2005

Communicating collaboration and empowerment: A research novel of relationships with domestic violence workers

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Communicating Collaboration and Empowerment: A Research Novel of Relationships

with Domestic Violence Workers

by

Elizabeth A. Curry

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
College of Arts and Sciences
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Date of Approval:
May 9, 2005

Keywords: CASA (Community Action Stops Abuse), engaged scholarship, action research, feminist research, poetic activism, life stories, narratives

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to my mother, Captain Mary O’friel Curry, the bravest and kindest rascal I have ever known. She was an army nurse in Europe during World War II, recognized by the French government for her service. She was also an incredibly empowering mother of three children. My Mom has been aptly described by friends and family as wiry, intense, generous, funny, smart, and utterly her own person.

I learned courage and compassion from Mom, as well as how to believe in positive possibilities for myself and others. Mom did not always approve of my decisions, but her love and acceptance were truly unconditional. She also nurtured my spiritual core by her example. For that, I thank my Mom and her special patron of impossible causes, St. Jude. It took me a long time to appreciate all her precious gifts.

I also dedicate this dissertation to all the families who have experienced abuse, the courageous survivors of domestic violence, and the people who work to empower and comfort those who need shelter from the storms of life. I believe in their goal to bring peace to our hearts, minds, words, and actions so that home is a safe place for everyone.
Acknowledgments

Writing this dissertation has been an arduous, but empowering endeavor, thanks to my committee members’ academic guidance and emotional support. Kathleen de la Peña McCook, my library colleague for over 20 years, was the impetus for the beginning of my journey when she suggested I pursue my doctorate in Communication at the University of South Florida. Jane Jorgenson made space for divergent ideas with her patient listening skills and gentle analysis. Art Bochner helped me grow with his rigorous scholarship and appreciation for a generous spirit. My major professor, Carolyn Ellis, was a model for me with her probing, innovative and evocative writing.

At times, it was almost impossible for me to focus on my research or readings while caring for my terminally ill mother. As my life became progressively more chaotic, my committee members let me proceed at my own pace, and they communicated trust and respect for my work and me.

I also want to express my deep appreciation to all the CASA staff members who opened their work and their hearts to me for the past four years. During my Mom’s illness and then death, my life was on staggering overload. My relationships and the time I spent with CASA kept me grounded. The CASA staff members truly understood crisis and life’s chaos, which helped me to find my way.

This work is indebted to those who read my drafts, gave me advice, listened to my ideas, believed in me, and encouraged me to write: my favorite sister, Peggy Miller, Laura Ellingson, Barbara Stites, Christine Davis, Deborah Walker, and Amy Harcar.
Finally, I acknowledge the scholars and writers whose stories have inspired and informed me since I first learned to read. Their work was the source that empowered me to write this research novel, a lifetime collaboration of ideas.
## Table of Contents

Abstract...............................................................................................................................................v

Chapter One: Co-constructing Stories of Changing Relationships.........................1

  Appreciation...............................................................................................................................1

  Looking for Feedback................................................................................................................2

  Communal Lunch—Breaking Bread Together.................................................................8

Chapter Two: Ferocious Activism, Collaboration, and Compassion................25

  Re-framing the Distance between Self and Others..........................................................25

  University Community Initiative Planning Meeting, September 7, 2000..............29

  The Revelation of Friends.....................................................................................................39

  Arriving at the NCADV Conference..................................................................................43

  Plenary Session and Memorializing Compassionate Activists..................................49

Chapter Three: Research Reflections: Subjectivity and Strengths.....................57

  Domestic Violence: Whose Side Are We on?.................................................................57

  Reflecting on the Super Glue of Collaboration with CASA Staff.............................60

  The NCADV Discussion Group and Food for Thought............................................77

    Subjectivity and Positioning the Researcher.............................................................80

    Research Questions, Research Reflections...............................................................82

    Narrative Method and Ways of Knowing.................................................................84
Communication and Empowerment…………………………………………87

Chapter Four: Mutually Observing the Process……………………………………….90
  Community-based Research…………………………………………………….90
  Ideas Floating and Swimming Around……………………………………….94
  Cooking up Feminist Ideas………………………………………………….102
  Dissertation Dinner…………………………………………………………105
  Messages of Friendship……………………………………………………111
  NCADV Empowering Conversations…………………………………….114

Chapter Five: Poetic Activism: Many Faces, Many Voices…………………………116
  Sharing the CASA Booklet of Stories……………………………………….116
  Composite of Experiences………………………………………………….126
  A Composite Story: Small Talk with a Big Voice…………………………127
  Whose Story Is It?…………………………………………………………140
  NCADV Poster Session Closes……………………………………………143

Chapter Six: Life Stories: Moments of Meaning…………………………………….144
  NCADV Plenary of Stories………………………………………………….144
  Telling Stories……………………………………………………………..151
  Clarissa’s Story: Mother Couldn’t Braid My Hair: Remembering and Breaking the Cycle…………………………………………………….159
  Judy’s Story: He Pulled the Strings: My Job Was to Protect Her……….163
  Homer’s Story: Finding My Voice: Drawing from My Pain………………168
NCADV Interlude on Life Stories..............................................................173

Chapter Seven: Becky’s Story: An Advocate Needs Shelter and Sanctuary.........178
  Empowerment is Personal and Political.................................................178
  Unexpected and Emotional Violence at CASA........................................183
  Good Dream Bunny.............................................................................198
  Becky Needs Her Own Good Dream Bunny..........................................201
  NCADV Helping Hands.......................................................................203

Chapter Eight: Advocating for Kids: Empowering and Compassionate Framing.......206
  Issues Knotted and Tangled.................................................................206
  The CASA Youth Center and Youth Advocates.....................................212
  Becoming a Youth Volunteer...............................................................216
  Collaboratively Cooking: Worms in Dirt.............................................221
  Helping or Harping at the Volunteer Meeting.......................................229
  The NCADV Visitation Center Program Ends.......................................232

Chapter Nine: Empowering Staff and Organizations......................................235
  Collaborative Inquiry at NCADV..........................................................235
  CASA Meeting to Explore Empowerment............................................239
  Conversations Constructing a Social Construction.................................245
  Empowerment Stories, Blame, and Ethics.............................................251
  Re-storying Empowerment...................................................................254
  Who Am I? Insider, Outsider, Collaborator?.........................................266
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NCADV Winding Down</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Ten: Conclusion: Looking Back and Coming Home</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering Criteria</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking Back, Looking Forward</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanctuary for the Vulnerable: Above the Clouds on the Airplane</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Pain and Laughter</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue: Floating with the Currents</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening to Possibilities</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Horizons Bridging Boundaries</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda Thinking About Stories</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting the Pieces Together</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Scholarship in Feminist Action and Research</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous Emotions and Creating Sanctuary</td>
<td>299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining and Framing Empowerment</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocal, Vulnerable, Compassionate Empowerment</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Invitation for a Journey</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Author</td>
<td>End Page</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Communicating Collaboration and Empowerment: A Research Novel of Relationships with Domestic Violence Workers

Elizabeth A. Curry

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an experiment in thinking with the story, not about the story in order to erase the boundaries between analysis and narrative. CASA, Community Action Stops Abuse, is the context for this research on the lived realities and meaning of working with an empowerment philosophy. A University-Community Initiative (UCI) grant with CASA and the University of South Florida is the occasion to study the communicative aspects of individual and collective perceptions of empowerment. The dissertation focuses broadly on two UCI project goals: developing a collaborative relationship and producing a booklet of stories about the work of paid staff and volunteers. The heart of the dissertation is my relationship with the CASA workers and how scholarship and advocacy intersect with a philosophy of reciprocal and compassionate empowerment. This layered account of my CASA experiences is framed by my observations at the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence conference.

The narrative methodology supports a feminist philosophy that extends the personal and the political to the personal as the theoretical. The CASA workers and I engage in what Kenneth Gergen calls poetic activism, writing or speaking about something in order to cause change, a form of communication activism. My dissertation
is based on feminist research principles in the form of engaged scholarship and participatory action research accomplished through participant observation and interactive interviews, written as ethnographic narratives, life stories, and autoethnographic stories.

I coined the term research novel because my research data is reported in a creative, narrative format that integrates the literature review, methodology, and analysis throughout the story. The boundary between analysis and narrative is dissolved with an emphasis on connected knowing, the language of possibilities, appreciative inquiry, strengths-based service, and positive reframing. Rather than oppositional approaches of either/or thinking, my work embraces the ambiguities, contradictions, multiple identities and blurred boundaries of our lived experiences.

The concept of empowerment can be ambiguous, particularly for women who are seeking ways to redefine power and empowerment. An area for further study is the connection between empowerment and the framing of vulnerability, including individuals’ perceptions of the paradoxical nature of compassion for self and others.
Chapter One

Co-constructing Stories of Changing Relationships

Appreciation

My stomach churns with nervous juices as I drive along the narrow, brick street approaching CASA’s domestic violence Shelter.\(^1\) This feeling is such a contrast to the joy I felt two months ago when I delivered holiday cheer to each staff member, a glass snowflake with a letter expressing my appreciation for their work and contributions to the community. Thinking of my holiday gifts over the years -- first a spun glass heart for each person, next a glass star, and then a glass angel – calms my nerves.

Four years ago, Deb Walker, my research colleague, and I began this winter ritual of visiting all the CASA locations for an annual appreciation tour of the Outreach Program, Legal Advocacy, Peacemakers, Administration and Finance, Development, the Thrift Store, the Transitional Housing office, and the Shelter. Deb would prepare festive baskets and tins filled with home-baked cookies, and I would wrap small holiday gifts for about 50 staff members. Working together on a University-Community Initiative (UCI) grant project,\(^2\) we became part of their organization in order to understand the lived

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\(^1\) CASA was previously known as Center Against Spouse Abuse, but the organization changed the meaning of the acronym in 2003 to Community Action Stops Abuse. The new interpretation of the name better reflects the organization’s overall vision. For detailed information concerning the organization, access www.casa-stpete.org.

\(^2\) We submitted a proposal in 2000 for a UCI grant, which subsequently was funded in 2001 by the University of South Florida through the Center for Engaged Scholarship. Carolyn Ellis from the University
realities of those who work against domestic violence. Since the beginning, we have honored their experiences as we cultivated our research relationships with the CASA staff.

This year, in an effort to reemphasize the collaborative nature of our research, I gave staff members the first draft of several hundred pages from my dissertation project. Having received virtually no feedback in the past month and a half concerns me just a bit. Many explanations for the lack of responses are plausible, like the hectic pace of the holidays, their heavy work load, uncertainty about their observations, or the imminent due date for comprehensive annual reports to outside funders. To assuage my worry, I arrange to visit the Shelter and solicit their reactions in person. Based on my past experiences, I doubt there are any problems, but it’s been a collaborative endeavor from the beginning, so we need to write this account together. Even if something minor concerns them, I want to be sure we make time to discuss it.

