the past and he pauses for a long backward look, the retrospective gaze of reminiscence. The voice that answers Pharaoh seems to come from somewhere far away and is spoken to someone else.

This kind of 'narrative event' or dramatic engagement with some scene the client has described may happen at any point in the counselling process. However, for me at the beginning of my project, this micronarrative and its brief, poignant expression of reminiscence became an early focal point. I am calling this two sentence story in *Genesis 47:7-10* a 'narrative' because it fulfils the elemental criteria of 'someone telling someone else that something happened' and the Aristotelian dictates of a discernible beginning, middle and ending (Herrnstein-Smith, 1978, cited in Bennett and Royle, 1995: 45). It is content that has sequence, time flows through it, and on some level it is possible to make tacit, causal or thematic connections between its elements. The nature of these connections is subject to Ricoeur's 'surplus of meaning' and multiple, even conflicting interpretations but there is something in the configuration that signals an evaluative explication is being made for how these elements are related to one another. A one hundred and thirty year span of life has gone by, been lived and experienced by a human agent with a voice and he is characterising the train of events in this span as 'few and difficult' and not equal to the lives of his fathers. And thereby, in these few words hangs a tale.

Reading the narrator-excised version of Jacob's voice led to a kind of 'meeting' which positioned me in a new relation to him and to his story. Who is this man and what is his story about? Could it be that I am hearing the story of a 'wounded storyteller' whose long life of 'pilgrimage' or 'sojourn' has not turned out as he hoped? Could it be that this has led him to unfavourable, and perhaps even depressively inaccurate comparisons with his forebears? Entering this micronarrative I experienced a fleeting but powerful glimpse of what Jacob's macronarrative might be like.<sup>27</sup> Did I choose this bit of his text to home in on or did it call out to me in some way? In either case, my interpretation of it is an assumption that becomes part of the ongoing hum of my 'inner conversations.' Like many early assumptions in hearing the stories of a client, if held too tightly it may blind me to other things. At the beginning, I have made a supposition about what kind of story it might be, who Jacob is in it and the territory, I think, we might need to explore further. My particular 'reading' of what any client tells me about a life event may and more often, may *not* reflect how the client experienced that episode or the meaning he wants to take from it. The tableau I created in my mind's eye above is rooted in the context of Jacob's story and what he says and does, but it is also liberally endowed with my own imaginative constructions. On one level I am being 'true' to the text, but I am also elaborating this moment in Jacob's life in ways that derive very much from my own horizons. My interpretive elaboration may owe more to Cecil B. DeMille and Andrew Lloyd Webber than anything Jacob intends or

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<sup>27</sup> Hardtkke and Angus, 2004:249) use the term *micronarrative* 'to identify the prose type stories told in the therapy hour,' and the term *macronarrative* 'to refer to the client's life story which he or she implicitly and explicitly describes and reconstructs over the entire course of the therapy relationship.' The ways in which these micronarratives are thematically ordered is important in understanding 'the structure of the overall macronarrative.'

wants to foreground. In any event, it was a moment of meeting that provided an early horizon for viewing the text, pulled me in, *in medias res* and became a focal point for my sessional reading of this part of Jacob's story. This can be correlated directly to the counselling setting where a word, phrase, or story picture can become powerfully salient, in an early session and my own response to it whether disclosed to the client or not, becomes a focal point for how I may, consciously or unconsciously, begin to shape him and his story.

## Iteration One: Imaginary Dialogue

[Jacob has arrived early today. We exchange a few pleasantries and he begins by giving me a description of what his living arrangements are like in Goshen and the way his family is settling in to their new surroundings. A partial transcript of our conversation begins below just after he has told me about his meeting with Pharaoh.]

1. Linda: I was really struck by your answer to Pharaoh's question, 'How old are you?' ... The length of your life is extraordinary, all you have seen and known, but you characterised the days of your life as 'few and difficult.' That took me by surprise and actually made me feel sad that your life seemed so bleak and barren to you at that moment. I wondered where you were and what you were seeing when you said that?
2. Jacob: Much had happened in too few days for me to catch up with myself. First came the news that Joseph was alive. My heart went numb...I could not take it in...I would not believe it ...my dead son alive and ruler of all Egypt? Who would believe such a tale? But my sons who had seen him and spoken to him recounted all Joseph had said to them, even then I did not believe them...but when I saw the wagons and the provisions Joseph had sent for the journey, then my spirit revived and I began to hope again, but still I was very afraid to go down to Egypt.
3. Linda: What frightened you?

4. Jacob: My grandfather had a dread of what would happen to our family in the land of Egypt...a great, dark dread. He forbade my father to go there and now that was the very place I, a grandson of Abraham was headed. Before we crossed the borders of Canaan, I was still filled with many anxious thoughts. I prayed to *El Shaddai* and offered sacrifices to Him at Beer-sheba, my father's old home. That night God spoke to me in a vision... 'Jacob! Jacob! Fear not to go down to Egypt. I Myself will go down with you to Egypt and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph's hands shall close your eyes.' This promise spoke *shalom* to my fears. So I set out from there the next day and resumed our journey with my whole household, seventy of us. Seventy!
  
5. Linda: So there was a history of fear about what might happen to your family in Egypt that made it difficult for you to move in that direction. Given that background, it makes sense you would be very anxious, but the vision and what God said to you, gave you a lot of reassurance, that you weren't alone, that He would be with you. By that stage, there were seventy of your family travelling together.
  
6. Jacob: Yes, seventy including all the children God has so graciously given me.
  
7. Linda: That was quite a troop. Tell me, what was the journey like?
  
8. Jacob: It was a journey unlike any other, the little ones laughing and running beside the wagons, mothers scolding, the dust and smell of the flocks and herds



on the road, Benjamin and I clinging to the sides of the cart as it bumped along. I had only one thought, only one desire, 'My son, Joseph is alive. I must go and see him before I die.' And then after a long time on the road, I heard the sound of hooves, and the wheels of a chariot, approaching at great speed. Suddenly through all the dust and haze and heat of the day...I saw as in a dream, my son, Joseph, my lost son... alight from his chariot, like an agile deer springing out of the mist toward me. We fell upon each other's necks, we could not stop weeping, we could not breathe for weeping. At last I could die in peace knowing I had seen for myself, my son *was* alive...and then...so soon, a few days only after that, I stood before Pharaoh's throne, in his marble halls, leaning on Joseph's arm.

9. Linda: That is an amazing story, physically, emotionally, spiritually, there was so much going on and as you say, it was a great deal for you to take in, in a very short time.

10. Jacob: ... for an old man it was too much... my life, all these things that happened to me came flooding back, like a parade passing before my eyes, but not in their place. They came as patches and remnants of old cloth, oddments, pieces I had forgotten... and others I longed to forget.

11. Linda: Were those the thoughts that came to you, when Pharaoh asked, 'How old are you?'

12. Jacob: Yes...all the days of my years ...they suddenly seemed so few...like a handful of sand, that slips through the fingers and is gone. I thought of my father and my grandfather and what they would think to see me and my family pitching our tents in Goshen. This is not where I thought it would all lead when I sought to seize the birthright and the blessing from my brother so long ago, but here I am, in Egypt, a frail old man who must summon all his strength just to stand before Pharaoh and pronounce a blessing upon him...and I know I will never leave here...only my bones will ever return to Canaan...this much God has promised me, but it is not how I thought my story would end or where I thought my youthful dreams would carry me. Few and difficult have been the days of my life. And as I stood before Pharaoh and leaned upon my son's arm, the weight of all that had passed and what had not come to pass, the end so near and the beginning so far away... I did not know ...I could not answer...How did I get here?

13. Linda: Mmm...Again, so much to take in. Let me share with you what I've heard so far so that you can let me know if I'm following what you're saying. Egypt is not where you wanted your life to end up. It sounds like there was a moment when you looked back and your life seemed a parade of patches, remnants, that seemed out of time, out of place, that didn't measure up to what you think your fathers would have expected of you and what you yourself dreamed you might be...too few days and too many difficult things...Pharaoh's question somehow connected you with the length of your life, the span between its end and its beginning. It's made you wonder, 'How did I get here? How does

the span of my life and where I find myself now compare to the spans of my forefathers and what they achieved? What would they think of me?

14. Jacob: Yes...There are so many difficult, evil things under the sun and I have seen too many in my too brief sojourn upon the earth.

15. Linda: I'm thinking about the story you told just now, about Joseph's disappearance, all those years of mourning, believing he was dead and then suddenly for him to reappear, alive and well, and thriving, that must have been one of those very difficult things for you to manage.

16. Jacob: There were two...two very different tales to bring together and still more treachery.

17. Linda: I don't want to intrude into that if you don't want to talk about it just now, but I'm wondering how you have gone about bringing those two stories together...and if you would want to say a bit about it.

18. Jacob: We agreed I would open my story to your *derash* and these two tales are part of it. What shall I say? The sun rose that day like any other...the day my son disappeared...

19. Linda: What was that morning like for you? Before you realised anything was wrong.

20. Jacob: I had sent Joseph off to see how his brothers were doing and how the flocks were faring. That wasn't unusual. Though he was only seventeen, just a boy, I thought he needed to learn the life of a shepherd, so he had been helping his brothers, his half-brothers Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. He would bring back reports to me about them, almost always bad. I knew they were disgusted with all his bad reports about them, they could not even bring themselves to greet him or speak *shalom* to him. But it was his dreams and his talk of his dreams that really wrought them up. It had been troubling me too...a great deal...What would become of him with dreams like that?

21. Linda: His dreams were disturbing?

22. Jacob: Their meaning was too plain, too full of hubris. He dreamed of gathering sheaves in the field, his own sheaf stood erect and all the sheaves of his brothers bowed down to him, later he dreamed that the sun, moon and eleven stars also did obeisance to him, this was too much... Were I and his mother and all his brothers to bow the knee before him? Did he think he should rule over his own father? I rebuked him about it and kept the matter in mind, but I could never stay angry with Joseph for long nor he with me. When I sent him off that day, he went with such a willing spirit, '*Hineni*, Here I am Father. I am ready.' I watched him walk away across the fields, his beautiful coat catching the light, the breeze wrapping it around him as he walked and I remember thinking what a handsome lad he was, how like his mother, like a wild colt on the hillside, I watched him until he disappeared over the hill.

23.Linda: When did you first realise something was wrong?

24.Jacob: It was much later that day, after the evening meal, I saw them, the brothers, walking into the camp carrying something, all huddled together, quiet, too quiet, deathly quiet, they usually returned with a great din and clamour, shouting greetings and calling out for food and drink but not that day. I looked and did not see Joseph with them. I wondered why he was not there. Had he made them angry again with his foolhardy talk of dreams? I thought they might have left him behind to find his own way home. Poor, foolish boy, I determined in my mind I would have another word with him when he got home.

25.Linda: But the unusual silence and not seeing Joseph among them alerted you that something was wrong.

26.Jacob: Yes, as they drew nearer, a sense of foreboding rose up in me, then I saw Dan and Naphtali cradling something in their arms, at first I thought it might be one of the lambs from the flock, then as they drew closer they held it up and I could see the folds of Joseph's tunic (he recoils and takes a deep intake of breath and then raises his arm in front of his face as if fending off a blow)...there was... there was a stain...a dark stain like the blood of grapes...

27. (We sit in silence for two, maybe three minutes. The image of the stain seems to fill the space between us. I do not know where this has taken Jacob but there is a

kind of unspoken understanding between us that the stain requires these moments of somber witness, in which we gaze steadily at it and do not look away)

28. Jacob: (stirs in his seat and looks up) the coat...my gift to him...

29. Linda: It was the coat you had given him? Do you want to say more about that or what happened then?

30. Jacob: (He doesn't acknowledge my question, but as if rehearsing a scene from a play, he launches into a dialogue which I feel is only marginally addressed to me) They said, 'We found this.' They held it up to me and asked me to 'examine it.' Examine it! I seized it with both hands and held it to my face, I felt the weight of the cloth and smelled the sweet smell of my son, still lingering in the folds of the garment...my son...there was the robe that had graced his body that morning, but it was empty...I tore my own clothes, rent them apart with my bare hands (he grabs the folds of his long woollen tunic and twists the fabric until his knuckles whiten). I couldn't find him. I kept clutching the robe, to find something solid, my son's limbs, his strong arms, so strong for a boy his age, like a bowman's... I kept grabbing at the tunic, searching its folds over and over like a madman, but there was nothing...empty... I screamed then...a red fury and blindness passed before my eyes and I heard the savage growls of a wild beast...the flash of fangs and teeth and slavering jaws...I felt its hot breath...tearing, devouring...my son...my son... Stop!...stop... make it stop...

31. Linda: (I am concerned Jacob is dissociating, re-living this moment in the present rather than narrating it as an event in the past, I call his name gently but firmly) Jacob...Jacob...that must have been a very shocking and distressing moment for you, ...it's a powerful memory that's still very alive with the images, emotions and sensations you experienced at the time... trying to put it into words has brought it back, in a way that feels too much like reliving it...it's important eventually to put it into words so that you can put it away more securely so that it doesn't ambush and frighten you like that ... in the meantime, something that may help is to say to yourself, out loud 'That happened *then*, this is *now*.' Take a moment just now and say that to yourself, 'That was then, this is now.'

32. Jacob: (He remains silent, slumped forward, his eyes open but not seeing his surroundings).

33. Linda: (I don't think he has heard what I've said or registered it, so I repeat my words in the same tone) Jacob...Jacob...what you're seeing and experiencing was then, this is now. We're sitting together here in my office today. The sun is streaming through the window...Can you feel its warmth on your face?

34. Jacob: (He stirs slightly in his chair and looks down, his eyes seem to focus on his feet).

35. Linda: You're sitting in your chair and I'm sitting in mine. You've been experiencing something from the past and now we're going to ground ourselves

in the present. One thing that helps some people do this ... maybe you'd like to try it...I want you to focus your attention on the soles of your feet, press them into the floor quite firmly like this. (I demonstrate the posture I am suggesting), now feel the sensation of your feet meeting the solid resistance of the floor. Try doing that just now.

36. Jacob: (He looks dazed but follows my suggestions, pressing his sandals into the carpet on the floor, the muscles in his jaw tighten and there is a slight movement of his toes as the weight shifts to the balls of his feet).

37. Linda: Yes...like that...get a sense of your feet and what it feels like for them to be connected to the ground...keep your feet firmly planted there... and then I want you to have a look around the room.

38. Jacob: (he looks up and slowly surveys the room as if seeing it for the first time).

39. Linda: Now, you've had a look round, can you tell me what colour the walls are?

40. Jacob: ....Green...they're a sort of green...or grey, ...like the rolls of Egyptian cotton in the marketplace.

41. Linda: Yes, that is a good description of the colour. Now, I know this may seem strange and even a little foolish but it's a way of bringing yourself, your thoughts



and your feelings back into the present. Would you tell me?...just say it out loud...What is your name? and how old are you?

42. Jacob: (He hesitates for a moment, still looking at the walls of the room and then down at his feet again) I am Jacob, son of Isaac. The days of my years are one hundred and thirty.

43. Linda: MmHm...Where were you born? and where do you live now?

44. Jacob: I was born in Canaan and now...now I live in Goshen, ...in the land of Egypt.

45. Linda: Yes, that is your name and where you live now and you have been telling me a story about something very painful and very shocking that happened twenty years ago.

46. Jacob: Yes, it was twenty years ago... I have never spoken of it that way before. It was not something I could speak of to anyone. They...my sons and their wives, they tried to comfort me but I paid no heed to their words. Useless...all useless...what did they know of my sorrow?... I wanted only to go down...down to the grave, mourning to my son in Sheol. I wanted only to die of grief. I bewailed my son...I do not know for how long...it was many, many days.

47. Linda: You thought he was dead, lost to you forever.

48. Jacob: I never expected to see him again. Those were very dark days.

49. Linda: What was the worst moment for you?

50. Jacob: It is strange ... it was not the moment I saw the ...um...the stain... It was remembering Joseph on the hillside, and his words, 'Here I am, *hineni*, I am ready.' Knowing I ...his father...sent him off to his fate, I asked him to go ... the sweet willingness with which he said 'Yes, I am ready.' The memory smote me like a knife.

51. Linda: The love, the trust between you, your pride in him ...

52. Jacob: (Slowly nodding) My heart was bound up with him and I sent him to that terrible fate. For what? an errand of so little substance...to know how my cursed sheep were faring?! For this I sent my own choicest lamb to the slaughter, that thought devoured me every day and troubled my dreams at night.

53. Linda: You thought it was your fault.

54. Jacob: I have been so often deceived in my life, these evil things always happen to me. It is always me who is bereaved. I sought the blessing but it is the curse that has befallen me. I was his father, a father should protect his household...he was the joy of his mother's eyes... He has her eyes...I see her face always in his... In the days of my grief, what wounded me most was hearing my own voice

over and over saying to Joseph, ‘Your brothers are at Shechem. Come I will send you to them.’ How I longed to... to take back those words, to blot them out! Oh, if only I had never sent him from me, to have kept him always by my side...I...I alone bound him to that fate. I might as well have tied the cords myself. I sent him to his ‘brothers’ who I knew very well were wrought up with him...and toward that cursed Shechem of all places...I should have known...

55.Linda: I wonder how you could have known what would happen that day...or how you could have prevented it.

56.Jacob: I should have seen...

57.Linda: seen what? the future? (Softly, tentatively) How many people can do that? Is that something your *El Shaddai* requires or expects of you?... Do you think?

58.Jacob: No...I do not think so...no one but the Most High can see where all paths lead, and *El Shaddai* does not always tell us His ways. Sometimes it is all a man can do to put one foot in front of the other not knowing where he is going...but...

59.Linda: ...just so... one foot in front of the other, maybe you were doing the best you could with what you knew and could see at the time.

60.Jacob: What I did not know...that would fill many scrolls.

61. Linda: Yes for me too, for every human being. There are things we do not know and cannot foresee. We cannot protect our children forever. At some point we have to send them off to their own fates. Maybe you had helped Joseph to be ready for that day... and what happened after, maybe you had prepared him in ways you're not aware of right now.

62. Jacob: (Shaking his head, adamantly, he dismisses my suggestion) I cannot see any of those ways...Still...there is something I did know...it troubles me greatly...I knew what it was to be the unseen son, the un-favoured offspring of a father who had eyes only for my brother. I have known the envy and rage of brothers, that death and the desire to kill lurk in the shadows, crouch at the door, even in the tents of a man's own household. No one knows this better than I... yet I sent my own son into the jaws of this beast.

63. Linda: It was a different kind of beast than you first imagined.

64. Jacob: Yes...but a devouring beast nonetheless, ...his own brothers! His own flesh and blood! Deceit and treachery!

65. Linda: And you think...what you know...what you've experienced of what brothers are like, the rage and hatred that envy can spur to action, you feel you didn't use this knowledge to protect your son from...

66. Jacob: Can their evil have no bounds? Could any human being hear a boy's cry of anguish and not be moved to mercy? To cast him into a pit, to sell him into slavery, to watch him be bound with ropes and then hold out their hands, not to deliver him but to grasp the filthy silver coins of the slave traders...How can this be? Their faces of mock grief...when they knew...they *knew*...they witnessed the woe which overtook me, which brought my white head down to the grave... and they stood there...and said, Nothing!

67. Linda: It's so hard, ... impossible for you, ...for me, for anyone to make sense of how they could do that, and it must have been very difficult in the aftermath of your joy at seeing Joseph alive... to discover that ...that there was a...this different story, a hidden story about what had really happened to Joseph that day.

68. Jacob: I have been seized with trembling and sorrow that such a thing could happen in my household. This second story is more shocking than the first...and so shameful...their intentions were only evil toward their brother. He has paid the price for their evil and... and for my folly and blindness.

69. Linda: I wonder...the person you are most concerned about, the one who bore the brunt of all this, who was affected the most, what would Joseph say about what happened that day? He's had a lot more time, twenty years, to come to terms with this, it's not a new story for him, whereas you've only heard about it very recently. I wonder how he might tell the story from his point of view, both

at the time and now all these years later. It might help to hear what it was like for him.

70. Jacob: (He draws back, and cocks his head to one side as if startled by a sudden sound. He murmurs something under his breath. It sounds like it might be a Hebrew word but I can't make it out).

71. Linda: Sorry, I didn't hear that.

72. Jacob: I said, *Ephraim*. It is the name Joseph has given his son, his second-born son. It means in Hebrew, 'God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.' Perhaps...perhaps there is another story, I have not yet heard. There is wisdom in what you say. I will speak to my son...I think the time has come...to hear his story...all of it.

[End of transcribed portion of this session]

## Iteration One: Commentary

*Our perception of the situation we are facing in the moment  
depends in part  
on what we sense our story  
as a whole  
is all about.*

Randall (2011:27)

Jacob's situation in the moment has elicited a seemingly melancholy and morose sense of what his life story as a whole has been about. At least this is how *I* heard what he was saying from my own particular vantage point at the beginning of the previous dialogue. His current evaluation functions for me, at this early stage of our encounter as a kind of overarching 'metanarrative' and a potential galvanising theme for how he is perceiving his life story. Otasuke et al. (2004:195) define metanarrative as the 'overarching story that organizes our life.' These authors equate it with other designations such as Hardtke and Angus's (2004) 'macronarrative,' McAdams' (1993) 'personal myth' and McLeod and Lynch's (2000) 'story of the good life.' McLeod (2004:357) places the process of 'metanarrative repair' and the 'construction of an alternative metanarrative' as a central task in psychotherapy, even when the client and therapist may not be 'consciously aware' of this taking place.

My first exchange with Jacob in the dialogue above shows how obviously and perhaps blatantly, I have brought my counselling context and its perspectives on such tasks as metanarrative repair into the conversation. I characterise his answer to

Pharaoh's question as 'a bleak and barren' summation of a long and eventful life and encourage him to elaborate on what he means by it (1). In reflecting on this now and especially in light of the impact Jacob's reply to Pharaoh had on me, I am struck by what a major lexical leap I have made from Jacob's adjectival choices, 'few and difficult' to my own, considerably more gloomy descriptors, 'bleak and barren.' My interpretive retelling appears in retrospect as a far more extreme imposition of my own standpoint than when the words simply flowed out in the writing of the dialogues. My 'utterance' here has already exerted some power in positioning Jacob and myself in relation to this part of his story, his statement about it and its impact on the whole.<sup>28</sup> Although the descriptive judgment I offer him, is softened by an attitude of tentative, exploratory curiosity, my presentation of my response to what he has said is still highly directive and laden with my own assumptions. By proffering what amounts to an alternative perspective, I am also presenting a muted challenge to the way Jacob may be perceiving his story as a whole and the conclusions he has drawn about the meaning and significance of what he calls his 'sojourn.' His statement in reply to Pharaoh represents my point of entry into his story but not necessarily where or how he would want to begin himself. Behind my

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<sup>28</sup>Harré and Langenhove (1991:398) locate positioning theory in discursive practice of all kinds, including counselling conversations. They theorise that 'within a conversation each of the participants always positions the other while simultaneously positioning him or herself.' I am using the term to refer to the ways in which a counsellor and client may engage in positioning one another in a conversation in terms of 'the moment-by-moment negotiation of meaning' (ibid., 362) Harré and Langenhove emphasise this usually happens tacitly and unintentionally but exerts a powerful influence on what 'position' each takes up in the ongoing dialogue. In the case of the utterance I have made that Jacob's account of his life seems to me a 'bleak and barren summation' I may have unwittingly positioned myself as an authoritative interpreter of meaning and him as mistaken or lacking insight. Winslade (2005) argues that these positions can be accepted, resisted, refused or changed by either party and will also be impacted by wider external discourses. In this case one of the external discourses influencing me would be prevailing, contemporary counselling theories on what fuels depressive states in older populations.



offering of a personal response to his statement and my subsequent query about it lie my therapeutic assumptions that firstly, this is the most salient presenting issue in his story and secondly, that such a pervasive, negative attribution is not conducive to his mental well-being. I have interpreted his statement as a form of what Freeman (2011:3-4) refers to as 'narrative foreclosure,' a moment when the elderly storyteller feels 'the weight of the personal past' in such an 'oppressively burdensome' way that narrative capacity becomes frozen and 'there [seems] no way of revivifying [the] story.' Freeman talks about how the older person caught in this kind of impasse is rendered mute at the end of life. There may be a 'conviction that it is simply too late to live meaningfully' (ibid.,13). Jacob could be experiencing something like this but it may turn out to be that the sense of oppressive burden and potential 'foreclosure' I hear in Jacob's statement are more mine than his.

However, what is apparent at the outset of our dialogue is that I am offering him a perspective of his statement that strongly suggests it should be explored and mined for its meaning to him, its correspondence to past and present reality and its ongoing usefulness as a galvanising theme for his story. The therapeutic advisability of taking this particular tack is an assumption that comes from my counselling context and its discourses, including the research insights on narrative gerontology I outlined earlier. These insights, it now strikes me, amount to a very significant set of presuppositions that I bring to what I see, particularly shaping my expectations of what might be going on for an older person like Jacob when he states something like this. I also realise how much I am bringing my own clinical experience of working with depressive rumination and observing its stultifying effects on a client's view of self

and the world. From these horizons, my early choice of an entry point into Jacob's story makes sense and is therapeutically defensible. It is a contribution to the interactive construction of meaning taking place between us that arises from my clinical experience and theoretical understandings and it is in ethical accord with the research relationship we have agreed. The reader will perhaps notice, as I have done, how quick I am to bring in the voice of 'professional' counselling discourse to defend the choice I made. It is another early example of the way creating this fictive dialogue revealed the entourage of influences and discourses that can swirl around even a simple, two-word, affective counsellor response to a bit of client text.

It also highlights how different my counselling horizons and its discourses are from Jacob and the world in which he must construct his meanings. Although I cannot enter the environs of his contextual world and experience it as he does, I can give ongoing thought and awareness to what his assertion might mean for him in the world he inhabits.<sup>29</sup> Just as both Jacob and I brought our idiosyncratic understandings of 'play' into the space between us in the pre-research interview, the space between us here will also need to foster a co-constructed understanding of at least some of the components of this very significant utterance he makes in *Genesis* 47:9. Some kind of bridge between our perspectives needs to be built, undergirded by a hermeneutic approach which makes an effort to be aware both of what is

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<sup>29</sup> Ibrahim (1984:163) emphasises the necessity for this kind of ongoing reflection, aimed at the 'philosophical perspective and world view of the client.' She argues this provides insight into the nature of the issues facing the client, their meaning to him or her and the 'alternatives available to the client within his or her cultural context.' It also provides the counsellor with 'guidelines...in terms of ... goals, process, outcome and evaluation' (ibid., 166).

coming from my own horizons and what may be coming from Jacob's. There are multiple trestles which might help to build and support this kind of bridge but only a few will be discussed here.

First there are obvious linguistic and lexical ambiguities in working with any client who is not only from a different culture but also sharing his very personal story in a second language.<sup>30</sup> Some of these lexical ambiguities and the issues raised by them are apparent in this particular utterance of Jacob's and require deeper reflection. A few of these will now be examined using some of the hermeneutic and lexical resources available for this purpose. I begin with Jacob's use of the word 'sojourn.' Sojourn is the English word selected by the *JPSB* translation to denote the Hebrew noun, *ger*. My initial reading of the text in another translation (*NIV*) used the word 'pilgrimage' to denote the same Hebrew word translated as 'sojourn' in the *JPSB* version. The Hebrew noun *ger*, is elsewhere, variously translated as 'refugee,' 'resident alien,' 'immigrant' and 'stranger' depending on which textual version is consulted (Jobling, 2009: 315). There are very significant, yet highly nuanced differences in interpretive associations between these English word choices for the same Hebrew word which impact my understanding of what it may mean to Jacob.

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<sup>30</sup> In some sense even those clients with whom I share a 'native' language could be viewed as speaking languages 'second' or 'foreign' to me since the meanings of words and word usage even in the same semiotic system are deeply impacted by psychosocial factors, regional accents and conversational context. Even after many years living in Britain, my American-learned English can still surprise me with its nuanced differences, causing momentary lapses in client/counsellor negotiations of meaning even with fellow, 'native' English speakers.

For example, in my own array of cultural and personal associations, the word ‘pilgrimage’ and its chief cognate, ‘pilgrim,’ summon a motley crew of diverse images: from the literary (Chaucer’s tale-spinning troubadours and Bunyan’s ploddingly stalwart Christian) to the religious (the Jew of King David’s day making the thrice yearly ascent to Jerusalem, the sari-clad Hindu bathing in the waters of the Ganges, the Muslim on Hajj striving toward Mecca). Each of these pilgrims and the pilgrimages they undertake embodies a ‘spatial’ metaphor, life as a journey from one place to another. Whether it be toward Canterbury, the Celestial City or Mecca, all pilgrims travel some sort of road. Ultimately, although often circuitously, this road leads ever on toward some kind of spiritually meaningful destination. In most cases, it is an arduous, foot-sore journey, through dangers, toils and trials that reflect and shed light on the inner journey of the self. De Lange (2011:58) considers Bunyan’s, *Pilgrim’s Progress* ‘the archetypal model of modern narrative identity’ in which a person’s risks and choices ‘throughout the total trajectory of his [or her] life course’ determine the sense he or she makes of that life. De Lange summarises the metaphorical dynamics that are then set in motion between the image of the pilgrim journey and the individual’s narrative identity: ‘The meaning of his life is given by the pilgrimage he undertakes. Who he is will be revealed after he has completed his earthly voyage.’<sup>31</sup> This link between pilgrimage and identity formation, how a person perceives himself or herself being retrospectively bound up in the kind of

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<sup>31</sup> Nearing the completion of an ‘earthly voyage’ also represents a key moment for retrospective evaluation in Jacob’s understanding of his own pilgrimage or sojourn. In evaluating the meaning of the ‘good life’ or ‘happiness’ in the world of Jacob’s text, MacDonald (2012:66-67) makes the point that in this ancient culture ‘whether a life could be judged good or not could only be ascertained at the very end.’ Multiple descendants and a ‘happy old age,’ could only be accumulated and assessed at the end of life and these are the essential markers of a good life in *Genesis*.

journey they have been on and where it has led, has some resonance for me with how I am experiencing Jacob and his relationship to his story. It also calls to mind a quote from Nietzsche, whose spiritual viewpoint, although worlds away from Jacob's and mine, still accords deeply with how I engage with and entertain the idea of pilgrimage as a synonym for 'sojourn.' Nietzsche writes, 'The essential thing "in heaven and earth" is...that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something that has made life worth living' (1907/2003: Sec 188).<sup>32</sup> This life journey metaphor of Nietzsche's, a 'long obedience in the same direction,' has a poetic and spiritual appeal for me and conjures images of the many roads that traverse the stories of the patriarchs. Jacob and his forebears have travelled long pilgrim roads on the way to becoming who they are and this sense of the word 'sojourn' may have some mileage in understanding what Jacob means by it.

However, from a contemporary lexical and cultural vantage point, pilgrimage as a journey toward a goal may also elicit less exalted associations. The sublime, the ridiculous and all the shades in between may co-exist in any word picture the counsellor tries to paint for herself in trying to understand the meaning of a client's utterance. The life as journey metaphor, it could be argued, has been diminished and made more banal by its overuse in modern Western culture where it is a commonplace for all and sundry reality show contestants to refer to the 'journey'

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<sup>32</sup> The link between Nietzsche's statement and a Biblical view of pilgrimage is elegantly made by Eugene Peterson (2000) in his translation and commentary on the Psalms of Ascent, appropriately titled, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*.

they have been on. Some life as journey metaphors may have more gravitas than others. This co-existence of multiple associations within a single word highlighted for me a recurrent, idiosyncratic weakness in my interpretive style. Listening to my inner conversations and taking a keen look at my own contributions to narrative co-construction in this dialogue reveal a tendency to be swept away by the beauty and power of words, at times over-thinking and over-idealising their associations. The above reflections alerted me to the importance of holding my own, sometimes elaborately constructed interpretations of a client's meaning, with the proverbial 'grain of salt.' It may be useful to entertain them as part of my inner conversations inside and outside the session, even sometimes checking them out with the client, but always labelling them as the indeterminate, contingent, subject-to-revision interpretations they actually are.

Eventually as I sorted through all my inner associations with what Jacob might mean by sojourn, I held on to some of my initial sense of it as a pilgrimage toward a spiritually significant destination. I continued to hear echoes in it of Nietzsche's phrase, 'a long obedience in the same direction,' but I also sought a more nuanced and culturally informed picture of what Jacob could mean by it. I considered again and 'played' with other translators' attempts to denote the Hebrew word *ger*, including some of those I listed above: 'refugee,' 'resident alien' and 'stranger.' Like 'pilgrimage' each of these designations evokes a similar diversity of images, associations, denotations and connotations, drawing in other very different nuances such as disaster, flight, 'landlessness,' displacement, transience, alienation and the necessity of living for an extended time in a land that is not your own. In some of

these translation choices, the connotations suggest the impetus for movement from one place to another seems propelled by choice, determination, or resolve and in others such as 'refugee,' the movement seems compelled by exigency. Some, all or none of these connotations may be helpful in understanding the meaning this word has for Jacob. There are whole worlds within a word and it is easy to get lost.

Thus I turned to guides more familiar with the territory of Jacob's text and its world. Kennedy (2011) has studied the role of 'sojourn and ethnic identity in the ancestral narratives of *Genesis*.' She makes the point that in this particular passage (*Genesis* 47:7-10) the chiasmic arrangement of the text puts the concept of 'sojourn' at the very centre of what Jacob is saying about himself and makes it exactly equivalent with the 'days of the years of his life.' 'Sojourn,' she says, 'is an actuality so prevalent in Jacob's life that it is appropriate to generalise it as a descriptor for the whole of his life' (2011:228). It is the 'shape' his life has taken and a profound part of his identity. It is not just an individual identity which my contemporary Western mindset naturally focuses in on first, but also an ethnic, collective identity; who he is as part of a people or tribe, not just who he is as a person. It is an appellation that connects him, profoundly and inseparably with the life stories of his father and grandfather. They too were sojourners who lived out the days of their years in sunrise-sunset segments, all the while, *not* grounded in a land that was their own, but following a promise of who they might become and what it meant to be a bearer of

blessing. Jacob's revered grandfather, Abraham, his father, Isaac and even his sons are somehow all embraced in the meaning his own 'sojourn' has for him.<sup>33</sup>

As Kennedy suggests the meaning of sojourn may be seen as both temporal and spatial but it is not so much a pilgrim road which takes them to 'actual localities' but more an 'attitude or orientation' toward a *telos*, a goal put in place and ultimately secured by the promises of God. However 'unsettled' Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob may be geographically, they each bear the privilege and responsibility of this sense of divine calling, not just to receive the promises of blessing for themselves and their descendants but to *be* a blessing to others outside these tribal boundaries. Despite their individually different experiences of sojourn there is for Jacob's ancestors and himself, a pattern, 'a curiously ambiguous relationship to promise and fulfillment' and the role of blessing bearer which must be lived out and evaluated (*ibid.*, 228). Thus 'sojourn' could also be a word and a self-designation which speaks powerfully to Jacob's 'curiously ambiguous' and universally human experience of living both in space and time. From the tents of Canaan to the pastures of Paddan-Aram, from the stones of Bethel to the banks of the Jabbok and back again, he is a man of border crossings and transient passages through spaces, entering, exiting, leaving, returning. All the while, the days of his years, the past, the present 'now' and what remains of the future gather up and converge in an understanding of himself and his story, centred on this personal and ancestral identity as sojourners and blessing bearers. There is something in this range of meanings across time and space which puts me in

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<sup>33</sup> The narrator gives the designation of sojourner to both Abraham and Isaac (*Genesis* 35: 27). Jacob's sons also identify themselves as sojourners when they stand before Pharaoh (*Genesis* 47:9).



touch with the weight or heft of freight this Hebrew word *sojourn* carries in Jacob's life. However sincere my efforts may be to capture its meanings, my understanding of it will remain partial and in some ways very indistinct. In spite of this my effort to engage with its meaning has at least given me a more circumspect awareness of its presence and prominence in his story as well as the family matrix of which he is a part. Whatever depth and breadth of meaning his sojourn has for him, it is a world-in-a-word that I need to ponder, respect and leave open to new insights.

This extends also to his assessment that the years of his sojourn have been 'few and hard nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns.' My professional standpoint originally perceived this statement as a 'barren and bleak' summation, an overly negative view of his current situation which was inappropriately skewing his view of his life as a whole. Also I was concerned that his locus of evaluation was inappropriately fixed on a sense of not 'coming up to the life spans' of his fathers. He seemed to be saying there was some mark he had missed. My inference from hearing his statement was that he was inaccurately and unhelpfully comparing himself to his forebears' life achievements as well as their longevity and that he would benefit from reality testing this assessment a bit more. However, in the process of dialoguing with him about his life, rather than just reading his story as a text, I experienced his original assessment in new ways. Perhaps it was because in the ebb and flow of our exchanges, I had a sense of 'sojourning' more intimately with him inside his story, a reading with him rather than about him, that altered my way of hearing and seeing.

## New ways of hearing and seeing

The first alteration or new way I heard Jacob was in relation to what he might mean by ‘few.’ Although he could not know it at the time he says it, his calculations, comparing the life spans of his fathers to his own are technically accurate. He is one hundred and thirty years old as he stands before Pharaoh. Even though he will live another seventeen years to die at the age of 147, this will still fall short of the life spans of his ‘fathers.’ Abraham died at 175, ‘a good, ripe age, old and contented’ (*Genesis* 25:8) and Isaac also ‘in ripe old age’ (*Genesis* 35:29) was 180 when he died.<sup>34</sup> Longevity in chronological years was an important evaluator of success and God’s blessing on a life in Jacob’s world (King and Stager, 2001). For these ancient sojourners, length of days ripened life to a wholesome, fruitful maturity. So it makes sense, by the measures that matter in his world that Jacob would evaluate his life span in this way and perhaps conclude that his experience of sojourn was briefer and lacking in some way compared to Abraham and Isaac. It also suggests the ways in which I may be valorising Jacob and not allowing him the freedom to feel the weight and consequences of his own choices in the manner most authentic and useful to him.

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<sup>34</sup> The unusually long life spans attributed to the patriarchs in the *Genesis* account may be perplexing for modern readers. There are parallels in other ancient Mesopotamian documents such as the Sumerian King List. Levenson (2004:20) suggests this may be a reflection of the writer’s rhetorical purposes in emphasising the ‘grand scale’ or legendary status of the heroes of the past. Wenham (2000a) points also to the complexities of Babylonian mathematics which used the sexagesimal system or base 60. In this scheme the ages given for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob form an exact and recognisable mathematical pattern. Interestingly, the age given for Joseph’s death links it with Egyptian culture, which saw 110 as the ideal life span. All of which may indicate life spans in the text serving significant rhetorical purposes.

However, the record in *Genesis* reveals and the dialogue above also reflects a tendency for Jacob to see his life as already over, to see his death as more imminent than it actually turns out to be.<sup>35</sup> Goyal and Charon (2011:66) point out the ways in which the older person must negotiate a more end-of-life oriented relationship with time. They compare it to wading into a river — the person’s experience of time is determined by his or her position in it, that is ‘how far into the river’ they think they have gone and their perceived distance from either shore. Jacob’s present perception sees his progression into the river as coming very near the opposite shore, the exit marked death. This makes for a strange and seemingly counter-intuitive calculation of time, what Goyal and Charon call the ‘contradiction between the lasting and the fleeting.’ They argue, ‘By the time of old age, the contradiction seems to shift dramatically toward the fleeting,’ when the limitless expanse of years once envisioned by a younger self are ‘eroded by the pain in the hip, cataract-clouded vision...’ and in Jacob’s case all the other ‘hard’<sup>36</sup> things he has endured. The fewer

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<sup>35</sup> The *Genesis* text also stories some of the near end of life preparations and circumstances for both Abraham (*Genesis* 24:1- 25:10) and Isaac (*Genesis* 27). Abraham’s personal deliberations or feelings about nearing the end of his life are not overtly disclosed in the text but his thoughtful, prayerful and expedient plans and provisions for his heirs are detailed. In contrast Isaac’s physical blindness and infirmity are highlighted in the text in a way that emphasises his spiritual failings and the less admirable foresight he shows in meting out his inheritance to his sons. Like Jacob, Isaac perhaps sees his death as more imminent than it is. Nearly twenty years will transpire between his seeming near-death handover of his ‘blessing’ and his actual death (*Genesis* 27; *Genesis* 35:28). Wenham (2000a:xxix) suggests the time frame could even be longer, as much as forty-five years for Isaac and thirty-five for Abraham.

<sup>36</sup> This word, drawn from the Hebrew word *rah* has interesting nuances in translation. Strong (1894:109, n7451) lists a range of possible synonyms in English: adversity, affliction, calamity, distress, harm, wretchedness, and sorrow. All of these carry the idea of painful difficulty but its etymology may also be associated with the idea of evil. The same root is used in *Genesis* 37:20, 33 to describe the ‘evil beast’ which Jacob assumed had devoured Joseph. ‘Hard’ (or ‘difficult’ in the *NIV*) things may be sinister threats to life as well as arduous tasks or painful losses. Jacob was well acquainted with all of these.

days Jacob foresees in his anticipated future, the more the past pileup of sunrises and sunsets seems to shrink to a 'handful of sand.' Yet this is not a wholly negative vantage point for the older person as Goyal and Charon (ibid:66) assert, 'The deepest fears and the broadest comforts of ageing human beings emerge from the poles of contradiction between the lasting and the fleeting.' It may be it is important for Jacob to express his 'deepest fears' about where he finds himself now before it is even possible for him to contemplate, much less draw upon, any of the broad 'comforts' which may lie ahead. I realise now in wanting to help him story his life, I have underestimated the reality and truthfulness of his statement, 'few and hard have been the years of my life.'

This realisation led me to look back at the text again with Jacob's words here as the lens and to reconsider the parade of events from a different vantage point.

Eventually, my response was to make a list of those events and circumstances I thought Jacob might be including in his current 'few and hard' assessment. I was surprised by the length of the list and the compounding of significant trauma; but more so by how all my previous readings of his story, while not overlooking the catalogue of difficult things he had endured, still had not fully engaged, affectively and personally, with just how hard this man's life had been. Through this process of re-reading with this different lens, something about my relationship with him changed, subtly but palpably. I still held my professional and clinical assumptions about his depressive state and its possible antecedents and potential consequences; but that was now tempered by a more embodied identification with his suffering and a stronger sense of giving him the dignity of his own interpretations, of trusting his

own innate wisdom to see and say his own truths. Ryff (1991:293) posits a view that the older person's negative self-evaluation may reflect pragmatic and useful realism rather than an overly pathological negative rumination,

When most of one's life is in the past, and the future holds countless unknowns regarding health and life expectancy, there may be a shift to erring on the negative side, that is, to having quite pessimistic views that may, paradoxically, help one brace for an uncertain future.

Jacob is the seer ('see-er') of his own life and his voice and vantage point here deserve a more tentative, watchful witness from me. This means not 'settling' so determinately on interpretive ground I may need to move away from later. Just as 'there is never a single fixed, final or true life story to tell, nor a single way to tell it,' there is also no theoretical insight, set of protocols or counselling model that constitutes a 'totalising narrative' which sees all and explains all (Botella and Herrero, 2000: 410).

