

CHAPTER ONE

What Is Narrative Counseling All About?

Ron, a new school counselor at Hamilton, put this sign on his door:

PROBLEM BUSTERS

Services offered include:

Lingering suspensions exterminated

Bad reputations reversed

Youth-to-adult conversions undertaken

“Boredom” alleviated

Trouble silenced

Treaties with parents or teachers drawn up

Miscellaneous problems neutralized, terminated, or otherwise gotten rid of

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OUR MOTTO

**The problem is the problem
The person is not the problem**

Not surprisingly, conversations that students had with Ron in his office often took on a weird, yet creatively intriguing, quality. There were some curious comments about the sign. One student asked what it meant. Ron was happy to explain his preference for seeing people as struggling under the weight of problems rather than being problems in themselves. He said he saw that blaming people for their problems often immobilized them with guilt and shame and got in the way of change. He described counseling as trying to find a fresh way to talk about problems so that they started to dissolve. The sign on the door was indicative of his ideas about this fresh way of speaking. It carefully focused on the problem as the enemy and the person as separate from it.

Although he was not saying so in so many words, Ron had a passion for using narrative approaches to counseling. They fitted quite closely with his own beliefs. What stood out for him was the deep respect for people embodied in the way of speaking that narrative counseling approaches offered.

WE LIVE THROUGH STORIES

We live our lives according to the stories we tell ourselves and the stories that others tell about us.

Narrative counseling is deceptively simple. It is based on the idea that we all generate stories to make sense of ourselves and of the circumstances of our lives. However, we are not the sole authors of our stories. Many of the *dominant stories* that govern our lives were generated in our early experiences of childhood at home, at school, at a

place of worship, and in the neighborhood. These local institutions are in turn given shape by the stories that are current in the wider social contexts in which we live. Some of these dominant stories regularly influence what we think about ourselves. Often, these stories create problems for us. Another way to say all this is that *a narrative perspective locates problems in the cultural landscape*, which implies that counselors who are seeking to help need to consider their own and the client's cultural positioning. This emphasis on cultural positioning distinguishes narrative counseling from approaches that profess a scientific grounding but scarcely recognize the role that cultural worlds play in the construction of problems and in their solutions.

If we are located in a school story line as dumb, mischievous, or a bad egg, there is a tendency to live our lives according to the contours of the problem story laid out before us by such a description. These negative character descriptions often stick like glue. How does one extricate oneself from a personal description such as conduct disordered, learning disabled, or emotionally disturbed? What effect do such descriptions have on a person? How would one go about giving up identities like these, which follow a person around in files and have a life of their own in the cultural world of the school and in the minds of teachers?

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In part, this book is about addressing the issue of the child who has a "problem" identity, or possesses the kind of reputation that yields few options for how to live with any sense of personal value and pride in a school community.

A NARRATIVE COUNSELING SCENARIO

As a way of introducing narrative counseling, we want to present a counseling scenario that occurred at Ron's school while we were writing this book. It will give you a feel for what a narrative counselor attempts to do with clients. It conveys the spirit of what narrative work is about, as well as illustrating some of the techniques and skills used. In later chapters, we shall explain more fully how to

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develop a narrative counseling conversation. We shall also show how to apply this approach in a variety of circumstances.

But first, let us tell you a story.

Alan

Alan was a ninth-grade student. He had a reputation as a troublemaker, which followed him around the school like a shadow. By the eighth grade, he had twice been nearly suspended from school. At the beginning of his ninth-grade year, his reputation preceded him and was quickly gathering some momentum of its own. According to his history, math, and science teachers, Alan was refusing to work. He shouted, argued, and left the classroom without permission. By the third week of the new school year, Alan had nearly worn out his welcome. *Troublemaker* appeared to be worn on his sleeve.

At home, Alan would tease his sisters and argue a little with his mom, Judy, but he was also adored by her. Judy had attended many parent-teacher meetings and had taken particular pleasure in pointing out how Alan was a very good boy at home—a little mischievous, maybe, but not really badly behaved. She knew that Alan had really struggled at school in some of the early grades. He just didn't seem to fit. His two younger sisters had seemed to adjust to school easily, but school had always seemed somewhat foreign to Alan.