Looking for Feedback

Walking up to the Shelter, I ring the security buzzer to be admitted. Pushing open the heavy wooden door, I am greeted by the calm demeanor and smile of Maria, the Shelter Coordinator. She ushers me into the office and closes the door. Several advocates are convened around the large, round table in the center of the open office space.

of South Florida Communication and Sociology Departments and Linda Osmundson, Executive Director of CASA, were the co-principal investigators. Deborah C. Walker and I were the field researchers.
As I roll a chair from one of the modular desks to the table, people scoot over to make room for me. Maria announces, “You all remember Elizabeth.”

Amidst their greetings, I pull treats from my worn canvas satchel: Hershey’s chocolate mini bars, a bag of peppermint patties, and a jar of nuts. “I brought you some goodies,” I offer, thinking how I usually bring something to the staff as a way of expressing my support for them, a nurturing touch.

As people sample the snacks, Maria invites, “Thanks, sit down and join us, Elizabeth. We’re finishing up our staff meeting. It won’t take long.”

Remembering the first meeting that Deb and I attended in 2000 to discuss a potential collaboration with CASA, I note how our relationships have changed. At that first meeting, the staff was hesitant, reserved, and suspicious, asking many pointed questions. After an hour we were dismissed, so that they could spend the rest of the meeting on Shelter issues and evaluating the possibility of a collaborative project.

Looking around the table, I realize that only three of the six CASA staff here today are veterans of that first UCI meeting four years ago. The process of sharing stories over the years has deepened my relationships with those staff members.

Judy, a senior CASA staff member for more than 20 years, has held many different positions and often mentors new staff. Her job today is to update the daytime staff with status reports from the night shift. She reports, “Joan is still in the hospital. She’s under a false name, Star Brady--she picked out the name herself. The hospital has been alerted to the abuser, and she should be here in maybe two days.”
Judy efficiently flips a page in her notebook and continues. “Sandy was really helpful with the new resident Moesha who came in last night, got sheets and blankets for her, showed her the kitchen. It was so good to see Sandy sharing and talking a bit because she has been so withdrawn. Most of the time I see her sitting and sucking her thumb, eyes darting in fear. Even here, I’m not sure she feels safe.”

Maria adds, “She’s so young, just 18, and she has two kids to support.”

Judy observes, “Her life is as horrific as I’ve ever seen. But that’s why I was hopeful last night. It will take time, but I think she has a chance. I hope she does.”

As I listen, I glance up at the framed poster in the corner that has been there for years. A simple spray of flowers covers a casket. Large maroon letters on a glossy white background proclaim, “She got beaten 150 times but she only got flowers once.” I vaguely remember a poem that a victim wrote about flowers and beatings.

Maria says in a serious tone, “We have a major situation with Shanna’s safety. Her abuser has been stalking her. He has been calling the shelter trying to verify her location, and someone called posing as Shanna’s mother. Yesterday, the stalking escalated with the police arresting a male trespasser at Transitional Housing, who turned out to be working in tandem with Shanna’s abuser. She’s safe for now because we moved her to another shelter in the state last night. Everyone still needs to be on alert.”

Bonnie, the Transitional Housing Coordinator adds, “We have warned all the residents and posted signs. I’m glad we got Shanna away safely, but now she’ll have to find a new job, and her kids will change schools. It won’t be easy for her.”
Judy continues, “We had great news about Angie. The judge granted her an injunction so her abuser must stay away from Angie and her daughter for at least two years. She is so happy that the judge believed her! We need to check on the name of that judge.”

Bonnie makes a note on her tablet, “Her application for Transitional Housing should be ready soon. Let’s remind her to maintain her safety plan because we can’t be sure he’ll adhere to the ruling.” Everyone nods.

Judy closes her notebook. “That’s it for now.” Staff members move to their desks, files, and other tasks. Several work at the round conference table. Maria, Judy and I huddle at the table and continue chatting.

Details of the recent murders in Tampa fill my mind. I think of the newspaper article posted on the CASA web site.

The final seconds in the life of 13-year-old Lauren O'Mara are unimaginable. She has just seen her mother and her brother ambushed and shot by her crazed father. She is running down her street screaming. He is right on her heels. He catches her. What people said later, what they said after Robert O'Mara killed his two children, critically wounded his wife and took his own life last Friday, was that it came as no surprise. After all, O'Mara's behavior against his estranged wife, Patricia Parra-Perez, just kept escalating. He had broken into her home, beaten her, stolen her dog, accosted her with his car at her workplace. This is a familiar pattern. People who know about domestic violence will tell you
this: It just keeps getting worse. It is a progressive, escalating syndrome. Each act of abuse and violence, unchecked, leads to the next. But precisely because it is an escalating pattern, here is what that means: It means we can do something about it. . . . There is no such thing anymore as, "It's none of my business." (Troxler, 2004)

Turning to Maria I say, “On the CASA web site, Linda mentions the Tampa murders in her executive director’s newsletter. Its almost surreal that it happened just days after the Peace Breakfast. That must have been traumatic for residents and staff.” Posing a question as much as making a statement, my tone is an invitation for their opinions.

Maria nods sadly, “I can’t imagine how that mother will feel when they finally tell her she survived and her children were murdered.” Maria pauses. “The media coverage is still everywhere and the Outreach Program has received lots of calls in the past weeks. The women in the Shelter are really shaken up, so we talk about it during our evening support groups. Some women are afraid to leave their abusers now. Others are more determined than ever to leave the abuser.”

Judy adds, “The media has covered that case as a high-profile example, but there are so many more that aren’t reported on the news. The story is news only after the murder, but we know there are years of stories behind this type of event! I keep hoping that people will eventually understand DV [domestic violence] better, but it is such a complex issue. People just don’t understand how dangerous it is when a woman leaves her abuser. They assume leaving is the best answer. We don’t tell victims to stay or to leave their abusers. We encourage women to come up with a plan to stay safe.”
With a slight edge in my voice I reply, “They just don’t get it!”

Judy, Maria, and the others laugh ruefully because CASA staff members often use that phrase.

“I was reading a book the other day that said domestic violence is the single most prevalent cultural pattern in the lives of welfare mothers (Hays, 2003, p. 212),” I share. “Social problems and social services are often mired in victim blaming. It’s a system that stresses deficits rather than strengths. I remember the volunteer training and the first meetings where you tried to explain different perspectives on DV, victim blaming, and empowerment.”

Maria cautions, “Poverty is definitely part of the equation, but we need to be careful because some people assume that domestic violence only happens to poor women of color. We know that DV occurs in all economic classes and cultures, like the murders in Tampa. People might just be starting to see that the victims are just like you and me, just like them. How we see ourselves and how we define our relationship to those who are victims of abuse will hopefully change the future of services, policies, and funding.”

“Even when I tell people that one in every three women has experienced abuse, some people just can’t comprehend it.” I remember when I first came to CASA I didn’t

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3 Statistical reports on domestic violence abound, and the numbers are often in dispute (Blair & Yoest, 2000). Therefore, I selected fairly conservative sources for this discussion. A review of more than 500 studies by Homer Hopkins University's School of Public Health and the Center for Gender Equity (CHANGE) indicated that one in three women has been beaten, forced into sex, or abused during her life. The percentage of those who hide their abuse ranges from 22 percent to almost 70 percent (Heise, Ellsburg, & Gottemoeller, 2000, p. 4). A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice surveyed a national sample of 8,000 women and 8,000 men. “Intimate partner violence is persuasive in U.S. society. Nearly 25 percent of surveyed women and 7.6 percent of surveyed men said they were raped or physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, or date sometime in their lifetime. . . . According to these estimates, approximately 1.5 million women and 834,732 men are raped and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner annually in the United States” (National Institute of Justice &
understand DV or the work that you do. I’ve learned a lot from you. Hopefully, what I write will help others understand more about reactions to DV and the consequences. The ideas about seeing strengths or working with empowerment apply to other parts of life, too.”

“I love your writing,” Judy declares. “I’ve told you that before. Now that the meeting is over, let’s take a break and then we can talk about your draft. For me, it was hard not to get bogged down in the punctuation, but I did what you asked--just reading for the story and the structure.” The crisis line rings and Judy motions for me to wait. The Shelter is bustling with activity, with residents coming in and out of the office once the door opens after the meeting adjourns. A Shelter resident comes looking for the substance abuse counselor. Another woman is looking for the bus schedules. A baby cries loudly upstairs, and a woman sobs softly while talking on the hall telephone.

Communal Lunch--Breaking Bread Together

Returning from a restroom break, I find the group pooling money for pizza. Payday is four days away and budgets are tight. I had been thinking of treating the staff to lunch today, but now it seems better to be just one of the group. Casually, I toss two five-dollar bills into the pile, but Maria hands one of them back to me. Gina, the new House Manager with short, spiked black hair and lots of energy, scoops up the order and

__Center for Disease Control, 2000, p. iii__. The Harrell Center at the University of South Florida ([http://harrellcenter.hsc.usf.edu](http://harrellcenter.hsc.usf.edu)) has cited estimates that three to ten million children are exposed to domestic violence with wide-ranging consequences for their emotional, social, educational, and physical development (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 1997). The Florida Department of Law Enforcement statistics showed 120,697 reported incidents of domestic violence in 2003, more than 300 per day. The numbers are even higher because many incidents are not reported ([www.fdle.state.fl.us/FSAC/crime_Trends/domestic_violence/](http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/FSAC/crime_Trends/domestic_violence/)).
the money so that she can pick up lunch on her way back from getting the mail at the CASA administration building.

“I have to admit,” Judy starts while waiting for pizza, “I’ve been reading your dissertation a chapter at a time, slowly. Then I finished it last night because you said you would be here today,” she smiles wryly.

“Me too,” says Maria, as she shuffles through files and paperwork.

Apologetically, I explain, “I know it was rough, a really rough draft, and I appreciate your time. Some of the stories you’ve read before, but I want to get your reactions to the structure, the new stories, and my observations about the stories. Basically, it all stems from the first year and the UCI grant, but then the stories also span the next three years after the grant ends.”

Judy is pensive. “Four years is a long time, certainly longer than any other researcher has stayed at CASA. Most researchers in the past have been in and out with meaningless surveys, which are too much trouble and not very useful. I remember when you came. I know why we accepted you and Deb, which is why I liked Chapter Three and the story you wrote about that first staff meeting--or us discussing the first staff meeting. Reading your dissertation helped me see why you have been willing to work with us for so long. In the past, sometimes I’ve wondered about that. I knew about your friends’ abuse, but your writing about communication activism, collaboration, and empowerment just sounds like you, and your Mom. It’s all connected in the stories.”

Bonnie interjects, “The part about you praying in church right before your professor invited you to the meeting with Linda is new. I didn’t remember that in any
other stories. You write more about yourself this time, I think.” Bonnie is deeply
spiritual, so I’m not surprised she remembers that part.

I smile, “Yes, this is more about my relationships with CASA staff, my
observations and feelings as I learn about domestic violence work. When I went to the
NCADV [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence] conference, I was intrigued by
the sessions where they talked about ferocious advocates, peaceful warriors, and
empowering compassionate leaders. It reminded me of that first meeting with Linda,
which I describe in Chapter Two of the dissertation. It seems logical to start at the very
beginning of the process with my prayers, the e-mail from my professor, Carolyn, the
first meeting with Linda, and then my friends’ stories. You all know that I didn’t plan to
become involved at CASA. I had another project planned.”