A second way that my hearing and reading of Jacob altered through the dialogue was a heightened awareness of the significant cultural, contextual and spiritual issues at play in how he sees himself, not only as an individual, but also as the head of a family and a tribe. Jacob's future and that of his family are uncertain and from his vantage point, as a new-comer to Egypt, very precarious. Our dialogue above reveals a family history of great unease about what may happen to them in this place (2-4). Joseph's careful remonstrations and scripting of the family's presentation to Pharaoh imply how fragile their welcome into this new culture actually is. Their arranged and officially sanctioned (even amply funded) immigration must be handled with circumspect behaviour and language to insure the family will have a safe space

to live and carry out their customary employment (*Genesis* 46:31-47:7). Pharaoh is clearly very well-disposed toward his vizier, Joseph, but there are clear indications in the text that the wider Egyptian culture and its traditions are not as well-disposed toward the ethnicity of Jacob's family.<sup>37</sup> How safe does the client feel in his own skin and in the social and cultural context in which he has to live outside the counselling room and its not so containing walls? Contextual issues outside the therapeutic setting matter a great deal and the client, himself or herself, usually has a better intuitive and practical grip on these than the counsellor. History will prove Jacob's fears to be well founded. The very next chapter of his family story, the Book of *Exodus*, will see 'A new king [arise] over Egypt who did not know Joseph' (*Exodus* 1:8). A long and cruel slavery awaits this family in the future. As a twenty-first century reader of this text, I know Goshen is not the last ethnic ghetto into which this family will be herded. Prejudice, persecution and pogroms of many kinds will follow and beyond these, the shadow of the Holocaust casts its foul shades over the 'safe space' I have tried to put in place for Jacob and his story in this research setting. These shadows speak to me of the importance of taking seriously the fear of harm and the heightened sense of vulnerability which many ethnic minorities and members of marginal groups feel. The threat of annihilation is a theme which surfaces again and again for Jacob not as a neurotic anxiety or some kind of cognitive distortion but as a contextual reality. Again I am impressed with how important it is to acknowledge and reaffirm Jacob as the authoritative

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<sup>37</sup> The narrator provides this cultural information in two incisive asides, one in *Genesis* 46:34b where he informs the reader, 'For all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians,' and earlier in *Genesis* 43:42 where he says, 'for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to the Egyptians.' Abraham's fears for his family's future in Egypt are revealed in a dream in *Genesis* 15: 11-14.

experiencer of his own life. He sees, feels and knows things about what it is 'to be' inside his world and his own skin that I do not. This insider knowledge also provides a cautionary tale for counsellor contribution to co-construction. It reminds me how frequently my perspective does not sufficiently take into account the subtle and often invisible (to me at least) issues in the client's context, those shadowy but very real undercurrents of how he is positioned in his world, what he senses, knows, anticipates and lives with on a daily basis that I cannot see.

Conversely, there are other things in his context that I *can* see that are equally important in understanding Jacob as co-participant with me in this research story. Our co-construction is impacted not just by my new insights into the very real dangers and fears Jacob faces in his cultural context but also by my renewed awareness of the sources of comfort and reassurance that arise from his spiritual beliefs. These sources are both implicitly and explicitly apparent in the way he tells his story. Jacob's faith is not merely an aspect of who he is, as though it were some kind of adjunct life choice, it is woven into the very fabric of his reality and imbues both the parts and the whole. What is it that has held him together in the buffeting winds of hard and difficult events that he says characterise his sojourn? It is not so much a *What* as a *Who*. There is another Person in his story whose presence and voice are strangely unobtrusive and undemanding but very powerful and empowering nonetheless. Jacob's spirituality, his reliance on the God who repeatedly appears and speaks to him at key moments of transition and uncertainty, is a personal reality for him and a heritage deeply inscribed in the witness and life experience of his forebears. Given the long span of years in the family history, these

epiphanic moments of meeting with God are surprisingly few but they are always momentous and frequently result in reassurance about the next step on the journey.

Jacob shares one of these moments in the dialogue above, a time when he hears God's voice as he camps by his father's well on the borders of a country he is frightened to enter (4). What holds him here, and perhaps assures a sense of his own and his family's continuity of existence and identity, is the voice of God and a promise of His presence even to the very end— 'I, Myself will go down with you' (*Genesis 46:4*). To this, is added a tender and poignant promise that it will be Jacob's own beloved son, Joseph, whose hands will close his eyes. Even in this dark hour of uncertainty, Jacob's faith gives him a vision of his own end—the divine and deeply trusted Companion who will go with him and the safe pair of much loved human hands who will care for him at the last. This moment of meeting and hearing God's voice at the well provides for Jacob, not absolute prescience that every contingency is now under control, but a safe enough vision of the future for him to step across a threatening border. He knows he will not be alone. Jacob's development of his own wisdom over a lifetime of 'few and hard' things always contains within it this faith in the benevolent, nurturing and reliable presence of the ultimate 'Other.' Jacob knows he does not possess any God's-eye-view himself, but he firmly believes he knows and can gain reassuring access to the One who does. This holds him in many dark places. Though much of his world remains foreign to me, this aspect of his spirituality feels more like common ground. He is a Hebrew male from an ancient age living long before Moses and the Law and I am a Christian woman living in a post-modern, increasingly secularised world, but we share a



similar monotheistic view of a personal and present God who cares what happens to us. Whatever kind of jointly produced research story this unlikely alliance eventually produces, it will contain, at least, something of this mutuality, Jacob and my shared belief that we are not alone.

It is in reflecting on all of the above, both the implicit and explicit elements in Jacob's story, the seen and the unseen, that his words 'few and hard' begin to take on less pathological tones for me as lenses to view his life. In their place an appreciation for Jacob's innate, deeply spiritual but also hard-won, learned-in-the-school-of-life wisdom, begins to grow. It is this quality of wisdom that Erikson heralds as the outcome of the final stage of his life cycle transitions, the struggle the older person must wage between Integrity and Despair. Cappeliez and Webster (2011:184) describe eloquently the nature of this kind of wisdom. Their description accords well with how I hear and experience Jacob at this point.

...critical life experiences are the forge within which wisdom is cast. Life events including loss, fear, anger, and related negative emotions require evaluation, analysis, and eventual assimilation if they are to serve as lessons learned, rather than as triggers of chronic, destructive rumination. Wise persons not only grow through and beyond such negative vicissitudes but also share their hard-won insights with others.

As I continue to bracket some of my early assumptions about his sense of what his story is all about, it leaves more space and quiet to see and hear still other new aspects of his experience to which I had not been attending. I am impressed now with something I took in before but did not fully acknowledge. This was his capacity, after all he had been through, to summon up the strength, words and wherewithal to pronounce *twice* a blessing upon Pharaoh, a man whose power in that

moment, at least by most worldly measures, far outstripped his own. However, in this moment as in much of his life, Jacob is aware of his unique spiritual heritage, an inheritance of the promises of God. Being a blessing bearer is an integral role in this legacy and means a great deal to him. I begin to see, whatever else may be true about him, Jacob is a man who is not done wrestling with his destiny yet, even if he is not fully aware of it himself. There is significant personal agency left in this somewhat frail old man and a narrative voice which while muted by sorrow and difficulty can still speak. He is still able to summon strength for the tasks that matter to him. Jacob's agency, displayed in this moment before Pharaoh, foreshadows for me the flowering of voice and perspective that will be revealed seventeen years later when Jacob delivers his climactic and poetically beautiful last will and testament (*Genesis* 49:1-27). The words he has for his sons, although a decidedly mixed bag of both accolades and accusations, are words that are insightfully 'appropriate' or fitting for each one. In these words, the long latent poetic voice of this 'mild' (*Genesis* 25:27) man makes out of a 'barren and bleak' wilderness, something akin to bounty and beauty. This change seen now in this way is a reminder for me of the space I try to inhabit with every client. There is more to his story and more to him than any therapeutic theorising can possibly discern.

In spite of what seems to me now a too directive positioning of Jacob in terms of the focal point I have chosen at the outset, none of my anxieties about this seem to faze him. While I inwardly muse over whether I have too blatantly constrained or directed his reminiscences, Jacob launches into his story with an energy and openness that surprises me. It may be that the level of trust and the negotiation of a

working relationship established in the pre-research dialogue have forged a good enough bond to withstand the possible threat my initial challenge to his viewpoint might hold for him. The importance and resilience of this trust is tested sooner than I expect as the session continues. However, it may also be the case that Jacob simply does not notice that I have called his statement 'bleak and barren.' Even if he has heard what I said, he may think my response irrelevant and has just cast it aside. While I have been carefully dissecting it in my inner conversations with my professional self, his storyteller self seems to dismiss it without a qualm. He has a story to tell, his way, and he has been given and/or taken the floor. The recognition of this quite plausible possibility makes me smile. Seeing it in retrospect gives my counsellor grandiosity and its sometimes over-precious internal processing the deflationary jab it deserves. Yalom (1989) chronicles with characteristic humour how often the counsellor's inner conversations and agonisings on behalf of the client bear little resemblance to the client's actual inner response or his concerns. This speaks again to co-construction in that it reminds me I have both more *and* less influence on the client's story than is readily apparent and the nature of that influence is always subject to review.

I do not share any of my inner conversation about all this with Jacob in the dialogue but continue to track with him. Two basic listening skills, reflecting the content and feelings in his account and summarising them, lead to more disclosure (5, 13).

Initially I thought this basic empathic tracking might lead to a further engagement with how he was interpreting and comparing himself to his father and grandfather. I thought this might be a way to explore the evaluators he was using to compare his

sojourn to theirs and that a more nuanced and realistic investigation of this might be helpful to him. As part of my reflective work on this aspect of his story I had re-read those sections of his family history that shed light on the actions, speeches, achievements, foibles and flaws of his grandfather, Abraham and his father, Isaac. In doing this I discovered some striking parallels and differences which I thought might interest Jacob and bring more nuance to his view of himself as the weak link in the patriarchal chain. Would he, for instance, be surprised to learn that the first time his revered Grandfather Abraham's voice is heard in the story, it is to ask his wife to tell a little white lie? In fact, the lie is *not* promulgated to protect *her* (it will in fact, significantly endanger her) but to save his own skin. Abraham endangered his wife this way, not once, but twice (*Genesis* 12:11-20; 20:1-13). Abraham's son, Isaac (Jacob's father) was guilty of a similar deception and was caught, literally in *flagrante delicto*, perpetrating the ruse (*Genesis* 26:6-10). The 'fathers,' these family heroes of Jacob's were great men, worthy of honour and homage, but they also had clay feet. I thought some perspective on this might be helpful to Jacob.

Try as I might, the flow of the conversation, as I wrote the dialogue would not cooperate with my pre-session insights and expectations of what would be helpful. I tried to introduce these insights but on some liminal level Jacob's contributions to the conversation, drawn both from his actual speech in the text and my imaginative gap filling, would not open a space for them. This particular dialogical exchange would not conform or succumb to my intentions, however well-meaning and informed they were. Experiencing this dialogical intransigence to my authorial intentions spoke to me of another value to hold in mind in understanding how I contribute to narrative

co-construction. Pre-session and out of session study, reflection and work on the client's behalf are professionally important and valid but should never become air-tight agendas to be enacted in session. Accepting the possibility that conversations, especially those in the counselling room, have minds of their own, implies they may also have some intrinsic, jointly produced wisdom about where to go next. If the information and insights I have seen and formulated beforehand would be useful to Jacob at some point, then they may enter the frame in some other way and some other time. If not, it is best they do not enter at all. Harm can be done by shoe-horning even the most benevolent and well-meaning formulations into the sacred space of a client's story of life, not only because they may not fit but also because they may crowd out other stories which hover on the margins and struggle to come to speech.

### The Unforeseen, Unbidden Emergence of Trauma

Although I hold the trump card as principal creator of this research story, I am and can only ever be a temporary visitor in Jacob's story. He lives there all the time and knows its contours better. It may be that his concerns in the moment direct our steps not to comparisons with his forebears but rather to a further exploration of the 'hard' and 'evil' things he has endured. The extent to which it is actually Jacob, the text, me, some external discourse, or all of the above which 'direct our steps' is not clear. *Who* is actually leading *Whom* by *What* means, *Where* and *How* in any conversation is an ongoing issue of co-construction for which the lines of demarcation are neither straight nor straightforward. For now, there is something about Jacob's obdurate

focus on the ‘few and hard’ things of his life that hints at a story that has not been told. Does he want to bring something to speech which his own ears have not yet heard? Does he want me to hear something, yet unsaid, about these ‘few and hard’ things? This painful struggle to put into words, to symbolise the ‘unspeakable’ is the disturbed, uneasy but natural home of trauma sufferers and the tales they seek to tell (Herman, 1992). In my clinical experience, a client’s terseness of speech may often be a defence against traumatic material, as if these sharp and acrid shards of fractured memory could be held at bay by tying them back with a tight knot of few but very flinty words. This terseness and sparsity of narration may build a wall of protection that works well enough, but not perfectly. Flashbacks, like lightning strikes, take little notice of such barriers and sometimes even the tiniest trigger, can summon their full strength. Herman (1992) and many other contributors to trauma treatment literature point to the value of finding words and a coherent narrative for fragmented trauma experience. This supports the move from random, raw re-experiencing of the event to ‘thinking’ about it which Garland (2004:37) describes as

the ability to represent events to oneself mentally in a way that enables them to be looked at without being plunged once more into the feelings of it’s-happening-all-over-again...a flashback.

Unless the trauma sufferer is able to gather up all of the bits of highly charged sensory and embodied imagery and include them where they fit in the memory of the event, the trauma story remains in Herman’s view, ‘barren and incomplete’ (1992:177). Such ongoing un-narrated, split-off fragmentation and fracture often means traumatic re-experiencing will continue.

My clinical experience working with trauma, the paucity of narrative detail in what I called Jacob's 'bleak and barren' summation of his life, and my early presumption and characterisation of Jacob as a 'wounded storyteller' may all be factors in why the dialogue took a turn in the direction of trauma and dissociative symptoms (26-36). This kind of sudden emergence of a dissociative response happens in counselling practice and potentially could occur even in counselling research interviews. Trying to walk with and within another person's story, especially the tales of a story teller as wounded as Jacob, is a riskier business than it may seem at first. Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995) have written movingly of trauma's capacity to outwit and overwhelm even a wary, experienced counsellor. Research in narrative gerontology suggests clues for why Jacob's grieving process may have remained 'stuck' for so many years and why unprocessed trauma may have lain dormant and unspoken for so long. Kaltman and Bonanno (2003: sec 5.2) posit that 'bereavement subsequent to violent death is associated with higher levels and more enduring distress than bereavement under more natural circumstances.' In Jacob's history, both his wife's death in childbirth and Joseph's presumed violent death in the jaws of a wild beast fit this scenario.<sup>38</sup> Although I was very familiar with the presence of these two episodes in Jacob's story before writing the dialogue, I had no conscious plan to write them into the content of Jacob's reminiscences here.

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<sup>38</sup> There are other examples in the story where violence and threat of death are very viscerally enacted for Jacob. Chief among these are his brother, Esau's threats to kill him (*Genesis* 27:41-45) and much later in his life the horrific genocide perpetrated by his two sons on the people of Shechem (*Genesis* 34). The latter story which involves his daughter, Dinah, will be discussed further in Iteration Four.

Sparsity of narrative detail is also reflected in the portion of the *Genesis* text that stories the moment when Jacob sees the bloodstained coat for the first time. This brief tableau in *Genesis* 37:32-35 shows the blood-on-their-hands brothers feigning ignorance of Joseph's fate. They ask their father if he can identify the coat as Joseph's and Jacob cries out, 'My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!' None of my previous readings had ever entertained a scenario where this moment in the story might become the charged content of a flashback. It was only when I read this part of his story from the standpoint of a research into narrative co-construction that this way of filling the gaps in the story occurred to me. More accurately, it was only as I wrote this dialogical exchange that this way of seeing and configuring Jacob's pain emerged and cried out to be heard. I certainly had not engaged beforehand with the visceral trauma elements (i.e. teeth, jaws, slavering, growls, tearing flesh, texture, weight, smell of the coat's fabric) inherent in the episode until they emerged, unbidden in the dynamic, to-and-fro of conversation. While this emergence illustrates the power of narrativity and dialogical voices to surface new ways of hearing and seeing, it also points to the importance of my initial contract with Jacob and the agreement we negotiated about my inhabiting a therapeutic counsellor role as well as a researcher role. This means we have already built into the research relationship, an appropriate and ethical containing support for this contingency. I note in re-reading the dialogue that I clearly give him the opportunity to opt out of talking about this story, but I am not sure whether that is sufficient to insure his complete freedom to do so (17). I have experienced a kind of 'courtly deference' from him before and I know that his agreement to 'open my story to your *derash*' is a commitment that he takes quite seriously (18). On the other



hand, working with trauma over many years has taught me that it has many diverse and idiosyncratic triggers and can emerge even in the midst of seemingly very innocuous and neutral contexts. Whether I could have foreseen and forestalled its emergence or not, and whether I should have done so are, in the immediacy of the session, somewhat moot points. A traumatic memory has arrived and so must be met with an ethical response that seeks to do no harm.

In suddenly being confronted with this trauma material and Jacob's dissociative reaction, I was aware of an experienced, clinical self awakening to the needs of the situation and springing into action. I had a sense of, 'I wasn't expecting this but I know what is happening here and what to do.' Most counsellors who have worked with dissociative episodes will recognise the debriefing techniques I make use of in the session, working with the emotions, visceral images and thoughts which accompany Jacob's flashback and seeking to ground him in the present moment (31-45). Some of my interventions here grow out of my experience of critical incident debriefing<sup>39</sup> with groups and individuals who have suffered traumatic events. Two specific examples used in the dialogue above are firstly, rewinding the client to the time immediately preceding the trauma and beginning the narrative story there (19, 23) and secondly, posing the question (49), 'What was the worst moment?'

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<sup>39</sup> Critical incident debriefing is a format originally introduced in the 1980's for first responders and emergency services workers. It was designed to help reduce the long term effects of exposure to traumatic events. The techniques used have been described in various models (Dyregrov, 1989, 1997; Mitchell, 1983; Mitchell and Everly, 1993; Tehrani and Westlake, 1994). There is significant research to show that those who receive debriefing after a traumatic event report that they find it helpful. However the technique has been criticised for being unhelpful or potentially harmful when the debriefing takes place too soon after the trauma, is too brief (less than an hour) and is conducted by an insufficiently trained or inappropriate debriefer (Lovell-Hawker, 2004).

Often encouraging the client to identify the ‘worst moment’ yields insights into the existential issues and wounds of the traumatic situation. These often go deeper than any physical or emotional woundings. These ‘worst of times’ in any trauma are frequently not the intuitively obvious ones looking at it from the outside. In the landscape of our co-constructed story here, it is not the bloodstained coat or the visceral growls of a savage beast that cause Jacob the most pain but rather a windblown hilltop and the silhouette of his son walking away from him to do his bidding (50). Jacob blames himself for what has happened to Joseph and longs to take back the moment when it seems to him his lack of foresight sentenced his son to death (52-54).

In retrospect, I wonder how much my imaginative gap filling here comes from my own experience of parenting and those moments when I wish I had seen the future, had been more awake to danger and had taken action which might have saved my children from grief. Although I think there is evidence in the text that Jacob may have entertained such a view of his own culpability, writing this part of the imaginary dialogue reminded me how easy it is to ‘read’ my own story into the client’s account. Even if I do not disclose any similarity in our experiences overtly to Jacob in the session, these unspoken counsellor identifications may still have an impact on how he experiences his reality. They can manifest themselves in other ways through such things as body language, tone of voice, silence, pace and the kind of questions I ask. I try to challenge his self-blame gently, using his deep reliance on a beneficent, omniscient God (a mutuality we share that I *have* disclosed) to query the extent to which his own power and capacity to control events are really possible (57). Yet I

still wonder if the suppositions and re-framings I give Jacob are really as much for him as for me (61). Co-construction always has this capacity to work two ways and this will not be the last time Jacob's story impinges on mine. My traumas are not Jacob's and his are not mine but the joint product we are creating together may contain for both of us new roads to recovery we had not dreamed of travelling before. Frank (1995) calls this a wounded storyteller's unique capacity to tell his story *for* as well as *to* another. Even though our traumas are very different, for both of us there may come a time when these memories become 'a part of the whole, still present, still painful, but able to be contemplated from a position of being separate from that event' (Garland, 2004:49). In the spontaneous flow of creating the above dialogue, I was surprised to hear myself suggesting at the end of the session that Jacob ask Joseph for his version of the story (69). None of my previous readings had ever entertained such a scenario. Yet it flowed into my voice here in the immediacy of the moment. Borne out of the dialogical fertility of creating this conversation with Jacob, a new idea suddenly presented itself and became an overt counsellor contribution to co-construction. Perhaps hearing Joseph's experience of the story, a highly relevant, alternative narrative counterpart to his own, might be able to help Jacob do this work of integration. I know this is a role play and I am the one producing the words on paper yet I find myself genuinely hoping Jacob will follow through with the resolution he makes at the end of the session.

## Afterthoughts and a poetic adjunct

Finally, what stood out for me in creating and reflecting on this dialogue was the way in which the to-and-fro of conversational exchange summoned up my reading and hearing of the episodes, but took me in directions I was not, at least consciously, intending. My entering into the imaginary dialogue foregrounded Jacob's being, his 'otherness' in a far more compelling way than my reading, hearing and note-taking. He suddenly seemed to emerge incarnate out of the conversational flow between us, not as my intellectual conceptualisations of him and his story had shaped him (however well-meaning and empathic these might have been), but as a human being. It was as if I had created in my numerous hearings and readings of his story, a cardboard cut out image, a very good, accurate life-size representation of Jacob which I had painstakingly fashioned in colour and as close to the original as possible, an image mimetically but not hermetically sealed. As I engaged with the dialogue and entered the flow of the conversation, this cardboard construction suddenly took on flesh and blood corporeality. An 'I' addressed me as if I were a 'Thou,' and responded to my initial question, 'What were you seeing when you said that?'(1) with an eagerness and authenticity that belied his virtual, fictive status. Jacob became not just an object of study, a character and a story I was thinking *about* but a subject in his own right, a separate subject whose being, story and plight I was thinking *with*. We met as persons in the middle somewhere, Jacob emanating a view of himself and his story, having a standpoint, having a voice which became a more flesh and blood counterpoint to my own. He became not an object I was studying but a person to whom I was relating. Frank (1995:158) in his efforts to bear witness and

listen in new ways to the stories of ‘wounded storytellers’ considers this ‘thinking *with* [a client’s stories]’ rather than *about* them as ‘the basis of narrative ethics’ (Emphasis mine). Disconcertingly and beyond my expectations, Jacob has taken me seriously and is taking up the role of client sharing his life story, he is entering into it. He said he would ‘play’ and with every fibre of his textual being he has entered into the spirit of the game.

The spaces that open up between how counsellors listen, whether in a therapy or research setting, and the dynamics of hermeneutic ‘play’ have been helpfully explored in the work of Jane Speedy (2005). She points to the value of bringing what she calls ‘poetic-mindedness’ to the work she does as a therapist and a counselling researcher. Her words strike a chord with where I find myself at this point in Jacob’s and my co-construction of this research story. She suggests,

it is not only the conversations that we have that may open up richer possibilities for people’s lives, but also, for many (albeit not all) of us, the poetic documents that we construct within, or as an adjunct to these conversations. Opening up the space in between us... is a process actively supported by the cultivation of multiple forms of listening, listening with “another ear”, or what I would describe as “poetic- mindedness.” It is this kind of listening that most consistently sustains me and those that consult me in not “arriving” within the conversations we are engaged in, but rather in continually remaining as speaking subjects in process (2005: 289-290).

Jacob and I have not yet arrived anywhere and we may not, but we have begun a journey, a ‘pilgrimage’ perhaps, or at least a time and space of being with each other in his story. A new space has opened up. Speedy’s emphasis on the uniqueness of poetic expression as a form of layered listening reminds me of Wordsworth’s famous (though often challenged) definition of poetry as ‘the spontaneous overflow of

powerful feelings' (1800/1991:246). In the same vein, Hartman (1986:12) referred to poetry's capacity to 'digest the disparate.' These metaphors of overflow and digestion speak to the importance in therapeutic work, particularly with trauma, of being able to hear, contain, and metabolise the rawness of the bits of the tale so that they cohere more securely (Levy and Lemma, 2004). Frequently, for me as a counsellor there is at the end of a session this sense of a stored up, piled up, powerful detritus of disparate images and emotions which needs a place to flow. Sometimes I use poetry as another way of retelling the session I have just experienced. It provides an alternative language, differently spaced and paced, rhymed and rhythmmed, which reveals to me (and sometimes to the client if I choose to share it with him or her), some quiddity of meaning that cannot be expressed in the tidiness of prose. For the counsellor who often has very disparate experiences to digest, Speedy says these kind of poetic documents can act as an adjunct to conversations with clients. The one I have written below flowed out of the previous session. I offer it to the reader without commentary as a way station, 'a stopping by woods on a snowy evening' before we travel on to the next session with Jacob (Frost, 2001:224). There are still miles to go.

## A Moment of Meeting

Ancient and Modern

Eye one another across a room

A room with a view

Of stories and once upon a times

A faint fire on a far hill  
A flicker in the gloom  
What is it?  
The seasoned traveller lifts her head  
And points  
'This way,' she says. 'Yes, perhaps this way.'  
A frequent visitor to foreign places  
She has studied maps...too carefully,  
Perhaps  
But Hope springs nonetheless. Enough for two?  
Perhaps  
Yet she is a stranger in this so strange land  
Mishaps happen  
Where words are weighed, when time is sand  
These stony hills do not belong to her  
The old man knows his ground  
Estranged but not a stranger,  
Sojourner  
He travels the space  
At a different pace  
His walking stick so gnarled  
With knots from many tales  
Few and hard  
Bloody and blessed  
He has promises to keep before he sleeps  
She may learn to walk with him

Across the sandy space...teller-told may meet

And something new arise

Somewhere between these 'I's'

To be

Perhaps

We'll see.



## Chapter 8: Iteration Two

### Introduction

*It has happened to me, as to most novelists, to have the odd experience, through the medium of reviews or dramatisations of their work, to see their books as they have taken shape in other minds: always a curious, and sometimes a painful, revelation.*

Edith Wharton (1932/1996:263)

Whenever stories are shared, whether in public or in private space, they address an audience. Once released into the fertile ether of human response, stories begin the irresistible and ineluctable process of taking shape in other minds. This dynamic process is particularly potent and relevant when activated in the therapeutic space between client and counsellor. Levitt and Rennie (2004: 302) place this activity within a research perspective that ‘views all psychotherapy discourse as an effort to reshape the client’s autobiographical narrative.’ The shaping which takes place in the ‘other’ mind of the counsellor may lead to re-seeing, re-hearing and reshaping in the client’s mind.

In Iteration One my response to Jacob’s story began with a focal point, a single salient moment of meeting. This entry point opened its doors and beckoned me into the story via a highly dramatic event and an evocative two-sentence autobiographical narrative voiced by Jacob as he stood before Pharaoh. Iteration Two follows on from this beginning to reveal the ways in which a focal point like this may grow, gather substance and begin to take on a shape in the counsellor’s mind. This introduction

will highlight what I bring to the ongoing formation of this new shape, my reader response to the world of the text and the mingling of my counsellor horizons with the horizons (at best, only dimly glimpsed and imperfectly understood) of my client's world. I will begin with a discussion of the ethical imperatives that adhere when counsellor shaping of a story may have an impact on the client's experience of his own autobiographical narrative. This will be followed by an account of the methodological background and process by which Iteration One flowed into and influenced Iteration Two and in consequence also entailed Iteration Three. At this point in my time with Jacob, a significant new theoretical influence enters the frame, impacting the shape the story took in my mind. This influence comes from the developmental framework espoused by Erik Erikson. Erikson's psychosocial life stages in human development and especially, the prominence he gives to the identity crisis of young adulthood, played a major part in the choice of episode and content for Iteration Two. My interaction with Erikson's ideas and my use of them as a cohering, story shaping framework will also be reviewed in this introduction. Finally, before presenting the dialogue, I will offer a brief survey of the context of the principal episodes from *Genesis* used in this iteration, particularly highlighting the iconic and fertile reception history of *Genesis* chapter 32, a story which continues to speak long after and far beyond its textual world.

## The Ethics of Re-shaping in Other Minds

A primary theoretical starting point for this research project as a whole is the assumption that a useful, analogical link can be made between a counsellor's *hearing*

of a client's story and a reader's *responding* to a life story narrative such as Jacob's. Counsellors are to some extent multiple 'readers' of their clients' stories. This 'reading' is not only in the figurative sense of a personal interpretive response, as the story is spoken out in the counselling hour; but also in a practical, literal way, when client stories are transcribed or summarised in case notes after the counselling session. These written accounts over time become a new story to be read or reread (and perhaps, even role played with a supervisor) as the counsellor thinks about and theorises her client's needs.<sup>40</sup> Both the immediacy of the in-session 'reading' of the storied elements of the client's presentation and the post-session writing, reading and re-reading of case notes contribute to the process of co-construction and the shape the story begins to take in the counsellor's mind. This new shape has significant implications for a client like Jacob, who will experience its subtle configurative power, both explicitly and implicitly, as he continues to 'story' himself and be 'read' by the counsellor in subsequent sessions.

The potential for this new shape to have a disconcerting, unsettling or in the best case scenario, a therapeutic impact, on a client is an ongoing issue of power throughout the therapy relationship and beyond it (McLeod and Lynch, 2000). From a literary perspective, Edith Wharton, describes this 'odd experience' of seeing the book she

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<sup>40</sup> There are multiple other ways besides case notes in which written retellings of a client and his story may be expressed by the counsellor. My poetic adjunct to Iteration One is one example of another form. Letter writing and the use of other creative documents is encouraged in narrative therapy and particularly family therapy. The post session letter writing or 'reformulation' employed in Ryle's Cognitive Analytical Therapy (CAT) is another kind of text through which a retelling from the 'other' mind of the counsellor may take place. In the CAT model there is a purposeful intention to 'read' this new textual shaping back to the client. Collaborative revision based on the client's response to this document is actively encouraged and facilitated as a means of clarifying suitable target problems and aims for the therapy (Crossley and Stowell-Smith, 2000).

has authored taking ‘shape in other minds.’ Her work is read, responded to by others, reshaped into new stories, and retold in new forms, whether in the analytical work of literary critics or in play scripts interpreted and performed by actors. All of which leads to the ‘odd experience’ for Wharton of becoming the viewer/reader responder of her own altered creation, in its newly co-constructed shapes and as she claims, this sometimes ‘curious,’ sometimes ‘painful’ experience is always revelatory.

Novelists like Wharton, in their life times, can exercise some control over their work, even though critics are notoriously impervious to authors’ protestations about what they did or did not intend and especially, what levels of autobiography they have inscribed, consciously or unconsciously, into their texts. This contesting of meaning and intention is an outcome of public storytelling that living authors deal with in varying ways and with mixed success. In the case of cinematic or theatrical versions of their textual creations, any rights to reshape the story often have legal constraints and have to be purchased.

However, in the therapeutic setting, the shape any client story or stories takes in the mind of the counsellor is subject to much stricter and far more nuanced parameters for handling the revelatory power of seeing our stories as others see them. Clients, as a matter of ethical necessity, must be accorded full authorial control and revisionary rights over the stories they tell, or at least as much as it is humanly possible to do so. Counsellors, unlike literary critics or playwrights, do not have the same poetic license to shape the client’s story in the image of their own presuppositions or most

cherished theoretical preferences.<sup>41</sup> There is also an ethical imperative for counsellors to develop awareness of the ways in which client stories are taking shape in their minds and exercise due care and circumspection in how they share these evolving new shapes with clients (Christopher, 1996) As Wharton describes, there may well be curiosity and pain which are aroused by seeing our stories take shape in the mind of an ‘other’ but particularly, in the counselling setting, these responses carry responsibilities to manage them in ways that benefit the client.

### Erikson’s Influence on the Emerging Shape of the Story

The need to manage with due care and circumspection my own contributions to story shaping has already become apparent in the first two dialogues with Jacob. The ease and alacrity with which all sorts of counsellor-generated contributions have manifested themselves already is evidence of the value of an ongoing monitoring of the influences emanating from my side of the therapeutic alliance. A major theoretical influence in my choice of episodes for Iteration Two has been the framework provided by Erik Erikson’s psychosocial life stages. This has been supplemented by McAdams’ subsequent work, linking Eriksonian concepts of

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<sup>41</sup> An important clarifying caveat for this analogy is the significant difference between literary works and the stories of life that clients tell in therapy. ‘Literary works are valued for the particular structures of words that they have put in circulation’ and for the artistry of the poetics with which they achieve their effects. They are judged not so much on what the author meant as on ‘what he or she succeeded in embodying in the work’ (Culler, 1997:66). Even though I am often impressed and moved by the way a client may tell his or her story, infused as these stories often are with humour, pathos, elegance or clarity of expression, the poetics of how they achieve their effects are not relevant to the task. The choice of words, syntax, tone, mood, point of view etc. in a client’s narratives are relevant only in how I seek to understand them and relate that information to their aims in coming to counselling but not as a means to judge the craftsmanship inherent in their storytelling.

identity formation with the individual's project of life story construction (Singer and Blagov, 2004). Erikson's whole corpus of work also accords well with my use of Jacob's story in *Genesis*. Although his primary focus was the epigenetic progress of key transitional stages throughout the life course, he produced classic examples of how both fictional tales and historical biography could be responded to and used as valuable source materials for understanding how human beings become who they are. He wrote several of what Baddeley and Singer (2007:191) have termed psycho-biographies or psycho-histories. They define these as 'the intensive study of individual lives and the developmental and psychological themes that run through them.' They claim further that this method has been a major one 'in the narrative study of generativity.'<sup>42</sup> Prominent among Erikson's psycho-biographies are his accounts of the lives of Thomas Jefferson, George Bernard Shaw, Martin Luther and Gandhi (Johnson, 1977). Although scholars from relevant disciplines have criticised some of his historical, theological and psychological conclusions, particularly in relation to Luther, Erikson's text, *Young Man Luther* is nevertheless, a superb example of a psychotherapist engaging with a life story and rigorously researching the shape the story takes in his own mind (Johnson, 1977; Stevens, 1983; Gross, 1987). This points to an important caveat in my use of Erikson's psychosocial stages as a framework or story-shaping tool for cohering Jacob's life story. My use of them is not based on any claim to the truth or universal applicability of Erikson's theories or any desire to validate them. Although I think they have credible theoretical utility and were formulated with some consideration for cross-cultural differences, my

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<sup>42</sup> 'Generativity' is defined in Baddeley and Singer's terms as the developmental concerns of middle adulthood which may include 'raising children or making meaningful professional and creative contributions or both' (2007: 191).

emphasis in using Erikson is rooted primarily in his methodology. His deep engagement with life stories and his therapeutic responses to them are highly relevant to investigating narrative co-construction.

Besides iconic, real life historical figures, Erikson also tried his hand at using fictional accounts of life story in the same way. He was profoundly influenced by the films of Ingmar Bergman and used the fictional story of Dr. Isak Borg, depicted in Bergman's celebrated film, *Wild Strawberries* (1957), as a vehicle to illustrate his own ideas about how people develop and grow psychologically through life. Erikson's (1978) stated aim in his 'Reflections on Dr. Borg's Life Cycle' has significant echoes with the kind of episodically-driven, narratively cohered, theoretically rich account I wanted to achieve in my engagement with Jacob's story. Erikson explains his purpose and method,

I shall use Bergman's screenplay in order to present a conception of the life cycle ... which I find admirably illuminated in ... a memoir which *begins with the end*- that is, it demonstrates how a significant moment in old age reaches back through a man's unresolved adulthood to the dim beginnings of his awareness as a child. To use the screenplay, however, means to retell it in my own words, which is already a first step in interpretation (1978: 1, *Emphasis mine*)

Viewing Bergman's screen character, Dr. Borg, 'reading' him in a figurative sense, Erikson then sets out to present the shape the story takes in his mind and the way it illuminates his own understandings of human beings and their development through life. Although I had not read Erikson's work on Bergman's film when I began this project, I discovered in retrospect that my first approach to Jacob's story, my

‘climbing aboard the text,’<sup>43</sup> began in a similar ‘illuminated,’ temporal space very near the end of the venerable patriarch’s life.

As Iteration One demonstrated, my epiphanic encounter with Genesis 47: 9-11, meant that just as Bergman, the film maker, and Erikson, the psychoanalyst, I began with the end and ‘reach[ed] back.’ I saw Jacob first at a time when he had just made a tumultuous journey to another country. On a momentous day of high ceremony and national prominence, his reminiscences are triggered by his introduction to Pharaoh and his desire to proffer a blessing (*Genesis* 46: 31-34). The opening scene of the film, *Wild Strawberries* begins in a similar temporal space with an old man sitting at a desk, writing a memoir. Also, like Jacob, Dr. Borg is about to depart on a journey to another distant part of the country to attend a national ceremony of great pomp, held in his honour, to celebrate the ways in which his life has been a blessing to others.

I viewed Bergman’s film, *Wild Strawberries*, for the first time as part of my research into the links between life story review and identity formation through narrative co-construction. Coming upon this unexpected similarity between my chosen point of entry into Jacob’s story, and Erikson’s point of entry into Dr. Borg’s story, was a reassuring discovery. Not only was this similarity interesting and stimulating in

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<sup>43</sup> The metaphor, ‘climbing aboard the text’ is one used by Wolfgang Iser in his description of the phenomenology of the reading process. He describes the role of sentences in a literary work and the perspectival connections between them. These connections, Iser posits, allow a reader eventually to find a place where he can ‘climb aboard’ the text (1986:378). I am suggesting a similar phenomenological process may take place in hearing the spoken text of a client’s story.



itself, but it also led me to a sense of the appropriateness of letting the research story take its own shape, that co-construction was as much a part of the immersive incubation stage of research as it was being 'inside' a story in the counselling relationship. Trusting the process, waiting for something to take shape, emerge and come into the light might be murky and confusing at the outset but it offered hope and promise enough for the next step. I also was reassured by the way in which Erikson clearly identified 'retelling' the story in my own words as the 'first step in interpretation.' In the counselling relationship this first retelling may happen in the session as I verbally paraphrase a part of the story back to the client or later when I write it down for myself in case notes or even later, recount it to a supervisor. However and whenever this 'retelling' takes place, it is an early intimation of the shape the story has begun to take in my mind and forms the basis for how it will continue to evolve and be configured as a vehicle of co-construction.

My project also resonates with Erikson's analysis of the fictional Borg (and probably to an even greater extent his treatment of Luther) in that I am interested in the life course, the ways in which episodes, seemingly discrete, individual storied units relate to each other and are cohered into an integrated whole. Although Erikson's theories of life transition have been challenged for their gender, class and Western, cultural bias (Pietikainen and Ihanus, 2003), they still provide a unique and comprehensive psychosocial template for thinking about how a person is growing, or not, through his or her life. It is a way of understanding the complex time line of scene, setting, characters, episodes and plot which often clamour for narration and in our present culture often find their way to a relationship of co-construction with a counsellor.

Although not the only factor, Erikson's emphasis on a central identity crisis in young adulthood became an important theoretical bridge that led me from my choice of episode in Iteration One to the content of Iteration Two.

## Linking Iteration One to Iteration Two

Having explored the antecedents and resonances of a beginning focal point in Iteration One, it then became necessary to engage in a process that would lead to my second life review session with Jacob. I will begin this section with a further elaboration of how Erikson's work in particular contributed to the choices I eventually made. All of these reflections point to the ways in which my own contextual horizons, whether theoretical, aesthetic, literary or personal, contributed to the shape the story took in my mind and my attempts to cohere its parts into a whole.

As I mentioned above, my second iteration has been deeply influenced by my reading of *Young Man Luther*, my viewing of Bergman's film, *Wild Strawberries* and my reading of Erikson's, 'Reflections on Dr. Borg's Life Cycle.' Both these stories, the fictional Borg and the historical Luther, and Erikson's treatment of them had strong and interesting intertextual links for me with Jacob's story. In the film, *Wild Strawberries*, some of these were patently concrete, as in Dr. Borg's first name being Isak and his mother, as well as his lost love, being named Sarah (Isaac is Jacob's father's name and Sarah, his grandmother's name). Like Jacob, Dr. Borg's story is also punctuated by powerful dreams and a journey through the significant episodes of his life. Erikson calls it 'a journey...on marked roads through familiar territory...a

symbolic pilgrimage back into his childhood and deep into his unknown self.' (Erikson, 1978: 1) Erikson calls it, a 'Womb to Tomb' story, which accords well with my original attraction to the comprehensive time line of Jacob's story in the *Genesis* account with its depiction of the whole of the life course from pre-natal beginnings to death and burial (1978:2). Erikson's conceptualisation of Dr Borg's 'journey' as a 'symbolic pilgrimage' also sounds very strong echoes with my earlier linguistic negotiations of meaning in Iteration One.

Another strongly resonant connection to the Jacob story which influenced the link between Iteration One and Two, was Erikson's central concept of struggle, opposing forces within a person that crescendo to crisis at various points in the life cycle and must in some sense wrestle each other to resolution, to growth and to the impetus to move on. Struggle is a fundamental component of each of Erikson's life stages. It is also a central leitmotif of the Jacob cycle in *Genesis*. Fishbane (1979: 45) puts the 'feature of struggle and strife' as the dominant, 'recurrent thematic emblem' of Jacob's entire story, and claims its tonal presence echoes through all the other characters in his story as well. Erikson's theoretical use of 'struggle' as part of the identity crisis of young adulthood, defines it as a, 'necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshalling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation' (Erikson, 1958, cited in Gross, 1987:78). Erikson theorised that the successful negotiation of each of these turning points would result in the development of a more mature ego strength, which he catalogued progressively as Hope, Will, Purpose, Competence, Fidelity, Love, Care, and Wisdom (Stevens, 1983). A deficit or insufficient negotiation at any one stage

does not militate against later renegotiations. Erikson made clear the struggle was ongoing and the stages were not rigidly discrete or irresistibly linear. It was not, in his view, a matter of the more positive pole (e.g. Trust, Identity, Integrity, ) completely subsuming the corresponding negative pole (e.g. Mistrust, Role Confusion, Despair) but using the creative tension between the two to achieve a more robust and habitable relationship with the more positive pole. Both the negative and positive are necessary to the new negotiation. Without the negative, the positive virtue would be insipid and watered down. Thus, Erikson might argue that it is not possible to engage fully with the virtue of trust unless there has been some experience of the untrustworthy, or to embrace the wholeness of integrity without knowing some of the despair of disintegration (Gross, 1987; Stevens, 1983). Again there are many resonances here with Jacob's story, which literally and figuratively embodies human struggle and the negotiation of multiple binary tensions.<sup>44</sup> Erikson theorised that the outcome of these developmental struggles at each stage of life, if adequately resolved, had the potential to result in the above list of ego strengths, all of which are highly compatible with the values inherent in Jacob's world view and the text of which he is a part.