For two straight years at school, Judy said, Alan had had trouble trying to relate to a couple of his teachers. He just couldn't adjust to what the teachers wanted. He couldn't work out what he needed to do to be called successful. It seemed as if he was an alien in the culture of the school.

Alan was sitting with his head down in Ron's office, having been referred to counseling as a last resort, and wearing the same defeated expression he had been showing since the new school year had begun. A small scowl was etched into the right corner of his mouth. It threatened to occupy his whole jaw.

Ron was never one to waste words. "I don't force counseling on anybody who doesn't want to work with me."

The match was a perfect one for Alan, although Ron didn't know it yet. Before Alan had a chance to think about answering, Ron continued in the same matter-of-fact tone, "Do suspensions work for you?"

Alan shrugged and said, "I dunno." The reply had a beaten-down, defeated, flat quality.

Ron had his work cut out for him, but he was equipped with a strong respect for young people's right to speak about what goes on in their lives. He wanted to hear Alan's conclusions about his own life. Usually, it is the other way around. Young people are more typically the objects of study by adults and are often excluded from examining their own purposes, reviewing the consequences of their actions, or discussing the effects these actions have on others. Adults often do this work for them and hand them ready-made conclusions. Scowling at these conclusions is often one of the few ways a young person in such a position can exercise some say in what is happening.

Because young people are given so few opportunities to reflect on and evaluate themselves and their circumstances, many of them "dunno" when asked about important things. People like Alan did know a lot, but accessing their knowledge is a challenge, even for a skillful counselor.

It wasn't long before Ron realized that Alan hadn't completely given up on trying to adjust to the culture of the school and its institutional demands. The school's prescriptions of etiquette didn't have much appeal for him, but he still objected to being thought of as a troublemaker.

Ron quickly warmed up to this perceptive young man. Alan's hair was bleached by the sun. His face was freckled and somewhat weather beaten, and he looked a little older than his years. Ron generally took a liking to most of the students who came to his office. He wanted to know about their hopes, fears, dreams, and some of the pain they had known. He believed that everybody had gifts and abilities, some of which were still waiting to be discovered. To discover Alan's gifts and abilities, Ron was going to have to win his trust. Without that trust, it wouldn't matter what counseling approach Ron used. Unless he could establish this basis of trust, Ron too would be defeated by Alan's "troublemaker" reputation.

As with any therapy, the establishment of a strong relationship with the client is crucial. Everything you learned about attending and listening skills in graduate school is necessary for narrative approaches to counseling.

Narrative counselors are primed to avoid being captured by *totalizing descriptions* of a person's identity, particularly if these

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descriptions define the person in terms of a problem. Totalizing descriptions purport to sum a person up in a few words and then start to organize everyone's responses to that person. They reduce complexity to simple explanations but must of necessity leave many things out. Ron refused the option of seeing Alan as Troublemaker. He wanted to hear Alan's account of the problem story. He also wanted to explore the effects of this problem story on Alan and on his outlook on life.

At the same time, he was keenly alert from the outset for any fragment or tidbit of information that was not Troublemaker material. Other brief therapists call this "looking for exceptions." Ron was like a detective on the lookout for clues. However, he was not collecting evidence of Alan's crimes in order to understand the problem better or prove Alan's troublemaker reputation. Instead, he was seeking

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hints of competence, ability, and knowledge that would form a counterstory to the troublemaker story.

The narrative counselor stays highly sensitive to any information about the client's areas of competence and ability (particularly in relation to the problem concern) that can be stored away and retrieved later in the counseling process. This information will be the raw material for the construction of a preferred story line for the client.

The previous day, Alan's mother had been called into the school yet again and told to take Alan home for the day. He had sworn at a teacher and was described as very noncooperative. Today he was very subdued. He was as close to being finished with school as the school was to suspending him indefinitely.

Ron asked Alan for permission to ask about five questions. He added, "If I get carried away with asking you questions, you must tell me."

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They identified a signal that Alan could use if Ron did get carried away with asking too many questions. Ron's persistent yet respectful curiosity about Alan's experience of school got Alan talking. His "I dunno" gave way to a more animated expression.

The stance of the narrative counselor is one of *respectful curiosity*. The counselor works at not assuming too much about the client's world of meaning. Respectful curiosity is used to explore both the effects of the problem on the client and the ways the client is taking action to reduce the impact of the problem.