“But you’re still here, aren’t you? Maybe it’s where you are supposed to be!”
Bonnie laughs.

Judy reminds me, “You know I’m not a flag waver, and I don’t claim to be a
feminist. Linda is the executive director, so she needs to be a flag waver. She’s good at
fighting for social causes. But the way you describe the principles of feminist research
makes sense. Maybe the problem with other researchers at CASA in the past is that they
didn’t follow that kind of research”

Carefully choosing my words, I say, “I guess the most important thing I see is that
this work is full of ambiguities, emotions, and reframing the ways we see things, which
fits with feminist theories. I remember how you feel about the feminist label but I’m glad
the narratives showed you how our collaborative relationship has been based on feminist

Maria looks up from her notebook and jumps in, “Yes, the word ‘ambiguity’ is the perfect description. At CASA, we see how life can be an emotional roller coaster for staff and residents. It’s more like gray areas rather than black or white. We need to use judgment, not rules, in this work because we are dealing with people’s lives—in crisis. I like the way you explain that in your dissertation. Trying to create an empowering environment is very difficult and full of ambiguities. Reading your thoughts and worries as part of the process helps me understand more about the research.”

I reply, “My work at CASA evolved from observing others to something we call participant observation—getting involved—to observing and reflecting on our participation (Tedlock, 2000). The narratives show the importance of the research relationships and interactions in the learning process (Bochner, 1994; Bochner & Ellis, 1999; Ceglowiski, 2000; Ellingson, 1998; Ellis & Berger, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Milburn, Wilkins, & Wilkins, 2002; Tillmann-Healy, 2003), a process full of contradictions and struggles to find meaning in life.” After a short pause, I continue,
“Going back to discussing NCADV, what do you think about the NCADV conference in relation to the CASA stories?”

“It shows how CASA fits into the national scene,” Maria replies. “It’s interesting to think about the relationship of the personal and the political, as you say in the dissertation. Each day we provide shelter for victims of abuse and that’s a personal as well as political act.”

“Yeah, overall it was great, but I don’t like the boring parts.” Judy makes an embarrassed face. “I’ve told you that before, but I know you need to meet your academic requirements.” She holds up her hand, palm out. “Truthfully, I like the parts about us the best, but you did a good job of blending the different parts, like the swimming pool discussion with Linda in Chapter Four. That was fun, and I learned how the academic theories on action research fit with our work at CASA. I also learned some things about how our fearless leader thinks. I felt like I was in the pool and at dinner with you!”

I laugh, “My professor, Carolyn, says the same thing about the boring parts, but she is an academic with a very strong commitment to narratives! In class we discuss many different ways to frame and present research, such as realist tales, confessional, impressionist, critical, formal, or literary tales (Van Maanen, 1988), as well as more experimental, artistic ways of writing (Banks & Banks, 1998; Bochner & Ellis, 2003, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Richardson, 1995). The methods and format of the UCI project match CASA’s organizational culture and philosophy, which is important.”

“That’s why you fit in,” Bonnie adds. “You try to understand us, and help us, not just investigate or criticize us.”
“Thanks! I coined the term research novel to describe this dissertation as an example of something called engaged scholarship (Boyer, 1996) and action research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). It is critical that my dissertation be accessible to multiple audiences. All of you tell me over and over again that you want it to be readable. My challenge with a research novel is to satisfy both the academic and the community audiences. In a sense, each audience gravitates toward one half of the description: research or novel. I am reporting my research data in a creative, narrative format that integrates the traditional literature review, methodology, and analysis chapters throughout the body of the story.”

“’Research novel’ is a phrase that gets my attention!” Judy quips.

“The idea came to me; then I looked in Webster’s Dictionary, where the definition of research includes this meaning: ‘careful, patient, systematic, diligent inquiry or examination in some field of knowledge; a laborious or continued search for truth’ (McKechnie & Editorial Staff, 1997, p. 1538). That means there are multiple truths that hinge on how people interpret truth differently.” The staff looks skeptical about my explanation of postmodern multiple truths, but I forge ahead. “The word ‘novel’ is commonly used to describe something as new, unusual, original, different, or unique. It also is used to describe literary works of fiction, which portray imaginary characters or events.” Several staff members nod encouragingly, so I continue. “Combining fiction and research together may seem contradictory, but the word ‘fiction’ is derived from the Latin word fingere, meaning ‘to form, mold, devise’ (McKechnie & Editorial Staff, 1997, p. 680). By linking the words ‘research’ and ‘novel,’ I mean that I have devised and
written a literary work based on four years at my research site that expresses my understanding of truth. My “novel” is the combination of science and art, cognition and emotion, head and heart” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Maria’s eyes light up. “Like in Chapter Five, where you write the story about the CASA advocate at the community meeting. I remember how we couldn’t figure out whose story it was until you explained that it represented all of us. That’s when it made sense to me how stories can be research. ‘Poetic activism’ is the term you used.”

“Right, I didn’t create that term. It comes from another researcher, Kenneth Gergen, whom I cite frequently in my dissertation. I love that combination of terms, the poetics of writing or speaking about something in order to cause change--that’s communication activism (Gergen, 1994, 2000, 2001; Gergen & Gergen, 1999; McNamee & Gergen, 1999). I think your work is poetic activism, and my dissertation is an example of it, too. I write composite stories and characters to represent the information I collect from multiple, interactive individual or group interviews with staff members. The characters or events in the story may or may not exist, but the story’s content expresses ideas that I understand to be true. I fictionalized some of the situations in order to communicate my perceptions to the reader.”

“Sometimes you use the composite stories so that you can protect confidentiality, and that is essential at CASA. Your composite stories work for lots of reasons,” Judy reminds me.

“Yes, that’s true,” I reply. “One of the leaders in our field says, ‘A life is a social text, a fictional narrative production. The method of production is primal…. Form is
content’ (Denzin, 1989, p. 9). A life story isn’t the life story but a telling of a story, one of multiple possibilities.” I’m not sure that my explanation makes sense to all the staff, so I use a metaphor.

"This dissertation is more like a story stew than a sandwich. In the past, I’ve written papers, articles, and chapters of books that use the sandwich approach, with narratives sandwiched between the traditional literature reviews and concluding analyses. That’s the stuff Judy skips because she finds it boring.” Judy laughs and nods with her eyes wide open. I continue, “In a story stew the theories and literature are mixed together with the conversations, settings, plot, and characters of the narrative. With the sandwich approach, each part is separate, but related. The pieces are built on each other, but not necessarily integrated. The narrative can be used as an example to illustrate the relevant theories and conclusions. With a story stew, however, the ingredients are simmered together and changed to form a whole new dish, where the individual parts have merged. A combination of theory and analysis mixes to become the story. In the communication field, some people talk about how we can think with a story not just about it” (Bochner, 1997; Frank, 1995). Carolyn calls it “seamless writing” in her methodological novel (Ellis, 2004).

One of the new advocates says, “That’s why we tell stories, sometimes personal stories, when we give presentations about DV. The stories help people understand.”

“Exactly,” I respond, and she looks pleased. “Since the 70s, the feminist philosophy has extended the connection between the personal and the political to the personal as the theoretical. In feminist research, the theory and the story often become
linked. The boundary between ‘narrative’ and ‘analysis’ is dissolved (Richardson, 2000, p. 927). At least that’s what I hope I show in my dissertation.”

“I have another metaphor,” Judy declares. “Your dissertation is like a big, fat chocolate layer cake because there are so many layers to all the stories! Let’s see, there’s NCADV, CASA, e-mail messages, stories about meetings, meetings about meetings, our life stories, your story of volunteering, composite stories, and even stories about stories.”

“Or maybe it is like vegetable lasagna with lots of layers,” Maria says as she closes her file folders. “The layers make it rich and interesting, but hopefully not fattening!” We laugh, and Gina returns just as Maria says, “I think we’re getting hungry!”

Gina arrives, balancing three pizza boxes and the mail pouch. She places the pizza on the table, and other staff members bring the paper plates and paper towels. The smell of warm dough, tomato and cheese makes me salivate.

Opening the boxes, Gina says, “We have cheese, mushroom, onions.”

“I’ll take mushroom!” Robyn, a CASA youth advocate, exclaims with a bright giggle, as she arrives right behind Gina.

“When are you scheduled?” inquires Bonnie, glancing at the 24-7 round the clock schedule board on the wall.

“I’m working at the Youth Center this afternoon, but I came to the Shelter to talk to Elizabeth about her dissertation. I’m lucky to arrive at pizza time,” she winks. Robyn’s offer to contribute money to the lunch fund is waved away. The conversation stops for a short time while we eat.
One of the newer advocates asks, “Elizabeth, I think I’ve got a sense of what you’re writing, but can you explain it for those of us who weren’t here at the beginning of the project? I’d like to read the next draft maybe.”

Wiping my greasy hands and swallowing my half-chewed piece of pizza I reply, “Sure I’d love to have you read the next draft! For now I’ll give you a summary and then we can chat some more with those who have read it--they can tell you what they got out of it.” Pleased that she asked, I wonder if I should have made more copies of the first draft.

I explain, “CASA is the context for my research on the lived realities and the meaning of working with an empowerment philosophy. Building on this foundation, I research the communicative aspects of empowerment. The University-Community Initiative (UCI) grant project is the occasion for us to look at the individual and collective perceptions of empowerment, while we developed empowering collaborative research relationships. The dissertation focuses broadly on two of the UCI project goals: developing a collaborative relationship and producing a booklet of stories about the work of paid staff and volunteers (Curry, Walker, & CASA staff, 2002). The heart of the dissertation is the story of how I developed relationships with the CASA workers and how our understanding of scholarship and advocacy intersects with a philosophy of compassionate empowerment.”

“Oh, right! I read the CASA booklet of stories from the grant,” the advocate observes. Some of those stories are in the dissertation?”
Judy answers, “Yes, my story of taking care of my aunt and my uncle’s abuse is in there. I’ve told that story for years, but seeing it written is so powerful. When I first read my story I cried. My daughter finally read it, too, after years of not being willing to discuss it. I don’t know how Elizabeth takes all those pages of taped conversations and turns them into a story!”

“I didn’t get to read the whole draft, but I looked at sections,” Bonnie admits. “Chapters Five and Six about our CASA booklet are good, and I’m glad Homer’s story is included. His drawings are so special.” She gets a mischievous grin on her face and bursts out, “Who else could draw me as a bald Black superwoman on roller skates, flying over tall buildings with a tool belt!” We laugh enthusiastically, pounding the table and slapping hands.

“You all are so funny! Some people wouldn’t expect the mix of humor with tears in this work.” We pause and pass around the pizza boxes. “Lots of memories,” I murmur. “Some are emotional and complicated like Becky’s assault in Chapter Seven and my struggle at the Youth Center to become part of your team in Chapter Eight. Any thoughts on those chapters, which aren’t in the CASA booklet?”