I was also impressed by the way Erikson used the story of Borg to 'illuminate' his theory of the final transitional stage, in which Integrity and Despair meet head on and

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<sup>44</sup> Fishbane (1979: 60-62) highlights three of these recurrent binary tensions in the Jacob cycle as: barrenness/fertility, nonblessing/blessing and exile/homeland. These correspond with the three main themes he outlines for the Jacob cycle: 'birth, blessing and land.' Another significant binary tension, older/younger also echoes throughout Jacob's story not only in the struggle and strife with his brother but also between his wives. This binary tension will reach a climactic enactment in Jacob's final crossover choice to prioritise Joseph's younger son as the principal heir rather than his older brother.

grapple until an ego strength akin to Wisdom emerges. This life stage and its struggles were clearly evident in Iteration One. Gross (1987:72) describes Erikson's conceptualisation of this transition as,

a battleground between gathering together the experiences of a lifetime into a coherent whole called wisdom, and the sense of despair attendant upon the realisation that there won't be another chance to rectify yesterday's mistakes.

In retrospect, this struck a chord with the way I related to and experienced Jacob's struggles in Iteration One. In that encounter with Jacob, his summoning up of the 'few and hard' events of his life and the integrity with which he laboured to draw them together to tell his own story were juxtaposed with a voice of seeming despair and regret in his self-evaluations. Witnessing his struggle to make sense of these two polarities, (i.e. Erikson's Integrity vs Despair) and to grapple with the nature of the legacy he might leave behind led me to a more nuanced and respectful recognition of the multi-layered quality of wisdom he had gained.

The concept of struggle and battleground is also powerfully illuminated in Erikson's analysis of the life of Martin Luther. Here again his overview is of the whole life course but instead of using the final life stage as the organisational pivot for his analysis, he focuses on an earlier transition, Identity vs Role Confusion. Erikson (1958) prioritises this stage as a 'central crossroads,' implicated profoundly in all the other stages, both in the way it gathers up what remains of the remnants of childhood and in the ways it anticipates the possibilities of the future self. It is proleptic and analeptic, a galvanising process drawing together the elements of how the person has

known and understood themselves in the past and how they anticipate their 'becomings' in the future (Gross, 1987).

## Playing with the Time Line

All of the above readings and associations led me to re-examine and experiment with Jacob's time line from an Eriksonian perspective. Since I had begun with old age for my first iteration, I wondered what criteria I would use to select the episode or episodes for my second life review session. With due respect to the research participant I was coming to know, what might the fictive Jacob of my dialogues share next from his repertoire of story episodes?. One idea was to use rereading and reflection on the previous episode to trigger other parts of the story. I tried this and surfaced some other possible avenues to go down but felt I was trying too hard to make connections, that there was an element of contrivance in it. This did not sit well with my newly gained sense of letting my research story take shape itself through the process of immersion and incubation, so I decided to wait a bit longer and see if something else that felt more authentic might emerge.

In this state of mind, I returned to the story of Martin Luther and my eyes fell on one of the chapter titles, 'The Fit in the Choir.' To say my eyes 'fell' on this title is of course an imprecise way of saying, 'I am not sure why I was attracted to these particular words at this particular time.' The 'Fit in the Choir' seemed to 'fit' my purposes, by evoking not only the sound of multiple voices in contrapuntal harmony but also the punning play on the word 'fit.' This word in contemporary English

evokes ideas of the right size, shape and suitability for the task but also has connotations of sudden seizure by an uncontrollable and unpredictable force. ‘The Fit in the Choir’ is a legendary episode from Luther’s life, that may or may not be apocryphal, but is attested to by more than one contemporary witness. During his time in the monastery, before he was established as the preacher and reformer he later became, ‘he suddenly fell to the ground in the choir of the monastery at Erfurt, “raved” like one possessed, and roared with the voice of a bull: “*Ich bin’s nit. Ich bin’s nit!*” ’ (Erikson, 1958: 21). Erikson translates this outburst as ‘It is not me!’ or ‘I am not!’ He then goes on to give a masterful analysis of the meaning of this event in terms of Luther’s long time struggle with the domination of his overly harsh and abusive father. Erikson casts the ‘fit in the choir’ as a classic crisis of identity, Luther’s bullish battle for the ownership of his own destiny, purpose and role in life. As Erikson points out and as history records, Luther’s destiny would, in fact, *be* to wrestle mightily with another powerful father figure, the pope in Rome. Against this father figure Luther would also find it necessary to take ‘a stand,’ find a foothold, and in doing so declare, ‘I can do no other’ (ibid.). As will be seen, Luther’s identity struggle also has a long set of resonances with Jacob’s life story: in the battle for his father’s blessing, the lifelong grasping for security and safety, his domination by the harsh and manipulative Uncle Laban (a powerful father figure), the crisis moment at the ford wrestling with God, the spiritual transformation catalysed by that event and finally, in the evolving recognition of his own name, identity, and purpose in life.

On the basis of this, I wondered then, where would Erikson have placed an identity crisis in Jacob’s time line of episodes and was there a storied moment that embodied

the issues of that in some obvious way? There is, arguably, more than one episode where this might be glimpsed, but the word associations of struggle, bull, battleground and roar, pulled me convincingly toward an obvious combative moment in Jacob's story, the wrestling match in *Genesis* 32:24, 'So Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.' He was seized suddenly by the unknowable. There is hardly a more 'fitting' icon for identity struggle, knowing your name, grasping your life purpose, than this sparsely narrated but richly meaningful tale from Jacob's life history. Tellingly it involves darkness, a battle, a wound, a blessing and a new name. For Jacob on a lonely river bank, as for Luther in the choir at Erfurt, it also embodies a moment of crisis and opportunity, a *chronos* and *kairos*, deeply connected to his understanding of who he is, who he is not and who he may become. As the dialogue will show, this episode in Jacob's life story features a mysterious, unnamed shape taking corporeal form in the eerie silence of a dark night. Only when the silence is broken does the identity of the assailant emerge and with it a new enlightenment and consolidation of Jacob's name and identity (*Genesis* 32:23-32).



## The Struggle for the Text

The emergence of this shape, as enigmatic and inscrutable as it seems at first, is an apt metaphor for my experience of Jacob's story and the ways in which my reading of it took shape in my mind. Jacob's wrestling all night with this shadowy shape, a very physical presence who only reveals himself at break of day, also has resonance for me with the nature of my own research struggle with Jacob's text. In my earnest desire to extract useful knowledge from my face to face encounter with the story, I was at times so gripped by the power, beauty and for me, sacredness of the text, that I struggled to grasp hold of what I felt, but could not see. In the midst of this, it often seemed a long time until something dawned and I was not always aware with whom or with what I was grappling. Alter (1992: 152, 22) describes this enigmatic struggle for meaning as a characteristic of Biblical text,

The Bible...is artfully contrived...to open up a dense swarm of variously compelling possibilities, leading us to ponder the imponderables of human character, human nature, historical causation, revelation, election, and man's encounters with the divine. If all literary texts are open-ended, the Bible, certainly in its narrative aspect, is wilfully, provocatively open-ended...[It invites] endless exegesis not only because of the drastic economy of its means of expression but also because it conceives of the world as a place full of things to understand in which the things of ultimate importance defy human understanding.

This capacity to generate multiple personal and metaphorical identifications with its long history of individual readers is a unique feature of this dark night episode in Jacob's life. Cunningham (1992: 308) suggests once the story 'entered local, tribal, ethnic history...it has mightily haunted the wider consciousness of Western readers ever since.' Besides the oceans of ink devoted to theological interpretations of its

meaning, the tale can lay claim to significant interdisciplinary appeal and application. Rad (1972:324), an eminent Biblical commentator, described the ways in which ‘its breaks and joints...and the looseness in the inner connection of [its] statements to one another [make] room for many ideas... [giving it] an essential spaciousness.’ Its enigmatic and gap-filled text created fertile soil for the work of the early Jewish midrashists who wrestled with its implications and produced artful explanations for its mysteries (Hartman, 1986). It has also provided an image-rich inspiration for poets (e.g. Dickinson, Hopkins, Rilke) and for painters and sculptors (e.g. Rembrandt, Dorè, Gauguin, Delacroix, Epstein). Hart (1991:329-330) claims literary theorists have likewise been intrigued by it, recognising their own ‘activity in the story of Jacob [wrestling with the angel] more than any other single biblical tale.’ Barthes (1974), representing literary structuralism, famously produced a diagrammatic analysis of the text, emphasising the binaries inherent in it. Hartman perceived such a ‘universality’ in Jacob’s combat with the angel that he titled his analysis of *Genesis* 32, ‘The Struggle for the Text’ (1986:16). The sociologist, Arthur Frank, referenced the story to illuminate his understanding of illness stories and the relationships between the body and the self. He also heralded Jacob at the Jabbok as an ancient archetype of the ‘wounded storyteller,’ whose ‘wound is evidence of his story’s truth’ (1995:xi). Among psychotherapists, Erikson used the story to suggest Freud’s battle with his father neurosis and the way in which this led to his formulation of the Oedipus complex (1958: 43-44). Thus across disciplines, culture and history, *Genesis* 32 is a text which speaks long after and far beyond its world. The scope and diversity of its interdisciplinary impact provide some merit for

the place of prominence I have given it as a point of coherence and ‘central crossroad’ in Jacob’s story.

Eventually, especially as I began writing the imaginary dialogue, I realised I also needed to include the bookend contexts for the wrestling scene, namely, the Laban episodes (*Genesis* 29:13-32:1) which precede it and the Esau episode which follows it (*Genesis* 33:1-16). The whole span of Jacob’s time in Paddan-Aram working for his Uncle Laban, a stretch of twenty years, has some elements of Erikson’s notion of a ‘moratorium’ that seems to precede the culminating move to the Identity vs Role Confusion crisis. Erikson (1958:40) explains his concept of ‘moratorium,’ in his ‘Fit in the Choir’ discussion of Martin Luther’s identity crisis. He argues that most cultures provide young people with ‘a span of time after [which a person ceases to be a child] but before [his] deeds and works count toward a future identity.’ Elsewhere Erikson (1968:157) defines it as a ‘period of delay granted to somebody who is not ready to meet an obligation or forced on somebody who should give himself [more] time.’ Côté and Levine (1987:278) point to the psychosocial sense of Erikson’s moratorium as a form of ‘anticipatory socialisation [that] allows the individual not only to gain familiarity with the roles he or she may eventually adopt, but more importantly to experience himself or herself as developing the responsibility for choosing among future roles.’ Although Erikson’s conceptualisations of the identity crisis of young adulthood are strongly bound up with twentieth century conceptions of the life course, his descriptions of moratorium are highly consonant with the circumstances of the Laban years on Jacob’s time line. Placing the two alongside each other, a form of moratorium, may be construed in Jacob’s twenty years of

indentured apprenticeship working for his Uncle Laban. His forced exile to the home of his mother's brother in Paddan-Aram bears some relation to a 'period of delay,' a time in which he is chronologically grown up and functioning as an adult but very much still bound to his childhood issues. Even though he had schemed, stolen and tricked his brother Esau out of the birthright and his father out of the blessing, it could still be argued that he neither owned nor yet believed his identity as the bearer of blessing. Interestingly in Hebrew the words for blessing (*berakah*) and birthright (*bekhorah*) have very strong assonance, and contain syllabic sounds that are also part of the name Rebekah, Jacob's mother. Even linguistically, these important aspects of his future role are still perhaps too bound up in the past, with mother's tent, and with old childhood alliances and strategies not yet relinquished. Not long before he has to face his mighty opponent at the river ford, he begins to chafe against his Uncle Laban's domination of him and plaintively wonders aloud, 'When can I do something for my own household?' (*Genesis* 30:30). This desire to be his own man after years of Laban's domination heralds the ascending crisis of identity which will lead eventually to a river ford, a nighttime battle, and a new name. The confrontation and eventual reconciliation with Esau that rapidly follow the wrestling match are further evidence of the ways in which a sturdier identity helps him fully own what he has done in the past, make appropriate amends, and move on. Erikson's (1958:99) words about the client's experience and negotiation of the youth identity crisis and the therapist's response to it make a fitting entrée into the imaginary dialogue which follows:

All of this narrows down to something like Jacob's struggle with the angel, a wrestling for a benediction which is to lead to the patient's conviction that he is an alive person, and, as such, has a life before him,

and a right to it.... I have called this the “rock-bottom” attitude... an attempt to find that immutable bedrock on which the struggle for a new existence can safely begin and be assured of a future.... Needless to say, we can offer the patient nothing but our willingness to jointly face the odds that are the lot of all of us.

## Iteration Two: Imaginary Dialogue

[Jacob enters the room slowly. I notice how heavily he leans on his staff as he limps toward the chair closest to the door. His face contorts slightly, and there is a short, sharp intake of breath, as he gingerly eases himself into the chair. This is followed by a long sigh, and for the first few moments he sits very still, staring out the window.]

1. Linda: That looked painful, are you comfortable there? Can I get you a cushion?
2. Jacob: No...no...I have everything I need...It is my hip, a strain, a wound from long ago.
3. Linda: It looks like it makes it difficult to walk, or at least to get up and down.
4. Jacob: It is well...I have my staff. I have learned to lean upon it... and limping is no sin, especially for an old man. It pleases me to use my own strength as long as I can. I have always found a way to do what must be done.
5. Linda: So... are you saying you keep going even when it's painful?
6. Jacob: An old man must summon up what little strength he has left. I must go on bending my shoulder to the burden. I remember many hard times when that was

all that I could do. I have always told my sons, there is little good in standing still and staring when there are mouths to feed.

7. Linda: Those sound like things you believe very strongly, maybe words you have lived by, that say something about...um... the value of taking action, seeing a difficulty or a challenge and finding a way to do something about it...taking arms against a sea of troubles.

8. Jacob: Hmm...Troubles often do come in waves, one upon the other, ...but to take arms against a sea of them... I have not thought of my story this way (he shakes his head and looks puzzled).

9. Linda: Sorry, that was me playing a little too freely with the meaning of what you said, throw it out if it's not useful.

10. Jacob: No, ...I don't mind that...er...your words, they washed over me for a moment and I thought what it would be like to...to be tossed about in the waves, flailing, without a foothold, trying to strike a blow...it reminded me, although I cannot say why of my Uncle Laban and the long years I spent in his service and at the mercy of his guile.

11. Linda: You worked for your uncle?

12.Jacob: Yes, for my Uncle Laban. I pastured and kept his flock and in time he became my father-in-law but though he was my own flesh and blood, he made me a servant son-in-law. I was indentured to him for over twenty years. He was a man full of deceit and he dealt with me very ill. I did not discern his ways until it was too late. Oh, he was clever, ...cunning! He tricked me into marrying his older daughter, Leah, whom I did not love, although I did my duty by her... But it was only...it could only ever be Rachel, her younger sister, who owned my heart. Laban knew this and used it to wrest seven more years of hard labour out of me as bride price for Rachel. But that was as nothing to me, I would have laboured a lifetime for her. Even though Laban was my father-in-law and grandfather to my children, he kept right on cheating me year after year. Finally, after Joseph was born, I could endure it no longer. I decided to leave, take everything that was mine by right... my family, my flocks and move back to Canaan.

13.Linda: You felt tricked and mistreated for such a long time and in such a painful way...the way Laban used your love for Rachel to bind you to his service...and for him to use his own daughters in this way. My own response just now in hearing this part of your story is anger. I wonder what feelings you had when those things happened.

14.Jacob: I was shocked... incensed. On my wedding night! He tricked me cruelly again and again, yet he was always accusing *me* of some treachery or other. Try as he might Laban could not point to anything I had taken of his. For twenty years in my care, his ewes never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from his



flock. Those which were torn by beasts I never brought to him; I myself made good the loss... and how he exacted it of me! Those were very difficult years, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes. I was an honest man in his service, I blessed him with my labour, but his payment was always trickery and deceit ...my grievance against him was very deep...

15.Linda: Yes, I can hear that in your voice...your anger...maybe it helped you reach a turning point? It was a big decision, a risky major move with your family. What helped you decide to do it?

16.Jacob: The time had come to make provision for my own household which had grown much larger, eleven sons by then...and...um...and a daughter. Those are tales of struggle too, but I will not speak of it today. I had spent twenty years labouring for Laban, he knew well how the Lord had blessed him through me. The little he had before I came had grown to much but still he tried to deprive me of what I had earned. He changed my wages ten times, he would have sent me away empty handed were it not for *El Shaddai* who gave me success... But you speak of a 'turning point.' There came a day when I overheard Laban's sons saying to one another, 'Jacob has taken all that was our father's and he has built up all this wealth.' It was not true as I have told you, I had given Laban all he was due and more, but still...they were jealous of me... of the way my own herds had grown and multiplied. I had become exceedingly prosperous. They spoke ill of me and soon I saw that Laban's manner toward me was not what it had been in

the past. His countenance grew darker and darker...I knew this would end in evil. Something had to be done. I spoke to Rachel and her sister, Leah and they both agreed, it was time to leave.

17.Linda: It seems like a lot of things were building up to that, the difficulty and unfairness, the underhanded dealing and the jealousy at your success. His attitude towards you seemed to be getting worse and maybe even took a sinister turn...you were afraid he might harm you or your family?

18.Jacob: I was afraid he might take my wives and children away from me by force. Even his daughters, my wife, Rachel and Leah agreed he had treated them very ill...and those two...they seldom agreed about anything...I remember now, I called them both out into the field and I told them about a dream I had...Yes, yes that was the moment ...that was what made me sure it was time to return to Canaan.

19.Linda: A dream?

20.Jacob: Yes...I had a dream. It was in breeding season. At that time of year, I often spent the night out in the fields with the flocks, making my bed near the watering troughs, where the animals would come to mate. I remember looking up at the stars and hearing the murmur of my sheep and goats all around me...those stars, no man can count them...their tiny lights in the darkness made me think how far I had come, how *El Shaddai* had helped me over and over when no one

else was there, when I was alone, with nothing but my wits and my own two hands. I fell asleep like that on the hard ground and dreamed a dream in which I saw all the he-goats, hundreds of them were mating with the flock and they were all streaked, speckled and mottled. Perhaps you...you are an interpreter of dreams, for you to hear a dream is to know its meaning?

21.Linda: Well, ...um... it doesn't work quite like that. It's more important what you make of it, what it said to you. Was there more to the dream?

22.Jacob: There was a Voice...in the dream God called my name, 'Jacob!' 'Here,' I answered. I did not know what else to say. What else can a man say to the Shepherd of the heavens? Then God said, 'Note well that all the he-goats which are mating with the flock are streaked, speckled and mottled; for I have noted all that Laban has been doing to you.'

23.Linda: And did you?

24.Jacob: Did I what?

25.Linda: 'Oh...I just meant did you... um...in the dream, did you do what the voice of God said to you? He said to 'Note well.' As the Jacob that God addressed in your dream...did you take a second look, see anything new about the he-goats... attach any special significance to the way... to the way they were so many different colours.

26. Jacob: I think I did look again more closely...it is hard to remember...but I do think it came to me, in the dream, that *none* of them were pure black, or white or brown, they were all mottled and streaked, their colours mixed together in many patterns. I think what stirred my heart then was that God said he had *seen* all that Laban had done to me...*seen* it...seen it all...just as I could see the speckled, streaked markings on the goats, he had seen Laban's treatment of me and noted it well. In the dream it seemed it mattered very much to Him that I had been tricked and cheated year after year.

27. Linda: Mmm...so you felt He had taken careful...caring note of it...So when you looked again at the... all those he-goats, you were aware ...um...that none of them were just one colour, all black or all white, there was a complexity, a mixture of colours and patterns, but what really spoke to you in the dream, what helped you, was a new awareness that God had seen, taken note of all your work and all the painful, difficult ways Laban had treated you. He saw who you were and what your life had been like all those years in a way maybe no one else had. What did that feel like?

28. Jacob: You mean in the dream, what did it feel like?

29. Linda: Yes, in the dream and then... after... when you woke up.

30. Jacob: Even in my sleep, I felt a warmth like the sun...the light changed...like an embrace...I saw and was seen...it felt ...it had been so long since (inaudible)...

and when I woke up, I felt more certain about what I needed to do next because the last words in the dream, were a command. God said, ‘Arise and leave this land and return to your native land.’ My native land, the place of my birth. I had been longing to go home and this felt like permission to leave at last (as his voice trails off into silence, he reaches down with his right hand and absent-mindedly, rubs his open palm up and down the outside flank of his leg between the hip bone and thigh).

31.Linda: Your hip is still bothering you?

32.Jacob: No, it is nothing...I was just remembering something that happened later...though I longed for my homeland, it was not easy to return there. How difficult each step has been for me (looking down at his feet and shaking his head slowly) too few days and full of evil.

33.Linda: I have heard you say that before, it’s a thread that seems to run through your whole story.

34.Jacob: Exile, struggle, treachery. I have always been fleeing from one danger into the arms of another.

35.Linda: Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

36. Jacob: (smiling) I have not heard these words said like this before but it is an apt saying...this is the story of my life, out of the frying pan and into the fire.
37. Linda: So in the part of your story you've been telling me just now, what was the frying pan and what was the fire?
38. Jacob: Getting away from Laban was not a simple matter. I tried to sneak away in the dead of night but I had with me (he touches one by one the finger tips of his left hand with his right index finger as if counting up his assets) two wives, two maidservants, eleven sons, a score of hired hands, camels, cows, bulls, sheep, goats, she-asses and he-asses...
39. Linda: You were travelling light then? (I am not sure why I ask this question which seems to make 'light' of this desperate midnight escape. Am I avoiding something? Is he? I notice too, but do not call attention to the fact, that he has listed his eleven sons but not included the daughter he mentioned, somewhat cryptically, earlier. There are other untold tales of trouble connected with his children, but he has signalled clearly he does not wish to speak of these now).
40. Jacob: (Responding to my question with a wry smile) Light? No, not since the days of my youth when I had only my staff, but when I ran from Laban, I chose the time of the sheep shearing when I knew he would be busy with his flocks. But, always suspicious of me, he soon discovered I had fled and pursued me with all his kinsmen. After seven days they caught up with us where we were camped

in the hill country of Gilead. He might have done me much harm then and as I have told you, he could have taken my wives and children by force but God prevented him.<sup>45</sup> (He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms across his chest) *That* was the frying pan.

41.Linda: And the fire?

42.Jacob: That was having to meet my brother Esau again, to come face to face with him after twenty years. I have not spoken much of him before...he was my twin brother, the first born of my father. Esau was his name but he was also called, 'Red' and this suited his manner and temper very well. The last time I was in my father's house, my older brother, my twin...well...he threatened to kill me (he casts a fleeting glance in my direction as if to gauge my response to this revelation). That is why I ran away all those years ago. So having crossed one border to leave Laban behind, I came to another ford, the river, Jabbok. I sent messengers ahead and their report struck me with terror, they said my brother, was coming to meet me and there were four hundred of his own men with him. I had no reason...no reason at all to believe his heart had changed toward me. I was afraid he would come and attack me...and the mothers with their children.

43.Linda: Very frightening...an army approaching in the night. I can see why you thought you had only escaped the frying pan to encounter the fire. I wonder if

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<sup>45</sup> As he pursues Jacob into open country for seven days, Laban and his posse rest for the night. Laban has a dream in which God warns him not to harm Jacob, that he should take care neither to bless nor curse him (*Genesis* 31:24).

you've noticed that's the third time, maybe fourth I think, today that you've mentioned the number twenty, those twenty years you lived in Laban's land, it was a big chunk of your life...and there you were still a reasonably young man, with a lot of your life before you and there's this terrible, twenty year old threat hanging over you, barring your way, threatening your existence and that of your family... Facing your brother after all that time...

44.Jacob: (Interrupting, as if talking to himself) I was greatly frightened and in deep distress but I went on my way, this was where my road must go and I did what I had to do. I made a plan to protect my family and then I prayed as I had never prayed before. I sent everyone and everything across the river, everyone I cared about and everything I owned. I wanted to be alone that night, just me, just Jacob, my wits and my two hands.

45.Linda: Alone with yourself.

46.Jacob: I cannot explain why that was, why I awoke and arose in the dead of night, but I was ready, I was wide awake and waiting.

47.Linda: It feels like a very important moment, waiting for something to happen.

48.Jacob: (Leaning forward and lowering his voice, he shifts his weight to face me squarely) It was dark, very dark by the river...but I could make out a shape, the shape of a man, a powerful, mighty man, he seemed to spring up from the dust at



my feet. I could feel the weight of him in the air around me, the world seemed to shrink down to the small circle of nothingness around us, and suddenly we were wrestling in the dark. I'm not sure if I grasped him first or he grasped me, but there seemed nothing else to do but ...to hold on, hour after hour...it was not a dream or a vision ...but a real struggle of flesh and blood and bone, jostling and shoving, lunging and clenching, grasping and not letting go...I would not let him go...I ...

49.Linda: (I lean forward and nod solemnly, as I do so, an image flashes across my mind, powerful and sudden, it draws me to another primal scene of struggle...*two foetuses in the womb, twins, alike but not alike, floating in a sea of darkness, alive, hearts-beating, limbs-forming, silent, wordless, human shapes coming to corporeality slowly, cell by cell, in a watery world without footholds, the space around them shrinking down, the dawning awareness in each of the other, there are minds and mouths here, but no language, no thoughts that can even frame the questions, Who is this? Who am I? Why is this happening? yet the bodies know, the knowledge is in the bodies and still the space shrinks further, and there is no room and the struggle begins and...* I consciously turn off this image. My reverie has gone on too long. Have I too been 'locked in combat?' I make a very small movement to lean back in my chair, shifting my weight and with it, my thoughts, back into the room. I choose not to share this image with Jacob at least for now. I am not sure what it means, but I have a strong sense that it would not be helpful to share it with him now).

50.Linda: This powerful human shape in the darkness...you were wrestling with...  
you did not know who it was.

51.Jacob: Not at first. In the darkness, I could not see his face. I wrestled with him  
until the break of dawn. I sensed then he knew I would not let go. As the light  
began to touch the heads of the mountains, the struggle became so intense...so  
intense...that I hardly felt it...no more than a touch when he...when my hip bone  
was literally wrenched out of the socket. It was that moment, I think, when he  
spoke for the first time (Shaking his head as if in disbelief and wonder).

52.Linda: What did he say?

53.Jacob: He said, 'Let me go, for dawn is breaking.'

54.Linda: The *break* of dawn.

55.Jacob: Yes, until then...I had not been sure who he was...he might have been one  
of Esau's men, a scout who caught me alone in the wild, or even Esau himself,  
remember I had not seen him for twenty years...there was a moment too, when  
the terrors of night and my own fears conjured up old stories of a river demon  
who sought to block my way...others may say, I wrestled with an angel there...  
Though angels have often met my fathers on the way...and I too have met  
them... the man was not any of these things. He asked me to release him and I  
would not. I told him, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'

56.Linda: You wanted something from him...a blessing?

57.Jacob: I wanted blessing. I wanted to be blessed (a suppressed sob escapes his throat and tears stream down his face). That is all I have ever wanted. I did not care what it cost.

58.Linda: Or how painful it was. You were wounded by this wrestling.

59.Jacob: I *was* wounded but *blessed* in the wounding...that struggle made me, it entered my bones. What a sunrise that was, upon the mountains of Peniel. Long before, on the day of my birth, I was named Heel-Grabber, that is who and what I am. But on that morning, at the Jabbok... exhausted, panting and at the end of my strength, streaked and mottled with mud and dirt and sweat and in that guise and in that place, knowing very well my old name, He gave me a new name.

60.Linda: He?

61.Jacob: It was *El Shaddai* I met at the river crossing, although I did not know that until just before the dawn... when He spoke...to pronounce my new name. I strove with Him for a blessing but I did not trick Him into giving it. He knew who I was and the name I had lived by but He gave the new name to me as a gift, 'Prevailer,' He called me. One who has struggled against God and men and prevailed, the name is *Israel* in Hebrew. I knew this was a name that fit, that I could wear, that I might grow into some day. I was never the same after that

night by the Jabbok. When I met my brother on the road, he too had changed. He was not the man I remembered. Seeing Esau again was like seeing the face of God, I bowed low to him and we wept for all that had passed between us. This brother whom I had tricked and cheated. My life was spared. He embraced me... accepted me...No, he was not the same man I had known.

62.Linda: Maybe *you* knew who you were a little better...all those years of struggle, the wrestling with your brother, your father, with Laban, with God, maybe even with your self, all of that went into your name...the name you had been given and the one you might become... like the dream you shared earlier today...there is something about being known, being grasped...your history, your self being truly *seen* face to face in all the streaked and mottled complexity of your being... that...that is what seemed to hold you in one of the scariest, darkest nights of your life.

63.Jacob: Yes, a very dark night, a wound and a blessing.

64.Linda: A strange twist. Actually from what you've said it sounds more like a violent wrench... that somehow released you? Would that be a way of describing it? You were able to keep going on the road you had chosen, to face your brother and the threat to your life, to take the next step...

65. Jacob: A limping one...but it feels looking back on it now, even as bad as things were and as much danger as I thought I was still in at the time...I think...I believe even with all that...it was the first free step I had ever taken.

## Iteration Two: Commentary

*Then he said, 'Let me go for dawn is breaking.'*

*But he answered, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'*

*Said the other, 'What is your name?'*

*Genesis 32:27-28*

As I have detailed above, my choice of this episode for this iteration was influenced and in a sense drew inspiration from Erikson's theoretical perspectives and his methodology. I heard, co-heard and cohered the plot line of the story in a way that positioned *Genesis 32* as the 'central crossroad' around which the rest of Jacob's life story shapes itself. Clearly, in my theoretical formulations before, as well as in my experience of creating the dialogue after, I have given prominence to this dawn-breaking, name-forming moment in Jacob's life. However, my own previous readings of the text coupled with its extraordinary reception history also gave me a profound respect for this story's capacity to continue to speak beyond its world. From a counselling theory perspective this episode, especially its core question, 'What is your name?' was the Gestalt figure, the shape which kept emerging in the foreground for me. The significance of this question has a similar prominence within a Biblical and literary perspective. Fokkelman (1987:51), a noted Biblical commentator, gives a structural account of the text of chapter 32, heralding it as a literary unit of masterful craftsmanship. His precisely drawn symmetrical framework

puts the question, 'What is your name?' at the very centre of the whole wrestling scene. Whether seen from a counselling, literary, Biblical or theological perspective, this story and this question are central. Who Jacob is, his history, his identity, his motivations, his purposes, his relentless, persevering desire for blessing are all focalised through this epic struggle that culminates in a strangely truncated but profoundly intimate conversation. A 'Thou' asks an 'I' — 'What is your name?' There follows for Jacob, a humble, truthful acknowledgement of his old name and a limping, dawning affirmation of his new one. The old Jacob is not erased or subsumed but lives on within the enigmatic but decisive resolution of the wrestling match. Blessed and wounded, after his long struggle with God, others and himself, this 'Prevailer,' opens his eyes to the morning light and knows himself better, both within the lived realities of his old name and the longed for potentials of his new one. It is an ambivalently mixed name, like his 'mottled, speckled' sheep, both divinely endowed but also very earthly earned. In this moment of investiture, who he was, who he is and who he might become, all prevail. 'What is your name?' begs the question, 'What's in a name?' For Jacob, in this part of his story, it turns out the answer is, a very great deal.

This commentary will explore some of the ways I contributed to the shape the story took in the dialogue, beginning with how the echoes of Erikson may be heard (or not) in the way I relate and respond to Jacob in this session. I also discuss other personal and contextual factors of counsellor contribution to co-construction relevant to this iteration, especially the way in which my early attempts to voice the dialogue surfaced my own and other voices in ways I was not expecting.

Also in line with Erikson's suggestion that 'retelling is the first step in interpretation,' I include an example of case notes to illustrate and simulate how in practice I might have summarised the content and process of the session. An analysis of the subsequent shape the story took as a template for understanding co-construction will conclude this section.

## Echoes of Erikson in the Dialogue

In looking back over the dialogue for Iteration Two, I notice there is little or no overt presentation of any of Erikson's theoretical constructs. I do not identify, name or refer to them in my conversation with Jacob. This follows my own experience of practice, as my counselling model tends to think about and hold in mind a range of psychodynamic theories and ideas, consulting them as useful templates to think about a client's needs, while offering a more person-oriented, client-centred way of relating to the client in the session. However, there is still evidence in the dialogue of the ways in which Erikson's theory may have shaped my responses.

I begin the session by drawing attention to the obvious pain Jacob is experiencing and the difficulty he has had, walking from the door to be seated in his chair (1-5). I will discuss other co-constructive aspects of Jacob's limp in more detail later in the commentary. However, for my purposes at this point, my concern for Jacob's limp and my asking him about it reveal the link I am making to the content of *Genesis 32* as a story of identity formation. The hip injury is a direct, life-long result of his wrestling encounter. In my pre-session formulations I speculated a parallel between



Erikson's description of Martin Luther's 'Fit in the Choir' and Jacob's wrestling at the river ford. I then theorised the latter as the culminating identity crisis which ends a period of moratorium represented by Jacob's twenty years working for his Uncle Laban. This pre-intention may be operating at this point in the ongoing dialogue with Jacob because my next response is to offer him a reflection in the form of a gentle, but challenging, clarifying question: 'Are you saying you keep going even when it's painful?' (5). This addresses the way he seems to be diminishing the pain he is experiencing while, at the same time, suggesting to him one of the ways I might 'read' what he is saying about it. In a further paraphrase I summarise whether the way he seems to persevere through painful difficulty may reflect a life motto or strongly held belief of some importance to him (7-8).

When I went back and reread this part of the dialogue in preparation for writing the commentary, I realised I had used a very familiar and famously mixed metaphor from *Hamlet*, 'to take arms against a sea of troubles' (Shakespeare, 1969, 3.1:59). I wondered why I had said this and what the internal musings of the indecisive Prince of Denmark had to do with Jacob. My intention in using the phrase was to flesh out what I thought Jacob might be saying, to provide a word picture to describe what his preferred strategy for dealing with adversity might be (7). It was an iconic image I had to hand that arose from my own heritage of plots and characters from a Western

literary canon atop which Shakespeare reigns supreme.<sup>46</sup> I have imbibed this canon with its matrix of stories and melange of characters, from Hercules to Hamlet to Hercule Poirot and filtered it through the experiences and circumstances of my own life. The resulting traces are very much a part of what I bring to Jacob, to his story and to any client's story. In retrospect I can see some connections between Hamlet and Jacob that were not in my thinking when I included the metaphor in my response in the dialogue. Both of them, as prince heroes of their own tales, have to struggle with a dangerously deceptive uncle and must muse long on how and when to take action. However, it is patently obvious that an association like this and even less its literary provenance, however interesting or parallel it may be, would be lost on Jacob. His world contains very different tales and treachery in Denmark is not one of them. In fact any connection between their 'uncle issues' did not occur to me either, until I went back and sought to unravel why I had used this metaphor. What did occur to me within the session was that I might be allowing stories from my world, my comfortable embeddedness in my own textual traditions to intrude too unhelpfully into Jacob's equally rich but very different story world. For a moment Jacob is puzzled and swept off his feet by this strange admixture of water, waves, arms and troubles into which my use of Hamlet's metaphor have flung him (8). My response in the dialogue is to apologise for what seems an error in judgment on my part, 'for playing a little too freely with the meaning' of what he said (9).

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<sup>46</sup> There is, especially in a poststructural climate, a great deal of controversy not only over the content and criteria of the literary Western Canon but also its legitimacy. Harold Bloom (1994) has contributed substantially to this debate, presenting his own list of authors and standards for inclusion. However, my use of the term, 'Western Canon,' is not intended to represent taking any standpoint in this debate. I use the term here as a way of summarising the matrix of literary texts, many of them obviously from Bloom's list, that constitute my own highly idiosyncratic set of textual influences.

Yet in spite of its anachronistic entry into the space of his world, the fictive Jacob of my dialogue finds a way to use the ‘taking arms against a sea of troubles’ metaphor for his own purposes. Its origins may be lost on him, but its ability to speak beyond these is not wasted. He co-constructs out of it something else, something new.

Oddly enough, with no knowledge of Hamlet’s plight, this ‘sea of troubles’ metaphor surfaces for my fictive Jacob, another tale, his own tale of a troublesome uncle, treachery, betrayal and a long ambivalent indecisiveness. There *was* something ‘rotten’ in Paddan-Aram. ‘To Leave or not to Leave?’ that was the question. Jacob describes where my utterance, ‘taking arms against a sea of troubles,’ takes him. It is a place where he is ‘flailing without a foothold, trying to strike a blow’ (10-11). This brings to mind for me the imagery of the upcoming wrestling match, a kind of sporting contest which requires above all else the ability to find a foothold and secure it. Although it does not surface until later in the session, Jacob’s use of my metaphor triggers for me another image— a warm amniotic sea and a tiny foetal hand grasping for his twin brother’s heel as they struggle down the birth canal (49). All of the above imagery, both mine and Jacob’s, are directly related to a primary etymological meaning of his birth name, ‘one who grasps the heel.’ There is a theme of hard-fought-for identity developing here, its contours still uncertain, its presence still in the shadows, but a powerful intimation that shapes my experience of the session and our ongoing co-construction of the story.

There are other indications in my chain of responses in the dialogue of the ways in which Erikson’s developmental theory and its interconnected transitions across the

life course are contributing to the co-construction of Jacob's life review. For example I draw his attention to how often he has used the number 'twenty' to refer to the years he spent in Laban's employ (43-44). While it is common in counselling practice to pick up on repetitions of words or phrases, I think I chose to highlight this one because I am connecting it with the importance of Erikson's, 'moratorium.' This twenty years has echoes for me of Erikson's description of the 'period of delay' and experimentation which he says precedes the move to the young adult's struggling encounter to resolve his or her identity crisis. My awareness of the developmental pregnancy of this moment for Jacob is also apparent in my subsequent offer of advanced empathy, 'It feels like a very important moment, waiting for something to happen' (47). This leads directly to Jacob's powerful account of the scene which I have centralised in his story as the culminating negotiation of the transition to adulthood.

Erikson (1958) also suggested the reverberating quality of his transitional stages, that the negotiation of any one stage often evoked, mirrored, recalled, pointed forward or back to other stages and other points on the time line. My sudden and momentary vision of Jacob's intrauterine experience resonates with the most extreme primal point on the time line of life development (49-50). This form of maternal reverie arises from Jacob's intense, hushed and almost eerie tones as he shares his wrestler's eye view of his dark night on the river bank. The fear, solitude and existential threat seem to shrink the space around him down to this 'small circle of nothingness' that becomes for me, a palpable space, a kind of arena in-the-round, where this intense combat once took place for him (48). It is only in looking back on the dialogue later

that I realise my writing of this moment in our conversation included stage directions which pictured first Jacob and then myself ‘leaning forward’ as if to replicate the greater intimacy and reduced circumference of this moment in Jacob’s life (48-49). Without any conscious intention to shape the text or position client and counsellor in this way, this instinctive shrinking of the therapy space between us mirrored the intimate content and contact inherent in Jacob’s narrative account of this episode in his life. I also had a sense of sitting in the stands of an arena looking down on the scene, with much the same feeling of unfolding drama that I had when I imagined the throne room scene in Iteration One.<sup>47</sup>

Jacob continues to describe the mysterious, burgeoning ‘other’ body gathering substance and taking form in the space around him. His account of the silent intensity of the struggle between them, his reference to blood and bone, the violent physicality of the contest, the shrinking of the space around him, as well as the growing presence of an unknown ‘other’ in the darkness ; this conflation of images suddenly and unexpectedly connected me with Jacob’s primal struggle with his twin brother in the womb (48-51). Although it will not be until Iteration Four that Jacob recounts the unusual circumstances of his gestation and birth story, its immanence enters the co-construction now in this session as a powerful word picture in my mind. As Jacob will tell me later, his mother, Rebekah, experienced considerable physical

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<sup>47</sup> There may also be a latent connection here with my recent, contemporaneous viewing of Gauguin’s painting of the wrestling scene in *Genesis 32*. The composition of Gauguin’s unusual painting is arranged very much like a viewing platform or gallery, where a group of contemplative Breton peasant women sit above a surreal vermilion landscape. They are separate and distinct in their starched white hats and black frocks but very much engaged with the brilliantly stark vision below them. Gauguin’s vermilion space isolates a field where the wrestling figures of a winged angel and a man are resolutely locked in combat.

and mental distress in her pregnancy. The text of *Genesis 25:22-23* describes the twins engaged in a 'struggle' inside her womb. Wenham (2000a:175) argues the word 'struggle' used here possesses more violent force in the original Hebrew. He translates Rebekah's experience as 'the children smashed each other inside her.' This disturbing, colliding internal battle leads her to deep metaphysical questioning expressed in her cry, 'Why is this happening to me?' (*Genesis 25:22* TNIV). In fact, I voice this same question in the stream of words and images that come to mind for me as I engage inwardly with this primal scene (49). Rebekah's struggle to make sense of her experience leads her to go on her own to 'inquire of the Lord.' The reassurance she receives from God's answer is expressed in the form of an oracle (*Genesis 25:23*). The enormous impact that the content of this oracle has on Jacob's identity will be explored more fully in Iteration Four.

However, for now, within the flow of dialogue I recall Jacob's comment, 'flailing for a foothold, trying to strike a blow' (10ff). There is something about the layered meaning of this utterance that shifts my reflections, even my presence, into the watery world of this other circular arena that Jacob once experienced so intimately. Here within the womb of Rebekah there is a wordless, timeless space in which two fraternal but not identical twins jostle and manoeuvre, competing for precious placental resources in an ever shrinking space. Using ultrasonographic observations, Piontelli (1989:415) has studied the way in which these early relating patterns between twins in the womb vary markedly but in some cases, she noted, the interactions could be interpreted as 'violent and each contact seemed to end up in a fight.' In such an amniotic 'sea of troubles' Jacob would have primal experience of

the presence of an other, a corporeal entity in close physical proximity in the dark, whose tiny embryonic arms even then may have begun wrestling for supremacy. At the critical moment, Jacob would also have endured the long tortuous ejection from this space to emerge, hand first, grasping his brother's heel and entering the light of a brave new world where floating shapes become persons, persons have names and the names matter. Piontelli's (1989:425) studies of twins relating patterns inside the womb involved tracking them after birth as well. Although her research is case-study based and anecdotal, she observed significant ongoing parallels between 'temperament and behaviour' in the ways twins related to each other inside the womb and then later outside it. Even though embedded in the horizons of an ancient text, Jacob and his brother, Esau, twins in the womb and brothers in the world, show some evidence of these parallels. Yet, as Jacob's story reveals, somehow they were able, each in his own way, to find a path to their own identity, to know themselves and to live in these separate identities in a way which set aside old hatreds. The text reveals in the years subsequent to that 'first free step' of Jacob's, these two men, Esau, the older, and Jacob, the younger, were able to bury their father in peace, together (*Genesis 35:29*).