The dialogue between Ron and Alan continued:

Ron (R): When did trouble at school first come along?

Alan (A): I just hate it when teachers think they know everything and try and force their ideas on you!

Although Alan was agitated, he looked very thoughtful as he answered Ron's questions. He explained that Trouble had been around him since the third grade.

Ron inquired about Trouble's pattern of entry. It seemed that something would happen that would offend Alan's sense of justice, and agitation would set in. Once agitation reached a certain level, Trouble would make an appearance. Alan talked about when he had gotten together with a couple of friends and was caught shoplifting. He didn't see himself as a thief, but he hadn't been able to resist the dare from his friends to steal some fishhooks for jagging in the nearby stream. This was when he first came to the attention of the police, who contacted the school. Since then, Alan had been fitting in at school just enough to establish a place on the edge of the mainstream.

The rapport between Alan and Ron developed quickly. Alan was intrigued by Ron's unusual questions. Ron spoke as if Alan's problems had a life or personality of their own that was separate from Alan, although related to him.

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Narrative counselors engage in *externalizing conversation*, separating the problem from the person and giving it a name. The effect of this subtle language shift is that clients begin to experience the problem as having a source *outside themselves*. Externalizing conversations open up space for a perspective in which blame and shame become less significant.

Ron externalized Trouble as the problem and explored with Alan the effects Trouble had on him.

R: How did being caught shoplifting affect you?

A: I dunno really. I didn't like being caught.

R: How did being caught affect your relationship with your mother and sisters?

A: I usually get along really well with Mom, but when I got caught, she was really mad, and I was grounded after school for a month.

As Alan continued to respond to questions about the effects of Trouble on his life, he gained a much fuller awareness of both the upsides and downsides of Trouble. Ron was carefully mapping the story of Trouble. This enabled Alan to flesh out in some fullness the problem-saturated Trouble story. As he listened to himself speak, he was coming to realize the extent to which Trouble was influencing his story.

By now, Ron had used up his five questions and negotiated permission to ask a few more.

Having named the problem, the counselor can ask *mapping-the-influence questions* to explore the relative strength of the problem and the person. First, these questions map the influence of the externalized problem on the person. In the process, clients gain a much fuller experience of what the problem has cost them and others around them. The counselor follows this stage by asking about the influence of the person on the problem.

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- R: Do you think Trouble is getting more strong or less strong?
- A: [*slumping in his chair*] It seems like it is bigger these days.
- R: Would you say that Trouble is trying to take over your life completely, or are there still places where it hasn't taken charge yet?

Ron asked the question nonchalantly. He did not want to appear as though he was taking on Alan's own battles. Nor did Ron want to push Alan to take a stand against the problem story, although Ron's questions were clearly helping Alan consider moving in that direction.

It did seem to Alan that his new year at school was just one total disaster. However, specific questioning made it apparent that there were areas in Alan's school life that were not subject to Trouble's dictates. His physical education teacher was a "cool guy" in his eyes. Alan was one of the top surfers on the surfing team, and surfing was one domain where he experienced confidence and control. He just loved surfing. It was his passion, and as far as Alan could tell, that was what he lived for.

Life wasn't quite so excruciating in his English class, either. His English teacher was young and enthusiastic and could make even small aspects of learning seem relevant. In fact, in English and physical education, Trouble was barely present. Instead, something else was present—something like a good relationship with a teacher.

As areas where strengths lie come to the surface, counselors have an opportunity to switch the direction of the interview. The narrative focus should turn to the domains where the problem (such as Trouble, in Alan's case) does not dominate. In most students, there are many areas of life where the school-identified problem barely presents itself or is absent altogether.

- R: [*looking for a way to pry open a new story not dominated by problems*] Alan, how come Trouble doesn't get you in these classes?
- A: Well, it does sometimes. Yesterday, I didn't do one of the essays I was supposed to do. I was reading a surfing magazine. Miss Davies went ballistic.

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- R:* Okay. [*He recognizes that developing a more favorable story often requires three steps forward and two steps backward.*]
Have you experienced any times when Trouble was about to take over and you called a halt to it?
- A:* Well . . . yeah . . . I suppose so.