Judy is solemn and looks around the table, “When Becky’s husband tried to kill her and then she ended up a resident, it was horrible. One day she’s a CASA advocate, and the next day she’s a Shelter resident. God help me, there were times I was so angry with her husband, and then I got upset with her when she didn’t seem to be taking personal safety seriously. I realized that I might be blaming the victim, but I was worried. It was confusing as hell for the whole staff!”
Maria observes, “It’s back to ambiguity again because Becky’s role and identity weren’t clear to anyone. The situation challenged our assumptions and in the end helped us reflect on our beliefs. I think it is an important story to include.”

I say, “It is difficult to write that story for lots of reasons. I have over 16 interviews with her and staff about the assault, her residence in the Shelter, the trial, and her recovery. The volume of information isn’t really the main difficulty, but rather trying to convey the complexity, the meaning in the moments that are so emotionally charged. I guess my goal is to tell people how confusing it can be to deal with abuse.”

“The Good Dream Bunny story melts my heart, and I didn’t know you gave Becky her own stuffed bunny. That section is sweet and you are always bringing us goodies,” Maria observes.

“I think the story shows that you got it,” Judy says. You wrote an honest, but empathetic story.”

“Thanks!” I feel relieved, proud and humbled by her compliment. I ask, “Any comments on Chapter Eight, the program on Visitation Centers and my story of becoming a CASA volunteer at the Youth Center? That is tough for me because I am digging deeply into the realities of working within an empowering philosophy in situations that also can feel disempowering–on many levels.”

Robyn speaks up, “That’s the chapter that I read thoroughly, for obvious reasons: It’s about the youth advocates.” The group chuckles. “One of the main things I took from the chapter is that each of us brings different perspectives, life experiences, and various frames to our work. The conversation with your sister shows me how you feel
when you start volunteering. There are parts of the story that show problems with the
Youth Center, but the way you write about it isn’t negative. I guess because you are part
of the group, involved in solutions, and contributing your time, the story doesn’t seem
critical. The insight about the kids’ survival skills is super, and volunteers need to
understand the special needs of our kids. *Cooking Worms in Dirt* is such a cute story, and
it could be used as a training tool for volunteers. The whole chapter could help new
volunteers.”

“I love the part where the kids want you to smell their hands!” Bonnie laughs at
the quizzical looks that some staff members are giving her. “You just have to read it!
The story shows that we need dedicated staff to make the program successful, and this
work isn’t easy! You also remind me that being a volunteer can be scary. We need to
work harder on getting and keeping volunteers. I think you can help us with that,
Elizabeth.”

“You know I will,” I reply. “Now at the end of the dissertation I have a chapter
about defining empowerment. Do we need that Chapter Nine, or is it repetitious or
obvious?”

“No, you really need that,” Maria asserts firmly. “It is the summary that explains
how empowerment fits in CASA. Many people won’t understand how we interpret the
philosophy without that chapter. I also like the way you work in ideas about compassion
for self and others. I can’t remember which chapter, but the ideas touch on how we seek
to believe in the strengths of those with whom we work. It links to stories of advocates
who have experienced DV so they understand it personally.”
Bonnie adds, “Empowerment is supposed to be the core of how we work, but it isn’t easy to learn, especially if you want to be a helper, a fixer, a rescuer. Empowerment means allowing women to manage their own lives. It’s not just an abstract idea because we need to practice empowerment every day in the way we talk and how we think.

Elizabeth, your research has been empowering for us. The stories you write for us bring tears to my eyes because I see the importance of what I do everyday, and realize that usually I don't think twice about the process. I just do it. It has become natural and I don't know if that's good or bad. With your research, you have given us all a chance to see our names, our stories, our work, and ourselves in writing, and that's a good thing. It has allowed us to laugh, cry, and speak about issues within ourselves that we had not faced or recognized before. I think the research has allowed us as a program to define and be more sensitive to empowerment. You model empowerment and write about it.”

Judy follows up, “I agree. Your writing validates our work and us. I think of empowerment as walking arm and arm with someone. You offer support, and they can lean on you a little. But with empowerment you aren’t trying to carry them on your back. You can’t just tell them what to do or even do it for them. You can help them find the resources they need. You can help them by believing in them.”

“Right, seeing and believing in the positive possibilities,” I respond.

“Empowerment and collaboration are major topics for social workers, educators, business, government, non-profit organizations, nursing and community health workers, leadership training, and self-directed teams, as well as family therapists, community building, social justice activists, and other areas. However, studying CASA is unique
because the core philosophy of empowerment has been espoused since the inception of the Battered Women’s Movement, and it relates directly to those served. I’m personally interested in the ways we interact and communicate with each other that seek to support and develop, rather than criticize or control. I think empowerment is about believing in the best people have to offer and communicating that to each other—with recursive implications. ‘One becomes the stories one tells. . . . Stories then, like the lives they tell about are always open-ended, inconclusive and ambiguous, subject to multiple interpretations’ (Denzin, 1989, p. 81). For me, the importance of my dissertation is making a contribution to how we live our lives. In many ways, I’m also writing about my own search for how I want to live my life.”

Robyn says, “You learn empowerment by watching others, and sometimes other people help you to find your own sense of empowerment. We all find our own way of empowerment. That’s what I learned at CASA and in your stories.”

I explain, “The dissertation demonstrates that each of us has a part in defining social interactions, such as empowerment or collaboration, and defining how we see ourselves and our work. ‘Reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always embodied; that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality’ (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 116). The most important point to remember is that we create and maintain empowerment or disempowerment in a relational environment. Three assumptions of what Communication scholars call a social constructionist worldview are the basis of my dissertation: first, tolerance of disparate voices; second, sensitivity to the process of communication and the manner in which
knowledge is claimed; and lastly, the communicative social character of knowledge. The methodology and narrative reporting also are built on the idea that ‘the most important vehicle of reality maintenance is conversation’ (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 152). The narratives of conversations with CASA workers and others demonstrate that conversation serves not only to maintain, but also to continually modify reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 153). My dissertation is full of conversations in stories and about stories.

“That’s what we do at CASA.” Judy offers an example: “When I do support groups, sometimes I tell the women the story of the flower who thinks she is a weed because everyone keeps calling her a weed. One day, someone comes along and tells her she’s really a rare, beautiful, and capable flower. Then she starts to think about herself in a different way. After the story, I ask each woman to tell the group what kind of flower she sees in herself. The discussion is usually really engaging on those nights, and fun.”

I reply, “Great metaphor. I like that. Will you give me a copy?” Judy slides her chair from the table to her desk and rummages in a file drawer to get me a copy. People begin cleaning up their paper plates and lunch mess.

Judy reminds me that there is one more chapter. “Chapter Ten is the conclusion, and I can see where you are going, but the draft was rough, more like your notes. I did like the story about how you found CASA to be a sanctuary when your Mom was dying. It shows our sense of humor in the midst of chaotic emotional times, and it shows that we care for each other. CASA was a sanctuary for me many years ago when my life was upside down.” Judy raises her voice, “Now that doesn’t mean there aren’t days I want to
scream or I get a headache from this place, but in the end CASA is a sanctuary. The stories show that.”

“I hope so,” I reply. “Throughout the narratives, I tried to describe a commitment to DV work and research relationships that not only ‘produce knowledge, but also . . . inspire hope and promote caring’ (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1998, p. 58). This hope is the seed of empowering, compassionate lives.” I pause briefly. “Judy you are right I’m looking forward to reworking Chapter Ten because the first and the last chapters are so important.”

As I pack up my bag to leave the Shelter, one of the advocates asks, “So what happens now?”

I reply, “Your feedback will be the inspiration for me to write an introduction. Then I’ll review the whole thing and bring you a copy of the next draft, a polished version. If my professors approve that version, then we have a dissertation defense, which is like a presentation of the research. I’ll definitely let you know when that’s scheduled, and I hope a few people from CASA will attend.”

The staff members nod their heads. “I think you could publish this for other shelters and advocates to read,” one of the advocates offers.

Laughing, I say, “That would be a dream, and the next big project. Right now I just want to graduate, but I hope you are right about the publication!”
Chapter Two

Ferocious Activism, Collaboration, and Compassion

Reframing the Distance between Self and Others

One e-mail message changed my life--and my research plans. It planted a seed that eventually grew in different directions, branched into many ideas, and blossomed with relationships. Becoming involved in studying domestic violence work wasn’t my plan, but somehow that’s what evolved. This is my story of how it started.

The whirring of the closing garage door grates on my frazzled nerves as I return home and drop my duffle bag in the hall. Tossing my keys and mail in the wicker basket on the golden teak bookshelf, I sigh, exhausted from juggling work and school while trying to care for my Mom, exhausted in a way I never could have imagined. During the past five days at Mom’s house, I didn’t sleep well because she was up and down all night and I am worried about her. The comfort of my own bed beckons tonight, but I am determined to catch-up on my e-mail. I turn on the halogen floor lamp and my computer with a practiced and resigned motion. While the e-mail loads, I pour ice-cold green tea into a pottery tumbler. The rustic feel of the stoneware comforts me. Sinking into the large, dark-blue desk chair that slides easily to the desk on the cool champagne colored tiles, I scan the list of e-mail messages, cursing under my breath at the huge number, until I notice the name of my major professor, Carolyn Ellis. Class starts soon, and a
requirement for her advanced qualitative research class is a project that is already in the works. Working all summer on data collection with groups using storytelling and personal narratives to understand leadership characteristics, I am definitely prepared, but lately I’ve been questioning my goals for the future. When I read Carolyn’s e-mail message, my skin tingles like something is sliding up the back of my neck. Maybe it’s the ice cold drink, or maybe it’s something else.

From: Carolyn Ellis
To: Elizabeth Curry, Deb Walker, Penny Phillips, Judy Perry, Laura Ellingston, Yasmin Forienza, Elissa Lee
Sent: Tuesday August 22, 2000 3:17 p.m.
Subject: Question – Research Project

Are any of you interested, or do you know a very sensitive graduate student who might want to be involved in getting life stories from women who have been abused and who are in a shelter? I have this wonderful opportunity but I can’t do it myself. It might make a lovely thesis or dissertation project. If we can’t think of anyone, I’ll hand it off to another department or professor. Thanks, Carolyn

Reply
From: Elizabeth Curry
To: Carolyn Ellis
Date: August 22, 2000 9:28 p.m.
This is so strange. I just returned home from taking care of Mom for a few days. I took her to church, but I think it might be her last time. She’s getting weaker and weaker, can hardly walk from curb to church door. She can’t breathe, can’t see very well, or even hear the priest. Soon I think I’ll need to move into her house to care for her. Mom doesn’t want to ask me, but she needs help even with simple chores. She is happy when I’m there. But I just can’t face it yet, because there have just been so many changes in my life in past year. Anyway, while we were in church I prayed for the openness to recognize whatever path God wanted for me. I meditated on continuing to be being receptive to changes in my life. I was trying to resist the urge to stay safe and continue the same work I’ve done for years. I wanted to cleanse my mind of the confusion surrounding my research goals. So I asked God to give a sign that was as clear as possible. When I got your e-mail it gave me chills!