Despite the fact that I have read chapter 32 of *Genesis* many times over many years, this connection between Jacob's struggle with God for a blessing and the struggle with his foetal twin for space and dominance in the womb had never occurred to me. Yet given the research lens I am using for this reading and in particular Erikson's emphasis on the galvanising properties of this key identity formation crisis, there are obvious reasons why I might have filled the gaps in the text in this way. Such a

centrally important negotiation of identity, represented here by Jacob's wrestling match, is *proleptic* in looking forward to who he might become: the elderly father and blessing bestower seen in Iteration One; and *analeptic* in drawing together all the strands of who he has been before: the foetal twin, Rebekah's favourite child, and the young adult who cheated his brother and was cheated by his uncle in Iteration Two. Iteration Three and Iteration Four will pick up on this earlier Jacob and reveal other places on the time line where this central identity crisis also echoes. The scarlet thread that runs through the entire story will continue to be this grasping for blessing, Jacob's persistent and unyielding demand, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' Here in his description of what happens to him on this dark night beside a river, it is the ultimate 'Other,' the Blessing-Giver he calls *El Shaddai* who grasps him, who sees him, knows him and 'notes well' all that has happened to him.

Thus this momentous encounter of Jacob's 'I' with the 'Thou' in this scene, made salient other episodes in the 'Womb to Tomb' time line of his life. Within the dynamic flow of the imaginary dialogue, the point on the time line that emerged for me was, as I have detailed above, the very beginning pre-birth episode of his story. It flowed in unbidden and brought its co-constructive power to the space. The reverie I experienced, besides demonstrating the way in which the central identity crisis called forth an earlier episode on the time line, also pointed to another vitally important aspect of Jacob's life experience to which I had not yet given sufficient weight—his life as a twin. There are pertinent psychological factors relevant to working with a twin that, Lewin (1994:499, 501) argues, directly affect the nature of the therapeutic alliance. 'This ever-presentness of *an other* is very important,' and she claims 'there



is always a shadow of the other for each individual twin.’ The process of establishing an individual, separate identity is often more difficult for twins, whether monozygotic or dizygotic (Pietilä, Björklund, and Bülow, 2013). It is salutary to this importance that the very next episode in Jacob’s life is his dramatic reconciliation with his brother and their new, more realistic negotiation of the space between them. As Piontelli (1989:424) concludes, ‘Certainly a twin is a twin and for good or for bad the other co-twin seems to represent always a landmark in his life.’ Deeply touched and transformed by the God who grasps who he is, Jacob has been able to emerge from this landmark’s shadow, to make amends for his past wrongs, to embrace his brother warmly, and to feel the freedom, for the first time, of walking in his own separate identity (61, 65). For the wounded storyteller, it seems a blessed injury, for which his limp signals not disability but truth (Frank, 1995). In Jacob’s memory, blessing and wound limp along together in a strange oxymoronic unity, both a ‘crippling victory’ and a ‘magnificent defeat’ marked this crossroads for the rest of his life (Buechner, 1966).

## Other Voices in the Choir

In this second iterative engagement with the story, the procedural movement from hearing and reading the episode in the *Genesis* text to writing the creative dialogue facilitated a more nuanced and polyphonic engagement with voice and voices. These included Jacob’s, my own and others who had not been present in the same way in the previous two conversations with him. It is difficult, if not impossible, to

determine why this should be so or to trace any reflexive response directly and conclusively back to all its complex family of antecedents.

The first draft I produced for this iteration's imaginary dialogue (the text of which is not provided here) grew out of a close reading of the story episodes, primarily drawn from *Genesis* chapters 29 through 33. In that initial conversation with Jacob about this part of his story, I engaged with and responded to the same or very similar content as the present one above. However, in spite of hearing similar echoes from the text, my voicing of Jacob in the first attempt called forth a very different voice from him. Of course, as I have made clear earlier, I am making no claims at all to recovering an authentic, Mesopotamian, Bronze-Age, male voice in any of these conversations. However, I am attempting within the constraints of my own horizons to pay due respect not only to Jacob's situated-ness in the world of his text, but also to the voices of all those oral storytellers and redactors who contributed to the extant text of *Genesis* I have before me. I have made a promise to Jacob, my principal research participant, about respecting the origins and integrity of his textual story and I want to try and keep it.

For some reason, in my first attempt to voice Jacob in this iteration, my careful tuning in to the text and texture of his Mesopotamian origins and culture was disrupted by the static emanating from a choir of uninvited but not wholly unfamiliar voices. As I wrote that first version, Jacob was suddenly speaking in accents I had not heard for some time. Years of living in Great Britain have morphed my own native Tennessee drawl into a middle-Atlantic hybrid, with only faint echoes of its

former inflections. Yet here was Jacob speaking in the accents not of Memphis on the Nile (he is, after all, a Hebrew living in Egypt) but Memphis on the Mississippi. In that first attempt to hear Jacob tell me about his twenty years in Paddan-Aram, my own native accent with all its elongated vowels, languid intonations and folksy idioms kept resurfacing in Jacob's speeches. The voice of this 'It' or 'He' or 'She' joined in with what I think were the voice-traces of some of my previous male clients to create a strange aggregate argot that was not Jacob at all. This sudden onset of polyphony amounted to my own, much less auspicious and even humorously incongruent, mini-'Fit in the Choir.'

These distinctively accented voices jarred with my desire to write Jacob's voice as authentically as possible. I wanted my created script to unfold in concert both with the actual quotations I was using from the text and with the way I had already voiced Jacob in the Pre-Research and Iteration One dialogues. Even though this polyphonic choir had something to say that was useful in understanding how I was responding to Jacob and the origins of my contributions to co-construction, its greater utility was in drawing attention to the ease with which other voices, alien to the client's presentation of himself, may infiltrate the intersubjective space between us and change the conversation. More tellingly, these voices and their accents may also introduce for good or ill new personas and positions for both client and counsellor. Hermans (2004, 261-267) points to the ways in which 'Who is speaking?' is never 'a straightforward issue in psychotherapeutic discourse.' There are both multi-voiced 'I's' and 'hidden addressees' in any client utterance. Interestingly, literary theorists who study the poetics and rhetoric of texts point to the intrinsic capacity of narrative,

almost by its very nature, to surface multiple voices. To identify and distinguish these voices requires skill and poses the questions: who is speaking, to whom, when, in what language and with what authority? (Culler, 1997). Bakhtin (1984), in particular, stressed the ways in which any utterance, by any interlocutor, entails 'the broader issues of a speaking subject's perspective, conceptual horizon, intention, and world view' (cited in Wertsch, 1991:51). In Bakhtin's view the 'tone' of any utterance is also deeply complicit in positioning the author in relation to his own world and to the world of the addressee (Rober, 2005). In that first draft of the dialogue, it did seem as though the voice accents I was hearing were having an impact on the 'tone' of both Jacob's speech and mine. The register felt wrong.

The potential power in these dynamics reminded me of the value in listening to a client's stories of holding an ongoing inner conversation with myself which revisits regularly the basic narrative question, 'Who, do I think, is speaking now and to whom?' and its corollaries, 'What does that mean for this client?' and 'How should this be managed and facilitated for his benefit?' It also alerted me to the mirror image inherent in this vital point of praxis. As the counsellor, I also need to be asking 'Who is listening?' What set of receptive ears, professional or personal, has any particular utterance or series of utterances, perked up for me? I think in this case it may be that Jacob's proximity to his own youthful identity crisis triggered memories of my own early negotiations and struggles with identity. Like Jacob, though on a much more modest scale, my early life was marked by a sense of exile, loss of home and a major geographic displacement. It is not surprising then that the more native accents of my earlier self might have crept in surreptitiously. In the end

I took note of the multiple voices that had surfaced in my initial dialogue, thanked them for their choral contribution, and after a suitable period of time, bid them farewell. It was not a purge but a gentle setting aside that then allowed me to rewrite the imaginary conversation transcribed above (the fraternal but not identical twin of the first one) and to re-engage with the Jacob I thought I was coming to know through careful tuning into him and his textual world.

### Making a Case for Case Notes

Some time after writing this new version of the imaginary dialogue, I read it out loud, voicing Jacob's speech and mine (without the Tennessee twang) to simulate hearing and co-hearing the session with him in the research context where we find ourselves now. After that pseudo experiencing of the session as an active, back and forth, conversation between interlocutors, I made a brief case note summary, such as I might have produced in practice. In many counselling and even counselling/ research settings, it is often the case that there is not sufficient time immediately after the session to reflect on the content and process of what has transpired. If audio or video taping has not been used, some form of brief note taking, post session, as an aide memoir is the method of choice for many counsellors.

There are significant ethical issues around note-keeping which are not relevant in my imaginary set up here. My main purpose in producing them at this point in my research project was to mirror my own experience of practice, to reflect on the kinds of things that I might jot down in haste to help me recall the session later. I did not

produce case notes for the previous or subsequent iterations, but it is interesting to me now what may have given rise to this idea in response to the preceding imaginary dialogue. There is something in the content of this dialogue with Jacob which communicates, both explicitly and implicitly, the importance of being 'seen;' that who Jacob is, the ways others have treated him, and the ways he experiences himself point to the value for him of having an 'Other,' to witness and acknowledge what life has been like for him, to 'look' and 'note well' (22-27). Repeatedly in his life, it has been God's voice and presence that have provided this kind of acknowledgement and witness. I jot down the following case notes to recall to mind later some of the words, phrases, key moments and feelings his story has left behind for me. As I suggested in the introduction to this episode, case notes compiled over the course of several sessions become another form of retelling the client's story and have an impact on the shape it takes in the counsellor's mind.

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### Case Notes

Client: Jacob

Session: Iteration 2/Genesis 29-32

Thematic Title: 'Note well'

Enter limping - Did he want me to notice this today?

Initial diminishing of discomfort, avoidance of the memory attached to it

Story connected to hip pain surfaces at end of session

Words to live by-'Limping is no sin'

'Do what needs to be done',

Physical strength - coping strategy, relation to identity?

Flailing, 'finding a foothold,' surfaces Uncle Laban story—helplessness and then anger

Trickery, distrust, disguises- feel myself strongly recruited to see Laban as persecutor, list of grievances aired

Complicated Relationship with wives-

'Tricked' into marrying older daughter-'did my duty by her'

Served gladly and starry-eyed for Rachel,

Alluded to but untold story of 'struggle' in births of eleven sons?

And daughter?

Strife between wives/sisters but both agree on 'mistreatment' from Laban

Client lacking empathy for wives, unnamed daughter here?

Alone- 'my wits and my two hands'

Dream story- male imagery 'he-goats' 'mottled and streaked' turning point, God's voice, being 'seen' 'Note well' Is this addressed to me too? Am I noting him well enough?

Exploration of dream resurfaces hip pain, 'few and difficult' - frying pan and fire (my metaphor but he picks it up) this frames two stories: leaving Uncle's domination, facing brother's 20 year old death threat

Extreme Fear- Code 'Red' threat to life,

first story triggers flight

second story triggers fight

'Wrestling in the dark' story-

Powerful, numinous, 'blood and bone'

(Reverie for me of regression, twins in womb)

Wound/Blessing, Old Name/New Name, Heel-Grabber/Prevailer

Transformative, 'first free step' leading to reconciliation with brother

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As I highlighted in the introduction, Erikson considered 'retelling' the story, 'the first step in interpretation.' The creation and rereading of case notes is one form of this retelling. These notes in this form are another way of storying the dialogue and point me to a structure for the session. They hang it upon a frame I might not have seen otherwise. In the abbreviated clarity of this outline, I notice the 'enter limping' beginning of the session is symmetrically mirrored by the 'first free step' comment Jacob makes at the very end of the session (1-5, 65). These fore and aft references to walking, how Jacob puts one foot in front of the other, echo back to the 'few and hard' difficulties of Iteration One. They call to mind the importance, explored there, of sojourning pilgrimage, the walk of faith as a means of understanding how Jacob views his life. They also frame from beginning to end how much persevering through pain and 'finding a foothold' matter to both the content and process of the session.



My case notes highlight that it is the seen and felt presence of a physical embodiment of pain, that ushers Jacob into the room today. I notice this pain at the outset and refer to it, but my observation does not lead at that point to disclosure of the injury that caused it. The case notes reveal spatially how the dream story sits near the centre of the session, acting as a pivot which leads both to a re-emergence of Jacob's physical pain and the movement into the story which gave rise to this injury. They show in a more structural way how these two key stories, with the dream as the turning point, flow into each other (20-30). The first story of Laban's mistreatment is balanced by the second story of the struggle at the river and mirrors the two parallels I make in the dialogue, 'frying pan and fire', 'flight and fight' (35). The second story enters the dialogue more explicitly when Jacob makes another physical gesture which suggests to me his hip is still bothering him (31). There is a 'story' in the painful limp. The body and how it moves have been shaped by its history and the story-body speaks first, though not yet in words. Phoenix (2011:111) points to the important synergies between storytelling and the body. She cites the work of Randall and McKim (2008) who conclude, 'Our body is not merely the housing of our life; it is the setting of our story, the main (though ever moving) environment in which that story unfolds....' The story of the origin of Jacob's injury is an incredibly powerful and numinous one. It is experienced and present on a bodily level but does not come to words until near the end of the session. Instead, perhaps grasping for a foothold, Jacob begins with the story of another 'injury,' equally painful for him, his years of ill treatment by his uncle.

As his story continues to unfold, the abuses mount and eventually the convergence of events and relational signals climax in his decision to change his circumstances by getting away from Laban. This decision is given further colour and divine sanction by Jacob's presentation of his very evocative dream of the copulating and motley coloured he-goats. My case note outline reveals the way the dream forms a kind of bridging story that connects two of the major narratives of this time period, linking the 'out of the frying pan' story of his uncle's treachery with the 'into the fire' story of his brother's wrath (a retribution very much feared but not actualised). It is God's voice that speaks most clearly in the dream, identifying Himself as the One who has truly seen Jacob and taken careful note of his long labours and 'all that Laban had done to him' (22). Jacob has generated flocks and herds, married wives and fathered children in these twenty years but even in the midst of a growing, clamouring entourage he has experienced himself as alone and unseen. The affirming recognition he received in the dream 'moved' him internally and externally, figuratively and literally. The dream's 'mottled and speckled' ambiguity is evocative of his own character. Its emphasis on being seen and known foreshadows the events and outcome of the wrestling episode. He felt 'seen,' encouraged, and enlightened by what he saw and heard in the dream and this, he tells me, helped him to 'remove' himself and his family from a difficult and increasingly dangerous situation (26, 30). His anger at Laban, his wives' uncharacteristic agreement on his plan of action, and the reassurance in the dream provided the turning point he needed 'to do,' what he thought, 'needed to be done' (4). I wonder if I have replicated this affirming witness today in our session. My case notes reflect my concern. Have I 'noted well' enough

those aspects of his story, Laban's treatment in particular, that mattered most to him, that he wanted to be 'seen'?

In reviewing my case notes, I am left also with some of those things that remain unseen, those things that Jacob either does not see himself or prefers to leave unseen. Thinking about this now, I am struck with what a male story this is. He-goats predominate and there are echoes of Campbell's (1968) heroic quest in his escape and subsequent adventures.<sup>48</sup> I also reflect on his very sketchy treatment of his complicated domestic arrangements, his dutiful toleration of one unloved wife and his romantic idealisation of the other, the conflict between these sister/wives, and the births of his children, especially the daughter he seems to mention as a nervous afterthought (12, 16). All this leaves me feeling within the session and afterward in my case notes that he has not 'noted' these women's realities as poignantly or as empathically as his own (39). These aspects of his story remain untold for now and do not figure prominently in what mattered most to him today. However, their liminality hovers in the air for me and I hold them in mind. They are reminders that Jacob is first and foremost a 'patriarchal' figure, the father of a family, a tribe and ultimately a nation. The gender and kinship relations he understands and is

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<sup>48</sup> Campbell's central thesis in his influential text, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, has clear resonances with the content of *Genesis 32*. Campbell describes the plot of the hero myth as, 'A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man' (1968:30). Besides associations with Campbell's work, Roland Barthes (1971) has argued in his structural analysis of *Genesis 32* that this story also contains elements of Propp's folk tale categories. He cites numbers 15 through 19, 'including the perilous *passage* from place to place; *combat* between villain and hero; *branding* or *marking* the hero or bestowing on him a special gift; [and] *victory* of the hero' (Barthes 1971, cited in Hartman, 1986:14).

embedded within are very different from my own. More of these issues and their implications will be discussed in Iteration Four.

## Limping is No Sin

While I have titled the above session in my case notes as ‘Note well,’ there are many alternative thematic titles I could have chosen that might be just as apt, but would retell and shape the story and my perspective on it differently. For example, a very significant phrase for me was Jacob’s assertion, ‘limping is no sin’ (4). While a large proportion of what Jacob says in the above dialogue is made up of direct quotes or paraphrases from the *Genesis* text, this sentence is not one of them. I have put these words in Jacob’s mouth. Before examining how they might have found their way into my mind and then onto the page to emanate from Jacob, it should be noted what the text actually does say about ‘limping.’ That Jacob had a disability, an injury, that he ‘limped,’ is highlighted in the original Hebrew text in a unique way when the usually reclusive narrator, delivers a rare, direct ‘aside’ to his implied readers. He underlines the sacredness of this event for the ‘children of Israel to this day’ by pointing to a long standing dietary custom of not eating the ‘thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip,’ a custom, he says, that can be traced back to this moment of injury in Jacob’s life (*Genesis* 32:33).

Yet in creating this dialogue which touches on the origin of his disability, these words, ‘limping is no sin’ seemed to flow in, un-summoned and unbidden as part of how I was reading and hearing Jacob. Rober (2005:480), referencing the work of

Bakhtin, points to the ways in which the continually developing context and interactive dynamics of conversation itself, shape and invite the ongoing utterances which enter it, 'Like links in a never-ending chain, every word we speak is connected with words that were spoken before.' Every utterance is a response to another utterance and has a complex and ultimately inscrutable genealogy. To trace such a genealogy all the way back to every possible set of antecedents for it would lead to dizzying infinite regress. While not attempting such a feat, still I am curious about why I put these words in Jacob's mouth and used them to characterise how he might look at the meaning of his injury. First and most obviously, I recognise they are words that matter to me. They are drawn from a line of poetry, which I originally heard quoted without any source citation as, 'Whither we cannot fly, we must go limping. The Bible saith, limping is no sin.'<sup>49</sup> They represent a life motto which has profound significance for me. I first heard these words from the mouth of a 'wounded storyteller,' who shared them as the way she had dealt with a time of great tragedy, uncertainty and loss. They resonated so much with me, I wrote them down and eventually tried to discover their source. It turns out to be a complex dialogical chain of utterances which provides a kind of empirical support for Bakhtin's perspectives.

Psychoanalysts will perhaps recognise in this phrase, a quote from the epilogue of Freud's, *The Pleasure Principle* where he uses these lines of poetry as 'comfort' for his frustration at the 'slow advances of...scientific knowledge' and the necessity for

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<sup>49</sup> The Bible, as far as I can discover, does not contain this exact quote, 'limping is no sin,' but its rich narrative trove of human stories over centuries does embody and support such a statement.

accepting that progress is often made only in halting steps and requires much openness to revision along the way (Freud 1920/1961 cited in Harrasser, 2012). Harrasser (2012) traces the origin of the ‘whither we cannot fly’ phrase even further back. The poem from which Freud extracted these ‘limping’ lines, is called *Die beiden Gulden (The Two Coins)* by Friedrich Rückert, a German romantic poet who is also credited with being the founder of modern Oriental studies. This poem was first published in German translation in 1826. The story behind the phrase, ‘limping is no sin’ and its complex genealogy does not end here. According to Harrasser, Rückert’s poem is itself a translation of a much earlier work by Al-Hariri of Basra, *The Assemblies of Al-Hariri*, an Arabic prose poem, which dates from around 1100 CE. It would appear then that this sentiment, that ‘whither we cannot fly we must go limping, limping is no sin’ has quite an impressive cross cultural, transhistorical pedigree.

None of this, however, explains or justifies why I put these words in Jacob’s mouth in this conversation. What it demonstrates more convincingly in terms of co-construction is the way my own values, how I see the world, how I cope with difficulty, what has helped me, what has helped others I have known, what I reckon is the most helpful attitude to deal with adversity, these things may creep into the conversation with any client in spite of all efforts to bracket them out. As this iteration has already demonstrated, it is not possible to meet in an intimate space in dialogical exchange without bringing into it my own voices, value systems, stories, favourite texts and my own way of interpreting what makes for the ‘good life.’

McAdams and Janis (2004:169) cite the work of Taylor (1989) in claiming, ‘All

stories promote certain goods and particularise certain images of what it means to be a good person and live a good life in a certain cultural context.’ In the counselling setting, putting words into clients’ mouths does not happen so literally as in this imaginary dialogue where I had such a powerful hand in shaping the words that Jacob uses and the values he espouses. However, there is a different, more subtle kind of putting-words-in-mouth power operating in the counselling setting which can contribute to a similar alignment of values. McLeod and Lynch (2000:390) point to the ways in which client values ‘become more similar to those espoused by their therapists over the course of therapy.’ Speedy (2005:284-285) argues that ‘there are myriad opportunities for therapists to engage in the imposition of meanings when their client’s lives differ from their own or do not fit with the professional or political theories to which they hold.’ This is not necessarily a sinister working of power but it is another aspect of co-constructive dynamics that became apparent through this form of dialogical play with Jacob’s text and my response to it. In this case, I think I have enough indications from the rest of Jacob’s words and actions in the Biblical text, and the values espoused more broadly in it, that my ‘imposition of meaning’ is not too far from what Jacob, both as character in his own textual world and fictive client in mine, might adopt or voice himself.

As a counsellor/researcher into co-construction I leave this session with a great deal of appreciation for my fictive, co-participant Jacob and what he has helped me to see, hear and experience about how I contribute to this dynamic. Something is taking shape, fleshing out, a kind of knowledge I would not have come face to face with or wrestled with in quite the same way without his help. For me, at this point in my

experience of Jacob's life review, as well as my experience of our ongoing co-constructed research story, it is clear that this growing knowledge shape in my mind is not going to morph into a geometrically precise polygon upon which logical theorems may be proved, QED. The new shape being formed by 'narrative knowing' in this second iteration grows as a contingent, inchoate, fluid presence taking shape in the fertile, shadowy but not sinister space between me and my principal research co-participant, Jacob and his text. From the focal point of Iteration One I have climbed aboard the text to engage with the ubiquitous hermeneutic circle, and its constant back and forth jostling motion between themes and episodes, parts and whole, prolepsis and analepsis, anticipation and retrospection. This engagement with the hermeneutic circle, like dialogue in the therapy space, is a kind of dance, sometimes a waltz, sometimes a tango, sometimes two left feet and a broken hip but it has its own responsive, enigmatic form of relational knowing. Something of what it has been like for me to engage in this dance in this iteration is expressed with lucid ambiguity in these lines from Robert Frost (2001:362).

We dance around a ring and suppose

The Secret sits in the middle and knows

This ongoing dance with narrative knowing has led by the usual circuitous hermeneutic route to Iteration Three where the echo of 'What is your name?' will reverberate in a different way.



## Chapter 9: Iteration Three

### Introduction

*THERE* was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparel'd in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.  
It is not now as it hath been of yore—  
...  
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Wordsworth (1807/1968:149-151)

The fresh dreams of youth that so radiantly light the landscape and every ‘common sight’ in days of ‘yore’ may look very different from the vantage point of old age. What has faded and what still burns bright are important sources of illumination in Jacob’s life story review. They provide clues to what really matters to him, what has passed the test of time and narrative and what endures to give cohesion and meaning to the life story he is living and telling now. Faded glory is not necessarily glory that has utterly fled or diminished. A dream’s staying power is not just a factor of its original intensity, but its ongoing capacity to symbolise and contain the issues of identity, purpose, and hope which characterise the whole of Jacob’s ‘sojourn’ and what he wants to make of it.

My co-construction with Jacob and his text will now take us two decades further back into the stories of his life where the ‘glory and the freshness’ of a particularly

powerful, youthful dream will light the way. Iteration Three will focus on a time when, as a much younger man, he must make a hasty departure from his family home in Canaan because his older twin brother is threatening to kill him. This forced exile leads him for the first time to Bethel, where he falls asleep on a stone. Here he dreams of a ladder or stairway to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. It is in this dream that he also encounters for the first time the authentic voice and powerful presence of the God of his father, Isaac and his grandfather, Abraham. His waking from the dream marks the first time that his own voice, ‘the voice of Jacob’ is heard in a new, more autonomous way. The story of this dream is told in *Genesis* chapter 28. This episode embodies the core theme of Iteration Three but as in previous iterations, the co-construction of the story does not restrict itself to this passage alone but will range further afield and draw from other parts of his story as well. The three episodes most salient in this third session are the circumstances of his leaving home for the first time, the experience of the dream at Bethel and the first meeting with Rachel. These three, a domestic scene, a dream and a first date, represent a narrative, beginning, middle and end for this part of the tale and encompass the impetus for and outcome of Jacob’s early negotiations of an adult identity.

The following introduction will discuss some of the theoretical, thematic and structural links that influenced my choice of this episode. This choice grew out of the signposts I read into and out of the previous two iterations, which focused on *Genesis*, chapters 46 through 47 and *Genesis*, chapter 32. The outlining of these various signposts will highlight the ways in which Iteration Two’s wrestling episode

and Iteration Three's dream sit at opposite temporal and spatial ends of a key transition period for Jacob, the move from adolescence to adulthood. Comparisons and contrasts between the previous iteration and this one will be referred to briefly. Finally, this introduction will conclude with an exploration of some of the struggle I experienced in trying to connect with Jacob's voice in this part of his story and how I used alternative retellings of the story to overcome this impasse. These retellings which comprise two stories written in two very different genres, conclude this introduction and directly precede the dialogue.

### On the Cusp of Emerging Adulthood

My reading of the episodes contained in both Iterations Two and Three was strongly influenced by the theoretical perspectives I brought to them in terms of Erikson's and McAdams' ideas about the life cycle and the formation of identity. Across a twenty year time span, which corresponds with Erikson's view of a 'moratorium,' Jacob has negotiated the perilous passage from the dry stony ground of Bethel in *Genesis 28* (the subject of this iteration) to the dangerous ford of the Jabbok in *Genesis 32* (the subject of the previous iteration). Fishbane(1979:42) has produced an integrative chart which orders all the episodes of the Jacob cycle. He places these two episodes (*Genesis 28:10-22* and *Genesis 32*) in a chiasmic parallel, which forms a neat frame around what Fishbane calls 'the tale within the tale,' the twenty years Jacob spent in Laban's employ. Fishbane's focus on the way these two signature episodes are so artfully balanced in the narrative structure of the plot gives some support to my sense of them as forming a bookend set around a key period of adult identity formation in

Jacob's life. After engaging with the parallels in Fishbane's chart, I returned to these two story episodes and produced the following list of mirroring contrasts. These contrasts acted as another form of 'retelling' that shed light on the progression that takes place in these twenty years. They also formed a more overtly compelling, natural bridge between the themes and content of Iteration Two and those of Iteration Three.

<b>Genesis 28</b>	<b>Genesis 32</b>
A Dream	A Fight
Asleep	Awake
Dry Stony Ground	Fluid River Ford
Veiled, Ethereal Encounter	Visceral, Physical Encounter
A Glimpsed Gateway	A Grasped Responsibility
Fear and Fleeing From	Fear and Facing Toward
Emergence of Voice and Vow	Evidence of Strength and Action
Tentative Response	More Resolute Response
Place Name Change	Place and Personal Name Change
Resumes Journey with a Lighter Step	Resumes Journey Limping
Awe and Hope	Relief and Reconciliation
Contractual Distant Relationship	Intimate Face to Face Relationship
Reassurance and Promises	Challenge and Affirmation
A Ladder Connecting Heaven and Earth	Forgiveness Connecting Brother with Brother
Conditional, Measured Intention to Give	Unconditional, Magnanimous Restitution

This distance and differentiation between the two episodes illustrate the often protracted struggle between a young person's first engagement with the process of individuation and the culminating resolution of this most central and fraught of developmental crises.<sup>50</sup> The tenor of the contrasts reveals a progression from a tentative, veiled, conditional stance to a more muscular, substantial, resolute agency. According to Gross (1987:39), Erikson did not conceive of this outcome as a final, once and for all resolution but ideally as a form of firmer and more substantial 'fidelity' which moves the person from the dependencies of childhood to the interdependencies of adulthood.<sup>51</sup> The task requires a bargain to be struck between two key questions, 'What have I got?' and 'What am I going to do with it?' Iteration Two focused on the later stages of this struggle for identity when the key question to be wrestled with was posed by Jacob's mighty opponent at the river ford who asked, 'What is your name?' The new name he received there, 'Prevailer' acted as a culminating clarification that enabled him to cross the significant border of his unresolved past into a more secure sense of taking his place in the adult world. Significantly, this included offering a heart-felt and generous restitution to his twin brother and acknowledging with appropriate humility the wrong he had done to him. Jacob, after the Jabbok crossing, becomes a more fully individuated adult and as such

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<sup>50</sup> For an excellent elaboration of the theoretical concept of individuation in the life of Jacob from a Jungian perspective see Andrew Kille's 'Jacob-A Study in Individuation' in *Jung and the Interpretation of the Bible* (Miller, 1995).

<sup>51</sup> That this resolution is not absolute is reflected in the text by the ambivalence which surrounds the name change from Jacob to Israel in *Genesis* 32:29. God will later reaffirm this new name a second time as belonging to Jacob and accurately describing him but the appellation is seldom used in the rest of the story and Jacob never uses it of himself except once in his last will and testament (*Genesis* 49:2). Thus, the crisis point at the ford, though significant, life-changing and demonstrative of considerable 'fidelity' was far from the 'final' word. Inhabiting the new, wrestled-and-won identity as Israel was an ongoing process.

is able to see, perhaps truly for the first time, his brother's 'face' (*Genesis* 33:10).

The dream at Bethel acts as the epigenetic counterpart to this scene and focuses on the earlier, beginning stages of the identity struggle, a fraught time for Jacob when he must engage with an even more stripped down, primal question of identity, 'Who am I?' McAdams (2013: 281) portrays this psychosocial stage on the cusp of emerging adulthood as the time when the 'authorial *I* makes its first full-fledged attempts to define and integrate the self through narrative.'

Iterations Two and Three are also linked in their representation of memories drawn from what narrative gerontologists have identified as the 'reminiscence bump.'

Randall (2011:25-26) describes the significance of this period as:

that clustering of key events... when our adult identity is taking shape in earnest: when typically, we are leaving home, pursuing an education, establishing a career, finding a partner, and starting a home of our own.... Such recollections often figure centrally in our life story, ...[assuming] mythic proportions inside our imagination as, later in life, we think our way back to how it is we became who we are. We thus make them pivotal to our memoir... as if they carried clues to our innermost nature, to why we value what we value and believe what we believe, to our abiding "life themes." ...At the core of each such memory, as perhaps of many of our dreams, may lie some guiding metaphor of self on which we would do well to reflect.

Like the wrestling match at the Jabbok in Iteration Two, this dream comes from the period of the 'reminiscence bump'<sup>52</sup> and bears all the hallmarks of a 'nuclear

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<sup>52</sup>Cappeliez and Webster (2011:180) define the reminiscence bump as the 'tendency to recall memories from the time when participants were approximately 10 to 30 years of age.' They apply it particularly to involuntary memories which they say usually 'pertain to specific episodes rather than to general events or classes of events....Indeed older adults seem to manifest a marked bias toward the spontaneous retrieval of personal memories about events dating from that period of life.' Singer and Blagov (2011:231) suggest a reason for this bias may be that this period so powerfully encapsulates 'the consolidation of identity.'

episode' or 'self-defining' memory. It is 'pivotal' to Jacob's memoir, his values, beliefs and the 'guiding metaphor of self' which casts light and shadow on all that comes before and all that comes after.

## The Stuff of Dreams

Dreams as guiding metaphors have deep resonance with Jacob's world and the way meanings are constructed there. Wenham (2000a:352), drawing on a wide range of historical sources, asserts that 'dreams were a recognised form of revelation' in the ancient world. Across many different Mesopotamian peoples, dreams were seen and frequently used as a culturally acceptable form of hearing the voice of the Deity and receiving guidance. The significance of dreams for Jacob has surfaced in both the previous dialogues and provides another thematic link between them. In fact, this interest in dreams was present even in the pre-research interview. Early in that interview, Jacob queries the part dreams may play in people's stories and in how they come to an understanding of themselves, the meaning of their names and their futures. Throughout his own story, dreams are important conduits for hearing God, for reassurance, affirmation and guidance. The messages in these dreams are sometimes direct, sometimes enigmatic and at times disturbing, but Jacob 'holds them in mind' (*Genesis 37:11*). In Iteration One, it is Joseph's two boyhood dreams which trouble Jacob, and in Iteration Two, it is his own fertile dream in breeding season that fuels his determination to leave Laban's employ and return with his family to his home in Canaan. Wenham also points to the way in which the site where a particularly powerful or significant dream was experienced was often set

aside as a sacred space for worship. Jacob's dream at Bethel results in exactly this kind of long term sanctuary creation. Bethel is a safe and sacred place for him to which he will return again and again when the road is hard.

Since Jacob and I are co-constructing a story in which dreams play such a significant role, it is necessary to give a brief account not only of how they are situated and thought about in his world but also how they sit in the world of my own counselling context. Debates about the meanings of dreams and how to make use of them in therapy have a long history but in everyday counselling practice, they remain a rich source of client storytelling and meaning making.<sup>53</sup> Lyon and Hill (2004: 207) argue that 'Although working with dreams in therapy has ebbed and flowed in popularity since the advent of modern talk therapy, recent laboratory research has demonstrated that dream work is a useful clinical tool.' They cite research studies to indicate that '83% of clinicians surveyed (N=228) worked with dreams in therapy at least occasionally' as a way of helping clients gain insight, strengthen the working alliance and increase the depth of sessions. Jung, a great proponent of the value of meaning making derived from myths, folk lore, fairy tales and the stories of the Bible thought that dream images often emerged from these sources. Unlike Freud he did not see dreams as disguised repressions, but thought they might function more as straightforward messages directly related to a person's every day conscious concerns

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<sup>53</sup> Jung and Freud's disagreement over the meaning and interpretive use of dreams forms the historical backdrop for the way they are conceptualised in contemporary talking therapies, as well as in Western popular imagination (Rollins, 1999; Pearson, 1995). Even Beck, the founder of modern cognitive behavioural therapy, attributed value to the use of dream material in working with clients, although this is far from standard practice in the model (Montangero, 2009).



(Rollins, 1995). In this view of a dream's utility, he shares some commonalities with the inhabitants of Jacob's ancient Mesopotamian world. Jung suggested it was possible to use dreams as sources of insight and problem solving which he believed could be, at least partly, 'achieved simply by the therapist taking the dream seriously' (Pearson, 1995:38). In my own experience of practice when a client brings a dream, it is often because it has been disturbing or stimulating in some way and he or she wants to talk it through. Essentially clients want to know 'what it means' and they often look to me as an 'expert in this sort of thing.' As I demonstrated with my response to Jacob's 'goat dream' in Iteration Two, rather than position myself as an expert or artful dream interpreter, I chose to direct him to his own expertise in interpreting the dream himself. By responding to his dreams in the way I have in our previous conversations, I have perhaps opened a space where Jacob feels his sharing of dreams will be heard and respected. This particular dream at Bethel has created a safe space and sanctuary in his life for a very long time and I want to reflect that in the way I hear and respond to his voicing of it in this session.

## Losing Voice

I approached *Genesis* chapter 28 and its dream story using a similar method as my previous iterations, listening to the audio tape first and taking notes and then reading the text and taking notes. However, a difference this time was that I decided to begin listening to the story much further back in *Genesis*, beginning in chapter 15 which focuses on Abraham and Sarah's childlessness. My reasoning for this was the need to get a better sense of Jacob's family history and his positioning in the family story.

In the counselling setting, this might be achieved by taking a structured family history or collaborating to create a genogram; but more often in my own practice, these family factors, at least the ones which matter most to the client, emerge as the background noise in the stories of life he or she relates. One outcome of reading further back into Jacob's family history was a more culturally astute understanding of Jacob as embedded in a family matrix, and the importance of communal 'households' rather than individuals, as the key units of social organisation in his world view (Matthews and Benjamin, 1993). This will be explored further in Iteration Four.

Covering this wide a swathe of Jacob's life and family history generated a great deal of information, as well as providing new perspectives on material gathered in a similar way for Iterations One and Two. As I had done in the previous iterations, I used this material to produce a dialogue with Jacob based primarily on his experiences as they are textually set out in *Genesis* chapter 28 and its surrounding contexts. However, whereas in Iteration Two this process surfaced different voices for Jacob, in this reading I seemed to lose connection with Jacob's voice altogether. I started several imaginary dialogues with him but I could not seem to find and connect with his voice in the same way. My repeated attempts failed to capture any 'flow' as conversation.

Having encountered an impasse, I decided to approach the text differently, to 'play' with how it might be re-storied or retold in a different style. This mirrors client experience of impasse, as it is often possible for a person to be 'stuck' or become stuck in conventional or familiar ways of narrating himself or herself. The power of

the way parts of a story have become concretised may lead clients to lose a sense of their own voices. The experiments I chose to re-story the text were based on input from a storytelling workshop I had attended at about the same time. This kind of input and experimentation fits with the counselling context in which workshops, ongoing professional trainings, discussions with colleagues and experiential techniques often find their way into working with clients. The ways I experimented with re-storying the text of *Genesis* 28 to overcome the impasse I felt in connecting with Jacob are provided below. I decided to retell Jacob's dream story using the same plot sequence as the text, but in two very different narrative styles.

The first alternate story I wrote reflects the terseness and sparseness of the way stories are told in the Jacob cycle. The *Genesis* narratives often exhibit *parataxis*, the heaping up of statements, one after the other, without subordinate connectives or any obvious causal links being made (Sternberg, 1992; Alter, 1981). In fact, the previous text I used in the second iteration, *Genesis* 32 is uniquely structured in this way, using the Hebrew word *waw*, for *and*, which precedes nearly every verse segment in the text (Hartman, 1986). I wrote an exaggerated version of this paratactic style and extracted the third person narrator by casting the story in first person as if from Jacob's point of view.

The other style I experimented with was a direct application of a simple narrative technique used in the storytelling workshop I attended. It demonstrated how genre changes can alter or enrich meanings in telling life stories. It was a very simple exercise of listening to a person's story, reflecting it back in the usual way and then

retelling it in the form of a fairy tale. I decided to retell Jacob's story using this genre also. The juxtaposition of the two styles, the sparse parataxis and the fairy tale, makes an interesting addition to the data set of my third iteration. They are presented below as an introduction to and background for the ensuing dialogue. They also offer in two very different genres, a summary of what happened in this episode, the events that preceded the dream in Bethel, the circumstances and content of the dream and Jacob's response to it the next morning. The first paratactic version of the story is closely correlated to the text of the Jewish Publication Society (Berlin, Brettler, and Fishbane, 2004) translation and the sentences in italics are direct quotations from that translation. What I learned from this methodological 'play' with the text and how I reconnected with Jacob's voice will be addressed more fully in the commentary which follows the dialogue.

### Paratactic version of *Genesis* 28: 1-22

My father sent for me.

He blessed me.

He instructed me.

He warned me not to marry a Canaanite woman.

He told me to go to Paddan-aram.

He told me to take a wife from among my Uncle Laban's daughters.

He blessed me again with the blessing of Abraham.

He sent me off.

I left Beersheba and set out for my mother's birthplace.

I came to a certain place.

I stopped there for the night.

The sun had set.

I took up a stone.

I put it under my head.

I lay down in that place.

I had a dream.

I saw a stairway.

I saw angels ascending and descending.

I saw the Lord at the top.

I heard God say, *'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac:*

*The ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring.*

*Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth;*

*You shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south.*

*All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants.*

*Remember,*

*I am with you:*

*I will protect you wherever you go.*

*and [I] will bring you back to this land.*

*I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'*

I woke from my sleep.

I said, *'Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!'*

I was shaken.

I said, *'How awesome is this place!*

*This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.'*

Early in the morning, I took the stone that I had put under my head.

I set the stone up as a pillar.

I poured oil on top of it.

I named that site Bethel.

I vowed a vow.

I said, *'If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that you give me, I will set aside a tithe for You.'*

Fairy tale retelling of *Genesis 28:1-22* (including background material from *Genesis 25* and *27*)

Once upon a time in a desert kingdom, a royal couple, King Isaac and Queen Rebekah, longed for a child. After twenty years of barren waiting, hoping and praying, they were finally blessed with the birth of not one, but two princes. As is often the way with twin brothers, these boys were very different. The older one was ruddy and wild, a lover of the open country and a skilled hunter. His father named him 'Red,' a name which fit him perfectly. His father doted on him and loved the tasty game he often brought home to supplement the King's table. The younger twin was quieter, more reserved and more likely to be found hovering near his mother's

wing of the castle than anywhere else. He was called 'Heel,' not a very nice name, but unfortunately for him, he had been born grasping the heel of his older twin and somehow the name had stuck. In spite of that or maybe because of it, he was his mother's favourite and she often tuned her ears and sharpened her eyes for ways she could help him. She was a clever and resourceful woman and not afraid of hard work.

In that Kingdom, and in that royal family, being the first son really mattered, it meant you received a double portion of the estate and were entitled to lord it over your brothers. In this family, there was also a very special set of promises which the first son inherited, promises of land, and descendants and blessing. What made this family special and distinguished them from all the families, clans and kingdoms that surrounded them was their relationship with the Great Ruler of All, the *El Shaddai* or *Elohim* as he was sometimes called. It's a longer story how this very special relationship came about, but it was a sacred trust handed down from father to son and not to be taken lightly. Red, the older brother (by two minutes), though he loved his father very much and wanted to please him, had a tendency to think with his stomach more than his mind or heart. Being the blessing bearer, like his father and grandfather, was something he expected to inherit, but not something he thought much about. Heel, on the other hand, thought about it all the time and I'm sorry to say, looked for ways to trick his brother out of both his birthright and the blessing that went with it. It's another long story how he managed to lay traps for his older brother and the King, but suffice it to say, Heel certainly lived up to his name. For Red, the day his 'rightfully named' heel of a brother stole his blessing right from

under his nose was a day of infamy. Heel impersonated Red by a clever trick his mother devised. She gave him a suit of Red's very best clothes to wear and wrapped goat's hair round his hands. In this disguise, Heel duped his old, blind father into believing he was Red! King Isaac pronounced his innermost blessing, the one he had saved for Red onto Heel instead. In that land a father's word was final. The blessing once given could not be taken back and there was very little that could be done to change it. That was the final straw for Red. He was so furious, he could hardly contain himself. He paced up and down and swore he would kill his conniving, usurping, brother as soon as he got the chance.

Thanks once again to the Queen's sharp ears and quick thinking, Heel managed to avoid his brother's wrath. Queen Rebekah reassured him that Red would get over his anger and he would be able to return home soon, but Heel was not so sure.