The counselor selects for attention any experience, however minute and insignificant to the client, that stands apart from the problem story. These fragments of experience are the raw material from which the new story can be fashioned. By asking questions about these "unique outcomes" (White & Epston, 1990), the counselor inquires into the client's influence on the life of the problem.

- A:* When Miss Davies went off her head, I was real calm and didn't react at all.
- R:* Was that surprising to you?
- A:* Well, yeah, a couple of my friends were expecting me to blow up, and I didn't. I think I was a bit surprised myself.
- R:* How did you manage not to blow up? That would have been a good invitation to do so.
- A:* I dunno.

Ron had heard this answer before, but he believed it might be an important thing for Alan to come to know. He wanted to draw from Alan some explanation for the way he could on occasion manage not to rise to the bait. Such knowledge might be very useful to Alan if he could make it available when Trouble was more influential. So Ron was persistent. He believed that Alan had some competencies that he had not yet storied or that had not been described richly enough to be recognizable to Alan as competencies at all.

- R:* Well, what does that tell us about your ability to control this problem? You know, some teachers think you have a short fuse and just go off without thinking or caring about the consequences, but that didn't happen yesterday. What do you think you did?
- A:* I dunno.

Though Alan repeated his previous answer, it was clear that he was taking more time. He was engaged in wondering about himself rather than giving an answer that fobbed Ron off. He was thinking about how sometimes he could stop things from getting worse.

Persistent questioning and close listening are needed to bring into focus easily discounted or overlooked details of competence or achievement. The counselor needs to maintain a faith that these competencies can be identified, even at times when the client is having difficulty seeing them.

Because they had now established this moment as one in which Alan had clearly made a decision not to react as Trouble would have required, Ron focused on unpacking this moment. He was interested in the tiny fractals of experience and thought that went into staying calm and not reacting.

- R: Was it something you said to yourself that got you to settle down when Miss Davies went ballistic?
- A: [*thoughtfully*] Maybe. I think I just blocked out the words. It was like when I cut my leg surfing a couple of months ago, and when I went to the doctor's, the nurse injected some stuff into my foot and I just breathed and blocked out the pain. I think I probably did something like that with Miss Davies.

Ron's inquiry into the moment of decision yielded a connection in Alan's thinking with another moment in time. This connection held out the promise of a credible story of competence because the ability to do this blocking out could no longer be explained away as just a chance event. It had now happened at least twice. Alan's answer had also turned up the metaphor of "breathing and blocking out pain," which could be used again. Ron picked up on this metaphor and wanted to explore its usefulness in changing some of the negative encounters Alan was having with other teachers.

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Having established some recent unique experiences that are not problem bound, the counselor invites the client to develop an explanation of the significance of these experiences. In this way, *the plot of the alternative story* is thickened, and thematic links between different events are drawn. This works best when a few unique experiences have been identified.

Ron asked Alan about the connection between blocking out attempts by others to wind him up and blocking out the pain when he received the injection. Alan thought there was a connection. Ron wondered whether getting older and more mature had something to do with developing this ability to block angry reactions sometimes and not let fly. Alan thought that maturity definitely had something to do with it. Ron then asked a challenging question.

R: Does it interest you more to stay on the side that is trying to defeat Trouble, or would you prefer to let Trouble carry you along with it sometimes?

A: I dunno.

Alan had returned to his favorite line. But Ron stayed with this conversation. He felt he was getting close to an important turning point.

R: I was just wondering whether growing more mature and becoming your own person were the beginning of taking a stand against Trouble. Was it an effort to be in the driver's seat of your own life, or are you content to be a passenger? Are you happy to let Trouble steer you in the direction it chooses, or are you perhaps getting yourself ready to take charge of the steering wheel?

A crucial phase in the narrative interview comes when clients are given an opportunity to judge for themselves whether to continue to live by the problem-saturated story or to locate themselves in an alternative story.

Alan made it clear that he did want to be in charge of his life and had no interest in Trouble dictating its terms to him. Ron invited Alan to help him draw a rough graph of the influence of Trouble and the influence of Maturity in his life over time. They discussed what happened to Trouble when Alan made moves to increase the influence of Maturity. Alan now had a much clearer picture of what the problem had cost him. He also had begun to get a glimmer of a life that was not controlled by Trouble.