Caring for Mom reminds me to treasure the time we have. Her spirituality is rubbing off on me too. At 50 I’m trying to figure out the next phase of life. My work with women in leadership has led me to wonder about how I could use my research to make a difference in women’s lives.

I’m still not sure I’m the right person for this project about abuse or if it’s the right project for me, but I’d like to explore it with you. I was wondering if someone with more personal experience with domestic violence might be better. But then I thought about how we are all unique/special. We develop different strengths through our life experiences and bring those strengths to each new
experience. I think I can be a very good listener and facilitator. I can refrain from judging people, which helps them feel safe. I can be patient and gentle and I care about empowering women. So maybe this project is part of the new chapter in my life.

Reply

From: Carolyn
To: Elizabeth
Sent: August 23, 2000 11:39 a.m.

Well I couldn’t be more delighted!!!! Deb Walker also expressed an interest. Want to do a joint project? Or you could both work independently at the same site. Deb has been interested in volunteers and I know you could find another area to study.

You’d be exquisite as an interviewer. The women would warm right up to you and trust you. You know I’ve had trouble getting into your library leadership project, though I’m sure that we can figure it out. You decide and we will make it work. I love working with you, love your head and your heart. But I have to say that topics about life stories, trauma, aging, care giving and intense personal challenges just naturally arouse my passion. This project excites me!

I’ll ask Marcie Finkelstein at the Center for Engaged Scholarship to schedule a meeting with the director of CASA so we can talk about possibilities.
University Community Initiative Planning Meeting, September 7, 2000

I’m feeling uncomfortable. We sit in a drab, windowless room with scarred brown wooden tables covering most of the floor space, arranged so that people are separated by a wide expanse and there is little space between the chairs and wall. One wall is covered with a dusty blackboard. Marcie Finkelstein, Director of the Center for Engaged Scholarship, arranged a meeting for the CASA and university representatives that might result in a university community initiative grant project (UCI). I notice that there is no agenda, background information, or contact list of participants. This bothers me, but I decide that it’s an informal meeting so maybe an agenda isn’t necessary. As we wait, the setting feels awkward, but there is an informality to the preliminary chatter. At first I think this is much different from other collaborative meetings I’ve facilitated, but then I realize it is the familiar feeling of exploring the unknown, of beginning to form a new group and forging relationships.

We are waiting for Linda Osmundson, Executive Director of CASA, who arrives in a somewhat harried state, clutching a campus map. “I’m sorry to be late. It is impossible to find parking here and I got turned around looking for this building!” We laugh sympathetically. Linda is wearing a light, sand colored pants suit with a turquoise blouse and artistic jewelry. Her face is framed by a mass of white curly hair. I notice her outfit and think about how it is similar to what I wore when I was the executive director of a non-profit organization before coming to graduate school. We commiserate with

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4 Other versions of this story have been written for the UCI grant proposal, an introduction to the CASA booklet (Ellis, 2002), a book chapter (Ellis, 2004, pp. 269-271), and my colleague, Deborah C. Walker’s dissertation on volunteers (2005). In this version of the narrative, I elaborate my perspective on the meeting.
Linda and introduce ourselves as she gets settled: Carolyn Ellis, professor of Communication and Sociology; Deborah C. Walker and I (Elizabeth A. Curry) doctoral students in Communication; Penny Phillips a university employee who graduated from the Communication Department; and Sarah Jones from the Women’s Studies Department.

Deb and I planned what we would wear—not suits, but not grubby, wrinkled graduate student clothes either. I guess you might call it “business casual.” We notice that Carolyn also has dressed for the occasion in a flowing skirt. This all signals a special occasion. At the time, none of us knew how extraordinary the experience would become.

Marcie Finkelstein seems very pleased that we have all come together. I think of her as a “smiler” by nature. Marcie briefly explains how she and Linda met at a fundraising dinner and adds that Carolyn’s expertise in stories would be a good fit with Linda’s needs. Then Marcie turns to Linda, “So tell us about CASA and your ideas.” It bothers me that there is not even a verbal agenda, or if there is, it is very loose, open-ended, and implied. I wonder about the purpose and the process, something that I teach in my classes on facilitation and meeting management. Shaking off my concerns, I listen, trying to be open to what is happening.

Linda begins, “I’ve been frustrated with researchers who think that surveys and numbers can tell the full story. I look at the potential harm that researchers can cause. I look at the motivation of researchers, what they are trying to get and what they are going to give us, or what's the benefit. Some researchers administer long interview questionnaires that can actually cause harm to the residents of shelters. Women tell their
story to these strangers because they desperately want to be heard. Then the researcher leaves, and we're left with a Shelter of women who feel “unglued.” They're sad, angry, grieving, and upset. Researchers can sometimes re-victimize these victims of domestic abuse. Even if they don't harm residents, they often don't give back anything. Abused women never get to tell their whole story! That’s what I want--a chance for women to share their stories.” Linda pauses. I am struck by the passion and sincerity of her voice. We all lean forward eagerly and give Linda our full attention. She has drawn us into her story.

Carolyn comments, “Story telling is what interests us. In our Communication and Sociology studies, we’ve concentrated on narrative as both a product and method of research. We want to hear your story.”

“The courts and the police want to hear only about the actual incident of physical abuse,” Linda continues, “not 15 years of psychological and physical torment. There is so much more. People blame the women for the abuse in the courts, law enforcement, hospitals, the news media, and sometimes their families in subtle ways. These women are victims who suffer tragic circumstances, but even more so, they are courageous survivors with strong spirits and survival skills. People ask me, ‘why don’t they leave?’ These people don’t understand how dangerous it can be when a woman leaves her abuser. I say, let’s turn that question around and ask ‘Why do the abusers hurt their victims?’ Why does society tolerate domestic violence? At CASA we do all kinds of outreach to help people understand the stories of abuse, but we always need to do even more.” I am
deeply affected by her framing of the question and reframing the way we look at abuse. The word ‘courageous’ awakens my curiosity.

“So CASA is concerned with supporting the voices of those who don’t get heard,” Sarah interjects, “which is an important feminist principle. Their voices need to be heard and their stories need to be told in order to change things!” Deb and I nod, pause, and turn toward Carolyn in deference to her role as our professor.

Carolyn asks Linda, “What are the ways that you work with the survivors’ stories now?”

“Unfortunately even when women are housed at CASA, the staff only has time and resources to listen to part of the story. Sometimes the women tell us the most disturbing parts of their life stories on the day they leave the shelter. ‘My boyfriend killed someone or saw someone kill someone,’ one woman said almost as she was walking out the door, as though she just needed to leave the story behind.”

“We can be part of giving voice to women who have experienced abuse. If we collect stories, we need to be sure that we include all the marginalized voices—minorities, lesbians, the elderly, disabled,” Susan suggests. “We must be inclusive in our project.”

Linda describes CASA’s services to the deaf community, the elderly, lesbians, and communities of color. I begin to feel like the project has gotten too big, unmanageable, and unrealistic. I just can’t see it and I think, “Marcie should do something. She is the meeting facilitator. We should be recording ideas on a flip chart, but maybe that’s too formal. Maybe I’m just not right for this project; this is just not for me.” Then I remind myself that we are brainstorming possibilities, trying to listen for
opportunities, not problems. I also remind myself that I can clarify our scope as a participant, ask questions to narrow the approach, or take notes to record ideas myself. Awareness of the process can be a hindrance sometimes, so I try to refocus on content.

Linda continues, “When I was in England I was given a copy of a booklet of stories told by women living in poverty and abuse. It is a simple format, but very moving and powerful. These stories helped me understand their lives better.”

“We could offer writing workshops,” Deb says, “like Carolyn does in her classes, and the women could learn to write using personal narratives.”

Linda shakes her head to indicate a negative response. “We already offer journaling in our support groups for shelter residents. We need people to write the stories for us and with us, not add one more job to already overloaded schedules. Our staff is stretched to the limit, and the crisis-oriented nature of the work is stressful.” Linda closes that window of opportunity firmly.

“Do the staff members ever get to tell their stories?” Carolyn asks.

“Well, no, not really. The women who work as staff members and volunteers at CASA don’t leave their stories behind,” Linda says forcefully. “They come here, often survivors of abuse themselves. Their work is a daily reminder of their own stories,” she replies, seeming intrigued by Carolyn’s inquiry. “And that’s a need they have--for someone to listen to them. You know, sometimes I don’t even know which staff member is a survivor. Sometimes we don’t have time to share our stories until we are attending a conference together and sharing a room or going to a survivors’ caucus together.”
I can sense that we are getting closer to what I call the “golden nugget” of our discussion, but we aren’t there yet. We are sifting through the ideas to find a gem that glitters enough to captivate the group. “What can we do for you? How can we help you meet your needs? Do you have a project in mind?” I ask, building on Carolyn’s question.

I can tell by Linda’s open-eyed and smiling expression that she likes the unexpected questions. “I’m not sure,” she says thoughtfully, “but I’m hoping for a different approach. In the past, we’ve felt ripped off because researchers come and do surveys, and then they often don’t even share their results. When they do, the results often have little to do with the reality we live. I’m mainly interested in working with people who will take the time to understand what really goes on at CASA. We need research that reflects people’s lives, not research that uses insignificant questions and snippets out of context to test somebody’s research hypothesis. We need the women’s stories from their perspectives told in the context of their whole experience. Something like *Women in the Trees*, a book of short stories about abuse from the 1800s to the 1990s edited by Susan Koppelman (1996), or I’ll show you the booklet from England.” Deb and I make notes so that we can find copies of the short stories.

“That makes sense,” I say. “So the CASA story is comprised not just of the stories of residents, but also your stories and the stories of staff and volunteers,” I continue, summarizing what has been said so far. It is a moment where I begin to see the possibility for a project. The glimmer is spreading. Linda nods enthusiastically. I ask, “What if we constructed a project where Deb and I would participate in CASA activities
over an agreed period of time? I’d be particularly interested in staff, their path to becoming staff, how they create meaning in their work.”

“I’ve been studying volunteers in other programs already,” Deb contributes. “I could concentrate on them. I’m interested in why people become volunteers, and how their participation affects their own stories and their families.”

Linda nods, “Yes, we need to understand our volunteers better. Many of our volunteers have personal or family connections to domestic violence.”

“Although I can’t participate full-time in the project, I’d like to give my performance on being abused by my former husband, the one I did for Carolyn’s methods class,” says Penny. “I’d want to focus on how I came, through performance and personal writing, to restructure my story from one where I was a victim to one that highlights the complex interpersonal and performative dynamics between me and my former husband.”

"That might be very helpful,” Linda muses, but she doesn’t elaborate.

I ask Linda, “So you think it could be helpful for us to work with CASA on the stories of the staff and volunteers?”

“Many of us have experienced the same horrors that those who come to us for help have faced. Some of our mothers and sisters lived the nightmare of abuse. All of us have our own stories that brought us to CASA. We listen and cry silent tears for the women whose stories we hear. Our personal stories are woven around and through the stories of the women and children we cherish at CASA. This story about us has rarely

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5 In her book, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*, Carolyn Ellis (2004, p.269-283) writes the story of Penny’s class project, as well as the impact of her performance at CASA.
been told. This project could make a real difference in the way people see violence against women.”