Undaunted, his mother went into action, cleverly coaxing the King not only into agreeing the plan to send Heel off to her brother's family but also getting him to confirm, with the royal seal, Heel's status as the 'blessing bearer.' Heel was given a strict command by King Isaac to find and marry a princess from his mother's homeland. The young prince nodded his agreement and without saying a word, he purposed in his heart that he would obey his father's wishes. In any case, he really had very few alternatives and so, that very hour, he set out with not much in his pockets, very little in his stomach and no servants or carriage, not even a camel or donkey. It was many, many miles on foot to that far country, the land of the Easterners, and Heel set out not really knowing what would befall him or when he would ever return.



By the time the sun had set he found himself alone in desolate country, far from any friendly village or even a remote farmhouse. He was alone and very, very tired.

Unused to the open country and quite overwhelmed by the sight of the vast starry sky above him, he gathered some stones and arranged them round his head. Laying his body down on the hard ground, he rested his head on one of the smooth stones. How anyone could fall asleep like this is hard to imagine, but sleep he did and as he slept a sleep of utter weariness, he had a dream. In the dream, he saw a kind of ladder, or stairway that reached from the earth to the sky. It was an enormous structure, staggering in itself but the extraordinary thing about it was the graceful parade of angelic creatures, all of whom it seemed were either ascending the ladder, up toward the heavens or coming down toward the earth. The prince had heard about angels before, of course. He knew they often acted as messengers for *El Shaddai*. He had heard stories about how his grandfather, had once entertained them and he knew that even his father had perhaps heard their voices; but this was not something the young prince had ever experienced himself.

Almost at the same moment, in the dream he became aware of Someone standing at the very head of the stair. A powerful voice that he had never heard before, addressed him and said, *'I am the Lord, the God of your father, Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you: I will*

*protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'*

It was a very powerful dream, in fact more real than a dream in some ways because the prince remembered every word. As he realised later, it was very much like the words of the blessing his father had given him when he left home. He woke up very early the next morning, shaken and, it has to be said, frightened by the power of the dream and the awesome voice he had heard in it. The very ground and landscape around him took on a very different aspect and he exclaimed, '*Surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God and that is the gateway to heaven.'* As far as anyone knew, that was more words than he had ever strung together in his whole life.

Clearly something had changed and the prince was convinced the dream was not just a fleeting vision in the night but a real message for him not only for the journey he was on but also for his future.

The prince picked up the stones he had placed round his head and piled them up into a great heap. The stone pillow became a stone pillar as he carefully placed it at the very top of the stele and poured oil over it. As the oil streamed down over the stones, he decided to give the place a new name. Others had named it Luz but Heel wanted to call it something new, something in keeping with the powerful dream he had had, the ladder he had seen, the voice he had heard and the promises he had been given. He called the place Bethel, which in the language of that country means 'house of God.' Then he did something he had never done before. He vowed a vow. He began

his promise with a very big ‘If’ but he meant every word, *‘If God remains with me, if he protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father’s house- the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God’s abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for you.’* He said it aloud in his own voice, as he stood beside the stone pillar in the place he had renamed Bethel and where he had dreamed a dream. He picked up his meagre belongings and his staff and turning away from the road to his father’s house, he resumed his journey.

### A return to Jacob’s voice

What this experimentation with retelling in different ways (i.e. the sparsely linear and the once-upon-a-time fanciful) achieved for me was a new sense of Jacob’s voice. Although I had felt estranged from him in my recent attempts to dialogue with him in this third iteration, suddenly he was present in this process of ‘retelling’ and like him, as the light dawned on a changed landscape, I saw features in it of which ‘I had not been aware.’ This fits well with the dawning beginning of Jacob’s identity formation in this dream episode. The dream awakens his adult voice and hearing it through these other ways of storying enabled me to create the following imaginary conversation with him. More will be said about Jacob’s voice in the commentary which follows this dialogue.

## Iteration Three: Imaginary Dialogue

[I hear Jacob's slow and measured steps outside in the hall as he makes his way toward the closed door of the room where I sit waiting for him. His ever-present walking stick, or staff as he calls it, punctuates each step he makes with a soft clicking sound on the polished wood of the floor. I feel a sudden worry that he may slip on the smooth surface and that moves me to jump out of my chair and open the door for him. The movement of the door startles him. His face, framed by his long white hair and beard, peers suspiciously in the half-light of the hallway and then his eyes soften with recognition.]

1. Jacob: Ah...you have heard me coming...
2. Linda: Yes, welcome, come in and have a seat.
3. (We both sit down and Jacob reaches for a glass of water I have placed on the table beside his chair. He takes a long drink and then looks at me expectantly).
4. Jacob: It is a new day. Shall I recount still more stories?...for the *derash* ...
5. Linda: I value your stories very much... you have shared them, so openly and honestly. I am grateful for your willingness to participate so far, but I realise, especially after last time, that telling some of these stories as you have may bring

up more than you were expecting or are comfortable with. Maybe this is an appropriate time to just check in with you, that you are okay with continuing.

6. Jacob: Pain is not a reason to turn back from the road ahead...or to shrink from the will of *El Shaddai*...I have begun and so I will finish. In these stories, perhaps my name will be recalled...and since last time I have remembered another dream, my first dream. I came today wanting to tell you about this dream.
  
7. Linda: Please, carry on...
  
8. Jacob: It was so long ago but the dream... I have kept it in mind all these years. As you know when I left home the first time, it was also a time of great fear. I was fleeing from my brother, Esau whose hand was against me. I ran that first day until my legs gave out. I came to a certain place just as the sun was setting. It sets quickly in my homeland, dropping like a shining stone below the horizon and then suddenly, darkness, darker than the blood of grapes, darker than wine. The ground was cold and hard, and I had never been so far from home before.
  
9. Linda: You must have felt very alone and frightened.
  
10. Jacob: Yes, a stranger in a land where I no longer belonged. I made a bed there that first night.

11. Linda: Like your dream last time about the goats, that one too came to you after you had made a bed for yourself and slept on cold, hard ground.

12. Jacob: I am part of the earth on which I lie, a man fashioned from dust. Even though, I am not a man of great vision like my grandfather...I am so very little like him ...nor am I a wise seer like my son, but I could dream and who knows what may become of a man's dreams. I remember it still today as clearly as I did that starry night so long ago (Leaning his head back and looking up, he closes his eyes). In the dream I saw a stairway, with its base resting on the earth and its top reaching to heaven. The angels of God were going up and down on it. And there at the top of it, stood the Lord, but in the strange way of dreams the distance between us would not stay still. I saw the Lord at a great height at the top of the stairway but somehow at the same time, He was also beside me, very close, above and beside, different places but at the same time... *El Shaddai*, the God of my grandfather and my father...

13. Linda: How did you recognise him in the dream? How did you know who He was?

14. Jacob: (He opens his eyes to look at me directly) He told me His name, it was the first thing He said, 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.'

15.Linda: Yet there was this strange fluid distance between you and Him. It reminds me how dreams are often like that with shifts of time and place that would not be possible in waking life but they seem to make a kind of sense in the dreamscape...or not?

16.Jacob: I did not know the meaning of this...*where* He was seemed to shift and change but *who* He was, that was not in doubt. I think I may have...it is hard to remember the shadows in dreams from so long ago...but I think I may have tried to doubt who He was in the dream and to pretend I was someone other than Jacob... but found I could not. He was the same God in whose ways my fathers walked. I could see and hear and feel His presence and later, when I woke, I still felt He was present there in that place. I was so aware of the difference...maybe I should have had that kind of awareness before then... but I did not... and the dream helped me see and feel something new.

17.Linda: What else did it help you see and feel?

18.Jacob: I think in the dream at least, I felt less alone, less cut off, all those angels...their brightness, their being... I somehow felt they were aware of my troubles, my ups and downs, they were connecting me rather than cutting me off. Just before I fell asleep it had felt like a closed door, like being trapped in a deep pit, with no way out, but what I saw there that night was a gateway...a glorious, moving, living gateway...

19. Linda: You had been 'cut off' in a sense from your family, what you had known in the past and in another sense you were also 'cut off' from the future you had envisioned for yourself...the angels going back and forth, maybe they were mediating, the 'between' place you found yourself in, some of the distance and rupture you were feeling.

20. Jacob: (He shuffles his feet and sighs, I realise I have interrupted him, and not for the first time with what is really my own reflection on what he has said, however interesting and insightful it has been to me, it is not particularly helpful to him and disrupts his train of thought. I am impressed with the polite patience, a kind of mild reserve with which he acknowledges my observation but doesn't pick up on it. It makes me wonder if there are others in his life who also experience him in this way.)

21. Jacob: Mmmhmm...that may be true as you say...but for me what mattered most was that I was not alone ...and then there was what the Lord went on to say in the dream, 'the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring.' Land, offspring, future, blessing, none of those things were even conceivable to me at the time, an impossible dream. I was a piece of dust in a barren landscape not the father of a family or the giver of *berakah*. I could not even look after myself. How could I be a blessing to anyone?

22. Linda: Mmm...you didn't see any way that could happen.



23. Jacob: No...no...yet He said I *would* be...would be the blessing bearer as my father and grandfather had been...and that I would be the father of many.

24. Linda: Mmm...a kind of picture of your future.

25. Jacob: Yes, but there was something else, something very precious to me. He told me to 'remember,'... 'I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' As far as I know, *El Shaddai* had never said anything like that, promised that kind of protection before to any of my ancestors. It was a message of great consolation. A promise I took to heart. I have remembered it all these years.

26. Linda: A new promise...something special to you. That dream seemed to speak to you in ways that opened you to new possibilities, that you weren't trapped and alone, there were gateways to new things and to new or different relationships with God and with others.

27. Jacob: The promise, 'I will be with you,' has kept my feet from falling so many times. I am a man of the earth, a shepherd, a keeper of flocks and herds. And God has been my Shepherd from my birth to this day, redeeming me from all harm. That dream was the beginning, and looking back I can see what an important sign it was. Bethel, that place and what I dreamed there have always been my Rock, the place of safety I have returned to again and again.

28. Linda: So that first time you set foot in that place, Bethel, and the dream you had, remembering that connects you with El *Shaddai*, with safety and all the ways He has helped you.

29. Jacob: Always...What an awesome place it was. The dream showed me a world and God in it in a way I had not seen before. Early the next morning, I built a cairn of stones and I took one of the stones that had lain under my head the night before and I placed it on top of the cairn and poured oil over it. It was a way of marking what had happened, with the stones of the ground. I have often used stones in this way.

30. Linda: It feels like a ritual, a ceremonial marker of something very deep and important to you...a witness to it?...maybe

31. Jacob: Yes...but more than that, I wanted to make a vow, I wanted to promise something myself, I wanted to claim what I had been offered, the presence of a helper, God Himself, on my journey, protection, bread to eat and clothing to wear and...

32. Linda: Something else...

33. Jacob: (His voice breaks and he stifles a sob) I wanted to go home again. I wanted to return safe to my father's house some day. I had no idea it would be twenty years and so much agony and struggle.
34. Linda: That deep desire to go home, your longing to return, but you didn't know, that day, the morning after the dream, just how long that would be or how difficult the years in between would be.
35. Jacob: No, that is so (he gazes out the window for several minutes, fingering the end of the staff that lies propped against his chair, he shifts his position and a faint smile flickers across his face)...it was not all difficult. I 'picked up my feet' that morning at Bethel, there was a spring in my step as I headed toward Haran.
36. Linda: A spring in your step...your face seemed to lighten just now...a twinkle in your eye?
37. Jacob: I was just remembering a moment at a well when I first saw Rachel, my wife...I had come upon the well only moments before. I spoke to some shepherds who were congregated there. They knew my Uncle Laban and they knew that his daughter would be coming there to water his sheep. She was a shepherdess, they said ...and then, like a vision emerging out of the dust and noise of another flock coming toward the well, there was Rachel. She took my breath away...but the sight of her...her eyes, well, ... I was overcome. I had to *do* something so I

wrenched the stone off the well so she could water her sheep and then I kissed her and wept with relief.

38. Linda: That was quite an introduction. What did she do?

39. Jacob: Ah...I can still see her, like a free-running doe she ran off to tell her father.

He seemed very glad to see me and welcomed me with open arms. I told him everything that had happened, I didn't hold any of it back, even the part about deceiving my poor old father and cheating my brother. He embraced me and told me 'You are truly my flesh and blood,' and invited me to stay with them.

40. Linda: This is the same Laban you told me about last time, the one who tricked and cheated you?

41. Jacob: Yes, the same. But in that first greeting, I had no foreboding of that. That first month was a time of *shalom* for me, a haven, a resting place. I fell more and more in love with Rachel every day. For the first time in my life I wanted to work for someone besides myself...to earn her love, to do something to show how much I cared for her. As you know, I had no money to give as a bride price but I worked for Laban for seven years, and another seven years after that, so I could marry Rachel. She was his younger daughter...that many years might seem like a long time but to me it was but a few days...the years flitted by like clouds across the moon...I loved her so much...

42. Linda: There is a very tender, romantic side of you...I have not seen before...  
your meeting with Rachel beside a well, of all the stories you have told me about  
your life, it is the first one that brings a sort of wistful softness to your face.
43. Jacob: (His face reddens slightly and I immediately regret calling attention to  
this change in his countenance in such a direct way. I sense he has been more  
open about his feelings than is comfortable for him. It also reminds me how  
awkward and unusual it may be for him to share these feelings with me.)
44. Jacob: It was a long time ago... but I have not forgotten her. I will never forget  
her. She too had many sorrows and struggles...her strife with her older sister  
went on for years. There was much that was difficult for her to bear...most of  
all...her heart ached for the long years she went without children of her own.
45. Linda: You feel her days were few and difficult too.
46. Jacob: Yes...too few...She died in childbirth, bringing little Benjamin into the  
world...it happened on the way back to my father's house. I ... I had to bury her  
body by the side of the road, near Ephrath...on the road...this is no place for a  
grave...
47. Linda: It must have been so hard to leave her there...to leave so much of  
yourself, a love that had stirred you so deeply...

48. Jacob: I did what had to be done.

49. Linda: and kept going...I wonder how you were able to do that.

50. Jacob: My dream at Bethel...the place, the memory I have returned to all my life, sometimes I returned there with my feet but when I could not do that, even when I was very far away, I remembered the words of *El Shaddai*, to me, 'I will be with you wherever you go'...only a few moons ago, I heard this promise again before I made the journey to Egypt, before I came to Goshen.

51. Linda: Even with so much difficulty and loss, you have always had a sense that you were not alone.

52. Jacob: (He bows his head and closes his eyes, leaning forward, heavily, on the staff he always carries with him. His lips move soundlessly. After several minutes in which I sit without speaking, he looks up and answers) No, I have not been alone ...although I have lost much that was dear to me. Bethel is a holy place for me...where my dream taught me beyond all hope and expectation that I was not alone. I remembered my dream the day I raised a stone pillar above Rachel's grave...with my own bare hands I placed the marker stone there. It was all that I could do for her. With her dying breath my beloved, Rachel, named our second born son, *Ben-oni*, it means 'son of my sorrows.' I could not bear her final gift to me, to carry such a name, so I gave him a new name, a strong name, Benjamin, 'son of my right hand.'

53. Linda: Another new name...

54. Jacob: Yes...there are deep stories in the names we give and the names we bear...but *hinneh* ...you ... you have not told me the meaning of your name.

55. Linda: (Surprised and slightly disconcerted by the shift to this second-person address, I have only a moment to consider how to answer) Um...the meaning of my name? Well...um...I think the ways names are given in my world are very different (An image flashes across my mind of prospective parents, googling the internet for baby names, a common and perfectly acceptable practice in the modern world, but I feel slightly embarrassed about it. Sitting here in Jacob's presence this modern way of choosing names feels very distant from his world.) Well...mmm ...I have two first names, Linda, as you know and the second is Louise...I have never particularly liked them but...but knowing the meaning is not so clear...because these names, my names probably come from different languages. Linda may mean 'beautiful' or 'pretty' but some people say it could come from the word for linden tree and have the meaning 'soft' or 'gentle.' Louise means um...well, it doesn't fit me very well but it means 'renowned warrior' or 'famous fighter.'

56. Jacob: Ah...you are both mild and a fighter... I like these names. Your mother and father gave you these on the day of your birth?

57. Linda: Yes, they did. They picked them out together. They liked the sound of them, I think.

58. Jacob: They were wise, your mother and father to give you two names. A soft and gentle tree that moves gracefully in the wind and a famous, fierce fighter who does not let go. You should not be ashamed of these names. They are a gift that fits.

59. Linda: I haven't thought of it that way before....but, thank you...your insight... it's very kind

60. Jacob: To know your name, to hear it in this way is...perhaps then...*berakah*...a blessing?

61. Linda: Yes...it is...yes, I think so...

62. [ The session ends soon after and with a bow and the word, '*Shalom*' he departs. I close the door behind him and stand for some time, listening to the shuffle of his sandals and the clicking of his staff as the sounds recede down the hall. In the quiet that remains, a wistful sadness keeps me standing there, my head resting against the door, while the words from his story, birthright and blessing, *bekhorah* and *berakah*, fill the room.]



## Iteration Three: Commentary

*Isaac said to Jacob, ‘Come closer that I may feel you, my son—whether you are really my son Esau or not.’*

*So Jacob drew close to his father, Isaac, who felt him and wondered. ‘The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.’*

...

*Isaac asked, ‘Are you really my son Esau?’*

*Jacob said, ‘I am.’*

*Genesis 27:21-22, 24*

A voice speaking ‘I am’ has a profound existential resonance far exceeding the tiny sound and space of its diminutive pronoun and predicate. A first person ‘I’ activated by a state of being verb ‘am’ is grammatically a very basic way, perhaps the most basic way, to express in words what it is to be a human being living in time.<sup>54</sup> ‘I am’ and its interrogative counterpart, ‘Who am I?’ join to form a significant echo that informs and influences my counsellor contribution to co-construction in this third iteration. ‘Who are you really?’ is reflected not only in the speech and actions of Jacob and other characters in this part of his text but also in my experience of him and the way his voice in this part of his story seemed to elude my research attempts to hear it and dialogue with him. It also accords with the theoretical perspectives I have brought to both Iteration Two and Three, which focus on Erikson’s central

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<sup>54</sup> This is not to imply that the ‘I am’ I refer to here is some kind of disembodied Cartesian core of bounded cognition or a self identity isolated from the influence of intersubjectivity. My conceptualisation of the ‘I’ in this iteration (as elsewhere in my research) also takes account of the complementary, competing and contrapuntal voices of the dialogical self (Hermans and Dimaggio, 2004). The ‘I’ constitutes a centre in the sense that there is a ‘*phenomenological continuity*...a basic moment-by-moment feeling that I continue to exist as the same locus of feeling, thought and consciousness’ through time and space (McAdams, 2013:284).

developmental transition, the consolidation of identity in early adulthood. The compelling question that Erikson says must be answered in this stage is ‘Who am I?’

## A Domestic Scene

Jacob says these two words, ‘I am’ as he stands before his blind father in a domestic scene which precedes and propels his leaving home and the dream at Bethel. This scene combines low comedy with high pathos. The irony drips as the stew pot bubbles. Jacob holds in his hands, a meaty meal for his father but it is not made from wild game as he claims but from ‘two choice kids’ he himself has fetched from the flock. Dressed in his brother’s robes with coarse goat hair somehow glued to his slippery, smooth-skinned hands, his Esau disguise seems a very clumsy one. His blind father uses all his other functional senses, tasting the bogus stew, groping in the half-light, sniffing the clothes, touching Jacob’s dissembling hands and hearing his voice but still ‘he [does] not recognise him’ (*Genesis 27:23*). Isaac cannot see who his younger son really is. Later Jacob’s brother Esau, cheated out of his blessing, will howl with pain and through clenched teeth avow that his brother is ‘rightfully named,’ a heel, a deceptive manipulator, a grasper of another’s birthright and blessing (*Genesis 27:36*). Yet, ‘Is this who he is?’ How would Jacob himself at this point in his life, only days before the dream at Bethel, have answered the question, ‘Who am I?’ It begins to make some sense to me why his voice may have disappeared or gone into hiding when I tried to connect with it in preparation for our third session. At this very early point in his life, Jacob is pretending to be someone else and has not yet found his own voice. The dream at Bethel will move him to a

new landscape, an encounter with an 'I Am' who *does* recognise him and whose promises of land, descendants, blessing, safety and reliable life-long presence call forth a new voice from Jacob.

How that voice eventually emerged for me in the creation of the dialogue and for Jacob after the dream at Bethel are the main focus of this commentary. The pre-session alternative retellings of these episodes in different forms and genres helped me to find another way through the layers of the text to reconnect with Jacob's voice. I will begin with a brief discussion of some of the rationale for using these retellings and then an accounting of what they revealed. This will be followed by further analysis of co-constructive issues surfaced by the dialogue.

The different narrative styles and genres I employed to retell the story were helpful contributors to hearing this new voice and seeing the very familiar, iconic episodes used in this iteration in new lights. They also provide another example of what I brought to the text, my counsellor contribution to narrative co-construction. My experiments with two versions of these episodes, a paratactic list of declaratives and a fairy tale, as well as my list of contrasts between *Genesis* 28 and 32, all acted as forms of retelling. The rationale for these retellings may be traced not only to some of the basic tenets of narrative therapy and its postmodern play with alternative stories and voices, but also to literary theory conceptualisations of genre (Polkinghorne, 2004; Speedy, 2000). Bruner (1991:14) refers to the familiarity hearers and readers have with a variety of genres such as farce, tragedy, satire, saga, and fairy tale. These offer within their different frameworks ways of casting human

'plights' in formalised and often universally recognisable forms. Thus Bruner posits that genre operates 'both as a property of a text and as a way of comprehending narrative' (Bruner, 1991:14). Changing the genre, placing these episodes of Jacob's story in contrasting conventional forms changed what I comprehended. It did not change the order of events or the plot, what the Russian formalists called *fabula* but it changed the discourse, the *sjuzhet*, the manner of telling (Bennett and Royle, 1995; Bruner, 1991). It shifted my viewpoint and the expectations I brought to the story, all of which were coloured by my previous readings and their accompanying flotilla of pre-intentions. It allowed me to inhabit temporarily another set of narrative conventions and expectations. Genre change resulted in Gestalt shifts, foregrounding configurations that I might have otherwise missed.

## A Long Silence

The first of these and the most striking for me was a long silence I had not heard in the text before. The 'sound of silence' in the counselling context can often speak louder than words. Listening to what the client does not say is just as important as what he does say. I noticed in rereading the various retellings I had created that Jacob's verbal speech ends abruptly with his duplicitous assertion 'I am' in the scene described above. A flurry of very significant events and other voices fill the space between this moment and the moment his eyes open after the dream but through all the preceding time and turmoil Jacob's mouth remains firmly shut. He is an actor being acted upon, summoned, instructed, scrutinised, blessed, vilified, threatened, commanded, reassured and sent off but all without a word from him. This is

particularly made obvious in my paratactic version. The first eight subject/verb declarative sentences refer only to Isaac's agency, what he does. If I had also included in this list the events of the preceding chapter, there would be a similarly long list of Rebekah's actions: She listened, She overheard, She instructed, She prepared, She took, She covered, She put etc. (*Genesis 27:5-17*). Jacob's 'I' does not even make an appearance in the paratactic list above until it is followed by a very significant verb, 'I left.' Caught up in the coattails of his family's perceptions and misperceptions of who he is— his mother's plans for him, his father's preferences, his brother's rivalry, his grandfather's renown— Jacob's declaration of 'I am' is very much diffused through all these prisms. When finally he arrives at a 'certain place' on his way out of this polyphonic conflation of identities, he may not consciously know he is in need of a gateway to his own destiny; but asleep on a stone, his dream will fashion the symbols and the message that lead him more securely to it.

### A Momentous Meeting of Two 'I Am's'

Another insight foregrounded by the use of genre change was the meaning-rich contrast between two very different expressions of 'I am.' The first is voiced by Jacob standing before his father and the second, by God in the dream at Bethel. One is false and the other genuine. Like twin sentinels beckoning to each other across a vast expanse of text, these two declarations of personhood finally meet one another at Bethel. Jacob's counterfeit 'I am,' spoken in his father's tent, echoes across his long silence until it is met and mirrored by God's voice in the dream, a voice Jacob has heard about but has not, as far as the text reveals, ever heard himself. God's first two

words to him are a declaration of being, 'I Am.' This is followed by a particularly precise description of His identity in relation to Jacob and his forebears. The text itself underlines the uniqueness of God's personal presentation of Himself to Jacob in the dream. Wenham (2000a) claims the speaking of this divine title worded in this way is not used of God anywhere else in *Genesis*. There are specific promises in the dream of continued, reliable presence, protection and safe return that are also worded in a unique and personal way. Wenham claims that this kind of intimate 'I will be with you' and 'I will not leave you' is a level of reassurance that has not been offered to anyone else in the *Genesis* text in quite this way before. The bright angels going up and down reinforce the message-bearing significance of the dream. Something very important is being heralded. When he wakes from the dream, his silence is finally broken. It is then that Jacob, at last, speaks for himself.

## Princes and Frogs

The fairy tale version I wrote also highlighted this moment of meeting and its transformation of voice. Perhaps this was because of the associations this genre has with spells being broken and with disguised princes, whether frogs on lily pads or beasts in haunted castles, being released from enchantments to return to their true identities. This kind of transformational moment in the fairy tale chimes also with a recurring leitmotif in Biblical narrative, the 'epiphany in the field' (Alter, 1981: 51). It is often the case when Biblical characters are wandering about in the world, that the 'wilderness' becomes the place where very significant things are revealed to them. Writing part of Jacob's story as a fairy tale also evoked its family resemblance

to what McAdams (2001:111) calls the ‘coming of age story...a timeless and universally loved mythic form’ in which the hero or heroine must make ‘the adventurous transition from childhood innocence to young adulthood.’ These scenic and narrative likenesses between genres with their focus on transformational moments prompted me to look back at what was going on for Jacob *before* he left home, the once upon a time part of the story. I focused particularly on his earlier speeches, delivered before his blatant lie to Isaac, and what they revealed about his identity. He is described by the narrator as ‘a mild <sup>55</sup> man who stayed in the camp’ but his spoken words which are few and far between, portray him as taciturn and calculating (*Genesis* 25:27). When he lured Esau into trading his birthright for ‘a mess of pottage,’ Jacob says, ‘Sell it to me’ and ‘Swear to it!’ The only other things he says in the text before the ‘I am’ fib to his father are all related to outright deception, planning deception or wondering how to avoid getting caught (*Genesis* 25: 31-32; 27:11-12). This textual record of his early voice reveals a less than auspicious start and forms a significant contrast to what he says after the dream. Jacob’s transformation is not as dramatically metamorphic as the frog becoming a prince. Real life is much more ambivalent and nuanced than a fairy tale, but there is no doubt the dream and its living stairway awaken a new awareness and a different voice, his own and an ‘Other.’

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<sup>55</sup> Alter’s (1981:42) elaboration of the Hebrew word, *tam*, translated in the *JPSB* as ‘mild’ casts very interesting lights on the ambivalences inherent in Jacob’s identity. Mild can also mean quiet, plain or retiring. Alter says in all its other frequent uses in the Hebrew Bible, it refers to innocence or moral integrity. This adjective, ‘mild’ is used as a modifier for Jacob, a name etymologically linked to deceptiveness. This signals for Alter a ‘basic enigma’ or polarity that plays out in Jacob’s character over many years, ‘deception and shrewd calculation’ contrasted with innocence and moral integrity (1981: 42).

## I and Thou

God's declaration of 'I am' in the dream reveals Him as a 'Thou,' an 'Other' deeply present and personally involved in Jacob's world, not as a taker but as a giver. God's words in the dream speak unequivocally. He says His name in language particularly meaningful to Jacob. He recognises without suspicion or question who Jacob is. Surprisingly, the Voice of God speaks not a word of condemnation for Jacob's past indiscretions (when there might be some justification for doing so) but rather He offers an expansive, fertile, hopeful vision for the future and a tender, gentle care for the immediate fears and concerns of the present. This Voice, emanating both from above and beside<sup>56</sup> the dreaming Jacob, pervades and seeps into the landscape on which he lies. It makes the stone-strewn ground an 'awesome' yet safe and sacred place for him. God's words help him to begin to engage with the question 'Who am I?' and 'Who might I be?' The promises made to him are bigger than he can take in at this point but he responds on the level he can at the time. On waking and reflecting on the dream, he begins to express his own insights and to respond with his own actions. His new voice, his actions and his decisions are prefaced by very big 'If's' but they represent a more adult encounter with 'Who am I?' 'What have I got?' and 'What am I going to do with it?'

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<sup>56</sup> Wenham (2000a: 222) refers to an ambiguity in the Hebrew translation of these prepositional phrases. He says, 'The LORD standing over it [i.e. the stairway] could also be translated "over him" (i.e. Jacob).' Wenham's translation opts for God standing at the top of the stair while the *JPSB* translates the position as 'beside him.' Given this nuance in translation, I chose to make the uncertainty of exactly where God was positioned a part of Jacob's dreamscape. The ambiguity spoke to me of the mixture of omnipotent authority and solicitous care which characterise Jacob's descriptions of *El Shaddai*. When I comment on this fluidity of God's position in the dream, Jacob is nonplussed. For him, it is not the detail of *where* God is but *who* He is that matters (15-16).



The distance in the text between Jacob's false 'I am' and God's genuine 'I Am' is vast on every level, but there is for the first time a potential stairway of connection. The use of two such radically different assertions of 'I am,' and Jacob's silence between them, focuses powerfully on what it means 'to be,' language and self reduced to their sparsest, barest subject/predicate simplicity. It is early days but Jacob's move from a disguised and false 'I am' to a more individuated self begins here. It is only the bottom rung of the ladder, but the Voice in the dream helps Jacob to step up and start climbing. As Iteration Two revealed, this will be a climb that includes twenty years of hard graft toiling under his Uncle Laban's domination. This 'moratorium,' a time of exploration, searching and experimentation, will eventually lead to a showdown struggle in which the early identity gains at Bethel will be consolidated. The consolidation he makes twenty years later will show more evidence of fidelity, the virtue which Erikson believed would result from an adequate resolution of this transition. Stevens (1983:49) describes this fidelity as 'the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of inevitable contradictions and confusions of value systems.' As Iteration Two demonstrated, the circumstances in Paddan-Aram tested this burgeoning fidelity to breaking point.

## Fidelity and Faith

As detailed above, one of the theoretical perspectives I have brought to co-construction in this third iteration construes the dream episode in terms of Erikson's identity transition and the development of 'fidelity.' However, the perspectives Jacob

brings are not theoretical but deeply theological. I think his contribution to co-construction in our dialogue would be much more likely to story this episode in terms of 'faith' and promises made and kept, rather than any concern with individuation or his own resolution of an identity crisis. This dialogue emerged, as the previous ones have done, from the meeting of Jacob's story and its textual horizons with my counselling research horizons. In looking back on the session now, I notice that I have not overtly brought any of my theoretical perspectives into the conversation. There are a few reflections where I have inserted, unhelpfully and irrelevantly, my own take on the meaning of some of the imagery in the dream (11, 19) but for the most part the co-construction of his story in the dialogue concerns itself with what the dream means to him.

Although dreams in Jacob's cultural context can be allegorical and somewhat enigmatic (Joseph's hubristic dreams in *Genesis* 37:5-11 and Pharaoh's famine dreams in *Genesis* 41:1-40 are two notable examples), this dream does not fit that kind of interpretation. It is not the metaphors the dream conjures up that matter to Jacob, it is the meeting with God and how that changed his life that day and ever since. He comes to this moment in his life review with this dream in hand. He says, 'I came wanting to tell you this dream.' In the storying of it, he says 'perhaps my name will be recalled' (6). It could hardly be clearer he does not want my perspective on its meaning so much as my witness to its significance. Jacob's personal encounter with God here on this ground is the pivotal moment of his life. Something of who he is, his developing 'I,' mottled and speckled as it always has been and always will be, it is this 'I' who is confronted by a 'Thou.' The dream helps

him step into another world and the presence of an ‘Other’ who is neither a tool to be used nor a rival to be usurped. The God who speaks to him is no longer an objectified projection fashioned from the borrowed beliefs and experiences of his father and grandfather or even his mother, but his own authentic companion, the ‘Shepherd,’ whom Jacob believes has guarded and provided for him his whole life. As a counsellor thinking about my client, I connected Jacob’s story in this iteration with some of my theoretical understandings about how young people establish a more secure identity. However stimulating and interesting these formulations were to me they are far from Jacob’s world. What he is really interested in is what the dream meant to him, what God means to him and his family, and how what God promised fits together with the rest of his life and colours his sojourning role as a bearer of blessing.

### Intimacy and Isolation

Telling me about his dream eventually stirs another memory in Jacob’s mind. It was an episode I had not intended to explore when I began the dialogue but again there was a sense of it entering the conversation of its own accord. This memory of meeting his future wife, Rachel, at the well comes, like his dream, from the store of memories characteristic of the time period known as the ‘reminiscence bump.’ Meetings at wells are also such iconic motifs in Bible narrative that early readers of the text would have recognised straightaway there was romance in the air (Alter, 1981, 1996). In the text itself, the first encounter with Rachel follows very closely on from Jacob’s vow. Barely are the words of the vow out of his mouth when this

poignant, romantic scene sweeps into view, replete with cinematic closeups (*Genesis* 29: 1-20). In retrospect, I can see several possible contributing factors for why this memory surfaced in the dialogue in the way it did (35-39). The first impetus came from how the episode is introduced in the text, the segue from alone in the wild to smitten at the well. The very next words in the text after the dream story concludes come from the narrator who says Jacob ‘resumed his journey’ (*Genesis* 29:1).

Wenham (2000a:229) reads this Hebrew verb as having much more energy and initiative than the English word ‘resumed’ can provide. He translates the original Hebrew phrase as, ‘Jacob picked up his feet.’ This spring in his step signalled for me an uplift in his mood. Along the trail of ‘few and hard’ memories in his life, there is this other memory of a meeting that brings joy to his heart and a softness to his face (35-36, 42). Cappeliez and Webster (2011:182) refer to this kind of reminiscence for the older person as ‘intimacy maintenance...characterised by the wish to keep alive memories of intimate partners with whom the person [is] no longer in contact.’ This is a rather technical description for what is a very poignant and personal remembrance for Jacob.

It occurs to me too, how embodied this part of his story is for him. He picked up his feet, he wrenched the stone off the well with his hands, he embraced Rachel in his arms and he kissed her. The dream at Beth-El has wrought another change in him. Before that epiphany, his mind, his body and his hands in particular, seem engrossed and implicated in shrewd calculations aimed at grasping the birthright and blessing from his brother. Here at the well, for the first time they are employed in the service of others, the strength in his hands providing life-giving water to thirsty flocks. Not

that a measure of shrewd calculation may not enter into it; the fact that this show of strength may impress and earn the appreciation of the strikingly beautiful shepherdess he now has in his sights may also fuel some of his altruism. He is still Jacob after all, flaws and foibles, strengths and weaknesses remain intact but he shows signs of moving into the next stage of Erikson's model, intimacy vs isolation. Becoming a more individuated self he is now able to contemplate giving that self to another in intimate and interdependent relationship (37, 41). It will not all run smoothly and the fairy tale romance will not end in an untarnished happily ever after, but Jacob is becoming a man who can love and be loyal, make pledges and keep them, and care deeply for others besides himself. I am moved by his memory of Rachel and the very mixed sadness he feels about her loss. I think this memory surfaces for him because there is a grave somewhere on the road to Ephrath which still wounds him deeply (46). He wants and requires a witness to kneel beside it for awhile, gently touch the stones that guard it, and remember with him the woman he laboured for, lost and has never forgotten.

## Names and Faces

This brings me to some afterthoughts that remain with me from this session. In rereading (and I seem always to be rereading) the dialogue and all my retellings, it strikes me how many moments in the text, how many little things in Jacob's experience of himself and his story remind me of clients I have known and the stories of life they have shared. A respectful crowd of names and faces, with stories and their own moments of meeting, walk alongside my encounter with Jacob. At certain

places as I walk in his landscape, one or more names and faces from this companion crowd will flash, flit or soft focus into view. Like Jacob peering from the hall in the half-light at the beginning of this session, we see and recognise one another.

Hearing, seeing, and recognising who they are and what their stories have taught me is so much a part of what I bring to Jacob's story.

Finally, in thinking about the contributions of my own clients, I am more aware of one of the practice values I hold and brought to this last session. Clients and their stories do not exist out there only as a kind of analytical resource for examination. When you are inside a client's story, either in therapy or research, of course it is important, ethical and prudent to keep a sense of appropriate distance between your 'I am' boundary and that of your client. However, intersubjectivity, like Buber's I-Thou relationship, at times may provide moments of meeting which transcend the subject/object dichotomy of I-It. Such moments are not mergers, fusions or even unions, they are 'confrontations...in which each becomes enriched through relation' (McAdams, 1993: 290). As Buber (1970:62) writes,

When I confront a human being as my Thou and speak the basic word I-Thou to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. He is no longer He or She, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighbourless and seamless, he is Thou and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light.

Grasping people's names and faces even in half-light, seeing and recognising who they are, staying a self, remaining an 'I', but living in the light of the other's being without needing to use it, is a lesson for both Jacob and me and very much a part of

our co-constructive endeavour. The dream introduces Jacob's relationship with a Thou who sees and recognises him not as a person to be used or acted upon but as a person, an 'I am,' with his own particular name/s, face and voice. Many years will pass but that kind of light, experienced in the dream, does not fade. Friedman (1960/2002:69) speaks of the ongoing impact of this kind of relationship,

In the silent or spoken dialogue between the I and the Thou both personality and knowledge come into being. Unlike the subject-object knowledge of the I-It relation, the knowing of the I-Thou relation takes place neither in the "subjective" nor the "objective," the emotional nor the rational, but in the "between"- the reciprocal relationship of ... whole and active beings. Similarly, personality is neither simply an individual matter nor simply a social product, but a function of relationship. Though we are born "individuals", in the sense of being different from others, we are not born persons. Our personalities are called into being by those who enter into relation with us.

These observations and simulated experience of an I-Thou moment in therapy led me to reflections on how human beings relate to one another in the wider discourses prevalent in my own cultural context. I-Thou moments that call selves into deeper, personal and mutual understandings are a kind of blessing there needs to be more of in the world, not only in the every day conversations of life as we listen to friends, family or colleagues, but also in the specialised, carefully bounded conversations of the counselling context. If as counsellors we choose to find our vocation in a profession whose *raison d'être* involves seeing another as he or she really is, then we must expect to be seen ourselves. Not all the time or every moment, we cannot live continually in I-Thou epiphanies, at some point they disintegrate again into I-It, but if there are no such moments in the work we do, then we have not really met one another at all.

I am somewhat taken aback at the end of the third session when Jacob suddenly addresses me as a 'Thou,' and questions me about the meaning of my name (54). I did not see this coming. Yet even in our fictive co-construction, I have experienced something of what this ineffable mutuality of being may engender in counselling practice with real clients. I have brought myself to Jacob's text and Jacob has reciprocated by bringing himself to my research context. Something new arises, directed more at me than at him, but it is a kind of living knowledge that is co-constructed from the textual reality of this fictive client and the dialogical play I have engaged in to fashion him. Speedy (2000) writes of the way her clients' stories have often helped her to re-author things in her own story. Jacob accomplishes this for me by telling me my name in a way I have never heard it before. If his heart's desire is to be a blessing then it should not be surprising when he enacts who he desires to be in the environs of the counselling research relationship where we meet, 'I am' to 'I am.' Jacob, this mild man and prevailing fighter, long ago dreamed a dream that he would be a bearer of blessing. What this means in his world and what his responsibilities are to live it out go far beyond my brief or my capacities. What I do know is that in writing this dialogue, for me at least, there was a moment when his dream came true. I heard his voice and he blessed me.



## Chapter 10: Iteration Four

### Introduction

*Home is where one starts from. As we grow older*

*The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated*

*Of dead and living. Not the intense moment*

*Isolated, with no before and after,*

*But a lifetime burning in every moment*

*And not the lifetime of one man only*

*But of old stones that cannot be deciphered...*

*Old men ought to be explorers*

*Here or there does not matter*

*We must be still and still moving...*

*In my end is my beginning.*

T S Eliot (1969: 182-183)

Kierkegaard's famous maxim that 'Life is lived forwards but only understood backwards' is deeply relevant to the individual's quest for a narrative that makes sense of life as lived. Life, experienced *through* and *in* time, has a relentless way of keeping on happening. Like the proverbial 'Ole Man River,' it just keeps rolling

along. Being and Time are ontological certainties and being human means being cast into this river of time experience from the very start. Like the irresistible assault of a swift flowing stream in springtime, there is not sufficient time or tranquillity to narrativise, much less make sense, of *what* is happening, *while* it is happening. Flung headlong down the channel, breathless and splashing, it is enough for Jacob, experiencing his life in time, just to keep his head above water and only in photographic flashes, survey and store as memory the scenes he passes through on the banks. People, places, encounters, events, the ‘isolated intense moments,’ ‘the lifetimes burning in every moment,’ flow in and out and around one another. What they mean, how they are connected, why he even remembers or cares about them, can only be understood by the backward, constructed story. It is often in old age, when the quieter waters are finally reached, when it is possible to ‘be still and still moving,’ at last free to explore the known and unknown country where endings and beginnings meet. In life and in therapy, ‘the beginnings and endings of stories are always important’ (McLeod and Lynch, 2000:398). As will be heard in this final session with Jacob, endings and beginnings call to each other, echo and reverberate in profound ways. My first entry point into Jacob’s story, described in Iteration One, was a scene in which an old man stood before a foreign monarch and ‘blessed’ him. Blessing continues to be a theme which connects the end with the beginning and its presence and influence will be as evident in this fourth iteration as it has been in the other three.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Fishbane points to the primacy of the struggle for ‘blessing’ which ‘undergirds the family drama.’ In one section of the *Genesis* text I used for this chapter, *Genesis* 27:1-28:9, ‘the verbal stem barekh (“bless”)...recurs...twenty-two times’ (Fishbane, 1979: 50).

## ‘Home is where one starts from’

This introduction will begin with a summary review of the co-construction Jacob and I have been involved in so far. Then, in keeping with my interdisciplinary focus, I briefly survey some of the social and cultural factors in Jacob’s world which represent my attempts to gain an understanding of the home he starts from. The breadth and depth of scholarship required to construct even a speculative approximation of his world, are outside my capacity and the scope of this research and will not be attempted. The cross cultural observations I supply below are drawn from scholarly texts in the field of Biblical hermeneutics and are informed by archaeological and anthropological studies of the period. Using these authoritative sources mirrors what might be possible in practice for the counsellor seeking to supplement and inform her understanding of a client’s culture or indeed any other significant sphere of difference. These insights, as well as the content of the episodes from *Genesis* used in this final session with Jacob, will highlight an important contextual issue integral to co-construction, the impact of gender differences and the place of women’s roles and voices in Jacob’s story. This is an issue which has surfaced already in my inner conversations, especially in Iteration Two, but has not yet been addressed. This introduction summarises the insights I have gathered ‘outside’ of the counselling space to try to understand gender roles in Jacob’s culture. My processing of these insights prior to my fourth session with Jacob reveals how women’s voices in his story, both heard and unheard, have come to the foreground for me at this stage. After the dialogue with Jacob that follows this introduction, the commentary will contain, for the first time, an example of an imaginary dialogue

with a supervisor. In the ongoing fictive set up of my life review with Jacob, I have had multiple sessions with him already. In accord with ethical practice, it is now appropriate and necessary for me to take some of this work to supervision (BACP, 2013).<sup>58</sup> My supervisory session will also reveal the extent to which a range of women's voices, inside and outside Jacob's story, colour my counsellor contribution to co-construction.