Alan agreed to another counseling session the next day to investigate where this new story might take him. Something in Alan had changed. He became more thoughtful about what some of the teachers were doing and how he had been reacting to them. He did not want to be suspended from school, but many people had made their minds up about him and were just waiting for him to take one step too far.

However, he felt unsure about how to turn the tide. His life wasn't going entirely in the direction he wanted. Ron had helped him see that. Sure, he loved surfing and fantasized a lot about living at the beach and surfing all day. Maybe he would become a professional surfer. He didn't need to work. He didn't really need to get an education.

On the other hand, he couldn't give his education away just like that, could he? His mom worked very hard, and he knew she wanted him to make something of his life. His dropping out of school would not please her. He had wanted to be a builder for a long time. He could do things with his hands. He had loved the chance to be a builder's laborer the previous summer, when he had helped his Uncle Geoff build a house. His uncle had convinced him to become a qualified builder. For this, he would need to do well enough in high school to be able to go to college. Alan knew that a lot was stacked against him. He needed to lose his temper only once, and that would be it. The vice principal had told him so.

Ron was experienced enough as a counselor to recognize what Alan was up against. He continued to ask Alan about his overlooked knowledge of ways to prevent Trouble from getting the better of him. They identified and explored three or four occasions when Trouble had not run away with Alan.

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As counseling progresses, the narrative counselor consistently surveys with the client new areas where the alternative story might be growing. It is not always immediately apparent to the client that aspects of the plot of the alternative story are growing. Persistent and respectful curiosity remains an important characteristic of the narrative interviewing style.

Alan was good at managing angry feelings at home. He was the only male in the household and felt the pressure of responsibility to act maturely in this setting. Ron talked with Alan about how Alan had developed his ability to be responsible; to think of others, such as his mom and sisters; and to care for their needs. He could remember his mother saying to him when he was six, after his father had left home, that he had to be the man around the house. That memory was as vivid as if it had happened yesterday, including the awful pressure he felt to fill his dad's shoes. He looked back on his life and noted how he had cared for his mother when she was sick and helped sort out arguments between his little sisters. He knew he had a special place in the family.

Ron had discovered that in one whole area of life, Alan was entirely responsible and thoughtful. He was used to managing pressures most of his peers had never experienced. Ron asked detailed questions to flesh out the self-description of Alan acting responsibly and caring for others. Despite some hiccups along the way, this story afforded a picture of Alan very different from anything anyone at school knew about. Together, Ron and Alan decided it was a story of growing maturity.

Just as the problem story has a beginning a long way back in a client's life, so does the alternative story. It is important for counselors to detail the history of the client's every relevant competence and ability. Hidden talents do not emerge from nowhere. The counselor's careful questioning about the client's early experiences of these capabilities strengthens the base on which to build the client's new sense of direction.

Ron wondered whether the maturity Alan had been developing all these years could display itself more at school. He asked Alan

whether he was getting stronger or getting weaker or something else. Alan thought he was definitely beginning to grow stronger. Already that morning, in math, he had decided he couldn't be bothered with the pettiness and negativity of the teacher's comments about his incomplete math assignment. He felt good about not having been wound up, as he might have been the day before.

Ron asked Alan what that said about his ability to beat Trouble. Alan liked thinking about it in this way. Ron went on, "If that continued, what predictions would you make about Trouble's future?"

Alan was confident that Trouble would become unemployed. Clearly, he wanted to give Trouble the slip. The obstacle that remained in his way was the reputation he had acquired. It takes a school a long time to revise its views of troublemakers when they have created much havoc and put burdens on already overburdened teachers. Some teachers have long memories, and positive changes often get missed in the hurly-burly of school life. There was also the question of his reputation with his peers. Some of his friends had a vested interest in watching him stir the pot with teachers they didn't like.

Ron checked with Alan about his old reputation. "Does it still fit, or have you worn it out and do you need a new one?"

Alan thought he was ready for a new reputation.

"So, what kind of a reputation are you seeking?"

Alan said that he wanted a reputation as "somebody who could achieve." After all, he had achieved in some areas that really counted for him. He was one of the best surfers in the school. Moreover, he wasn't that bad in English and could probably make a go of it if he knuckled down.

Ron asked his favorite narrative question, "Out of all the people you know, who might not be surprised to hear about the changes you have been making and the plans you have to build a new reputation for yourself?"