I have a sense that we have found the project swirling in all our ideas, and from the eager participation of others around the table, I think they feel the same way. By listening to each other, we have sifted the golden nugget out of the process and many possibilities. As an articulate, charismatic, assertive activist, Linda offers alternative frames and different ways of thinking. As we come together to craft a project, relationships will be critical. Clearly, involvement and collaboration will be key ingredients for CASA.

Linda now is leaning toward us with a big smile. Carolyn adds, “My colleague and friend, Doni Loseke, Chair of the Sociology Department, has written a book on women’s shelters, and I know she is intrigued by the organizational components and policy implications (Loseke, 1992). From what she has told me, research on the workers and internal operations is rather limited in the literature (Iliffe & Steed, 2000; Loseke, 1992; Matesa, 1995; Priestman, 1995). I’m willing to sponsor a UCI [University-Community Initiative] proposal to get funding for a narrative project, and I’d provide methodological guidance. Not hypothesis testing,” Carolyn assures Linda quickly. “By concentrating on how people create stories about their work, we could focus on the meaning of the experiences. We would work with you to co-construct stories, not just write about you. It would be a collaborative project.”
Deb contributes, “Elizabeth and I could be in the trenches, volunteering, trying to understand CASA from the inside out. We’d hope to produce evocative stories that give readers a sense of the experience and make them feel some of what goes on there.”

“Yes, we could also create a product from the experience,” I add, “one that would be helpful to the CASA community, something you could use in your outreach and training. Maybe something like the booklet or the book your mentioned, our own *Women in the Trees* (Koppelman, 1996); only this booklet would have stories of staff and volunteers.”

“That’s it!” Linda exclaims, now beaming. “That is what I’ve been hoping for, and I didn’t even know it until our meeting today. A booklet of stories about staff and volunteers, about CASA’s work, would be unlike any research we’ve ever done.”

“This really is a collaboration between the community and the university,” says Marcie Finkelstein, who has been quietly taking it all in. “It’s not just university professors using the community for their own benefit. As Director of the Center for Engaged Scholarship, I have been hoping for a project just like this one. I feel sure that if you write a cohesive UCI grant proposal, it will get funded.”

“Assuming we do get funded,” I say, “I also would consider chronicling our collaborative process, perhaps producing a paper that provides a model of successful collaboration between the university and community.” I’m thinking about my extensive experience with grant writing and facilitating collaborative projects. I could make a difference here and bridge my academic and work experience. In some of my academic work, the synergy of a cohesive team seems lacking, and the CASA project offers the
opportunity for such collaborative work. Still, I’m hesitant to abandon my original project that I’ve spent three months researching. What will my library colleagues think? They were so interested and cooperative during our focus groups on leadership and organizational stories. I’m torn, yet I feel a part of the excitement that pervades the room.

Linda says, “This has been such an affirming meeting, to be with a group of women academics who listen, share, and look for connection. I’d like you to discuss the idea with the CASA staff and see if they are willing to work with you.”

As Carolyn, Deb, and I walk back to the Communication Department, we review our reactions to the meeting. We all feel like we have found a moment of meaning with Linda (Denzin, 1989). Deb enthusiastically declares, “I’m really psyched about this project. It will fit so well with my studies of volunteers!”

Hesitating, I say, “I’m interested in the possibility of working on the stories of staff and Linda’s framing is provocative. I’m not sure what to do with my other project, so I’ll think about it and let you know before class in a few days.” Wondering about how much time it would take to change projects, I begin thinking of schedules. Caring for my Mom 60 hours a week, doing a few days of consulting each month, and going to school often overwhelms me unless I break things down into smaller steps. Constantly organizing is my effort to stave off the chaos.

Driving home from campus across the long bridge, surrounded for miles by the blue sky and the blue-green water, feels unsettling. Thinking about how working on domestic violence would fit into my roles and identities as librarian, trainer, consultant,
executive director, and information technologist, I have trouble seeing myself as part of this project. One thought keeps returning: I don’t really know anything about domestic violence. But then a compromise surfaces. Maybe I could just do a one-semester project--helping with the grant proposal, since Deb and Carolyn have less grant experience. That seems like a possibility and I start thinking of what I can do, instead of what I can’t.

That evening, I browse the CASA web site and various links to domestic violence sites, gathering information as I internally debate my options. On-line I order the book Linda mentioned and several other titles, non-fiction and memoirs. Still feeling uncertain, I call several friends and colleagues to discuss a potential change in my research focus and site from library leaders to CASA workers. The surprising stories I hear lead to my final decision.

The Revelation of Friends

At my kitchen table, with notes spread on the large, whitewashed surface, I doodle while talking to my friend Yvonne on the phone. After listening to my description of the meeting about CASA, she doesn’t tell me what to do, but asks questions, leading me to realize the project would draw on the collaboration and facilitation skills that I’ve been using for the past 20 years, just in a different field. We also touch on the potential ethical dilemmas that might arise if I research the leadership classes I’m teaching as a consultant, as I’d planned (Cheek, 2000; Christians, 2000). Would the participants change their interactions if they were part of a research project?
How would my relationship with the emerging leaders be different? Would my writing be impacted because I’m paid to conduct the classes?

Then Yvonne says with almost no emotion in her voice. “I have something very difficult to tell you. I was abused.” Stunned, I listen. “It was years ago. Carl’s drinking had gotten worse and worse. When I finally decided it was time to leave him, he exploded and tried to lock me in the bedroom.” In her long pause, the hum of my old refrigerator invades the silence of the room with a distracting and irritating sound. “As I ran out of the house, he chased me, grabbing my hair, ripping my clothes, and slapping me really hard. I ran to a neighbor’s house to call the police. Carl was so attentive at first, but then he got more and more possessive, critical, and violent. I thought it was his drinking, but that was just another excuse.” Her voice trails off, beginning to choke.

I grip the phone tighter and push it toward my ear, listening to her with my whole body. Her disclosure makes me feel empty and flushed hot. I don’t think I am shocked that she had been a victim, or am I? I know that I am surprised that she hadn’t confided in me before. “You never told me,” I reply softly.

“I just couldn't,” Yvonne's voice became a whisper. "I was so ashamed."

“I wish I could have helped you” I say, ashamed that somehow I didn’t know about her pain, that she didn’t feel she could tell me. But on some level maybe I knew. She left him quickly and never talked about why. I’m flooded with emotions, guilty and confused, but angry that the victim was still the one who felt she was at fault for her abuse. She couldn’t tell a friend because she thought that somehow the violence was her fault.
“You did help me later. You were always telling me about projects we could do together. It was a low point in my life, when I didn’t have any strength or confidence, but it felt good to know that I had your respect. Sometimes you think I’m smarter than I think I am. And don’t forget that you always tell me that we’re smarter together.” We laugh and end the call with promises to keep in touch. Absently, I put a bag of popcorn into the microwave. The smell, salty taste, and crunch help me refocus. But my thoughts are still swirling, so I call Wanda, another friend.

When I tell Wanda about the potential project with a shelter, I don’t mention Yvonne. There is a pause on the phone line, and then Wanda tries to sound casual as she tells me, “I was abused for nine years in my first marriage, before I met you.”

“Nine years? But you never mentioned it,” I stammer, thinking of all our late-night conversation and confidences. I even remember sharing ex-husband jokes.

“Well, it was in the past,” she replies. “Silence is a habit in the military. Imagine a drill sergeant who demands obedience at home, too. Things are different for me now, so part of me wants to forget, but another part of me wants to remember. If you decide to work with the shelter, it might be incredibly rough for you emotionally. I know, I volunteered for several years. Seemed like many of those working there were survivors. You can do it; just take care that the traumatic situations and crisis-oriented environment don’t overwhelm you. Our volunteer trainer used to talk to us about compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma (Aschoff, 2000; Denzin, 1996; Fullerton & Ursano, 1997; Marotta, 2000; Matesa, 1995; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Saakvitne & Pearlman, 1996; Schauben & Frazier, 1995; Wilson & Raphael, 1993).”
These stories shock me because I haven’t heard them before. My friends’ experiences resonate with Linda’s description of silenced stories. For many years I have cared about women’s issues, including violence against women, but I still didn’t think domestic violence could happen to educated, competent, and confident women who had good jobs. I wonder if I have been benevolently blaming the victims, a realization that shocks me even more. Like many people, I was distancing myself from trauma by assuming I could control the violence, thus rejecting its chaotic realities (Brison, 2002; Greenspan, 1998). People find comfort in blaming victims because that means they have control over their own life situations. If we have control, then we can avoid the horrors of violence and set ourselves apart from victims. Otherwise, the chaos of violence seems unexplainable and thus unavoidable (Brison, 2002). Meeting with Linda and hearing about survivors challenged me to think about my beliefs.

Over the next four years, my research relationships would change me even more, and I would learn that we are all potential victims and survivors. I met many CASA staff members who told me that they hadn’t planned to work in domestic violence, but their work at CASA changed their lives. I met staff members who had personal and family experience with domestic violence. Most of all, I probed the meaning of domestic violence work and complexities of the core value of empowerment in the lives of those who undertake this work.

A significant culmination of this research is my experience attending the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) conference four years later, which helped me frame my experiences with CASA in a broader context.
Arriving at the NCADV Conference

Clunk! The elevator door closes. Sighing, I trudge forward and scan the hotel room numbers. My feet are throbbing and my shoulder is cramped from the weight of my bulging briefcase. I’m weary, mentally and physically, from traveling for the past week on consulting trips and crossing several time zones today. Pulling my suitcase down the turquoise and maroon hallway, I’m careful not to bump my jacket pocket and crush the macadamia nut, chocolate chip cookies the desk clerk gave me at check-in.

The hotel room is empty when I arrive. At first, I’m surprised that Linda is not in the room because it is 1:00 a.m., but then I remember that although my body feels like it is 1:00 a.m., it is only 11:00 p.m. here in Denver. Wondering which bed will be mine, I drop my briefcase on the floor and park my suitcase next to the dresser. This is the first time Linda and I have roomed together at a conference, so we haven’t developed any roommate routines. On the bed near the window, I see a thick spiral booklet, an envelope, a pile of colored papers, and a note with my name. Kicking off my shoes, I plop on the bed to read the note. “Elizabeth, I knew you would arrive too late to register so I picked up your name tag, conference program schedule, and a few things for you. I went to a pre-conference reception for survivors but I won’t be too late. See you later, Linda.”
Sighing again, not sure I have the energy yet to read the hefty conference program, I begin to sift through the pile. A button slides onto the bed: Empower - Don’t Evaluate is emblazoned in large, white letters across the deep-purple background. The slogan is provocative and effective because empowerment is so important to the activists who work against domestic violence (DV). They believe in fostering environments that create opportunities for self-determination and self-actualization. An empowering philosophy rejects the perception that victims of abuse are sick or deficient people who need a clinical diagnosis or evaluation. Illusive and sometimes ambiguous, empowerment is critical for our collaborative relationships. This is what intrigues me personally and drives my work. Empowerment is the core of my research, and the button seems like a sign to me that the conference will be a meaningful event.