### Summary Review: How did we get here?

After negotiating a counselling research relationship with Jacob in the Pre-research Iteration, my first life review dialogue with him in Iteration One included a moment when he put his head in his hands and asked, 'How did I get here?' This poignant query arose not from the text itself but from my interpretation of the text. I had Jacob voice it this way in the conversation I created with him at the start because I experienced him as asking something about the ways in which the end of his life was connected to the beginning and how his own performance measured up to the lineage of which he was a part. All along the way, this question has been accompanied by an issue of equal significance to Jacob, his role as the designated 'blessing bearer,' the heir of Abraham and Isaac's legacy. The implications of his forebears' unique, covenantal relationship with God and how he has embodied that in what he calls his 'sojourn,' are deeply important to him. As a co-creator of his life review, these two questions, 'How did I get here?' and its corollary, 'How have I done?' have

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<sup>58</sup> This possibility of outside supervision was included in the initial negotiation with Jacob (Pre-Research Iteration 45, 49).

become a point of coherence, a narrative driver for the conversation in which Jacob and I are engaged. We have been exploring who he is, how he became who he is, and what sense he wants to make of his life achievements and legacy in light of his own value system.

From that initial scene in Pharaoh's throne room in the first iteration, Jacob's life review story began to gather substance and take on a shape. It flashed back to a much earlier moment in Jacob's life when as a distressed but determined wrestler, he grappled with God on an isolated river bank and prevailed. He grasped God and God grasped him. There followed a name change, a sunrise and a long, overdue reconciliation with his brother. From that pitched battle in the dark, the river of time wound back through twenty more years of toil and strife to another isolated spot which sheltered Jacob on another night, far away from his mother's tent, on his own, for the very first time. There a younger Jacob, fleeing the hatred and revenge of his brother, dreamed a dream, saw a stairway, and awoke with startled surprise to new horizons, never glimpsed before.

The retellings of his story and genre changes I constructed in Iteration Three, while focusing on the immediacy of the dream and his response to it, also included references in the dialogue to his earlier history; those episodes, further back, that shed light on the circumstances that brought him for the first time to Bethel. This place became a refuge and spiritual sanctuary he would return to for help and solace over the course of his long life. Though experienced at first only in a dream, it was an 'I-Thou' moment of encounter with God he never forgot. The significance of this

place for him and its prominence in the previous iteration acted as a catalyst for the content of Iteration Four in which Jacob and I explore how and why he found his way to Bethel for the first time. This naturally led to an engagement with the home he starts from, his family history, his birth, and his childhood days as the son of Isaac and Rebekah, and the younger twin brother of Esau. Whereas the selection of episodes in previous iterations was often a more inchoate and circuitous process, the episodes for this part of Jacob's story seemed to flow naturally from the impetus of the stories already told and the more substantial, recognisable shape of a narrative nearer its ending than its beginning.

Near the end of our last session, Jacob made reference to the 'deep stories' embedded in the names we are given and the names we bear. *Genesis* is a text whose very name, provenance and significance points to 'deep stories' of origins and genealogical chains of relationship.<sup>59</sup> Thus this iteration also makes reference to some of the family stories of his forebears that precede and propel Jacob's moment of appearing in the world. His Grandfather Abraham and Grandmother Sarah, his Uncle Ishmael and others are all part of the matrix of deep stories that the infant Jacob found himself entering, new-born eyes blinking at the light and tiny hand grasping the heel of his older twin. Only seconds separated the order of these twins' entry into their world but in this particular world, such a tiny micro-measure,

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<sup>59</sup> Genealogical chains punctuated by the narrative lives of individual characters are a feature of the Book of *Genesis*. Wenham (2000b:19) argues that the 'clearest structural marker' running throughout the fifty chapters of *Genesis* is the 'toledot formula' that occurs ten times, and is usually translated by the phrase, "These are the generations of." It could just as well be translated, 'This is the family history of.' These 'short genealogies alternate with the long narratives centred on key actors in the overall story' and this format invites the reader 'to compare the careers of the leading figures in the story' (2000b:19).

mattered a great deal. The cultural norms of primogeniture made those few seconds a monumental span of time, which marked the life of Jacob from beginning to end. That such cultural norms are powerful, but not unassailable; and that there are different expressions of power available to actors in this world will become apparent in this part of the story. In any event, Jacob's tale continues to unfold and regardless of where it eventually leads him, 'home is where he starts from.' The principal textual segments of the story that form the basis for the dialogue in this iteration are *Genesis 25:19-34* and *Genesis 26:34* through chapter 28:9. However, because it is also so influenced by family background and family stories, it will also draw fragments from the earlier stories of his forebears chronicled in *Genesis* chapters twelve through twenty-six and the later stories of his descendants which stretch across to *Genesis* chapter fifty. As in previous iterations, when links are made to other stories found elsewhere in the text, these references will be identified and notated by chapter and verse as they emerge. To aid the reader in placing Jacob within a wider genealogical framework and keeping track of various characters, names and relationships, the abbreviated family tree provided in Appendix One may be helpful.

## Social and Cultural Aspects of Jacob's World

I now turn to the part of Jacob's storied world that opens the door, or more accurately, the tent flap, of the home he starts from. There is a rather wide gulf between my understanding of 'home,' family life and relationships and these same realities in the world that Jacob must inhabit. This is, in some sense, also true for

any client whose family stories and early home life enter the therapy space. I cannot know what it was like to live in that setting and can only learn about it by listening. However, in Jacob's case the distance between our lived experience of 'home' is not just the gulf of society and culture but the uncrossable chasm of the ancient past, that 'foreign country where they do things differently' (Lowenthal, 1985 cited in King and Stager, 2001:4).

Matthews and Benjamin (1993:x) underline the hermeneutic impact of this gulf, declaring that 'knowing something about the cultural anthropology of the biblical world makes a difference in the way we read the Bible.' As with any client, 'knowing something,' however cursory of Jacob's world, may help me to read him and his story from a more informed position. The above authors provide useful points of comparison to begin to understand this distance. For the peoples of these eastern Mediterranean cultures of Mesopotamia, every day home life was primarily a rural existence, often semi-nomadic, marked by sun, moon and seasons. The work Jacob's family would have engaged in together bore little relation to the industrial, production-oriented economy of the modern world. Daily sustenance involved nearly constant and intimate connections with each other, the land and the natural world of plants and animals. These organic, cyclical links to their environment led to a way of thinking about the world that was graphic, concrete and circular rather than abstract and linear. For Jacob's family, the art of weaving a story was far more important for chronicling and understanding their history than a linear, objective representation of facts. Storytelling was an important conduit of tribal identity and a resource for problem-solving. Their existential understandings of their own stories



grew out of a milieu in which, according to Matthews and Benjamin (1993:xix), 'Culture, society and religion were coextensive.' There was no division between secular and sacred in family life or in the political systems of clan, village and tribe. The presence of the divine, however that may have been conceived at different times by the socio-political groupings of Near Eastern peoples, 'pervaded every activity of daily life' and provided the means by which they explained, made sense, and managed their environment and their circumstances. This rich, textured relationship with their own stories wove together the strands of every day life, their faith in God, the meanings they made and the actions they took.

Fokkelman (1975) uses the literary genre of 'saga' to categorise the Jacob story in *Genesis* and goes on to make the point that sagas do not represent characters as isolated individuals but as part of family chains, always as 'relatives,' relationally embedded and connected to those who come before them and after them. The saga's depiction of a character as a link in a family chain is not just a function of the literary genre of Jacob's story. Anthropological studies suggest the social and cultural world of the Mesopotamian Bronze Age to which Jacob belonged did not conceive of individuals as 'private characters' but as part of a family matrix. A Bible census in Jacob's era would most likely have counted households rather than individuals.

The basic community in the Bible was the extended family or household headed by a father...[it] was made up of as many sets of childbearing adults and their dependants as was necessary for the entire group to feed and protect itself (Matthews and Benjamin, 1993:7).

The provision of food and protection from harm are themes which emerge again and again throughout the family narratives of *Genesis* and particularly in the Jacob cycle.

In Jacob's world the individual, on his own, 'could not survive...was not socially, economically, or politically viable' (ibid:xviii). 'The Hebrews were not just households with the same biological parents, but households with the same sociological experience and a shared legal commitment to one another' (ibid:8). Identity construction in such a household-based culture had more to do with a collective sense of family or tribal identity than with the rugged individualism so characteristic of post-Enlightenment conceptions of the self. In fact, my own embeddedness in this context is apparent in previous iterations where I have cast Jacob somewhat in the mould of the 'rugged individual' hero of his own tale, thus inadvertently taking insufficient heed of this collectivist mindset.

However, Collicutt (2012) cautions against a too facile categorisation of ancient cultures as devoid of any traces of individualism. She argues it would be an inappropriately reductionist stance to suggest that pre-modern cultures such as Jacob's were exclusively 'collectivist' and thus had no understanding or experience of an individualistic perspective. She cites Baumeister (1987) and Hobfoll (2004) to support her claim, that even though post-Enlightenment thought has reified individualism as a concept, there is much to indicate that 'individualism and collectivism always coexisted' and that these early cultures would not have been 'devoid of the concept of self' (Collicutt, 2012:12). This mitigates for me some of the cultural dissonance there may be between Jacob's sense of self and the foregrounding of an individualised ego so familiar in the modern world and in many contemporary counselling discourses.

This more nuanced caveat for thinking about Jacob's positioning within his culture is an important perspective as I listen to him in the ensuing dialogue. His own story matters to him but always within the context of his family and tribal story. In Jacob's context the Hebrew 'household' was the most significant social group. These groups were conceptualised and constructed in terms of four generations, the father and his brothers, the father's father and brothers (uncles), sons and grandsons. Thus Jacob's concern for how his life span and role as the 'blessing bearer' may compare to his father, grandfather and sons is not just the melancholy misapprehension of an elderly man, whose grief and confusion have clouded his judgment. His evaluation of his life in those terms is consistent with important aspects of his cultural positioning. Seeing himself as embedded in a generational chain, forged in four links, was a necessary and natural perspective for him to contemplate. Without an awareness of the importance of this perspective in his culture, I might see his locus of evaluation, 'How have I done compared to them?' as slightly suspect. Even though Jacob has lived most of his life away from his family of origin, he does not see his life as separate or excised from that generational chain, grandson of Abraham, son of Isaac, and the father of his own twelve sons.

## Patriarchy and Gender Difference

The preponderance of exclusively male designations in the last paragraph points to a potentially contentious and difficult contextual issue which has been present from the start in my co-constructive work with Jacob but becomes particularly salient in the content of this iteration. Goldingay (2003:69) states the issue succinctly, '[The

*Genesis* stories] are [primarily] androcentric and take for granted a patriarchal understanding of marriage and parenthood. They are mostly stories of fathers and sons.’ These are uncomfortable emanations from the text when read in a twenty-first century Western context for which even the word ‘patriarchal,’ much less the perceptions of its practice, have almost exclusively pejorative connotations. Gabel, Wheeler et al. (2006:391) provide a definition of patriarchy or ‘father-rule’ which reflects a widely-held contemporary perspective on this kind of social formation:

a political, cultural, and ideological system in which women are subordinated to men; narrowly, a system of oppression in which the domination of the “father” (usually a single, elite male) is complete over not only women but also over perceived lesser-status people. It does not mean the complete suppression and silencing of women or the complete removal of power and agency from women; it does mean, however, that the role of a man in society is considered dominant according to stated or unstated doctrines of authority.

This modern, socially constructed understanding of patriarchy does not necessarily reflect the world in which Jacob lived or the standpoint he occupies in relation to the women in his life. First on a purely historical level, it is important to distinguish between the way in which family and tribal relationships are depicted ‘in any society’s traditional literature and the actual social formation which obtained at the time of this literature’s composition’ (Oden, 1983:204). Second, from both a literary and a Biblical exegetical point of view, there is considerable disagreement as to how these ‘patriarchal’ narratives should be read. Ricoeur’s ‘conflict of interpretations’ is nowhere more evident than in the range of responses to the family narratives of the Hebrew Bible. This applies not only to the extent to which these texts reflect the actual attitudes and practice of the time (whether in the textual world or the world of the author/s of the text) but also the extent to which contemporary concerns and

understandings are read back into the text. Greenstein (1999:222) cites the postmodern feminist perspective of Mieke Bal in contending ‘that the patriarchal interpretations that have characterised most readings of the Hebrew Bible result from projecting the often unconscious male biases of Western culture onto the text.’ Tribble (1978:7) maps out the extreme positions in this range of responses when she writes, ‘For some people today the Bible supports female slavery and male dominance in culture, while for others it offers freedom from sexism.’ She maps the former position as represented by feminist writers who see the Bible as so oppressive and tilted toward male domination that it should be rejected altogether. At the opposite pole, occupying more moderate positions Tribble puts feminist exegetes who see these narratives as potentially highly empowering for women. Their readings of them encourage investigation of the ways in which different kinds of power and agency are available to and expressed by women in the text. However, regardless of where the interpreter sits on this spectrum of extremes, Jacob is a patriarch and he lives in a man’s world. Certainly, to the modern reader, there are moments in his text which seem to position women as appendages to men, possessions who are primarily valued, either as sexually desirable objects or as bearers of children (Tribble, 1978).

### Women in Jacob’s Textual World

To help me reflect on this as a contextual issue in his social setting, I turned again to insights from historians of the Biblical world. Matthews and Benjamin (1993:22) maintain there has never been a completely matriarchal society where power and authority reside only in women or a society in which gender does not have a role in

organisation. They argue, 'The Bible...grants women much more access to the administrative, judicial and economic systems than many of today's generalisations about women and the Bible acknowledge.' Meyers (1988) points to the vital role of women in this agrarian society and the ways in which their work and influence contributed to economic survival. She suggests that women's roles carried with them a significant degree of status. She makes a distinction between two manifestations of power that could be operant in gender relationships. There is undoubtedly patrilineal authority, in that goods and property are passed down through the male line, and the father is the unquestioned titular head of the clan (King and Stager, 2001). However, Meyers argues there is also, apposed to this, the power operating through female influence and active participation in work. She claims a greater degree of power sharing for women in this Bronze Age world than is generally assumed. Fuchs (2005) challenges Meyers' view of women's power (expressed through energy and influence), by pointing out that while women's economic contributions may have been substantial and their active participation valued, this does not insure social parity or protection from exploitation. Fuchs argues that Meyers' suggestion that women's contribution earned them status and influence, and that this in some sense mediated the extent of male domination, is undermined by her failure to provide specifics of what this status entailed. Fuchs cites as well the absence of any attestation for how material compensation was made for 'women's work.'

Kinship and marital relationships are fundamental to women's place in the social order of *Genesis*. Marriage in Jacob's world was not considered a religious rite but a civil contract, more often a delicately negotiated political agreement than a romantic

union. 'It was designed to bring together two households that were willing to exchange substantial goods and services with each other over a significant period of time' (Matthews and Benjamin, 1993:13). This was important in a semi-nomadic subsistence culture where resources were often very limited. In all four stories of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) famine, the scarcity of water, and limited grazing space are recurring motifs. The provision of food, water, and enough workers to shepherd the flocks and till the fields was a paramount issue of survival. Although all of the patriarchs accumulated significant wealth in the course of their lives, this sometimes, but not always, involved scraping it from an uncongenial and unforgiving landscape. This required many working hands. Thus childbearing was the essential economic reality for these Bronze Age peoples (Matthews and Benjamin, 1993). In these circumstances, for a woman not to be married was considered an humiliation and to be childless, a curse (King and Stager, 2001).

Examples from some of the women in Jacob's story illustrate the ambiguities and ambivalences inherent in both Meyers' and Fuch's arguments and the truth of Tribble's contention that success for these women, even when achieved, is usually in terms dictated by a 'man's world.' Against this general and very cursory view of Bronze Age gender relations and realities, a brief inventory of the women in Jacob's story will now be reviewed. Jacob's mother, Rebekah, has no peer in the story. Her complete command of the process of designating Jacob as the principal heir of Isaac's blessing is a case which points to the massive influence she exerts, not in the male enclaves of power but from behind the tent flap. The narrative sets up a contrast between her superior spiritual insight, assertiveness and energy of action and

Isaac's increasing blindness, passivity and 'love of game.' From her first introduction in the narrative to the last, Rebekah does not retreat in the face of difficulty or shrink from challenge. She goes in search of the resources she needs, her eyes are strategically scanning the horizon and her ears open to opportunity. Thus, it is Rebekah to whom God speaks, not Isaac, when the time comes to reveal and outline the plan of succession. Her hands, in a literal and figurative sense, grasp the nettle and make it happen.

Rachel and Leah, Jacob's two wives, replicate the ongoing motifs of deceit, sibling rivalry, conflict and primogeniture, so characteristic of the *Genesis* family narratives. Jacob is tricked into marrying Leah, the older sister, but his heart belongs to Rachel, whose hand he earns by fourteen years of hard labour for his Uncle Laban. His lifelong love and devotion to Rachel, in spite of her many years of not being able to bear children, seem to fly in the face of the cultural norms for relationship in his world. These norms should have privileged the status of the prolifically childbearing Leah over her sister, the barren but deeply loved Rachel, when in fact the opposite is true. Jacob's relationship with his wives also subverts the stereotype of the patriarchal, dominating male in other ways. A kind of mediated female power is evident in Rachel and Leah ordering Jacob about, determining where and with whom he will sleep from night to night (*Genesis* 30:1-24). The phallic imagery in this particular episode is blatant. Rachel and Leah argue and barter over the possession of coveted mandrakes, a supposed fertility aid. The scene as well as the mandrakes fairly drip with irony and double entendre. The way Jacob is lampooned in the midst of it diminishes his authority in oblique but comic ways. Part of Rachel's and Leah's



battles with each other also include involving their ‘handmaidens’ in the reproductive machinations of the household. Jacob seems to cooperate with this arrangement at their behest and without objection and sires four sons by these two women, Bilhah and Zilpah. Yet throughout years as part of his household, these two handmaidens remain utterly voiceless in the text and Jacob does not mention them in any of my conversations with him.<sup>60</sup>

Rachel’s and Leah’s capacity to exercise influence if not unmediated power are also suggested in the preparations to leave Paddan-Aram. As Iteration Two demonstrated, when Jacob needed to make the major decision to escape from Laban’s domination, he consults both Rachel and Leah, sharing his dream, his concerns and his plans, seeking their opinions and confirmation rather than presenting the decision as a *fait accompli*. Jacob’s treatment of them here offers a stunning contrast to the ways they feel they have been treated by the other dominant male figure in their lives, their father, Laban. Rashkow (2000: 155) highlights their tenuous position in relation to their father citing the moment when, in *Genesis* 31: 14-16 they ‘Bitterly and poignantly, ... describe themselves ...as exploited and dispossessed slaves, treated as foreign women unrelated to him [i.e. their father, Laban].’ Later Rachel also displays some Rebekah like traits of wily opportunism and individual initiative in deftly confiscating her father’s idols, the *teraphim*, which amount to the title deeds to his

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<sup>60</sup> Bilhah is mentioned later in the text when Jacob’s eldest son, Reuben, also sleeps with her. This incident signifies not just an incestuous breach of the family contract, but more significantly a power grab and a deliberate strategy by Reuben to secure and further legitimise his hold on the inheritance as the first born. His plan backfires and results in his being condemned and cut out of the inheritance that might have been his. Bilhah’s experience of being used in this way or whether she was complicit in it and what it meant for her are never addressed in the text (*Genesis* 35:22).

property (*Genesis* 31:19ff). It is salutary that she has to ‘steal’ from her father what she feels should belong to her and her children by legal right (*Genesis* 31:16, 19). She plans and achieves this property retrieval, utterly duping the suspicious, Laban, but without Jacob’s knowledge or his approval.

The other significant group of women in Jacob’s household, his daughters-in-law, also exist in the text as nameless, voiceless placeholders and have no status other than as mothers of the sons listed in the genealogies of men. Other than his daughter, Dinah, no women’s names appear in the list of Jacob’s female entourage making the trek to Egypt (Goldingay, 2003). However, there is one notable exception to this nameless, voiceless parade. She is Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Jacob’s fourth son, Judah. Although Tamar does not feature in any of my dialogues with Jacob, her story is central to the line of succession and is told with some detail in *Genesis* 38. Her father-in-law, Judah’s character is important in the text because of the profound transformation he undergoes from a resentful, withdrawn, callous plotter to a compassionate, unselfish even heroic figure. Jacob, in yet another surprise twist and subversion of the rule of primogeniture, will eventually make Judah his principal heir of the blessing, even privileging him above his favourite sons, Joseph and Benjamin. However, it is a woman, Tamar, whose resolve and courage are instrumental in singlehandedly bringing this character transformation about. It is another tale of trickery that reveals the property rights which women actually did possess in the culture, but that could easily be denied them by male power and obfuscation. King and Stager (2001:50) ‘suggest that trickery and deception may have been necessary, even admirable, qualities in a woman living in a male-dominated society.’ Tamar has

to use the only source of power she has, her sexual attractiveness, to overcome Judah's failure to recognise her rights. Eventually Tamar is able to use the symbols of Judah's male authority, his staff, cord and seal, deftly subverting them to her own purposes (*Genesis* 38:1ff). Judah who is publicly and deservedly exposed as a cheat by her deceptive ruse, does not condemn her action, although previously, in a self-righteous rage he had sentenced her to death. While publicly humiliated and shamed himself, he utterly vindicates and praises her motives and behaviour as being 'more righteous' than his own. Her cleverness and bold action result in her lawful rights to a lineage finally, being acknowledged and granted, and what is more significant, her character and integrity being exalted and elevated above Judah, a very powerful male figure.

There is one other very important but voiceless female character in Jacob's story, his daughter, Dinah. She made a brief appearance in Jacob's recounting of his story in Iteration Two but at that point he only hinted, cryptically, at the details of what happened to her. Dinah's story, a nasty, brutish and short tale of rape and genocide, is told in *Genesis* 34. It does not feature in any of the written transcripts of my conversations with Jacob and it will not make an overt appearance in the dialogue of Iteration Four. However, as part of my fictive research relationship with Jacob, my knowledge of the story is explained by suggesting it was related to me in a portion of our conversation that has not been included in any of the written transcriptions provided here. The impact of the story on me, as a contextual issue both of gender and moral vision will appear in the imaginary dialogue with my supervisor which also forms part of the commentary for Iteration Four. As often happens in practice, a

story like Dinah's may enter the space obliquely or connected with another story and either the client does not want to explore it further or, for any number of reasons, it remains overlooked or set aside. Whether unpacked with the client or not, it has an impact on the counsellor and may influence profoundly her contribution to co-construction, especially if there are issues in the story that create significant, perceived dissonances in moral values.

In the case of Dinah's story, Sternberg (1992) and Gunn and Fewell (1991) add another dimension to my 'reading' of gender relations in Jacob's story by their spirited and robust debate over what constitutes a competent reading of *Genesis* 34. Their back and forth dialogues, contesting the meaning of Dinah's story, are a conceptually rich exchange of reading and counter-reading with much of value to say about the nature of interpretation and its relation to poetics. However, their debate also functions as a cautionary tale for me in the sense that it flags up the dangers of reading into stories, using interpretive lenses that are too rigidly constrained or too narrowly focused by my own moral visions or strongly held ideological positions. In that capacity, it also acts as a further 'supervisory' conversation for me in relation to the androcentric bias I might find objectionable in Jacob's world and in him. The professional code of ethics I follow supports the principle that the personal views of the counsellor should not prejudice professional work with clients (BACP, 2013). However, in practice this is seldom a simple, straightforward drawing of a line in the sand. Christopher (1996) and McLeod and Lynch (2000) make a strong case for the counsellor's responsibility to examine and question the stance he or she takes in

relation to client values. Christopher (1996:24) summarises the task and the challenge as,

Whether we admit it or not in our work with clients, we are engaging in conversation about the good. Ultimately, counselling is part of a cultural discussion about ethos and world view, about a good life and the good person, and about moral visions. The only real choice becomes how honest we are with ourselves about our inescapable moral visions.

Jacob's story remains extant not as an apologetic *for* or a polemic *against* a patriarchal arrangement of society, now or in the past; although I acknowledge some may try to use it this way. The distances and differences between Jacob's way of seeing the world and mine, even the distasteful, disturbing ones, provide an opportunity for thinking and feeling through the way similar issues have intruded, coloured, and shaped my alliances with my own clients and their stories. We do not always see eye to eye nor do our 'moral visions' always align. However, as I have already discovered in my four previous conversations with Jacob, our dialogue can move both of us in ways we are not expecting, and to standpoints where strongly held beliefs and biases can look very different.

A purely feminist post-structural reading <sup>61</sup> would bring a much different and specialised set of lenses to Jacob's story than I have chosen to see it through thus far.

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<sup>61</sup> Gabel and Wheeler et al. (2006:331-332) suggest three strategic perspectives that characterise feminist readings. The first, 'a careful and an active reading of the text' which is, in my view, a generic principle which should apply to any interpretive reading of the text. The second perspective is to read with suspicion because of an assumption that some women in the Biblical stories 'do not speak directly or are made to speak against their own interests.' The third is a corollary of the second, that posits, 'The Bible does not help us to understand much about the lives of ancient women. It helps us to understand, primarily, how ancient men thought about women.'

My primary lens has focalised the story through the perspective of my own experience of counselling practice and my personal idiosyncratic response to gender issues as they arise for me in the therapeutic space. Modern antipathy toward patriarchy as a system has not featured in my experience of Jacob and certainly has not alienated me from him. In fact, in approaching this contextual issue for this iteration, I am aware of adopting a very protective stance toward my client. I do not harbour a view of him or his story that would seek to label him either as the embodiment or the perpetrator of an unjust system of oppression. I simply do not 'read' him that way, although I understand why others might read and respond to him from very different standpoints.

However, as the supervision dialogue included in the commentary for this iteration will demonstrate, I do have concerns about the women, both voiced and voiceless, named and nameless, in Jacob's account and the impact these women characters' experiences have on how I read Jacob and my contribution to co-construction. In the case of his daughter Dinah and her tragic story, I will question with considerable confusion and frustration the nature and circumstances of his care for her. This 'cultural discussion' and my choice to engage with my own moral visions will be evident in the supervision dialogue and my personal processing of it that follow my last conversation with Jacob. However, at the present moment it is Jacob and I who will enter another imaginary dialogue, this time focusing on the 'home he starts from,' and the way his beginning pervades, informs, shapes and colours the rest of his story.

## Iteration Four: Imaginary Dialogue

1. Jacob: (Jacob nods politely as he settles into his chair, and with a kindly smile asks) Are you well? Are you in good health?
  
2. Linda: Yes, very well, Thank you.
  
3. Jacob: (He points to a patch of sunlight on the floor and his face brightens)  
Look! The sun is still high.
  
4. Linda: Is that a good thing?
  
5. Jacob: I am a shepherd, as my fathers were, I have known many long years of watching the sun move across the sky and breathing in the fragrance of the fields and the herds. It was my life. High sun means there is still plenty of time before the flocks need to be gathered and watered, there is still time...but (He pauses and then shrugs. I notice for the first time the size of his hands, gnarled and brown, smooth skinned, but still muscular and unusually large. He follows my gaze and looks down at his hands, opens them, palms upward for a moment, resting them on his knees, and then gently curling them into fists, as if grasping something) I will not be there to water the flocks today. I can no longer do the work of a shepherd. As I told you last time, there was a day I could wrench the stone cover off the top of the well with my bare hands. Not any more.

6. Linda: Stones and wells, flocks and water, and hands...they seem to come into your story a lot... feats of strength and struggle, but I felt maybe today, your hands...how you held them just now, they seemed to be saying something about loss, those things you feel won't or can't happen any more. I wonder if that's where you were wanting to start today.
7. Jacob: I do not know. Where does any story begin? I have been journeying back over the paths of my life a lot these days. 'Researching my life review,' as you call it. (Smiling) You see how I have learned to speak some of your language too. All of this looking back...I have been remembering stories I was told when I was a boy, back in Canaan, living in my mother's tent as one did in those days. Not like here in Goshen.
8. Linda: Those days?
9. Jacob: Yes...the old days in Canaan...where I come from, where all my journeys began. Last time when we talked about my dream at Bethel, that has put many things in my mind, long forgotten...those days in Canaan... how I came to Bethel the first time, the steps that led my feet along that path.
10. Linda: Last time you said you were on the run...um... running away from home.
11. Jacob: Yes, not because I desired it but because I had to. My mother...you see...she...well, she arranged things. She...It all happened so quickly after I...I...



cheated my brother. Stealing his blessing and causing my father so much grief. I can still see his frail body literally trembling with shock and rage. And Esau... Esau was threatening to kill me. I could not stay any longer then but now I wonder, looking back, would I ever have left? If all that had not happened? Maybe...maybe I had waited too long to leave anyway.

12.Linda: Maybe you were waiting for something and just weren't sure what it was.

13.Jacob: Oh I knew. I always knew what I desired, not always how to get it, but I knew what I desired. I thought I should be lord over my brother. I wanted to wrench his blessing from his hands. I was often labelled the quiet one in our family, a 'mild' boy they said, but I was... I was full of what my father called guile and my mother called cleverness. Long before the time I had to run away, I had already tricked my brother out of his birth right. Oh what a stew I stirred up that day! The smell of it fills my nostrils even now. I caught Esau out in the open country... famished, he came staggering in from a day of hunting game. He was a hunter but he did not know that *I* was hunting *him*, that his quiet brother could be like the viper that bites the horse's heel. I sought to snare him in a savoury trap. A few red lentils, some herbs, an ordinary mess of pottage, bubbling over the fire, I watched him gulp it down, wipe his mouth with the back of his hand and the deal was done. 'Supplanter,' that's what my father and brother accused me of and they were right. Poor Esau. He was not an evil man, he just could not see... or grasp the value of what he had, the significance of it.

He spurned his birthright, just walked away from it. I never could do that...my, my mother taught me that.

14. Linda: Mmm...What you've said just now says a lot about how you saw yourself in those days, how you think your parents saw you, how you saw your brother. I've heard you speak of your father and brother before but this is the first time in a long while, maybe ever, I've heard you refer to your mother. I wonder...this is just an impression I've had, please dismiss it if it doesn't fit...but I had a sense in the way you told your stories today, I experienced them as a set of tableaux in a play, your father, your brother, you...all of you seem to be the main actors on the stage but she, your mother, is there in the background, in the wings, so to speak...but still I have this strong sense of her directing the action.

15. Jacob: (He looks surprised and eyes me sharply, but quickly diverts his gaze) My mother...yes...she was a keen watcher...her ears too were keen and her hands quick to grasp the nettle. Her name was Rebekah. She was from Haran. Strange how saying her name out loud brings so much to mind. You will not hear it or know but in my native tongue, her name sounds very like the Hebrew words for 'birthright and blessing,' *bekhorah* and *berakah*. She will always be very tied up with both of those things for me. She believed they were mine by divine right and she taught me to believe it. Hmm... Is it not strange the way one tale is tied to so many other things? Until I spoke her name just now, I had forgotten Rebekah can also mean, 'to tie with a cord' ... I was tied to her in so many ways.

16. Linda: What a deep, rich, resonant language Hebrew is. So many meanings echo. I wish I could hear it the way you do. There's as much meaning in the sounds as the sense, those sounds reminded you of her...um... your connection with her. What was your relationship with her like?
17. Jacob: I was her favourite, there was never any doubt about that from the beginning. She had been childless for so many years. Barren...this was a deep sorrow for her. My father prayed every day for twenty years that God would give them a child and then finally, twins, two boys.
18. Linda: Twins? Was that a surprise... to your mother? Did she ever talk to you about what her pregnancy and your birth were like?
19. Jacob: Indeed yes, she did. Her days of holding life within her brought much movement to her mind as well as to her body. She often spoke of it to me. Those months before Esau and I came into the world...what she experienced... was very frightening for her.
20. Linda: (With surprise and concern) Frightening?
21. Jacob: Yes, although she was overjoyed early on, as the months went by the movements within her womb became more and more violent. Not just the usual kicks and turns of all growing life, even twins, but a tempestuous battle, colliding and crashing to and fro within her...those are the words she used. It frightened

her so much, she despaired not only of a safe birth but of her own life as well. She could not make sense of such struggle so she went, on her own, to inquire of God...how brave she was, now that I think of it, it was a kind of *derash* for her, a searching for answers...she told me how she cried out, 'Why is this happening to me?'

22.Linda: Did her search bring her an answer?

23.Jacob: God's answer was something that made a deep mark on her *leb*...that is, her heart, like the stylus of the scribe carves its sign into the soft clay tablet. It leaves its message behind to be read again and again. God said, 'There are two nations in your womb' and that the younger would be stronger than the older and one day the older would serve the younger. It was very strange for an oracle from God to say such a thing, as that is not our custom to put the younger before the older, but my mother believed that oracle and she never wavered from it. She taught me to believe it too. So from the moment I was born, my hand on my brother's heel, I think her heart was tied to mine and she loved me with a love she was never able to give to Esau. We were twins but we were very different.

24.Linda: So what sort of babies were you?

25.Jacob: According to my mother, in spite of my name, Heel Grabber, I was not really a difficult or greedy little one. My mother said I was a fairly quiet, mild infant. My brother was a bit wilder and demanding, hungry all the time. I am

told his burping, greedy, gulping used to make my father laugh. My father was not a man of action himself, he often seemed lost in his own thoughts. He was a man who would prefer to make space for others than grab territory for himself. Because these were his ways, I think my father loved that streak of wild abandon in my brother. Later as Esau grew, I think my father's heart was drawn to his love of the wide open fields and the smell of the open country...the ancient hills they both loved...(He pauses and gazes wistfully out the window, after a moment he turns his gaze back and resumes his recollections) Esau became very good with a bow as he got older and he would spend hours, roaming far and wide tracking game. My father developed a keen taste for it, he loved wild game so... so Esau would often prepare a savoury dish of the day's kill, and they would eat it together in my father's tent.

26. Linda: Mmm...what was that like for you?

27. Jacob: I remember standing at the door of my mother's tent and watching the two of them together, the smell of roasting venison wafting through the camp. We do not eat roasted meat very often and so the smell of it...it signifies the meaning of the meal as something more, something special. I knew my father favoured Esau, that he did not see me, even in the days when he could... could actually *see* me... and I suppose I grew accustomed to it. But I still honoured him greatly. My father, Isaac, was the blessing bearer too, the one chosen by his father. My grandfather, Abraham, loved him deeply and they had a very special bond...er... but that is another story. My father was, I have always believed,

very fond of my mother. She was a comfort to him and she seemed to know his ways very well... his moods, his thoughts. (He chuckles softly) she was usually two or three steps ahead of him. She always saw him before he saw her, ah ... that reminds me of another meaning of her name. In the Akkadian dialect, Rebekah means 'springy,' or 'supple.' That was her too, always moving, always thinking ahead, always serving. Do you know she once watered a whole caravan of camels for a complete stranger with nothing but an earthen jar and her bare hands?

28.Linda: (Nodding with interest) Really...wow...I can imagine camels must have very deep thirsts.

29.Jacob: Yes, there are few women who could have performed such a feat, but she was never afraid of difficult tasks. She was a jewel among women. There is another very long family story about how my grandfather instructed his most trusted servant to seek out a bride for my father. I have heard this story many times, how God handpicked her. It is a wonderful story and as in so many things my grandfather did, it showed great wisdom and trust in God's care, he was a man who could see far and trust much... a visionary. She was like him in that way.

30.Linda: Alike? Your mother and your grandfather?

31. Jacob: Very like. I never thought of it that way before but she was so much like him. In fact, she was more like him than any of his sons, my uncle Ishmael, my father's older brother, well... half brother was a wild donkey of a man, a bowman of renown... and my father, Isaac, well he was the delight of my grandparents' eyes, they named him, 'Laughter,' that's what Isaac means in Hebrew... because his birth was so unlikely, so miraculous, so ridiculous. My grandfather was well over a hundred years old and my Grandmother Sarah, nearly 80, when he was born. My grandmother nearly fell over laughing when her pregnancy was foretold, she was well past the age of childbearing by then. I can still hear my father telling the story his mother had told him. He would imitate her voice, her wink and the swing of her hips, 'Can a worn out old woman have such a pleasure?' We'd all laugh (Chuckling and shaking his head ruefully) I heard that story so many times when I was growing up.

32. Linda: (Laughing too and incredulous) I'm a grandmother myself and I can't quite get my head around that. 80 years old... Really? Amazing... a miraculous birth story.

33. Jacob: Yes, beyond all hope or expectation. Abraham and Sarah were so blessed and happy, but (he sighs) ... there was soon trouble. My grandmother never expected to have a son and so she had endured the necessity of Hagar and Ishmael being part of the family. In fact, the trouble was really all her own doing. Years before my father was born, maybe thirteen, fourteen years before, she had despaired of ever having a child. She desperately wanted Abraham to

have an heir. She knew how much it upset him that everything they had worked for might go to someone outside the family, so she arranged for her handmaid, her name was Hagar, to lie with him. That sort of thing was sometimes done... in those circumstances...as well as others...um... but I think she bitterly regretted it. Poor Hagar, it caused her a great deal of grief too and I am sorry to say, my grandmother treated her very ill. There was much strife and jealousy. Sarah pleaded with Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. It distressed him deeply, he loved Ishmael, but he knew there would be no peace until they went. He did what he could for them and they left... and rightly or wrongly, my Uncle Ishmael has lived in hostility to the family ever since. His hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him.

34. Linda: That's a sad story...and hands again.

35. Jacob: Yes, but I know...I *know* my grandfather never intended it to be like that. He had a deep desire to protect and provide, to treat everyone fairly. He was the first and greatest blessing bearer, full of *hesed*, the one to whom God first gave the promises.

36. Linda: *Hesed*? I have not heard you use this word before.

37. Jacob: It is a deep word. Hard to fathom. In your tongue perhaps it means lovingkindness, loyalty. Abraham cared about people, looking after them, he would not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap he thought belonged to



someone else. He was a great giver of gifts even to his own cost. He would run to welcome strangers and make sure they were fed and cared for, that they enjoyed the best he had to offer. He was a man whose voice pleaded for the innocent... and he...he died as he had lived, having protected and provided for his household, he left behind gifts and instructions appropriate for each one. His was a good ripe old age, full of years, happy and contented with his family gathered round him.

38. Linda: You speak very warmly of your grandfather...and with respect for how he lived his life.

39. Jacob: Yes, this is true. Everything my family means, everything there is to know about who we are flows from him and his faith. *El Shaddai* told him He would 'make him into a great nation and bless him and make his name great and that he would be a blessing.' He told him to leave his home and go, did not even tell him how or where, just that the time had come and my grandfather obeyed and went...

40. Linda: Mmm...there is often in your story a sense of this fullness of time, of time reaching a place, a point of fullness where movement needs to happen...just something that occurred to me just then. I don't know whether it fits or accords with your own...um...

41. Jacob: It brings to mind how my mother was like Abraham in this, this wisdom of hers in seeing the need of the moment. She *was* like him. I am surprised I have not seen it before. There was a time she left her home too, not really knowing what she was going to, just believing it was the right thing. She had a sense God was asking her to do it and so she did. She left her family and went with Abraham's servant to marry my father, a man she had never met. She climbed up on a camel and travelled to a land where she had never set foot. She was not one to stand and wait. 'I will go,' she said...Just like that. If something needed to be done, and she believed it was God's will, she found a way to do it.

42. Linda: From what I've experienced and heard of your story so far, I would say that might be an apt description of you as well.

43. Jacob: I cannot say. I only know I am unworthy of the kindness and faithfulness *El Shaddai* has shown me all these years. He is the God rich in *hesed*. I left home all those years ago with *nothing*, nothing but my staff. I returned, the head of my own household, with flocks and herds as far as the eye could see.

44. Linda: That return home....What was it like to see your parents again after all those years?

45. Jacob: There was not much time for homecoming. My father was still living but died soon after I arrived. My brother and I...as you know, we had reconciled by then. Our days of quarrelling were at last over. Esau and I together...we buried

our father. As for my mother, after she sent me off, I think she thought it would only be for a short time, but for once in her life she was mistaken, twenty years would go by... I never saw her again or heard her voice... her voice it was...um...that is.... (His voice breaks and he sits very still, after a long pause he speaks, quietly) I have not heard that voice since the day I left Canaan ...I would give much ... of all that I have acquired since then to hear that voice again, to grasp her hand in greeting and let her know I was safe... that I did come home again.

### A Narrative Summary of the Rest of the Dialogue

The transcript of my created dialogue with Jacob ends here. The rest of the session as I imagine it is presented now as a prose summary. The following represents how I might recall and narrate for myself what happened in the remainder of the session in preparation for speaking with a supervisor about it.

Jacob and I continue to process together these memories of his mother, a long unspoken loss, never fully grieved even after so many years. He was not there when she died. I feel a lingering sadness for Jacob, in the session and after it, not as the old man he is now, but for that young man and the mother who sent him off, but was not there to welcome him back. I wonder if this affects my attempt to introduce an 'empty chair' exercise later in the session. I wanted to give Jacob an opportunity, if he felt able to do so, to reconnect with the mother's voice he has not heard in such a long time. At the time, in the session, it seemed the right moment to introduce this

often used Gestalt technique. I tried to help him enact a role play in which he would imagine his mother sitting in the empty chair next to him. The aim of this role play was to explore what it was he wanted to hear from her but could *not* hear either in the past or now and what he might want to say to her in reply. However, I think I managed it rather badly. Jacob made an effort to enter into it (to please me perhaps?) but found it too painful and awkward, so I suggested we put it aside. He nodded assent, gratefully, it seemed to me, and then told me, 'I need more time to hold this in mind.' Reviewing it now, I think I should have realised this kind of abstract exercise would not be appropriate for him. My introduction of the empty chair technique into the therapy space today was an example of the way my clinical experience, personal style and counselling discourses sought to contribute to the co-construction. The rationale and the method came very much from my world, what work I thought needed to be done, what kinds of processing I thought might help, and what my experience with previous clients had taught me about the usefulness of the technique. Jacob, to his credit, knew it was wrong for him and graciously and with considerable tact rejected it. He rejected the technique, but in doing so, somehow also communicated he was not rejecting me or the working relationship we have developed over time. It seemed a good test of the strength and character of the therapeutic alliance we have forged to watch it withstand this clumsy mistake on my part. There is some of his Grandfather Abraham's *hesed* in Jacob and I have been the beneficiary of it in our work today whether Jacob acknowledges this resemblance to his grandfather or not.