Alan quickly identified his mom as the person who would be least surprised with the new decisions he was ready to put into action at school.

"Who else would not be surprised?"

Alan thought of Robert, one of his surfing friends, a quiet guy who really looked up to Alan. Robert thought Alan had been "messing around" and had never quite accepted some of the crazy stuff that Alan had gotten up to. He knew that underneath, Alan actually took life pretty seriously. Alan thought that both his mom and Robert would be on his side in building his reputation as an achiever.

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Ron asked, “Among your teachers, who would most likely first notice your efforts to reduce the level of trouble in your life?”

Alan thought that Miss Davies would notice. He thought that she “kind of” liked him. Ron and Alan then discussed what exactly these people may have already noticed. Ron said, “If I asked them to write a reference for you, what sort of things would they write?”

They went on to discuss Alan’s plans for building his new reputation, a task he thought it best to do slowly so that he didn’t shock too many of his friends—or teachers, for that matter.

Counseling does not stop with the development of a desire for a new identity in the client. From a social constructionist perspective, identities are not the sole property of the person to whom they are attached. It is crucial, therefore, that the story being authored in the counseling room be anchored in the social world in which the client must live. For this reason, the counselor asks questions about the management of the client’s reputation. An appreciative audience for new developments is deliberately sought out. For most of us, it is not possible to make radical changes in our lives without somebody cheering us on.

Ron asked Alan what difference this new reputation might make to his life. Alan thought it would mean the difference between being a surf bum and somebody who was also into being successful in business. So one of the effects of this new reputation was that he could seriously think about being a qualified builder.

Ron expressed a desire to meet with Alan at the end of the week to keep in touch with Alan’s plans for himself. He warned that Trouble would be likely to make a comeback, and they discussed ways of dealing with Trouble if it made a reappearance. Alan looked confident that he could deal with it.

Ron, however, knew from experience that it was useful to expect a relapse from the alternative story. He then had more questions for Alan.

- Where was Trouble most likely to strike and catch him off guard?
- What combinations of events did Trouble most enjoy?
- What were his weakest moments likely to be?

This conversation proved invaluable, as it turned out. Alan lost it in math on Thursday. He swore at the teacher and walked out of the classroom. His math teacher, "Clarky," had given up on Alan. As far as Mr. Clark was concerned, once people became troublemakers, they were always troublemakers. At the end of the week, Alan was down-cast. He had been banned from the math class.

Changing one's reputation in a school is a massive task. A preferred story has to be worked at. The audience that witnessed the performance of the old story takes a while to adjust to the fact that things have changed. It is important to prepare clients ahead of time for their problem's attempts at a comeback.

The vice principal was prepared to let Ron assist Alan, but time was running out. Alan had two weeks to shape up or ship out. He met with Ron again.

R: Well, who won out this week when you tally up the results? How many wins for you, Alan, and how many wins for Trouble?

A: [*feeling defeated*] Well, I guess Trouble won.

R: Well, let's take a close look at the score. I haven't seen you for four days. How many times do you think Trouble got the better of you?

A: Probably about twice.

R: How many times did you get the better of Trouble?

A: I dunno.

R: Well, let's look at the number of classes that you attended, and let's rate them on the extent to which you were stronger than Trouble or where it went for your weak points.

As they tallied up the experiences of the week, Alan was considerably ahead. He had been different in many of his classes. There were no problems in physical education or English. There weren't even any complaints about Alan coming from science and history. He didn't recall losing it with any of his teachers except Mr. Clark! Yet the

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troublemaker reputation was intact with the vice principal. Despite his victories over Trouble, Alan was feeling somewhat disheartened.

Ron didn't hook into the despair. He stated quietly, "So, do you think it is going to be Trouble's victory? Do I sense you letting Trouble have the prize? Has it talked you into defeat when you virtually won the first round?"

Alan did not want to give up. There was too much fight in him for that. He had learned that at home. Some therapists might have labeled Alan's home life dysfunctional or described Alan as codependent in his relationship with his mother. Ron was more interested in how Alan's life experience might have been an asset rather than a liability.

Ron then asked Alan about his project of becoming an achiever. Alan looked a bit sheepish and admitted that he had not been doing all his homework. "I meant to when I went home," he said, "but I just didn't follow through."