I think fleetingly about my piles of dissertation work at home. My body tightens with stress. My neck cracks, and my mind wanders. There never seems to be enough time to write. Why did I come to this conference? More research? I don’t need more data after almost four years. Curiosity? In the end, I guess the answers are simple. I came to NCADV because I thought that attending the professional conference would help me understand the work of DV advocates and activists. Linda Osmundson, Executive Director of CASA, invited me to come and spend time with her and I enjoy her company. Also, I was attracted by the conference organizers’ efforts to build coalitions between researchers and practitioners, the same goal that first inspired my work with CASA in 2000.
The hotel room door opens and Linda greets me, “Glad you made it! You must be tired.” I nod with a weary smile. Dumping her purse on the desk, she points to the piles on my bed, “I’ll show you the schedule and help you get started if you have the energy.”

“Thanks! After 10 hours of travel driving back and forth from Fort Lauderdale to Tampa and then flying out here to Denver, I’m definitely flagging. But I perked up when the hotel gave me home-baked cookies at check-in. I got two so you can have one, too. They are huge!”

Linda sits cross-legged on the bed across from me and says, “Thanks! I got one when I checked in yesterday, but I’ll take another one tonight.”

As we munch our cookies, I flip through the conference program. “It’s strange. I really don’t know what to expect. I’ve gone to lots of different state and national library, education, and communication conferences. There are basic conference formats, but they are all unique, too. Any suggestions? I’ll take my cues from you during this one, since you know the boring speakers to avoid!” We laugh together.

“Yes, I know most of the speakers. After 20 years I’m one of the old-timers with this group. Usually I do a presentation of some sort, but NCADV planners didn’t invite me to speak this year. My ego is intact because I was asked to deliver the keynote speech for an international conference in Australia this fall. Sometimes it’s difficult when you’ve been around for so long. At NCADV conferences, I occasionally go to programs to get re-inspired or to meet new people, so that I can have lively discussions. At this
point in my career, one of my major interests is mentoring new leaders in the Battered
Women’s Movement, as we’ve discussed before.”

Linda briefly explains to me the founding of NCADV, the organizational
structure, and the relationships among other national organizations. “Look in the front of
the program and you’ll find NCADV’s herstory, principles of unity, ethics, mission, etc.”
She reads aloud, “Our new mission statement is to ‘organize for collective power by
advancing transformative work, thinking and leadership of communities and individuals
working to end violence in our lives’ (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
(NCADV), 2004). This is the 25th anniversary of NCADV and the first year that we’ve
had a specific track to include researchers and practitioners, so it’s an experiment, a new
chapter in radical organizing for change. DVRAC [Domestic Violence Research &
Action Coalition] was formed last year through the impetus of Barbara Paradiso at the
University of Colorado. I’ll be sure to introduce you to her, and you’ll probably want to
attend some of the research-oriented programs.” Linda hands me a bottle of water and
advises me, “Don’t forget to drink lots of water in this hot, dry climate and with the high
altitude.” We both drink deeply.

Browsing through the program for a few minutes, we scribble notes and make
comments. I tell Linda, “I definitely want to attend the Colorado Grassroots Action
Research program and the discussion group specifically about researchers and
practitioners, which should be a good networking opportunity. From the program
descriptions, it seems that much of the research is focused on domestic violence, services
to victims, and some on community collaboration. I don’t see much research specifically on staff,” I observe casually.

Linda points out another program, “Right, but look at page 59, ‘Collaborative Inquiry: Constructionist Research for Organizational and Social Change’ by Rose Pullman and Susan Roche, which seems like it might be relevant to CASA’s reorganization and our goals for revitalizing CASA’s mission and philosophy with staff.” I mark my program as Linda continues, “See the reception that will feature the poster sessions with researchers and practitioners. I took the CASA booklets (Curry et al., 2002) down to the display tables this afternoon. People were already taking copies, which is good because I’m determined not to ship anything back home!” We continue to review our program books and chat. Linda tells me about the speakers and the issues.

Flipping through the pages of the program I observe, “Here’s something interesting! ‘Respectful Yet Ferocious Advocacy.’ That program title interests me because the activists are powerful and assertive, often angry over injustice, but the feminist philosophies of the Battered Women’s Movement also stress compassion and empowerment.”

“That’s Susan McGee, right?” Linda replies, “You saw her at the FCADV [Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence] conference. She was the first keynoter. She’s really good. Do you remember her?”

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6 The booklet of stories cited here was one of the goals and a major deliverable of the UCI grant project. The process of creating the booklet is one of the important layers of this dissertation, and the final product will be referred to as the CASA booklet in subsequent chapters.
“Now I do! She was very powerful, funny, sad, and very political. How about Ellen Pence? Or Irene Weiser?”

Ellen is a major figure in the Movement, and she has a Ph.D., but doesn’t use the title much. Ellen was instrumental in developing the Power & Control Wheel that we use from the Duluth Model (Pence, Paymar, Ritmeester, & Shaepard, 1993). The National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence also has adapted the idea and created the Advocacy Wheel, the Community Accountability Wheel etc. (www.ncdav.org). Irene is new to the Movement, but she started Stop Family Violence and uses technology as a grassroots tool to provide information and develop political support (www.stopfamilyviolence.org). I’ve known Ellen for a long time, but I just recently met Irene at a march for women in Washington, DC.

“Here’s another program, ‘Ethical Communication: Building Coalitions with Coworkers.’ I’ve heard CASA staff talk about ethical communication. Maybe I should go to that,” I muse, while chewing on my pen. My late-night eating habit surfaces, and I wish I had about four more cookies or something salty for a snack.

“Lydia is an excellent trainer, but that program would probably be too simplistic for you.”

“I’m sure I’d recognize most of the ideas, but I’m interested in how she presents the topic. I want to understand the domestic violence perspective, which would help me work with the CASA staff.”

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7 The Power and Control Wheel is extensively used with staff, victims, and batterers to categorize violent, abusive behaviors. Further information is available from www.duluth-model.org or www.ncadv.org.
Linda hesitates. “I can send you some literature. Several of our staff members went to the training, but I’m not sure if the CASA staff has completely internalized the philosophy. That is all related to defining empowerment with the CASA staff because I think at times we support the women we serve more than we support each other.”

It is almost 12:30 a.m. (or actually 2:30 a.m. for me), so we arrange our wake-up calls and shower schedules. Sliding under the sheets, I hug the pillow and melt into the bed wearily. Linda says, “The plenary session tomorrow is on human trafficking, those sessions are the big-picture social justice topics. Then we have a memorial planned for two of the Movement’s leaders, Susan Schechter and Sandra Comacho. You can sleep late in the morning if you want.”

“No, I want to go, even though it’s early,” I mumble. “Susan’s book was one of the first works about DV that you gave me to read (Schechter, 1982). I want to be a part of the memorial. This conference feels like a really important part of my CASA experiences, my relationship with you, and understanding DV work. Thanks for inviting me, but I’m fading now. Don’t worry about the lights. I can sleep through just about anything.” Rolling over, I quickly fall asleep, while Linda sits at the desk to catch up on her e-mail messages.

Plenary Session and Memorializing Compassionate Activists

As I walk toward the ballroom for the first plenary session, the hallway is crowded with display tables, people, and voices. As women greet Linda, she introduces me. Noticing the casual dress, interesting jewelry, and comfortable shoes that many of
the participants are wearing, I feel at ease with the group. After pouring ourselves tall
glasses of water, we settle into our chairs. Soon the session begins with Rita Smith,
NCADV’s executive director, acknowledging long-time conference participants, as well
as the first timers like me. Rita introduces the keynote panel entitled, “This Human is
Not for Sale: Human Trafficking,” with speakers who address the law, social dynamics,
team responses, and global case studies, as well as the connections between human
trafficking and domestic violence. The statistics and the examples are staggering. I think
about how the program fits into the advice of my dissertation committee member, Dr.
Kathleen de la Peña McCook, who wants to be sure that the issues of DV collaboration
and empowerment are positioned in the larger context. Those attending the conference
care about violence in society and those who are oppressed in the broadest sense,
focusing on social justice and human rights for women, children, and families. My
approach often centers on the stories of individuals--the personal that ultimately becomes
the political. The conference is organized to blend both elements.

When the applause for the panel quiets, an African-American woman with a
husky body and booming voice comes to the platform and announces, “Now we will
begin our memorial session. To help us shift our energy and spirit, please join me in a
song.” Many voices immediately meld with her deep melody. The group sings a refrain,
like a chant, and a slow, rhythmic clapping spreads throughout the ballroom.

I love being a woman deep down in my soul.

I love being a woman deep down in my soul.

The rhythm changes to a faster pace,
Deep, deep.

Deep, deep.

Deep down. Deep down.

The song continues,

Deep down in my soul,

Deep down in my soul.

I love being a woman deep down in my soul.

I love being a woman deep down in my soul.

As the sound envelopes the space, the speaker continues, “I acknowledge all the men in the audience. You can sing, too. Sing ‘I love women,’ or acknowledge your feminine side and sing, ‘I love being a woman deep down in my soul’.”

The song continues.

Deep, deep.

Deep, deep.

Deep down. Deep down.

I love being a woman deep down in my soul.

I love being a woman deep down in my soul.”

As my singing is painfully off-key, I usually confine it to church, but today I sing out passionately in a loud voice that fills my spirit.

Shifting to another space mentally, I feel a change in the audience and within myself. The group is somber now. On two large screens we watch videos about the lives of Susan Schechter and Sandra Comacho. Large black and white posters of quotations,
all with the heading, “Inspiring Words,” surround the room. Audience members are
invited to the front of the stage to eulogize their colleagues. I’m unfamiliar with Sandra
Comacho or her work, but feel touched as the participants talk about her as a “peaceful
warrior” who inspired and empowered others with a combination of fearless strength and
gentle love. Several speakers mention how she rejected negativism and looked for
possibilities. The multiple meanings implied by the phrase “peaceful warrior” zing back
and forth like a slinky in my head. Captivated by the challenge of fulfilling divergent
roles, I feel like I know her because I strive to embrace her outlook.

Susan Schechter is memorialized next, and I feel a strong connection to her
through her writing. A woman in a black T-shirt with short salt-and-pepper hair says,
“Susan was an activist. She was a major part of our history, a mentor to many. At a time
when radical social change is giving way to personnel policies and credentials, Susan
gave us strength to hold onto our truths. At her funeral we didn’t talk about her books,
but about our relationships and her loving persona.” There is a pause as the speaker’s
voice wavers but then becomes strong again. “She was loving, but she hated researchers
who created false knowledge, hated the way society makes women pay for male violence,
and hated the tendency to oversimplify things. Probably Susan would have hated my
overly simple list.” Many people in the audience laugh sadly. “I didn’t know I loved
Susan until her funeral,” the speaker’s voice trembles again. “I liked her, respected her.
Sometimes I thought she was a prima donna, but I wish I had told her I loved her. So
today I’ll tell all of you.” The room is overflowing with quiet that reflects a spiritual
feeling of community and testimony, almost like in church. I am filled with the love the speaker just shared, as well as the sense of a greater purpose.