After my bungled attempt at the empty chair exercise, there was a long silence in which he sat very still with bowed head. Eventually he looked up and with tears in his eyes, said, ‘Thank you. I just needed some time to return to Bethel.’ With a settled kind of resolve, he said he now realised what was important to him was to remember his mother as she had been when he last saw her. He wanted to hear what she might have said to him at the time, the encouragement and instructions she would have given him if the urgency of the situation and his need to leave quickly had not prevented it. I agreed to help him with this and we collaborated on a letter she might have written to him the day he left home (See Appendix Four).

Our work on the letter brought another voice into the room, the content and cadences of which Jacob had not heard in a long time. As we listened to the words, the joint product of our collaboration, this mother of long ago seemed to come into the room with us, bringing with her both the echoes of her voice that once pleaded, ‘Listen to me,’ and the presence of her hands, those hands that had always grasped the nettle and made things happen. I had a sense of her sitting with us, smiling at her son, her once busy hands now folded in her lap, ‘still and still moving.’ Again I felt I was there in the role of witness, honouring the memory of this woman, Rebekah, who had meant so much to Jacob’s life— birthright and blessing, supple and springy, flawed and faithful, smothering and letting go, tied with a cord, good enough and just strong enough to hold her son for a lifetime.

What all this made clear in terms of co-construction was the way in which Jacob’s values, his priorities and his resources needed to take centre stage in how we storied

his life together. As well as 'more time,' perhaps what Jacob needed most was his own choice of space, a Bethel-shaped space to which he could bring this sorrow. My experience of him in all our previous conversations has demonstrated that the Voice he heard at Bethel and the Companion he met there have long been the deepest source of comfort, solace and embracing presence he knows. The cross-cultural information I have gathered also supports the view that there is no divide in his world between the secular and the sacred, the psychological and the spiritual. He does not have a theological system which he carries around with him in a sack and dips into when trouble strikes, he has a relationship with a Person with whom he walks and talks, who sees him and hears him no matter how painful the struggle or dark the night. This is his most important therapeutic resource. Bethel, the home where God lives for him, is as much an internal place for Jacob as a geographic one. Naturally, it is there he would want to go to grieve the loss of his mother, a grief that he has not even been able to name for many years. As the session comes to a close, I affirm his wisdom in knowing what sources of comfort are most helpful to him. He nods slowly, reaches for his staff to pull himself up and limps toward the door. As he turns to leave, I find myself rising from my chair to walk beside him. Behind my eyes, I feel a sudden sting of tears and on an impulse, I reach out and squeeze his hands where they rest, gnarled and smooth on the top of his staff.

## Iteration Four: Commentary

As Eliot's poem (in the peritext for this iteration) suggests there are in any personal or family history, many 'old stones that cannot be deciphered,' people or events which have not been fully read or understood. In the process of reminiscence and life review, the older person may come upon these old stones and like Jacob in today's session, contemplate what might be written on them. In the context of our collaborative work on his story today, the letter and the mother's voice it evoked led to a kind of ritual, a funeral service of remembrance. This solemnity gave rise to a kind of elegy, an acknowledgement of Rebekah and her meaning to him that was not able to take place when she died. This was not part of my therapeutic plan or even in my thinking when I began the dialogue with Jacob about his early life. However, the created conversation contained voices, memories and truths of its own which led to this intimate space and the opportunity for Jacob to grieve not only the death of his mother, but also the loss of any opportunity to say goodbye. Although I think it has been helpful to him to explore this gap in his story, to mark and mourn his mother's passing I wonder if I have been too directive in encouraging his connection with his mother's voice. Was it part of his own story that Jacob wanted to engage with in this way or was it my reading of his text, my theoretical perspectives, my feelings of sadness, my moral vision, my empathy with the unheard female voices in his story? Was it what I thought was best for helping him cohere his life story or was it what we genuinely co-constructed together, a 'joint product' of the 'teller and the told?' I do not know and this is in my mind as I consult with my supervisor about my work with Jacob.

## Iteration 4: Imaginary Dialogue with Supervisor

[Since simulating counselling practice as closely as possible is a key goal of my research focus, this conversation with my supervisor casts Jacob in the role of elderly client engaging in life review therapy, rather than in his other imaginary role as research co-participant.]

1. Supervisor: You're still working with your elderly client?
  
2. Linda: Yes, I'm not sure I would call it working with him. It's really a kind of looking back, listening to the moments and memories that surface... that seem important to him now, helping him over those parts where he feels stuck or that seem like unfinished business. He's evaluating how he got to this point, what kind of legacy he wants to leave, what it means to him but...you know...
  
3. Supervisor: You sound a little unsure...um, how to describe what you're doing with him and maybe...you're not sure whether it's ...
  
4. Linda: Yes, there is a lot of not knowing, not being sure...Time and narrative seem to flow in and out of our sessions in a way...it's hard to describe. Was it Augustine, who wrote about understanding what time is? How inscrutable it is... 'I know what it is when I think about it but when I try to say it, I don't know.' That sort of gets at it...but still...I don't know.



5. Supervisor: Knowing something you do know when you're experiencing it, but maybe...bringing it to language...'wording' it... makes you feel the loss of its meaning or loss of your understanding of its meaning. Sometimes we just know more than we can tell.
6. Linda: Yes, experiencing Jacob's story in time is a kind of knowing but when I try to pin that down to words, it seems to evaporate...well not evaporate exactly...that's the wrong word.
7. Supervisor: You can feel the breeze, but to grasp it... is nothing but empty space and flailing the air. I wonder if that's what it's like for your client.
8. Linda: Hmm...Strange... you've used the word 'grasp.' It's an important word for him, it fits with his birth story. He was born with his hand grasping the heel of his twin who was born first ...and his parents...well, they saw that and gave him a name to fit, evidently in Hebrew Jacob sounds like 'Grasper.'
9. Supervisor: Mmm...for him, a very early dubbing.
10. Linda: Yes, there is something about him, his hands grasping, that is central to how I understand him. Until you used the word just now, I hadn't made that link. In this last session, I began by noticing his hands, I don't know why but they suddenly loomed large... but now, just now, I've connected it to that birth story. That's what his mother noticed first too, what she identified with. Maybe on

some level I was seeing him through her eyes at that point. He's been grasping for something his whole life... maybe I am picking that up from him, the sense of grasping but not knowing, reaching....but not....

11. Supervisor: Maybe we're trying to grasp something at the moment.

12. Linda: Yes and it seems very will o' the wisp ...ungraspable...I'm afraid I'm not making very much sense.

13. Supervisor: Mmm...interesting isn't it? That sense is something we 'make.' It doesn't come to us ready-made. Making sense is work. And knowledge, something known, can exist without being completely pinned down in words.

14. Linda: This is random but that's just brought to mind a line from a poem by Emily Dickinson, 'Better an ignis fatuus than no illume at all.' Now why should I remember that?

15. Supervisor: Where does that take you?

16. Linda: Ignis Fatuus, I was intrigued by the sound of it, the first time I heard it, but had no idea what it meant. I remember looking it up. It's a Latin term for a will-o'-the-wisp sort of light, the poem is about loss of faith, loss of certainty. I don't remember the context exactly, but I think she actually uses a metaphor of

amputation, a hand cut off, God's hand, I think... In that kind of void, Dickinson is saying, better a false, insubstantial light than utter darkness, no light at all.

17. Supervisor: We might be following a light that doesn't really go anywhere or signify but at least it's not um...a completely dark void?

18. Linda: Yes, not the blind leading the blind... I guess that is saying something about another fear I have, that I might be misleading Jacob, taking him places that are not where he wants or needs to go, that are my will-o'-the-wisp lights and not his.

19. Supervisor: So...what do you think? Are you leading or following?

20. Linda: I thought I was following ...at least I was trying very hard to facilitate, not direct him, to let his story be as much his words, from him, from his standpoint as possible.

21. Supervisor: Maybe it's not possible to do that quite the way you thought, neutrality of that sort is probably a myth, and an unrealistic expectation of yourself. Sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow, sometimes you hang back, sometimes you push forward, it's about calling to mind at critical moments whose story it is, acknowledging that his telling has engaged you in a way that is not just about being a neutral observer, that isn't just about a (she uses her hands to trace speech marks in the air), that isn't just about a 'professional' role. When

you enter into the play of the story, it will also play you, acknowledge that is happening and stay aware of its happening...you can't help your responses, as long as you live in a body and in a world you will have them. Learn better what they are and use them for Jacob's benefit. Who was it who said, 'Fail, Fail again, Fail better?'

22. Linda: Hmm...Don't know. Useful words though. I think I have been fooling myself on some level, that I could be more detached and objective than was really possible, that I was offering Jacob some kind of tabula rasa to write his story on.

23. Supervisor: A blank slate? Oh that would be nice. Tell me where you can buy one of those.

24. Linda: (Smiling) Well...nowhere I guess.

25. Supervisor: Yes, the view from nowhere isn't available. We meet each other with words and voices and stories already written by others and rewritten by ourselves. Part of what you're offering him is *your* engagement with his story, you're entering into his story with him, my sense is that you have tried to be very respectful of his autonomy, ... in doing that...what you hear and what you hear together with him, ...well, ...it may move both of you to another place.

26. Linda: Perhaps...well yes...that seemed to happen with his mother's name in our last session. It really hit me how little he had mentioned her up to that point. Her name was tied to a lot of things. I think where that led may have been very valuable and useful to him...eventually we were able to collaborate on a way to hear her voice and for him to grieve her loss...although I did worry it was more my agenda than his...but there are...you know...there's another story he hasn't talked much about. It came up a while ago... about his daughter ...just an awful, horrific...he shared it in relation to another story and then never picked it up again. I don't want to lead him there if he doesn't want to go...but it's...you know...

27. Supervisor: Mmm Hmm...it's left questions hanging in the air...for you.

28. Linda: I can't ... I can't understand what he leaves out, what he doesn't talk about, ...it's his daughter ... from the little he said about her, his only daughter... this poor young girl...it happened years ago, right after they moved to a new place, and apparently she went out on her own, hoping to meet some other girls. She was grabbed right off the street and raped...so sudden...so brutal.... yet Jacob seems out of touch with her...as if her reality doesn't exist for him...I want to ask him, 'What happened here? It's ... um, She's your daughter!' For him the story was more about the danger his sons had put the family in... and...and given what they did, I can understand that. I tried to empathise with him. Clearly he was very frightened at the time and had reason to be ...but well... I couldn't somehow, you know...enter into that... so I just kept silent.

29. Supervisor: Hmm...a silent woman. Maybe a part of you wanted to 'attack' him but you didn't...and you didn't put your feelings for his daughter's pain into spoken words. Maybe he hasn't been able to do that either. I wonder why you haven't brought that story before

30. Linda: Well...um... I've been stewing over it for awhile

31. Supervisor: Stew?

32. Linda: (With a rueful laugh) Yes that comes up a lot in this story, doesn't it? So many ingredients thrown into a pot, a mess of pottage brewing in the wild.

33. Supervisor: What sort of smell are you getting from this one?

34. Linda: Very, very unpleasant, and disturbing. This daughter, she's voiceless... when the rape happened and then in the immediate aftermath, it seems all these men around her are deciding what to do about it, bartering over her fate as if she were a sack of grain in the marketplace, their needs, their wants, their feelings get more attention than hers. And Jacob seems so...I don't know...so absent...I don't get his response...I know he is completely dedicated to providing for and protecting his family but...

35. Supervisor: I notice you haven't used her name either...

36. Linda: (looks stricken) No...Why should she not be given a voice? Her name is Dinah. Someone should remember her name and speak it. She is his last-born child, the only daughter of Leah, the 'unloved wife,' the wife he was tricked into marrying.

37. Supervisor: So perhaps Dinah is not seen, overlooked out of neglect or... resentment?

38. Linda: Well...I do wonder about that... favouritism runs so deep in his family history. Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, are also his sons by Leah. At the time, they were incensed not only with the rape but with how hesitant Jacob seemed to take any action against the perpetrator. Their rage leads to the most vile...brutal strategy for revenge... what can only be described as bloody, bloody genocide. After all that murder and mayhem, her brothers, I think they released her from the house where she was being held and took her back to the family home. Of course it was all a long time ago, she's a grown woman now.

39. Supervisor: Do you have any concerns for her safety now?

40. Linda: Well no. Actually she seems to have been given a special status in the family, her name is listed in the record of Jacob's family emigrating to Goshen. Evidently it's very unusual for a woman to have that kind of official recognition.

But of course if this had been a recent story, it would have had child protection issues written all over it and I would have voiced my concerns directly.

41. Supervisor: Yes...We can only wonder how she has coped all these years. How did you experience Jacob's response to it?

42. Linda: His strongest emotional reactions seemed to be fury at Simeon and Levi for their rashness and wanton destruction, putting the family in so much danger and of course, how much he feared becoming a target of revenge himself. I'm shocked and sickened by what his sons did of course... but also... just not knowing why Jacob handled it the way he did. 'Handled,' there we are, hands again...

43. Supervisor: Like you, I have a very visceral, gut level reaction to this story...violence....violation... voices not heard...stories not told...blood, brutality, death and both of us wanting a girl's name to be spoken, the reality of her story to be acknowledged, remembered, mourned.

44. Linda: Yes ...Anger, shame, helplessness, blame.

45. Supervisor: Very powerful emotions, maybe some of which belong to Jacob too... but for whatever reason he isn't able to engage with how all this happened and his part in it...or at least not at the present moment. (Looks down at her own hands, palms open facing upward, she moves them up and down as if weighing



up their meaning) Hands keep recurring as symbols in your experience and presentation of him today. Hands. On one level, they're symbols of human agency, perhaps? How we get things done, take action, use our own power. How much of what has happened to him, or to his daughter for that matter, does he see as the work of his own hands and how much of it does he feel has been 'out of his hands?' How much does he *not* want to know about what happened?

46. Linda: Do you mean he feels rage and helplessness too... about Dinah and can't speak it?

47. Supervisor: Well...I don't know. Hands, they're very ambivalent symbols, aren't they? They can be instruments of both healing and harm, stroking and striking, creation and destruction, love and hate. There are some primal ambivalences and developmental conflicts that may still be exerting an influence on how he sees himself and interprets himself in the world. He's no stranger to trauma. Is the world a safe enough place or a dangerously hostile one? Who is looking out for him? If he lets down his guard, if he relinquishes his defences, will he be destroyed? How much power does he think he has to protect himself and his family? The threat of annihilation seems to echo throughout his story. Klein had a lot to say about how that primal fear results in splitting and paranoia for the infant. Those early conflicts can replay especially under duress.

48. Linda: Mmm... those are good questions, now that you point it out, there is quite a bit of ambivalence in the meanings his story gives to hands. His mother's

hands were very important for him in the last session I had with him, poignantly so. He often refers to God's hand as a source of steadfastness and help. Jacob's own hands, I don't think I mentioned that... they are very smooth skinned. His mother once covered them in goat's hair to fool his father, to make Isaac think he was Esau. What did he say his father said?... 'The hands are the hands of Esau but the voice is the voice of Jacob.' Actually those are words which echo quite strongly in his memory of his father. I think he saw his own hands as deeply complicit in that act of ... deceit...and come to think of it, now I remember him saying how much he had feared the 'hand of his brother, Esau.'

49. Supervisor: So hands of action, getting things done, nurture, safety, strength, but also trickery,... and menace, danger. They represent a very mixed picture for him, and for you too.

50. Linda: Yes, when I think about all the hard things that have happened to him, so many losses and grief...and this daughter story... still undeciphered.

51. Supervisor: You've brought her story and her name here but he hasn't... or at least he hasn't responded to her in the way you think he ought to. Given the violence of the story and his seeming indifference to his daughter's pain, it's not surprising you would feel that kind of ambivalence toward him. We don't really know how he felt about Dinah, then or now. Your being reminded of that line from Emily Dickinson has a lot of resonance for me. I haven't looked at her work in a long time, but I seem to remember she was a woman who for some

reason...no one really knows why...some form of agoraphobia perhaps, she isolated herself for years, yet poured out torrents of words, tight, pithy, powerful words in verse. Her voice is still heard, we heard it today in a poem, fragments of which came to your mind, a half-remembered poem by a woman writing of uncertainty, loss, an amputated hand...It's quite a severe, shocking image, a living hand, flesh cut off... but it fits with that sense of violent disjunction and bloody violations that this story has left you with, ...it's not so much a gap in the narrative as a slash...a rupture in the storyline and maybe...I don't know, I'm just wondering...it's penetrated you somewhere, a place where you carry a wound to your own sense of agency and voice...

52.Linda: (Long silence) Mmmm.... I hadn't thought of it that way ...

53.Supervisor: You said at the beginning today that you weren't sure what to call what you're doing with Jacob. It seems to me the role you are inhabiting is an audience and witness for his story. As he tells it, you are a hearer and co-hearer of it with him, and an active interpreter, but the ultimate cohering of it is, and must be, a work of his own hands. You are working to provide a secure enough base for him to bring what he needs to bring, even the most shameful and horrific tales, the stories that do not fit the image you have of him or want to have of him. You have to let that go enough to allow him to be who he was and is.

54.Linda: And will be, I guess ... Yes, you're right. There are aspects of the good enough mother in what you're saying, ...a hearer of tales, a reflector of life who

can contain the extremes of violent rage and adoring love, ...in a kind of reverie, a reliable 'holding' that does not resort to retribution under duress. Actually, it was my reaction to his story about his mother, not his daughter, that I wanted to bring to supervision today. Somehow it turned into another kind of story...

55. Supervisor: Stories often do bleed into other stories...they have a protean quality about them...and they echo lots of voices as there were here today, some of your own, some of mine, some of Jacob's. I think... maybe especially your own story and the stories of some of your clients who have affected you deeply...stories of the way women are sometimes treated by men...revenge...brutality...penetration...silencing stories.

56. Linda: ...yes...there are ...echoes... images.

57. Supervisor: Just as you and Jacob worked on hearing his mother's voice again, maybe writing out some of those other voices you feel need to be heard is something you would benefit from too. It may be a way to help you sort out some of your own stories from too close identification with his...so you can hear his story more clearly, not from a tabula rasa, where all your stories are erased, but from a written self, some lines of which will be meaningful to him and others that won't.

58. Linda: Yes, I need to do some work on that...

59. Supervisor: As for Jacob's story, maybe mother and daughter make an appropriate set of bookends for today's session. I think both stories, the mother he clung to and the daughter he seemed to cast away, say something about rupture and loss and Jacob's fear of annihilation...his very early need for safety and security....all that envy and splitting...That sounds like something we can continue to explore next time. We've followed the will-o'-the-wisp for a bit today. Was it an 'ignis fatuus', or did you find your way to somewhere useful?
60. Linda: No, it wasn't a false light. Not at all. I think it led somewhere. (Looking down at hands in lap) I think I grasped some things I need to think about, find words for...
61. Supervisor: (Smiling) So...You're not leaving empty handed then. Is this a good place to end for today?
62. Linda: Yes ...good enough. Thank you.

## Remembering Dinah

Supervision has been helpful for me in dealing with some of the issues raised in my time being ‘inside’ Jacob’s story in this iteration. Clearly though, the supervision relationship set out above is fictive. It reflects my own sense of an ‘internalised’ supervisor but is also a dialogical amalgamation of voices I have heard and benefited from in many hours of external supervision. In writing it, I experienced again some of the flesh and blood dynamism activated by the to and fro play of voices in dialogue, even ones I am making up as I go along. Even though it was written soon after and in response to the Iteration Four Dialogue with Jacob, it unfolded in directions I had not planned or envisioned at the start. Rather than exploring the grief processing Jacob and I had done in relation to his mother’s death, or expressly addressing cross cultural or gender issues, as I might have expected, the conversation took an unexpected turn in the direction of philosophical reflections about time, narrative and not knowing (4-8). A seemingly random polyphony of voices, (Augustine, Dickinson etc.) chimed in and images of grasping hands and strange will-o’-the-wisp lights led the way until I somehow stumbled into the Dinah story and my feelings about it. My fictive supervisor was highly supportive in alerting me to the fact that there was still more work I needed to do to separate out some of the voices I was hearing. The Dinah story was bothering me more than I realised. The personal issues it raised cut deep, not only in my own life, but also in its evocation of the stories of many of my clients, whose voices, silent and spoken, mingle powerfully with how I hear and respond to this part of Jacob’s story.

The presence of this brutal rape in the narrative, whether acknowledged by Jacob or not, affects the standpoints from which I hear and co-construct his story. Standing as I do, in a world where rape, abduction and sexual exploitation of young girls (and young boys for that matter) is a 'normal' offering on the daily news and an all too frequent refrain in my clients' stories, the rarity of this kind of event in Jacob's story and its distance from my lifeworld give it a hermeneutic power to speak beyond its textual moorings. My response to the presence of Dinah's story in Jacob's life narrative is greatly affected by the horizons I bring to it from my own context and the 'inescapable moral visions' that imbue my standpoint.

Dinah's story is important on two levels, first in the realm of moral visions, cultural values, and gender issues, those distances and differences to which I have already referred. Secondly, Dinah's silence poses the question, 'What does the counsellor do with her own gaps in clients' stories, when characters or circumstances are introduced in liminal ways and don't come into the focus of what the client is talking about or wants to talk about? Sometimes there are, of course, clear ethical issues of child protection or abuse which must be pursued and followed up. More often though, there are stories and characters who are not germane to the client's needs and agenda, but whose presence intrigues or disturbs the counsellor's own sense of what is important in the story, what is right and wrong, who should be heard and what should be done. Even if never addressed or articulated in the counselling dialogue, these parts of the story have a co-constructive impact on what and how I bring my personal and professional contributions to the story. Although my reading of Jacob's patriarchal position in his family has not, as I said earlier, alienated me from him, the

Dinah story has confused me and shaken my sense of what his actions (or inaction) mean in relation to her.

After writing the supervision dialogue, I went back to the story in *Genesis* 34 and read it again. The following represents the additional working through of Dinah's story that I carried out in response to my supervisor's suggestion to sort through the unheard women's voices that might be affecting me. It also illustrates how a client's story often powerfully intersects and resonates with wider issues relevant to the counsellor's own stand point and world view. Stories don't just take place in time they take place in worlds, the *Da-sein* into which Heidegger says we are all thrown (McLean, 2012).

I explored again other outside sources available to me, such as the interpretations of the story by Gunn and Fewell (1991) and Sternberg (1992) which I referred to earlier. I also surveyed some other literary voices which offered alternative lenses through which the story could be seen. The novelist, Anita Diamant (1997:1), uses Dinah's character and story to flesh out a future and an alternative reality for her that sees her transcend the role of victim and become 'more... than the voiceless cipher in the text.' A gifted storyteller, Diamant writes an articulate and self-aware, first-person voice for Dinah. While her novel, *The Red Tent*, wanders too far and too radically from the *Genesis* text for the kind of close reading I want to model, she does provide an ideologically feminist mosaic for Dinah's voice and the voices of the other silent or forgotten women in the text. She transforms the 'rape' of Dinah into a story of



adolescent curiosity and libido, a consensual romance with the prince of Shechem which is then desecrated and destroyed by the atrocity committed by her brothers.

In Diamant's version of the story, Dinah is the heroine, Shechem is the fallen hero and Jacob and the brothers are the villains. Diamant uses her literary skill to create an alternative fictive world based loosely on the Biblical story of Dinah. However, Sternberg and Gunn and Fewell's interpretations, make stronger claims to being 'competent readings' of the text's intent. They argue their rationales with appeals to contextual, linguistic and literary principles. The conflict of interpretations is everywhere evident in their differing attributions of haloes and brickbats for the characters in the story. Sternberg argues for the brothers, Simeon and Levi, as the action heroes. Like Diamant, Gunn and Fewell argue for Shechem as the romantic hero who somehow 'touches the heart' of Dinah (*Genesis* 34:3). All this ambiguity and ambivalence about whose fault it is, who is the hero or heroine and who the monster, speak powerfully to me of the same ambiguity that surrounds the issue of rape in contemporary culture. It is not uncommon for the attribution of blame to become not only a highly contested issue in the courts but worse, a source of shame, guilt and further mental injury for the victims of this crime.

In Jacob's world, Matthews and Benjamin (1993: 176) provide an important social/cultural perspective that challenges a facile or too ideologically driven perspective of the story itself or Jacob's response to it. They point to how differently contemporary storytelling portrays sexual activity in contrast with the Biblical world. In this ancient world, 'Sexual activity...was not as much an aspect of personal relationships

as an expression of the political power of households.’ They describe a culture which constructs the rape as not only the tragedy of a young girl who was not protected by those who should have protected her, but also an outright attack on Jacob’s position as head of his household. The rape may represent the first strategic move in a possible takeover bid by the rulers of Shechem, aimed at deposing Jacob and confiscating his considerable accumulation of wealth (Matthews and Benjamin, 1993). In this set-up, the rape could be seen as politically and economically motivated. It is still just as heinous, just as horrific for Dinah, but even more so as it represents an exercise of male power, diabolically cut off from Dinah’s humanity. It objectifies her even more despicably from a body to be used for soulless gratification to the even lower level of a commodity to be traded. This connects powerfully with my own experience and my work with previous clients and it is one of the woman’s voices that Dinah’s story calls forth from me: ‘I am not an object for your use. I am a person.’ As my supervisor suggested, there is a need for me to do some additional personal processing here. There is a confusion of women’s voices that I need to sort through and write out for myself as a way of separating them appropriately from how I listen to Jacob. This is both a means of addressing wounds that have been inflicted in my world and a way of honouring the courage of the survivors whose voices I have had a part in giving back to them.

Sorting out these voices from Jacob’s story helps me to see him and his ‘handling’ of this horrific event from a different standpoint. His concerns for the tragedy that happened to his daughter are also complicated by the safety and the welfare of his whole family whose future is once again deeply threatened. As has so often

happened in his life, he is trying to figure out what to do to meet the threat. Because there was such a powerful societal and spiritual responsibility laid on the father and brothers of the household to provide protection for the women who lived within its care, failure to do so may reveal layers of guilt, shame and regret which make it difficult for Jacob to bring himself to this incident, speak his daughter's name, see her face or comfort her distress. Later, however, her name will appear in the genealogy of those who travel with him to Egypt to meet Joseph. Her name, officially listed under Jacob's descendants borne by Leah, means she was still in some way part of the household and a bearer of its status. Ultimately, she was not erased from the record. She was counted in the reckoning of Jacob's legacy. Just because Jacob does not speak to me about her now, does not mean he has not spoken to her since or not maintained a fatherly concern for her welfare. As for Simeon and Levi, who perpetrated the genocide at Shechem, Jacob utterly condemns and denounces their brutality, anger and misuse of their male power. Deception maybe, careful planning often, but violent retaliation and murderous retribution against those who seek to harm him or his family are not Jacob's way.

This reappraisal of the story of Dinah has helped me see Jacob and his actions differently whether I have the opportunity to check those out with him or not. My reexamining of *Genesis* 34 after supervision has also moved me in another way. Two voices, that I had not heard the first time, now rang out more clearly when I returned to the story. The first was the voice of the narrator in the text. This voice says in speaking of the rapist, 'He had committed *an outrage* in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter- *a thing not to be done*' (*Genesis* 34: 7, emphasis mine). It slipped by me

before in the confusion of all the other voices in the story, but this time I heard it. I heard it as an unequivocal, steel-edged clarion call cutting through all the murkiness and mess in this story and in the stories of so many other voiceless victims I have 'heard.' The narrator says what needs to be said, what ought to be declared from the roof tops. What happened to Dinah, what happened to all those other young girls like her, is 'an outrage' and 'a thing not to be done.' Sadly, both Jacob's world and mine contain stories of rape, brutality, and crimes that silence and destroy. Often a counsellor's voice can be the one to help a client to hear that voice of clarity, so vital to recovery, 'This was wrong. This should not have been done to you. It's not your fault.' That is another one of those voices I write out for myself in response to my supervisor's suggestion.

The second voice I heard in a new way in my rereading of *Genesis* 34 was the question the brothers, Simeon and Levi, ask Jacob at the very end of the episode: 'Should he treat our sister like a whore?' (*Genesis*, 34:31). The text leaves the question hanging heavily in the air and no human voice offers a reply. Regardless of what mixed meanings it may have had for the brothers, it is still a vital and valid question for any society, any culture, in any age. It reached out from the ancient world of Jacob's horizons to co-mingle with the twenty-first century horizons of my own, an example of that fertile, co-constructive capacity of the relational space between a reader and a text, or a counsellor and client. It spoke to me and my world across leagues of distance but with surprising relevance and intimacy. How do we treat our sisters in the worlds in which we live, ancient and modern? Who protects the young girl, excited and thrilled with the prospect of walking out into a brave new

world, setting out to meet the ‘daughters of the land?’ (*Genesis* 34:1). Who helps her navigate the strange, awakening power and beauty of her own sexuality, her desire to know and experience love and relationship, in a world where brutal menace, darkened alleyways and porn-soaked pixels threaten to devour her? Jacob’s story has made me think about the gravity of these things and to remember and honour a girl who suffered and survived. She was not an object, or a commodity. She was a person. Her name was Dinah.

### Mutuality in the midst of difference

The personal processing I engaged in after supervision (the substance of which is only partially disclosed in my account above) helped me sort through the female voices which were troubling me. As this exercise helped me to see, these voices emanated more from my own unfinished business than they did from the text of Jacob’s story. This led paradoxically, not to any distancing from Jacob or his story but to a greater recognition of the mutualities between us. I look back at this still actively brewing stew of stories, text, dialogues and supervision from several new standpoints. Horizons have co-mingled, shifted and enlarged and the multiplicity of standpoints from which to view Jacob’s story have become somewhat overwhelming. First, I am more aware of my own connections to the stories Jacob tells in my own multi-generational and extended family stories and in the stories of my clients. I recognise in a new way, even in the staunchly individualistic twenty-first century Western world to which I belong and in my own history of frequent moves and living far from where I began that I am also part of a generational matrix in which I am

grandmother, wife, mother, sister, aunt and daughter. Like Jacob, my own matrix of stories comes also with a motley crew of characters, some revered and idealised (like Rebekah and Abraham) and others marginalised and maligned (like Ishmael and Esau), some whose stories are fleshed out (Joseph) and others who are virtually faceless (Bilhah), whose names and histories are embedded, truly or falsely, fairly or unfairly, in family jokes (Sarah), tragedies (Dinah), triumphs, myths and mysteries.

My own life stories are refracted through this generational and character-logical prism in similar ways to Jacob. As a counsellor, the stories I have heard my clients tell have also become part of this matrix and an inseparable part of what I hear and how I hear it. Besides these personally lived stories I am also a reader of texts. There are a host of other voices I have picked up along the way, some of whose names surface and are sprinkled throughout the dialogues I've constructed in this iteration (Eliot, Augustine, Dickinson, Klein et al.) whose standpoints and perspectives enter the frame, often unbidden. On a wider scale, the stories of my current positioning in historical time and geographical space, the local, societal, global stories around gender, power, conflict, rape and revenge also enter the frame and impact how I hear Jacob's story. Yet, across this gulf of time and culture, Jacob and I still encounter one another as fellow human beings. Even as a 'resident alien' in Jacob's world, there are places I can walk with him that are common ground. Ancient or modern, we live in worlds and in always moving time in which we exercise little or no control over contingencies. Thrown as we are into an unpredictable and often chaotic chain of people and circumstances to which we by varying degrees are attached and detached, we are both trying to do the best we can

with what we have inherited, what we have stumbled upon on the way and what we have wrought with our own hands. We are more alike in this way than I was aware.

What I do not know until much later is that this iteration and its dialogues are the last time I will see Jacob or hear his voice in this research setting. Our *derash* has come to an ending in these stories of his beginnings and still there are ‘many old stones that cannot be deciphered.’ Jacob fails to appear for our next session. Soon after a message arrives from his son, Joseph to let me know that Jacob is ill and has taken to his bed. The following letters tell the story of what happened next:

.....

Dear Jacob,

I was sorry to hear of your illness and hope you will be feeling better soon. I know your son, Joseph, is a great comfort to you during this time and that it must be a blessing to have him close by your side once again. He shared with me it is unlikely you will be able to participate any further but that you were still very interested in the outcome of our collaboration. With that in mind I wanted to send you a copy of the research story I have put together so far. It represents the work we have done together on your life review. As we agreed at the start, this is a co-construction but I am particularly concerned to make sure you are happy with those parts that represent your contribution most directly. Please have a look at it and let me know whether it represents you and what you have said accurately and in a way that is acceptable to you. If there are issues you have with anything I’ve written about you, material that you would like added, corrected or deleted, please let me know and we can work

together (with Joseph's help as intermediary) to make it better represent what you are comfortable disclosing.

You have been so honest and vulnerable and shared so many of the 'deep stories' of your life, I want to make sure you are okay with what I have chosen to reveal here and how I have revealed it. It is very important for both of us that this research, our *derash*, fulfils the agreement we made at the beginning. What others will make of it, whether it is the gift of blessing you long to impart and the contribution to knowledge I want to make, is for others to decide. You and I have done what we could, each in our own way, to accomplish those goals.

In that regard, let me say too how much I valued the way you entered into this work with me. From beginning to end, your openness, your honesty, your energy, your perseverance and your patience with the process and with me were greatly appreciated. It was a privilege to be inside your story with you for this brief period of time and in this particular way. You began by telling me the days of your sojourn had been 'few and hard.' I hope in these times together, I have grasped something of what that means to you. You were the 'teller' and I was the 'told' and we have in this space and time co-created a new story not only about your long sojourn but also what it is like to meet one another, inside the stories of life. You have confirmed again and again my belief that it is not possible to do that without emerging differently-shaped selves than when we began.



Thank you Jacob. I look forward to hearing from you soon through Joseph and in the meantime rest well. I send you a hearty *shalom*.

Sincerely, Linda

.....

Dear Joseph,

Thank you for the message you sent letting me know that your beloved father has died. I was greatly saddened by the news but happy to have known Jacob and spent so much time with him hearing the stories of his life. He was a blessing. Thank you for giving me an account of his last few months and the extraordinary funeral you arranged for him. I know having you there to close his eyes, at the last, meant everything to him. I smiled when your letter related how near the end he blessed your two sons, not as you expected by their natural birth order, but by crossing his hands over his chest and putting the younger Ephraim before the older Manasseh. Bless him, to the last he would want to subvert that old rule, it was his one last sleight of hand. The image of that touched me very deeply. You asked me what I will remember most about him. The last time I saw him, it was strange but his hands are what I noticed. I was drawn to them and looking back now I realise why. Somehow for me they were saying something about his life, the ways in which his long obedience in the same direction connected his ending with his beginning. After I read your letter I made a list, it's a summary, in a way, of his story. I thought you might like to have it.

Yours faithfully, Linda

## A History in Hands

How like him to offer a final show of hands,

Jacob

the embryonic hand that fought for space

the tiny hand that grasped a heel at first light

the scheming hand that stirred a stew

the false hand that pleased a mother, fooled a father, incensed a brother

the awakened, awe-struck hands that piled sacred stones at Bethel

the mighty hands that moved an immovable stone to impress a bright-eyed girl

the calloused hands that laboured long and hard for a cheating taskmaster

the sleeping hands that folded in dreams, heard the call to return home

the praying hands that pleaded for a deliverance that was granted, more than once

the wrestling hands that gripped his God and would not let go

the humbled, giving hands that returned a blessing to a cheated brother

the bereft and broken hands that buried a beloved wife,

the stricken hands that groped in terror a lifeless blood-stained tunic

the empty hands that filled with life again, embraced a long lost son

the worshipping hands that leaned with gratitude upon a wooden staff

the frail, crossed hands that touched the heads of two grandsons and changed the rules

Prevailer

With one last show of hands, his story ended as it began.

## Epilogue

As sometimes happens in research as well as in counselling practice, my co-constructed story with my client, Jacob, had to be left unfinished by the unplanned absence of its principal co-participant. There are many reasons for this kind of foreshortened ending in both research and therapeutic work but in this case, Jacob's absence was explained by the inevitable deteriorations of advanced age, his illness, and the ultimate breach in any story of a life, his death. Of course my prior knowledge of the story, outside the fictive, narrative space and time of my research engagement, meant that I was not surprised by this. I knew from the chronology present in the text that I had seventeen years to play with between Jacob's arrival in Egypt and his death. However, I was surprised at the way in which the looming teleological 'fact' of Jacob's death wove its way into the chronology of my research story. This timing of Jacob's death was a known thing in the *Genesis* text. However, the timing and manner of its entry into this research text and my imaginary relationship with Jacob were not. In fact I had several possible endings in mind for the fictive dialogues all of which stopped short of actually chronicling Jacob's death. Again there was a sense of the narrative's own drive toward an ending that my supposed authorial sovereignty and choices did not completely control. That strange mixture of knowing and not knowing *when* and *how* our life stories will end is perhaps the most universal, existential experience that human beings, living in time, share with one another. Ricoeur in his understanding of narrative time as human time considered this aspect of 'being-in-the-face-of-death' as the teleological reality

which characterises and culminates all human stories (Pellauer, 2007:124). Its presence is both a shadow and a light that I now see were there throughout my imaginary life review with Jacob as well as my accompanying research story, even though I was not consciously attending to it. The timing of Jacob's death and the way he seemed to slip through my authorial grasp was a co-constructive outcome I was not expecting and as I see now in retrospect, I may have been avoiding.

Through this dialogical play with fiction, I gained a sense of how this 'being-in-the-face-of-death' is re-enacted in microcosm whenever a counselling contract comes to an end for whatever reason, planned or not. Counsellor and client jointly work in the shadow and the light of being always 'in-the-face-of-ending.' Like Jacob awakening from his dream at Bethel, it was an awareness that perhaps should have been more obvious to me but was brought to the foreground with a little co-constructive help from my client. It made me respect even more the wisdom and perspicacity of Jacob's grasp of his own story, while it also brought to mind those clients in my own practice who, like him, have grasped very well and often sooner than me when it is time to end. This new awareness shed light on a characteristic but under-recognised obtuseness in my co-constructive work with clients, particularly those clients with whom I have established a strong working alliance. Sometimes, while I am still deep in the story looking for ways to tie up loose ends and address what I think still remains as unfinished business, these clients are looking for ways to let me know it is time to end.

Now in retrospect with Jacob's 'womb to tomb' chronology set out as a whole, I can grasp together another configuration, a Gestalt that was present all along but did not

come to the foreground until the end. In spite of all my descriptions, demonstrations and assertions about the reality of co-construction, I realised I had rightly seen Jacob's life story as *his* story but somehow still considered the research story as *my* story. The narrative event of Jacob's death and the unexpected way it entered *my* research story were a reminder that what I had suggested to Jacob at the beginning was true. Even as a virtual client and a virtual research co-participant, he had an autonomous hand and an authentic voice in the co-construction and particularly the ending of the resulting narrative. I hope that is because on some level I ceded that autonomy to him, but I am not sure. He is a wrestler after all and perhaps in this fictive scenario he somehow wrestled himself free of my authorial grip and timed his own exit from the page. In any case, inextricably linked with his life story, the research story was, a joint product in which he and I actively participated. His death coming when it did provided a mild simulation of the kind of affect that might accompany a foreshortened ending in the counselling setting when the client does not return. Being confronted with this kind of loss required another story to be told. My 'History in Hands' elegy for Jacob was not something I had planned to write. Giving voice to my own perspective on his story became an appropriate way for me to let go and say goodbye to a research co-participant who had so faithfully kept his promise to offer himself and his story to my *derash* or as the ending helped me see more accurately, our *derash*. All through my research relationship with Jacob, there was a sense in which, though it was his life review story, he had somehow given me the privilege and responsibility of holding it in my hand. My elegy was also a way of honouring my promise to him that his story would be in safe hands and that his own legacy and that of his family would be respected.

What this ending also achieved for me was an awareness that this new narrative retelling, now seen as a whole, is very much a product of the time, space and research parameters of its making, as well as my limited perspectives as narrator. It is unlike any reading of the story I have done before or will do again. Within the fictive domains of my reader/text analogy and its dialogues, my purpose was to help the Jacob I imagined to retell his story and to engage in a life review that was useful to him; what actually transpired was that he (as a text, a character, a voice and a standpoint) helped me to understand, reconfigure, critique and narrate my own counsellor/researcher's story of who I am, what I do, how I do it and what I think it means. It is only now as Jacob and I come to the end of our research conversation, that I realise these two questions, 'How did I get here?' and 'How have I done?' are not just relevant to Jacob's life review and the story he wants to tell about his life. They also represent my own questions about how I have enacted my therapeutic role as the privileged listener to my clients' stories. Looking back through a praxis lens, I can see how I have been trying to narrate and make sense of what my contribution has been to helping clients with their stories of life and how they want to tell them. I realise I have also responded to T.S. Eliot's admonition, 'Old men ought to be explorers,' but expanded his gender and vocational reference to include 'Old *women counsellors* ought to be explorers too.' This exploration has shown me that the essence of reflective practice in my research and perhaps in my counselling practice as well involves looking back and constructing a story about what I have done and evaluating its benefit or harm to the client. Viewed now in retrospect rather than in anticipation, it is more apparent what I have been trying to do in these pages. It is

clear I want my research exploration to make some sense of my own long sojourn as a therapist, while, at the same time, endeavouring to make a contribution to knowledge about the nature and process of counsellor contribution to co-construction. My investment in this role, like Jacob's lifelong grasping for blessing, is a mottled, speckled, limping and still unfinished endeavour, but it represents for both of us an earnestly aspirational, ethical good. In spite of our multiple differences there is, for both of us, a deep sense of divine calling to a vocation, not just the competent performance of a role. For Jacob, it is to embody his spiritual heritage and calling as the blessing bearer and for me, a similar desire to embody my spiritual beliefs while fulfilling a professional ethic to do good and not harm to those whose stories I participate in co-constructing.

Another theme which the retrospective gaze makes visible at this point is the ways in which a semblance of Buber's concept of the I-Thou relationship was enacted in the dialogues. 'In the beginning,' Buber (1970:69) declares, 'is the relation.' In keeping with Buber's views of intersubjective meeting, the I-Thou moments were present but not the norm in the dialogues. My research intentions meant that my relationship with Jacob as a co-participant frequently had to involve engaging with him and his story as 'objects' for analysis, the classic 'I-It' mode of relating. However, there were multiple times when the blurring of subject/object distinctions between Jacob and me became palpable: as in the dawning sense of him as a flesh and blood 'other' in Iteration One, Jacob's asking the meaning of my name in Iteration Three and my growing connection with our shared humanity in Iteration Four. Friedman's (2002:354) summary of Buber's I-Thou relation speaks to the value of these

moments of mutuality, 'What is essential is not what goes on within the minds of the partners in a relationship but what happens *between* them.' In Buber's (1988:61) words, 'The inmost growth of the self [takes place]... through being made present by the other and knowing that we are made present by him.' Presence is an important and basic value in counselling practice, particularly in humanistic models, but its ethos and essence are not easily grasped or taught. The dialogues replicated for me the kind of careful but elegant dance which takes place in any therapeutic alliance between the I-Thou and the I-It modes of meeting. As Frank (1995) argues, engaging with the stories of wounded storytellers does not so much involve the capacity to solve puzzles with elegant solutions as the willingness to face mystery and the reality of human pain, for which there may be no remedy. Sometimes it is simply being there together in the moment, gazing silently at something heard, seen and grasped by both, that matters.

