

**We don't have to die alone:
The comforting power of narrative therapy**

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+ Margaret Edson

- WIT: "love and knowledge, grace and redemption"
- "So the play is about miscommunication and misunderstanding and posturing and arrogance."




+ Competing knowledges or "regimes of truth" Michel Foucault

There are three main forms of knowledge represented in the play:

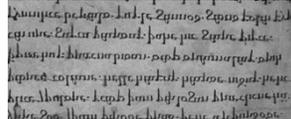
- The modernist scientific knowledge of medicine
- The metaphysical quest for wisdom and truth
- Wit: common sense, practical, everyday knowledge of how to live



+ "Wit" is an Old English word for knowledge

It survives only in a few phrases:

- "At her wits' end."
- "Living by his wits."
- "To have your wits about you."



+ Modernist medical knowledge

- formulated out of empirical research
- privileges facts and data
- scientific inquiry and rational thought
- medical procedures, charts, tests, experiments
- objective, impersonal, individualistic



+ Wittgenstein

- Knowledges are 'language games'
- How we speak matters
- 'knowing how to go on'



+ **Modernist medical knowledge**

- Separates people from their personhood
- Turns them into patients
- Vivian Bearing comments on the grand round:

“With one important difference: In Grand Rounds, they read me like a book. Once I did the teaching: now I am taught. This is much easier. I just hold still and look cancerous.”



+ **At the end of the “grand rounds”**

Kelekian stops to admonish Jason for his behavior.

- JASON: “Huh?”
- KELEKIAN: “Clinical.”
- JASON: “Oh right. Thank, you Professor Bearing. You have been very cooperative.”



+ **Vivian Bearing comments on her handling of the chemotherapy**

- “I have broken the record. I have become something of a celebrity. Kelekian and Jason are simply delighted. I think they foresee celebrity status for themselves upon the appearance of the journal article they will no doubt write about me.

“But I flatter myself. The article will not be about me, it will be about my ovaries ... What we have come to think of as me is, in fact, just the specimen jar, just the dust jacket, just the white piece of paper that bears the little black marks.”



+ Metaphysical knowledge



- John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*
- Metaphysical, mystical, truth
- "explores mortality in greater depth than any other body of work in the English language"
- "Death be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou art soe"
 - "Think of it as a puzzle, I would tell them - an intellectual game. Or, I would have told them. Were it a game. Which it is not."

+ E.M Ashford

- "and death shall be no more, comma, Death thou shall not die."

"Nothing but a breath – a comma – separates life from life everlasting. It is very simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on a stage, with exclamation points. It is a comma, a pause ... life, death. Soul. God. Past. Present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma."



+ Wit: or Folk Knowledge

- every day knowledge people live by
- common sense
- ordinary language
- personal caring

*VIVIAN: Popsicles? "Sweetheart?"
I can't believe my life
has become so ... corny.
But it can't be helped.*

VIVIAN: Now is not the time for verbal swordplay, for unlikely flights of imagination and wildly shifting perspectives, for metaphysical conceit, for wit. And nothing would be worse than a detailed scholarly analysis. Erudition. Interpretation. Complication. Now is the time for simplicity. Now is the time for, dare I say it, kindness.



+ Wit: or Folk Knowledge

- female
- relational
- conveyed in stories, narratives
- Jerome Bruner talks about 'folk psychology'



+ Michael White and Narrative Therapy

- takes folk psychology seriously
- avoid colonizing people with scientific knowledge
- curiosity about a person's intentions, practices, thoughts and feelings



+ Taking folk psychology seriously

- detailed inquiry into a person's life
- "What has it been like to bear living with cancer and to bear the treatment for cancer?"
- treat the person as having expertise and knowledge
- "How might your knowledge of John Donne help you deal with cancer, or with death?"
- "What experiences in life help with what you are currently experiencing?"
- "What has been helpful and not helpful during your hospitalization?"
- "What effects of the treatment do you find acceptable and unacceptable?"

+ Taking folk psychology seriously

- interest in people's intentions and beliefs
- inquire into a person's hopes, intentions, projects, and beliefs
- "What are your hopes for your life, including for your life in the hospital?"
- "How do you wish to inspire, or teach others?"
- "As you have consented to this program of study, what do you hope to teach the physicians studying this form of cancer and this form of treatment?"

+ Taking folk psychology seriously

- people are capable of acting as agents
- recognize a patient's agency
- ask questions that grow agency
- Is it OK if I ...
- ... ask you a question
- ... examine you
- ... replace your IV tube
- Do you want to have chemotherapy?
- Do you want to be resuscitated?

+ Taking folk psychology seriously

- Folk knowledge exists among ordinary people living in families and communities
- Honoring this knowledge involves fostering relational connections and support between patients and their families and communities
- "Who in your life has made a difference for you?"
- "If we were to recall this person's teaching, support, love, what encouragement might it give you now?"
- "How would holding close her belief in you be helpful today?"
- "How would Professor Ashford's description of you be useful to remember?"
- "What did Professor Ashford know about you that suggests you are capable of handling this?"
- "What difference might remembering this make for you now?"
- "What is it like to hold close Professor Ashford's belief in you?"

+ Taking folk psychology seriously

- Building a community of concern
- Constructing an audience
- "What were you hoping to inspire in your students?"
- "What long-lasting effects did you want to see as a result of your teaching?"
- "How would you like these people to remember you?"



VIVIAN: "Are you going to be sorry when -- do you ever miss people?"

+ Taking folk psychology seriously

■ In the end we bear **WIT**ness to Vivian Bearing's death

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+ **Death be not Proud**
Holy Sonnets: X

Death be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so,

One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

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