Rather than dwelling on the lack of follow-through, Ron was interested in Alan's intention to do more homework when he was leaving school. We all have intentions to do many things but manage to carry through on only some of them. Ron was interested in hearing this moment as an intention that was stalled. It could be the beginning of a story if it was given more attention, so he asked Alan some more questions:

- Where did that idea come from?
- Have you had that intention before, or was this the first time?
- Was it different from last week in any way?
- Do you think it is a useful intention to have, or not? Why so?
- Have you ever had that intention and then followed through on it? What was that like?
- Do you think there is any chance that you will have that intention again? What will you do next time?
- Are you someone that, at least sometimes, does follow through on intentions?

In his responses to all these questions, Alan was able to focus on the value of having this good intention rather than on the failure to carry it through. Ron's questions made it more likely that next time Alan would have extra thoughts in mind to support the good intention and make follow-through more likely. For the remainder of the session, they strategized ways Alan could inoculate himself against Trouble.

On Wednesday the following week, Alan popped in excitedly, saying that he hadn't lost his cool when Mr. Clark had barked at him

during the lunch break. Ron wondered whether Alan was open to letting a few more people into his plans to achieve at school. For example, would he mind if Ron circulated a letter informing some key teachers about Alan's efforts at developing a new reputation? Alan was intrigued but wanted to see the letter first. With Alan's help, Ron crafted a document that described precisely what Alan wanted known about himself.

Ron handed Alan the letter and suggested that he show it to his teachers and note their comments so that he and Ron could talk about their responses next Friday. The letter read as follows:

To Whom It May Concern:

I would like to bring you up to date on some developments that have been taking place in Alan Brown's life. As you know, Trouble had been having its way with Alan over an extended period of time and had given him a bad reputation as "Trouble's maker." It had occupied significant areas of Alan's life. It caused him to

- Swear at teachers
- Walk out of class
- Argue when corrected

I am delighted to report that Alan has been progressively (though humbly and quietly at first) dealing with Trouble in important areas of his life.

He has been seeking to take charge of his life at school and curb Trouble's effects. He favors being in the driver's seat of his own life and letting Trouble take a backseat.

Alan has allowed me to bring these developments to your attention. Our hope is that you will support Alan's efforts to move toward a Trouble-free life at school. We would greatly appreciate your noticing Alan's victories over Trouble.

Best wishes from
Ron James and Alan Brown (fighters for a Trouble-free life)

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The following Friday, when they met again, Alan expressed how surprised he had been at some of the positive responses he had had from teachers. Only one of them had seemed to regard the letter as a challenge to catch Alan out and prove that he was still a trouble-maker.

Ron handed Alan a certificate, presented on gold card (see Box 1.1). Alan could barely restrain himself from grinning with satisfaction.

Box 1.1

This certificate is to affirm and celebrate that

Alan Brown has made it his business to achieve greater maturity in his life.

This certificate makes public the fact that

Trouble has become less strong in Alan's life as Alan has become more and more mature.

This certificate predicts that

(apart from an occasional nostalgia show for old time's sake) Trouble will make fewer and fewer appearances until it is simply a thing to be remembered.

This certificate attests that

it is to the credit of Alan Brown that this important change has occurred.

With sincere congratulations!

Ron James

Official observer of important events,
Hamilton High School

The weight of the written word is well known to most of us. Statements written on our school record keep a reputation alive. Narrative letter writing recognizes the importance of the written word and uses it in the most positive way. A letter that *documents the changes* clients have been making strengthens the significance of the changes in their own and others' eyes.

Last we heard, Alan was staying with his new reputation of “mature achiever,” and it seemed as if it was beginning to stick for the people who count, including the vice principal. Not only was Alan still in school, but he was also making steady progress. As for Trouble, Alan admits to the occasional nostalgic trip down Trouble’s lane but nothing that gets him into the vice principal’s office. His grade in English has improved a lot. When he is given the chance, he has some great surfing stories to tell.

We have told you a narrative counseling story in order to convey the flavor of this approach. In this chapter we have kept explanatory comments to a minimum in order to allow the story to speak for itself. In the next chapter, we will work the other way around. Our aim will be to describe in an accessible way the basic ideas and skills of narrative counseling, accompanied by some much briefer examples.