I did not realise until I viewed my research story as a whole just how much the character of God in the story embodies these values with consistent clarity. His presence demonstrates throughout a mutuality of relating to Jacob as a *Thou* rather than an *It*. He holds Jacob in mind as a person on the road to becoming rather than a problem to be worked on or solved. Throughout Jacob's long life, God is present and speaks only when it matters and even then His words are few. His quiet withdrawals from the space are not punitive but often give space to Jacob to make up his own mind, find his own way and learn his own truths. Throughout their relationship, *El Shaddai*, as Jacob calls Him, chooses and offers ways of being with Jacob that are carefully attuned to his way of being, his needs and his levels of understanding. God



makes use of different symbols and metaphors, silence and speech, reassurance and challenge to help Jacob through the 'hard' places in his life. This consistent offering of safe, nonjudgmental support and appropriate, carefully-timed challenge work together to call out Jacob's developing identity. The way in which God offers Himself and accompanies Jacob as a 'witness,' one who sees with clarity and compassion 'all that has been done to him,' significantly empowers Jacob without ever seeking to control him or his choices. God does not impose His agendas, but He does, early in the relationship and to the end of life, focus Jacob's attention on the provision and protection that are available to him and to the promise of the legacy he is capable of building for the future. God accepts without comment or condemnation the chequered reality of Jacob's past. He opens a space to allow him to be completely who he is while also gently and repeatedly reminding him, the past is not a mire in which he is irretrievably stuck. Even in the direst extremity and seemingly without resources, there are stairways to the possibility of a different future. God gives Jacob glimpses of who he might be and become and in doing so communicates with words and without them, that while He holds Jacob in a gaze of unconditional positive regard, He also holds out the hope that change is possible. It is not a pie-in-the-sky fantasy of positive thinking and self-esteem building, but a secure base that frequently kickstarts Jacob's own sense of agency. He is often then able to trust the promise, see the path, grasp the opportunity, wrestle through the dark night and keep going. Looking back, I could see more clearly how the contributions God makes to Jacob's construction of his life story and how he makes them are a model of the kind of co-creator I would like to be. I also saw for the first time how closely this interpretation of God's role in the story and especially the significance of the

meetings at Bethel accord with the distilled essences identified by common factors research, those things which have been shown to contribute to good outcomes across different models: the ‘creation of a safe space to disclose troubles and express emotion, a relationship with a “healer,” and the instillation of hope or positive expectations’ (McLeod, 2004:360).

These are not insights I found my way to by myself, they grew out of the imaginary, dialogical, I-Thou, narrative co-construction Jacob and I participated in together. He was the teller of his story of life and I was the told. A joint product was narratively created in the space between us that contributed to the ethic of an examined practice. At the end, a basic tenet of reflective practice was enacted for me. As a counsellor, I come away from being inside Jacob’s story with a better grasp of what I am doing and how I am doing it. To paraphrase Socrates, another celebrated purveyor of dialogical play, if the unexamined life is not worth living, then the unexamined counselling practice is not worth offering. The duty of care owed to clients requires a capacity to listen to the stories of life within responsible and responsive hermeneutical frames, bringing practice wisdom to bear on my choices and monitoring the ways I experience and exercise power in the co-constructive process. The likelihood of doing harm and the potential for doing good are always central concerns when human beings meet in the stories that make us. Walking this fine line is a mottled, speckled, hard and ‘long obedience in the same direction’ but it is a journey that should be attempted. My co-participant, Jacob, has reminded me how in bringing our full humanity to one another, it is possible to bless and be blessed even when we are unsure of exactly who we are and even when the story is not quite

finished. However difficult the line is to walk for me as a counsellor or how faltering my steps, I have learned from Jacob that it is okay to limp.

## Conclusions

*Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realise the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors,... in reading great literature I become a thousand men [and women] and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself: and am never more myself than when I do.*

C.S. Lewis (1961:140-141)

I am aware that as my research relationship with Jacob has moved from its early beginnings to its ending, I have entered increasingly more deeply into my fictive creation. Travelling along, inside this story, I have viewed it from multiple standpoints with ‘myriad eyes’ but have not forgotten, ‘it is still I who see.’ Now, the time has come to step out of the world of Jacob’s story, and return to my researcher voice in a more overt and explicit way.

The rationale for creating a research story that traverses and sits with so many different intersections, gaps and border crossings between multiple disciplines, voices, selves and standpoints was to provide an alternative route to demonstrate and explore in what ways a counsellor may contribute to Bruner’s (1990:124) ‘deep sense [of] a joint product between teller and told.’ Inspired by narrative therapy ideas and practices, I called together an eclectic polyphony of voices to speak to one another in

new ways in order to add to the conversation about what happens in the ‘between’ space where client and counsellor meet to hear, co-hear and cohere the stories of life. Just as I engaged with dialogical play and genre shifts in relating to Jacob’s life story as a counsellor, I also purposely chose to play with my researcher voice and standpoint in relating to the research story I wanted to tell. In doing so, I hoped to avoid the ways in which some counselling research discourses, even qualitative ones, can become formulaic and overly propositional, wandering far from the lived experience they seek to embody and express (Bond, 2002). From this altered and genre-shifted researcher’s point of view, what does this kind of reader response to a life story text and a dialogically playful, hermeneutic approach to understanding reveal about counsellor contribution to narrative co-construction as an embodied practice in the counselling setting?

The iteration dialogues and commentaries have already surfaced and storied many of the specific co-constructive dynamics I have discovered by engaging with Jacob and his text in this way. These responses throughout are idiosyncratic, personal and context-bound to the horizons of this particular time and space engagement with this text. They do not represent a finalised or definitive interpretive reading of the story but rather what I brought and what I saw in the context of this unique research use of the story. This idiosyncrasy is patently obvious throughout, but also central to my research intentions. Turning my gaze on myself, as Bond (2002) suggests, created a unique and fertile space for accessing some of the layered complexity of my own ‘inner conversations’ and the subtleties of their influence on the spoken discourse between Jacob and me (Rober, 2005). By taking a deep dive into the variegated and

diverse particulars of my own reader response to this text, the research created a collage-like array and a simulation through time, not of what does happen in a therapist's inner conversations but what may happen. My long sojourn with Jacob and his story revealed some of 'the nature of what [might be] going on' in a counsellor's contribution to co-construction, 'rather than [merely] encapsulating it in finite terms' (Goss and Mearns, 1997:190). In this way, my research account contributed directly to addressing some of the research gaps I foregrounded at the outset. Rather than giving 'scant acknowledgement' to the counsellor's role in co-construction which, as Speedy (2000:365) warns, is too often the case both in research and practice, my critical self-reflections provide a comprehensive, descriptively detailed and ethically rigorous appraisal of how, where and when my contributions to the dialogue arose and manifested themselves. The research methodology I used and its outcome also met McLeod's (2004:356) call for more innovative research strategies to explore narrative co-construction and for such research to be done 'in a respectful way.' The freedom from confidentiality constraints enabled a public airing and sharing of aspects of counsellor contribution to co-construction that are seldom articulated or displayed in other kinds of research (e.g. those that use transcripts of actual sessions rather than counsellor-created, literary simulations). Employing this fictive, multi-disciplinary approach opened up the investigation to explore not just the influence of counselling theory, clinical practice and its professional discourses on the 'joint product' but it also gathered in another, far more mottled, speckled flock of personal experiences, standpoints, selves and voices that also entered the space. A contemporary counselling practitioner and an elderly client in an ancient text, speaking to one another while also interacting

with the voices of counselling theory, phenomenological and Biblical hermeneutics, literary theory and narrative gerontology introduced a level of cross-pollinating liminality and lacunae that invited new ways of hearing and seeing. The result was a research engagement that shifted genres and expectations, sounding neither the complete chaos of cacophony nor the ordered thematic harmony of symphony but rather a genuine, practice-near evocation of polyphony, an encounter with the range of voices that may arise in response to the complex dialogics of stories as they are told and heard in the counselling space (Hermans and Dimaggio, 2004).

As I set out at the beginning, previous research into this phenomenon suffers from a gap in examples of therapists' self-reflections on their experiences of narrative communication (Rober, 2005, Levitt and Rennie, 2004). This dearth of relevant, reflexive, *in situ* data from counsellors exists partly because of the difficulties involved in accurately and authentically accessing what Rober (2005:488) describes as the 'chaotic and complex' multiverse of the counsellor's inner conversations. By using the inherent capacity of narrative to disclose a world and the generative power of voices in dialogue (even fictive ones) to surface new meanings, my research created a space where some of the chaos and complexity of the counsellor's unspoken discourse could emerge, be delineated, and critically reflected upon in ways not readily amenable to Rober's and Levitt and Rennie's methodologies. The diverse collage of self-reflections on counsellor contribution evoked by this fictive play adds a wealth of relevant, reflexive, case study examples to research conversations about narrative co-construction. It provides counselling research data on this topic that looks and feels more like counselling practice. The extensive and

prominent amount of space given to the imaginary dialogues provides the counsellor reader with a more immediate, holistic, praxis-derived, lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Bond, 2002). Locating it in the familiar time and space world of storytelling and dialogue facilitates an alternative and innovative access to some of the under-explored dynamics of co-construction while contributing to a research ethos that addresses some of the alienating distance between counselling research and the practitioners who seek to use it (McLeod, 1994; 2001; Moodley, 2001).

In simplest terms, my research made a story out of what my counsellor contribution to co-construction might be like and used voices in conversation to tell it. Because of this intimate connection to a dialogical, 'narrative knowing' epistemology, my research demonstrates that exploring the nature of this incredibly interactive space cannot be achieved solely, by technically atomising the parts and seeking to eliminate variables, but also by entering into a lived experience of the story-making process itself. As a result, I maintain that an investigation into counsellor contribution to narrative co-construction benefits from and should also include some form of hermeneutic sojourn travelling through the parts to the whole, the whole to the parts and back again to the whole. In Ricoeur's (1981a, 1991) terms it is a spiralling through these that is somehow replicated in the phenomenology of reading a text and for Gadamer (1975), most clearly, mutually understood not by technical methods of decipherment but by dialogical processes of engagement. By using the fertility of reader response to a text, the hermeneutic action it ineluctably sets in motion, and the voices in dialogue it inevitably surfaces, my research story gets at the messy,



contingent, narratively woven, dialogically derived ways of being inside, outside, over, under, around and through Bruner's deep sense of a joint product of teller and told. It reveals the counsellor's contributive flow to the dialogue as a multi-layered meaning-making process. It leads to the conclusion that co-construction is a process much more intimately connected to the interpretive, reflexive, narrative-knowing humanity of the counsellor and her highly idiosyncratic horizons than it is to a paradigmatic information processing system based on cause and effect, data in and data out. To travel this 'sandy space' of time and being, narrative and voices with a client, to research what it is like to contribute to a jointly produced new story does not offer the comfortable tangibility of a measuring rod where features of the landscape can be isolated, counted, and weighed on the scales or its territory mapped down to the millimetre. Rather, the way in which my research approaches its data can be more accurately characterised as a 'sojourning with,' seeing what can be seen, hearing what can be heard and in the complex co-mingling of selves and standpoints, horizons and voices, grasping for an understanding. In this respect my research use of a reader/text analogy mirrors more authentically and experientially the kind of attentive, careful, interpretive intimacy between teller and told that the counselling relationship engenders. In the unique, one-off singularity of that kind of relational sojourn, ambiguity, ambivalence, contingency and uncertainty are not factored out as irrelevant threats to epistemological accuracy. They become an integral part of what is happening and what is being 'grasped' as client and counsellor travel through the story together.

This walking along together, as I have done with Jacob in this research, did at times generate as Gadamer (1975) predicts, a co-mingling of horizons. Even such a fictive role play produced ephemeral moments when Jacob's and my very different horizons reached across the space and created a new understanding. This happened, I think, not because at any moment or in any place our meaning horizons were the same but because our experiences and meanings spoke to each other in profound ways even across vast gulfs of difference. The ways in which Buber's (1937/1958) and Bakhtin's (1984) understandings of relational meeting through the dynamism of dialogue were enacted, created simulations of the essentially human, intersubjective, mutually generating, synergies of the to and fro of dialogue. This added further support to Yalom's (1989, 1992) use of fictive narrative forms to elicit some of the quiddity of the intersubjective relationship and his contention that psychotherapy is, at its fundamental level, a meeting of 'all too human selves.' In retrospect the research story as a whole reveals a co-mingling of the incredibly complex and often chaotic horizons of actively and always interpreting, reflexive human beings who cannot help but be influenced by other voices and who by nature and by nurture exhibit a near irresistible tendency to narrativise in order to understand (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; McAdams, 1993). Prioritising verisimilitude over verification the imaginary dialogues and their accompanying commentaries model a form of counselling research that takes seriously Gadamer's (1975) and Ricoeur's (1984) thesis that understanding in the human sciences cannot and should not be scrubbed clean of its human DNA. They provide ample evidence that, in fact, it is the factoring in of this ever present human element that enables rather than detracts from understanding.

In this regard as a contribution to knowledge my research investigation confirmed the impossibility of counsellor neutrality by demonstrating the persistent, pervasive entry of my own interpretive horizons into how I was hearing and reading Jacob's story. However, it also demonstrated these horizons were not necessarily sinister or inappropriately intrusive elements in my understanding of him and my contributions to his story. These differences in interpretive horizons between counsellor and client had their uses, not only in revealing my own biases and acting as a check on them but also in better contextualising my understanding of Jacob as an 'other' and more importantly, keeping my focus on allowing him to *be* and *remain* other (Davey, 2008). While this account focused intentionally on the counsellor's contribution to the new 'joint product,' it also offered a sense of the double hermeneutic always at work in co-construction. Because my contributions to the dialogue came not only from my reading of the richly voiced *Genesis* text but also my previous relational experiences with living clients, Jacob, at times, became an interlocutor who seemed also to be interpreting me. This manifestation of the double hermeneutic was, of course, also a result of my own creative fiction making, but it had a strong link to the reality of how this may happen in real practice. In the rich intersubjectivity of the reading relationship, there is, as Lewis (1961: 140) says, an often unacknowledged debt we owe to authors for the vast 'extension of our being' which their word-created worlds can bring about. 'Reading' Jacob, bringing him to life as an imaginary client in this research and hearing his fictive responses to me, gave me a sense of how much this same kind of debt is owed to clients who have also given me the privilege of entering their stories of life. By being a respectful but observant 'resident alien' in

their worlds, I have endeavoured to give them new ways of seeing and new ways of storying but have seldom fully realised the myriad eyes and gifts of seeing and storying they were giving me. Even in this fictive set-up, Jacob's textual voice could and did make contributions to my own understandings of self, in much the same way my real clients often do in practice. Thus the ongoing dialogical play of my research suggests that part of understanding Bruner's deep sense of a co-constructed joint product should involve not just a recognition of the marks I leave on a client's landscape but also the marks he or she leaves on mine.

By providing animated and resonant experiences of an 'I-Thou' mutuality and in simulating an experience of practice, my research reveals its value as a way to 'read myself' as a counsellor, to recognise and engage with myself at work. Conversing with Jacob in this imaginary way opened up another new horizon to dialogue with my own experience of practice, 'to transcend myself' but also deeply engage with my own way of being with clients (ibid., 141). Using a rich, deeply-voiced literary text like Jacob's as the springboard for reflexivity enabled me to read and write myself as a counsellor while simultaneously reading and writing my client. Paradoxically, the research methodology of a series of counselling dialogues with an imagined Jacob gave both expansive freedom and helpful limits to hear, see, and live in the complex layers of hermeneutic and dialogical contributions I may bring to an encounter with any client. It provided an experiential embodiment of just how diversely, quickly, fluidly and deeply these interpretive influences shaped my understandings from my first entry into the story's beginning, through my ongoing navigation of its middle to the culminating configuration of its ending. I was struck throughout with how easily

I could land on a focal point or a dramatic scene or a word in Jacob's account and with alacrity begin weaving those into a shape or a standpoint from which to view his story. My reading of Jacob's story became a story in which 'who I am' and where I was standing at the time intrinsically played a part and was implicated in the end product. It was not an unprincipled or unethical part but rather one that co-mingled a professional, personal, experiencing self with a deeply storied self, a written and still writing self. The flow of my own contributions whether in terms of my own stories and favourite texts, theoretical formulations, techniques, moral visions or previous clinical experience all had the potential if left unchecked, to freeze Jacob and his story in their frames and mould him into an image that was my creation not his. The cumulative impact was to underline for me the need to keep a closer eye, a lighter hand and a nimbler step when it comes to managing my multi-layered responses to the client's story and never again to underestimate just how much the 'who I am' that I bring to a client's life story is a product of the stories that have made me (McAdams, 1993). In retrospect, I see that my contribution has a great deal more to do with my presuppositional habits and horizons, my own experiences and evocations, my own deep store of stories than I might have been aware or acknowledged at the outset. The goal was not to present a coherent account of my own practice model or its theoretical foundations. It is not the kind of straightforward clinical examination of what I did and why I did it that might take place in supervision or in discussion with colleagues. In this regard the research is, as Jacob says of his reminiscences, a parade of oddments, patches and isolated tableaux. However, it is a parade that illustrates the value of dialogical play and reader response to a life story text as a supplementary, complementary means to

achieve this kind of carefully nuanced, reflective practice. By going ‘inside the story’ I gained not only an embodied, praxis-based experience of some of the complexity of my own multi-layered contributions but also increased my capacity to hear client stories in ways that give due weight and ethical care to the hermeneutic frames we both bring.

These hermeneutic frames are displayed by Jacob and me ‘inside his story’ but also apply to another virtual conversation set in motion by them. Early in the research story I directly addressed ‘you,’ my intended audience of counsellor practitioners and invited you to enter into this field of play with me for a period of time and a duration of words. As an active reader of this research text, you bring your own unique set of horizons, hermeneutic frames, selves, voices and stories into contact with that liminal and fertile space that Ricoeur (1984) suggests, somehow situates itself *in front of* a text. Given the ‘surplus of meaning’ and ‘conflict of interpretations’ that, Ricoeur says, emanate from this kind of space, your reading and your retrospective configuring of the whole will co-construct, out of its parts, a different story from the one I have told. Just as Jacob’s story contained gaps that revealed the ways my own contributions rushed in to fill them, my research ‘story as told’ may also provide you with a similar leeway in which to bring yourself and your own experience of practice. According to the research epistemology I have drawn on throughout, these gaps may be the very places where the ‘who you are’ that you bring to your clients’ stories may be most clearly seen and felt. These gaps may act like sluice gates opening up channels through which the flotsam and jetsam of your own counsellor contributions to co-construction may flow and be examined. For example, as you

read your way through the iterations, what gaps opened up for you? Where did you find you could most easily ‘climb aboard’ the research story and follow its moving viewpoint and where did you feel yourself distanced or even excluded? What questions arose most saliently for you and what perspectives did you expect or want to be in the research that were left out, attenuated or inadequately addressed? There is something about these gaps and differences in our horizons that may reveal your own biases, assumptions, and favoured filters for seeking to interpret and understand the stories your clients tell. As a practitioner reader of this research, there will perhaps also be moments, as I experienced with Jacob, when your own response was, not in every aspect but in some way, similar enough to mine that the idiosyncratic particulars of my experience reached across the space to speak to the different idiosyncratic particulars of your own experiences of practice. This co-mingling of intersecting, parallel, and often widely divergent horizons is the stuff of which new stories about what practice is like can be made, heard and shared. I offer this reader response analogy and its accompanying methodology first, as an alternative, innovative and practice near way to access, hear and examine your own inner conversations in close proximity to the interpretive, reflexive processes that give rise to them. Engaging with the idiosyncratic particulars of your own reader response to this or to any other life story text of your choosing (and there is a limitless supply of literary characters who might be talked into engaging in this kind of conversation), may enable you to hear more clearly, your own preferred, unacknowledged or half-heard polyphony of contributing voices and to identify those perspectives most important to you as you hear your own clients’ stories. Creating your own research ‘story of reading,’ dialoguing with an imaginary, literary character, in all its flotsam

and jetsam particularity adds to knowledge of what it is like to engage in this very sacred work of holding a client's stories in our hands for a space of time with the purpose of helping not harming. This points to a second and more extensive contribution this kind of narratively creative research can make not only to the exploration of specific issues in counselling like narrative co-construction but also to qualitative research in counselling more generally. It provides a means, a method and a milieu for sharing practice wisdom among counsellors in more recognisable, practice near ways that replicate the kind of interpretive intimacy you engage in every day as you listen to your clients' stories. Ambiguity, ambivalence, contingency, uncertainty, and downright messiness are not variables to be factored out of research in counselling any more than they can be factored out of practice. Living with complexity is what we do and there is a lot we can learn from one another's 'stories of reading,' especially our readings of stories that have stood the test of time and our dialogues with characters who can speak profoundly, humanly, meaningfully far beyond their moment of textual creation. By sharing the particularities of my engagement with Jacob's story, what I hope the research will also do is to encourage you to further research explorations using this kind of text/reader dialogical form. It is an epistemology that should not be consigned to the bottom of the evidence gathering hierarchy of research but valued more highly and widely for its close congruence with how human beings, both from ancient days and long into the future, actually make sense of their worlds, a task central to why clients come to counsellors in the first place.



Perhaps the most important contribution of this method is the way in which its emphasis on interpretation and reflexivity reveals what is most deeply human in the collaborative meeting between client and counsellor inside the stories of life. For counsellors it is a reminder of the importance of examining and getting to know their own co-constructive contributions. As I observed early on in my relationship with Jacob, it is possible for counsellors to ‘study maps, too carefully perhaps,’ and in doing so allow their cherished theoretical preferences, protocols and personal biases to dictate too much what is seen and heard in the client’s presentation of his story. Maps are often very useful tools for finding our way but sometimes they are wrong. However well-drawn and evidence-based they may be, they may still misrepresent or leave out important details in the landscape we are trying to traverse. It is clients’ feet walking their own ground and their storied hands holding their own gnarled staffs that should guide the journey. In this respect my research journey with Jacob may achieve, as all counselling research should always seek to do, a benefit for clients. Such a journey through and inside Jacob’s story may be another means of informing and reassuring them that counselling is not just something being done *to* them by an expert equipped with techniques, theories and protocols but also a conversation between human beings in which something far more storied and transformative is happening *between* them.

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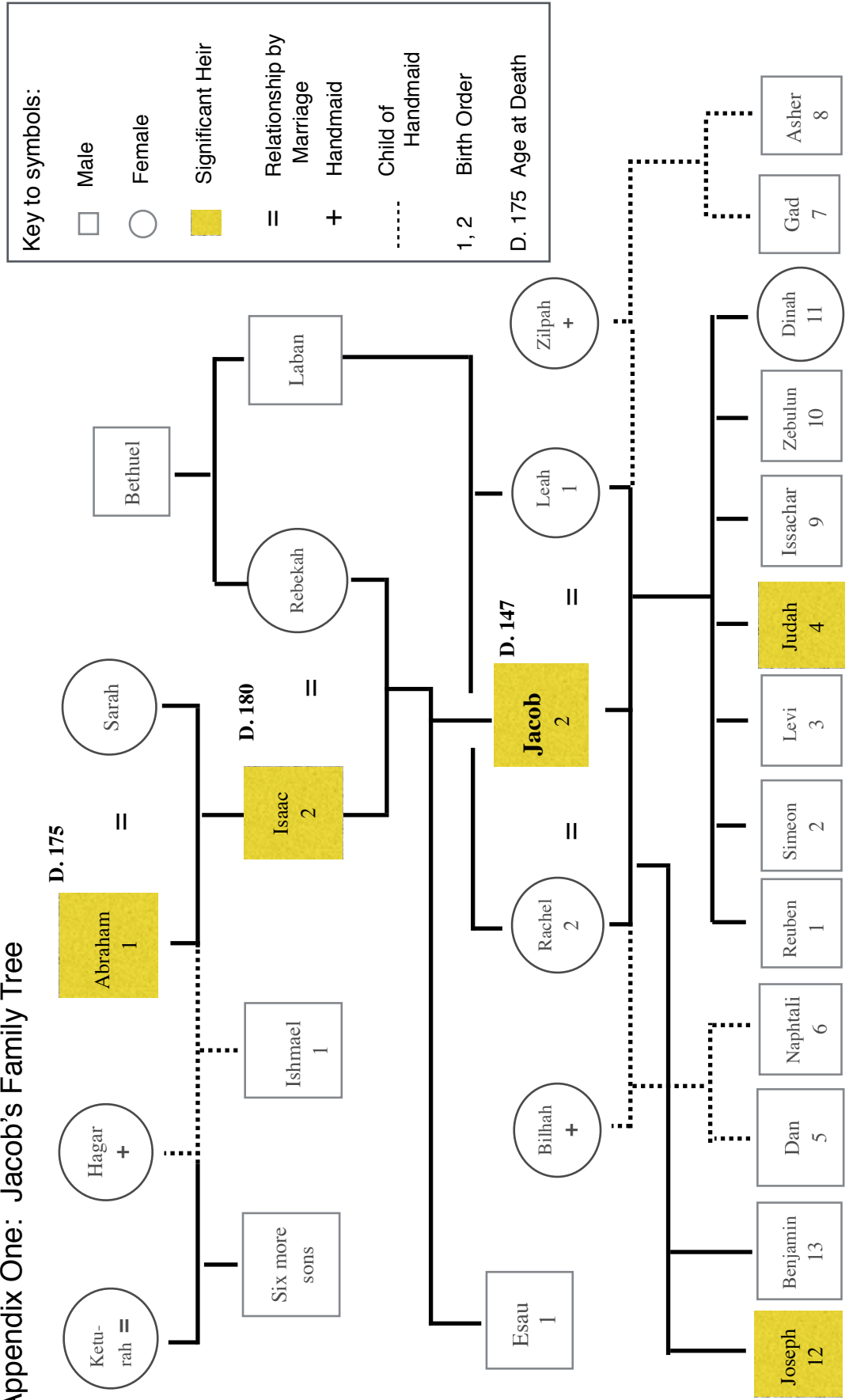
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# Appendix One: Jacob's Family Tree



## Appendix Two: Jacob's Life Story Episodes

Passages in **bold** type represent early attempts to divide Jacob's story into functionally discrete story segments which would resemble the kinds of story episodes, that might surface in a counselling context. Life story episodes are seldom, if ever, 'discrete' in any real sense, as they are inevitably linked into the macronarrative of the person's life. However, there are smaller story segments with beginnings, middles and endings which qualify as 'episodes' and that was what I tried to abstract here.

Jacob's episodes are listed in the order they are presented in the text of *Genesis* with their chapter and verse locations. In the early stages of trying to get a sense of his story, the brief labels or expositions I created for each one acted as an *aide memoir* for me of the content of each episode. Also included in the list below are passages, separated by brackets and not in bold type. These represent parenthetical episodes not directly involving Jacob but interpolated into the chronology of the *Genesis* text at that point. They form part of the familial, social, cultural, historical context before, during and after his lifetime.

- 1. *Genesis* 25:19-26 A Longed for Child, Birth Story, Twins Named**
- 2. *Genesis* 25:27-28 Playing favourites, Twins divide along lines of parental preferences**
- 3. *Genesis* 25: 29-34 In a Stew- Jacob's scheme succeeds, Esau's birthright acquired**

[*Genesis* 26:1-35 A famine, a fib and in *flagrante delicto* (Isaac, Rebekah and Abimelech)]

[*Genesis* 26:34, 35 Rebekah's heartache- Esau's wives]

**4. *Genesis 27: 1-45* Stewing again- Isaac and Esau tricked, Blessing usurped, A death threat**

[*Genesis 27:46* Rebekah's complaint- Esau's wives again ]

**5. *Genesis 28: 1-9* Blessing confirmed, Parental Instructions, Different Responses**

**6. *Genesis 28:10-22* Jacob leaves home, Bethel's stones, stairway dream, an encounter with God, promises made**

**7. *Genesis 29: 1-14a* Meeting the girl of his dreams**

**8. *Genesis 29: 14b-30* A wedding night trick and two brides**

**9. *Genesis 29: 31- 35* An unloved wife gives birth to four sons**

**10. *Genesis 30: 1-24* Jealous sisters and reproductive strategies (surrogate mothers and fertility drugs) - 7 more sons and 1 daughter**

**11. *Genesis 30: 25-43* Branching out- A cunning plan to increase wages and outwit Laban**

**12. *Genesis 31: 1-21* A family conference- a plan of escape, a dream about goats and a divine call to return to his father's house**

**13. *Genesis 31: 22-55* Setting a boundary with his tricky father-in-law**

**14. *Genesis 32: 1-21* Fear and facing the past, a fervent SOS prayer and preparing to meet Esau**

**15. *Genesis 32: 22-32* A mysterious wrestling match in the dark, a sunrise and a name change**

**16. *Genesis 33: 1-16* Brothers reunited- reconciliation, reparations and resolution**

**17. *Genesis 33:17-20* A purchase of land, pitching a tent, a spiritual stake in the ground**

**18. *Genesis 34: 1-31* Rape of his daughter, Dinah, and rampant repercussions**

**19. *Genesis 35: 1-15* Back to Bethel, reaffirmation of identity, faith and purpose**

**20. *Genesis 35:16-29* Milestones- Two funerals, the birth of his last son and a betrayal by his first son**

[*Genesis 36:1-43* Esau's descendants listed]

[*Genesis 37-50* The Joseph Cycle begins and his story unfolds]

[*Genesis* 37: 1-36 The real story, how Joseph's disappearance came about]

**21. *Genesis* 37:1-11 A colourful coat, jealousy and animosity amid Joseph's dreams of dominance, Jacob's rebuke of his dreamer son**

**22. *Genesis* 37:12-14a Jacob sends Joseph off to check on his brothers**

[*Genesis* 14b- 30 Joseph's brothers take their revenge, selling him into slavery for twenty shekels of silver]

**23. *Genesis* 37:31-34 A father's grief: Jacob learns of Joseph's alleged death**

[*Genesis* 38: 1-30- Judah and Tamar, duplicity, tricks and twins again]

[*Genesis* 39:1-23 Joseph and Potiphar, Potiphar's wife, false accusations, Joseph in prison]

[*Genesis* 40:1-23 A Cupbearer and Baker dream dreams, Joseph interprets]

[*Genesis* 41: 1-57 Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph's interpretations and rise to power]

**24. *Genesis* 42: 1-4 Famine, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt for food**

[*Genesis* 42: 5-28 The Brothers' first trip to Egypt]

**25. *Genesis* 42: 29-38 Jacob hears the story of the first trip to Egypt, his despair and refusal to risk sending Benjamin, Reuben's promise**

**26. *Genesis* 43: 1-14 Jacob forced by famine to send the brothers including Benjamin back to Egypt, Judah's promise, Jacob's resignation**

[*Genesis* 43:15 - 44: 34 The second trip and Joseph's games, Judah's heartfelt plea to Joseph which contains a story of Jacob's troubled state of mind and his fears for his youngest son's safety]

[*Genesis* 45: 1-24 Reconciliation between the brothers and Joseph, Joseph tells them what to say to Jacob about him, Pharaoh gives an enthusiastic entry visa to the whole family, then donates land, provisions and transportation]

**27. *Genesis* 45: 25-28 Jacob stunned, and then convinced that Joseph is still alive**

**28. *Genesis* 46: 1-27 Night vision at Beersheba and God's blessing on the family move to Egypt, an official headcount of the whole family**

**29. *Genesis* 46: 28-34 Father and son reunited, cross-cultural sensitivities for a family in a foreign land**

[*Genesis* 47: 1-6 Joseph presents his family's needs to Pharaoh]



**30. *Genesis 47: 7-10* Jacob blesses Pharaoh, ‘How old are you?’ ‘few and difficult days’ remembered**

[*Genesis 47: 11-26* Joseph provides for all Jacob’s family as well as managing famine relief efforts for the rest of the Egyptian and refugee populations]

**31. *Genesis. 47: 27-31* Jacob extracts promise from Joseph to be buried in Canaan, worships God as he leans on his staff**

**32. *Genesis 48: 1-22* Changing the rules, Jacob’s final illness and blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh, the younger before the older**

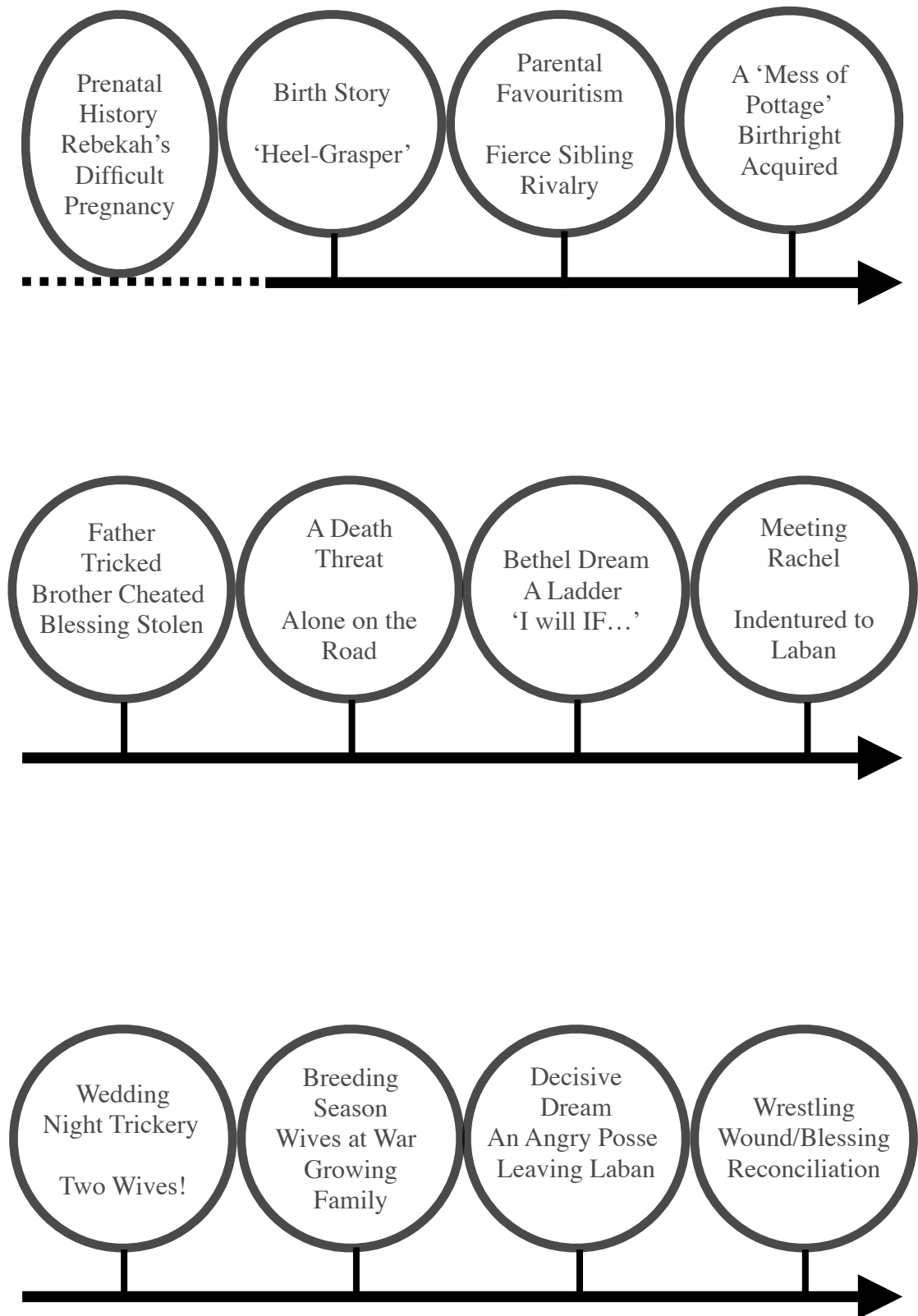
**33. *Genesis 49: 1-33* Last Will and Testament, Final blessings for all his sons, ‘each the blessing appropriate for him’ and instructions for burial**

**34. *Genesis 50: 1-14* Jacob’s funeral**

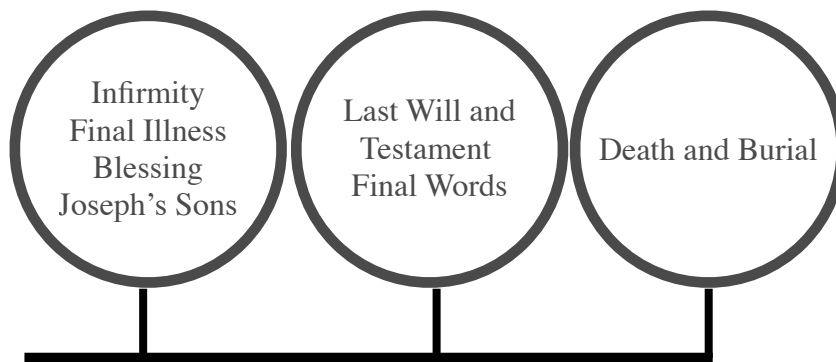
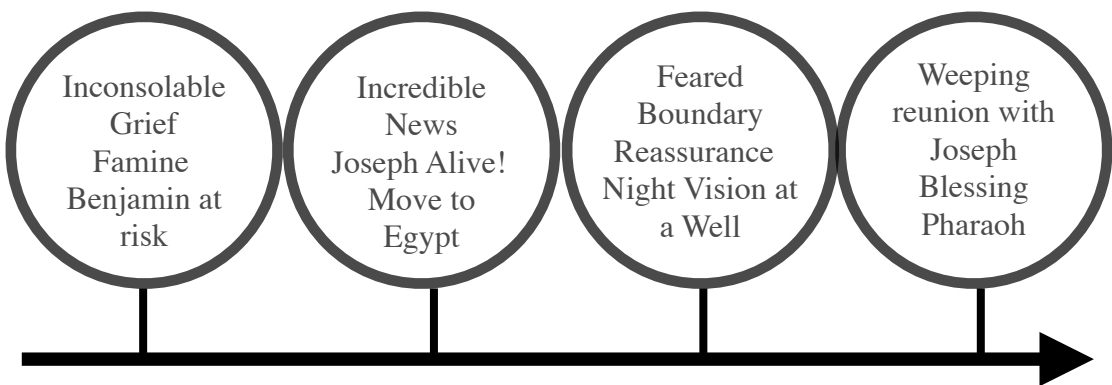
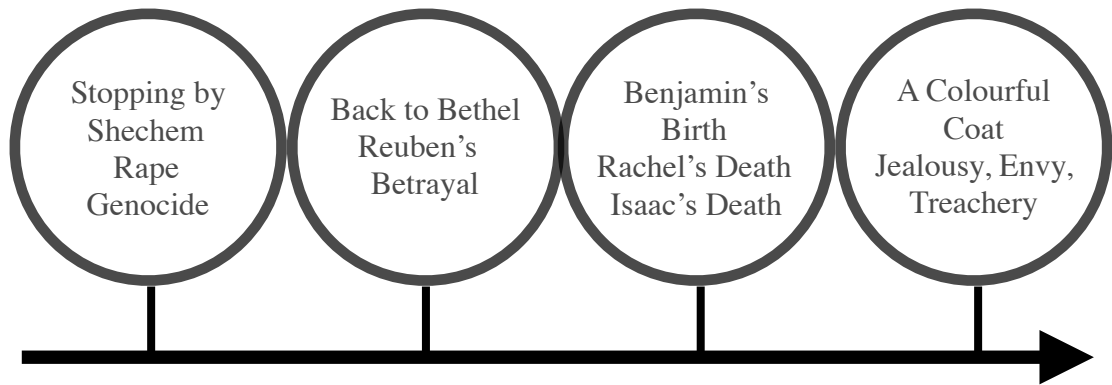
[*Genesis 50: 15-21* The brothers meet after the funeral. With their father’s death, the other brothers fear Joseph may exact revenge for their earlier terrible betrayal and selling him into slavery. These fears are allayed by Joseph’s words of kindness and reassurance to them. He promises to take care of them and their children. It is a promise he keeps.]

[*Genesis 50: 22-26* Joseph’s dying request, death and burial]

## Appendix Three: Time Line of Jacob's Life



### Appendix Three: Time Line of Jacob's Life cont.'



## Appendix Four: Rebekah's Letter

My beloved son, my little Ya'akov, how precious you are to me and how great my sense of loss at your going. But Listen to me and follow my instructions, as you have always done. You must flee at once to my brother Laban, in Haran. There was no time to prepare you for your journey in the way I would have liked, there is so much more I wanted to do for you, but I know you will find your way. Stay with your Uncle Laban for awhile until your brother's fury subsides. Esau will console himself for awhile with the thought of killing you, these murderous thoughts will help him deal with the bitterness of his disappointment, but it will not last. I heard his sobs and his weeping and his angry threats. But I am his mother, I brought him into the world, I know how quickly his angry tempests subside. Soon his wild, hunter spirit will move onto some new desire and he will forget. He has long exaggerated his discomforts and finds ways to fill his emptiness. Remember the red lentil stew you made, he said he was famished and about to die! Oh my clever boy, you seized that opportunity and made the most of it. He will make some rash gesture, marry another Hittite woman most likely, more misery for your father and me. My life will not be worth living, but he will get over his anger at you. By going away, you give him time to come to himself, find his own wide open spaces, and save me from the pain of losing you both in one day. In his heart Esau knows he is not the blessing bearer and that this task was never meant for him. I know this. You know this. Even your blind father knows this. It is God's promise to give and He gives it to whom He wills. I searched myself for this answer, terrified and despairing at the battle going on inside me, I went to

inquire of the Lord. I went. I screamed, 'Why is this happening to me?' 'Why do I live?' The struggle was so great, I thought I would die before giving birth. Remember how often I told you of God's oracle to me, the message he gave me when I was carrying you, the message that calmed my fears, the lullaby I sang to you from earliest days,

Two nations are in your womb,  
Two separate peoples shall issue from your body;  
One people shall be mightier than the other,  
And the older shall serve the younger.

How strong you are, my son, how mighty. You will possess the gates of your enemies. You are the blessing bearer, it is your future, my son, my little Heel-grabber. Your father knows this too, though he has long resisted it. He too, will forgive you and one day welcome both his sons into his heart. It grieves me that he has waited so long and been so slow to help you embrace your future. He has forgotten the care his own father took in finding a wife for him. Such tender care and planning, Ah,... your grandfather, Abraham, there was never another man like him. If only Isaac had taken such care to choose a wife for Esau. Your brother would not have married so foolishly and his wives would not have brought our household so much grief. So you and I, we have had to take matters into our own hands and now I must pay for it and let whatever curse remains fall on me. I do this gladly with all my heart for the son I love, who I loved from the first, from the moment I saw your tiny hand on

your brother's red heel. May God strengthen your hand, while you are away from me and help you grasp all that He has for you. But for you my son, I only long and pray that you will live in the richness of the blessings you have been given. May your offspring be as numerous as the sands of the sea and the stars in the sky. Hurry be gone. Soon, I will fetch you from my brother's house. Listen to my voice. Go. Do as I say.