Next on stage, a younger African-American woman with long braids, gold earrings, and a stylish ivory blouse looks at the crowd with a gentle smile that matches her words. “Susan and I often disagreed about different fundamental issues, but we both cared passionately. She was easy to disagree with because she was generous about our differences. Susan was intense, serious, and vigilant about the voices of survivors. She made a permanent imprint on me and I learned empowerment from her example and leadership from my relationship with her.” I note the phrase “generous about differences,” which to me means assuming the best you can about people. It is the essence of empowerment, dialogic communication, and collaborative relationships that open conversation rather than critique or judge (Hammond, Anderson, & Cissna, 2003; Josselson, 1995; McNamee & Gergen, 1999). The button slogan, “Empower -- Don’t Evaluate” comes to my mind.

Then a short woman with a ponytail speaks into the microphone in an emphatic voice. “I was pulled into this work because Susan made me feel that it was the most important work in the world! She showed me how to be compassionate while being radical, even when I wasn’t very good at compassionate communication. I’d be getting riled up wanting to tell someone off, and Susan would gently put her hand on my arm so that I would pause and think. She could tell people truths, but in a loving way, so that people could hear it.” At that moment, I wish I had met Susan Schechter and interviewed her or watched her activism in action before she died.
Linda walks to the front and takes a microphone, “Susan was a leader in many ways: in what she wrote, what she said, and how she lived her life. I admired Susan’s ability to speak about the hard things that needed saying, but she did it in such a sincere, approachable way. People listened to Susan because she was open to multiple voices. She listened. She could even be open to those who we thought were enemies. I know that I’m not always good at that, so Susan was an inspiration and an example. She practiced activism with a gentle spirit, but she was a strong, solid cornerstone of our Movement.”

As the memorial continues, I am moved to tears, and my body feels prickly with emotions and memories, like I’m wearing a new wool jacket that feels both soft and rough. We have been sitting for a long time, but I no longer notice the hard, cramped seats because my mind is so full. I aspire to live in a way that embodies the compassionate spirits of Susan Schechter and Sandra Comacho, identifying with the challenge of rejecting critical arguments in favor of possibilities and empowerment. Sometimes it is much easier to just focus on the differences and deficits instead of the strengths and commonalities.

I notice how Linda expresses her admiration for Susan’s gentle spirit and think about our first meeting, when Linda seemed charismatic, articulate, and committed, but also determined and very assertive. Some of her comments were highly critical of academia and researchers. My mind wanders back to how our research project began, and how I first learned about CASA, as well as some of the questions I posed to myself: Why did I become part of CASA? What drew me to the project and led me to spend
years researching domestic violence work and the empowerment philosophy? Several possible answers illusively flit through my mind, but none are definitive. Perhaps each answer is comprised of many threads, pulled together in the interlocking stitches of a colorful, crocheted afghan.

The unique way Linda reframed the issues and used the word “courageous” to describe women who experience abuse intrigued me initially. This frame counters the common conception of domestic violence and beckons me to explore it more. As a feminist from the 70s, I was receptive to the discussion of women’s equality. My friends’ surprising personal revelations concerning their abuse and their sense of shame, and my realization that I may contribute to benevolent blame, all spurred me to commit to the UCI project for one year. I saw an opportunity to make a contribution by using my grant writing and collaborative skills in a team project. When the first year was completed, I continued my work with CASA because I had developed relationships with the staff members and a commitment to the organization’s social justice cause. Attending the NCADV conference is a way I can enrich my understanding of the social justice issues and research relationships.

My mind continues to wander, but then I hear the speaker at the NCADV podium say, “Let’s thank our panelists for our plenary session this morning and all of those who organized the memorial ceremony.” The applause is loud and sustained. “We’ve honored the leaders who have inspired our past and with their words, their work, and their love. You are all the future leaders who will share your enthusiasm and inspiration. Enjoy the day until we meet again tomorrow morning for the plenary session on the
prison-industrial complex, the rape culture, and violence in our world. Don’t forget the vendor marketplace and reception tonight for the exhibits.”

As Linda gathers her notebook, she says, “I’m going to a meeting at the Radisson. You said you were going to the research discussion group and then the DVRAC [Domestic Violence Research & Action Coalition] panel. So do you want to reconnect late this afternoon at the exhibits?”

I tell her yes and ask, “Do you know where the Arapahoe Room is?” Linda points down the hall, and we move into the crowd in different directions. Still not sure where the room is located, I clutch my program booklet and floor plan.
Domestic Violence Research: Whose Side Are We on?

Feeling a bit lost; I double-check the conference program one more time for the floor plan of the hotel meeting rooms. Walking down the main hall past the restrooms, I stop at the Arapahoe Meeting Room and check the program marquee, which says, “Domestic Violence Research: Whose Side Are We on?” and I close my program. I’ve arrived. My body relaxes as I slide into one of the chairs arranged in the circle. It is obvious that the room had been set up in a traditional classroom style, but has been rearranged into a smaller circle, with extra chairs stacked along the side wall.

At first it seems like most people know each other, but they also greet me warmly with smiles and nods. The moderator signals that it’s time to begin and says, “Welcome! This is the first session of the research track for the conference. Our goal is to bridge the gap between practitioners’ needs and researchers’ agendas. I want to acknowledge Dr. Barbara Paradiso for her work on the NCADV Board and getting this research track organized.” She gestures to a tall woman with dark hair lightly streaked with grey, as the group applauds.

Barbara begins, “I want to thank all of you who are participating in the discussion group, the poster sessions, and programs throughout the conference. Don’t miss the
program this afternoon on Colorado’s project and DVRAC, which stands for Domestic Violence Research and Action Coalition. That’s my shameless plug for our panel program later today!” The group laughs. “This morning we start our conference track with a discussion about research perspectives. Much of the research on domestic violence has victimized women and hurt the Movement, so we advocate for practitioners and communities setting their own agendas, conducting research themselves, using the vast information they have and partnering with academics who are also becoming part of the Movement. We have many different groups represented here today, so let’s go around the circle and hear from each person. Tell us about your work and research interests.”

As the participants in the discussion group begin their introductions, I search my mind for how I’ll present myself. I struggle to define my identity as an insider and an outsider, both and neither, someone in a liminal space with many roles as an academic, volunteer, collaborator, partner, and action researcher.

I fidget as I seek a succinct way to present myself and the UCI project to the NCADV discussion group. If I could tell the whole story they would understand, but there’s not enough time. When it’s my turn, I say simply, “I’m a researcher and a practitioner. As a graduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida, I’ve been a volunteering for almost four years with CASA in St. Petersburg, Florida. We are involved in a collaborative university-community grant project that started when Linda Osmundson told us that she was tired of researchers who didn’t get it and wasted her time.” I use Linda’s name because I’m aware that some of
the leaders in the group know her. Several people laugh. “Linda and I are exhibiting at the poster session. We are showcasing a booklet of stories that is one result of the project (Curry et al., 2002). What is a bit different about that project and my dissertation is that we are focusing on workers, paid staff, and volunteers. So be sure to get a copy of the booklet, and I’m looking forward to talking with many of you this week, getting acquainted. By the way, this is my first NCADV conference.” People murmur and smile.

The introductions at the discussion group continue with a variety of comments about the difficulties in forging connections between researchers and activists. I think back to the interactive focus group with the CASA staff, where we discussed our assumptions, concerns, and observations on the research process. The challenges we faced and the collaborative relationships we established by working together on the UCI project mirror the concerns of the participants at this NCADV discussion group.

Beginning the research as an outsider to CASA and domestic violence, my goal was to engage in scholarship that would involve CASA staff as partners and co-researchers. Positioning ourselves as co-researchers, we strived for equity and positive frames, rather than describing people as inside or outside of either CASA or the academy. As collaborative partners, we attempted to form new spaces for learning. During the UCI research process, we highlighted the development of trusting relationships.

The NCADV program continues, and I think back to the first meeting with the CASA staff and then the discussion we had later, as we metacommunicated about the
meeting. The story of how the CASA staff analyzed our first meeting demonstrates the empowering nature of our approach and the key points of collaboration.

Reflecting on the Super Glue of Collaboration with CASA Staff

Exiting from the interstate, I clutch the directions against the steering wheel and glance down. The CASA Shelter’s location is confidential. CASA would not even email directions to me the first time I visited a few months ago. Being careful not to miss the turn, I’m thinking about my plan for today: that I would ask participants about their perceptions of our first meeting. Who were we to them? Who are we now to them? Who am I? Our first goal of the UCI project is a direct result of what the CASA executive director told us about previous difficulties with researchers. It is clear that developing relationships must be the foundation of the project, as well as documenting how we develop that collaboration.

Scraping the curb slightly, I parallel park on the narrow, brick street in front of the CASA Shelter. I stuff my directions into the glove compartment and lock it. Walking past the tall, wooden fence up the driveway to the shelter, I think about the rhythm and timing of the environment. During our first visit to the Shelter, Deb Walker and I didn’t stay long. We had an hour during the CASA staff meeting to explore the idea of a research project and the staff definitely regarded us as outsiders at that point. Later, during my first visit to start observing and interviewing, I was concerned about respecting their time, so I planned to stay only an hour. I left three hours later after chatting and joining the staff for lunch. This was such a change from the first staff meeting. Once they decided to let us in, they embraced us and our sense of inclusion evolved quickly.
Today I'm more prepared for the pace of the Shelter, which is often hectic, but
almost homey at times. Staff often must react to crisis situations, juggling their time, the
ups and downs, and the intense interactions, and then unwinding from stress. After
climbing the stairs to the porch, I push the button on the security box. A voice over the
intercom asks me to identify myself, and then I hear the buzzer as the heavy wooden door
is unlocked. Clarissa smiles broadly when I walk into the central work area with modular
desks and overhead cabinets around the perimeter of the room and a huge, mauve, round
table in the center. Boxes of donations, piles of mail, notebooks and files, paperwork, a
library shelf crammed with books, two computers, and a copy machine are all crushed
together in this all purpose area. Clarissa comes toward me with a greeting, “Elizabeth,
come in!” She radiates with her direct, efficient, and ebullient personality. She is
wearing her black hair pulled back so that her large, ornate brass, gold, and silver earrings
dangle to her shoulders unrestricted. Her golden-brown, animal-print jacket compliments
her deep-brown sienna skin.

As we walk toward her office, Clarissa offers me a cup of coffee. At CASA the
coffee pot is always on. A box of glazed donuts sits open on the small, crowded counter.
Judy, a senior staff member who has held numerous positions at CASA for the past 20
years, walks through the cramped corner and greets me in her matter-of-fact way. “I’ve
got reports to do, but I’ll see you on the porch for smoke break.” Judy has been
particularly generous with her time mentoring me. She likes to conduct our interactive
interviews on the porch because it is away from the phones, and it is the only place to
smoke. Learning to be open to the twists and turns of our conversations at CASA, I am
aware that the staff guides the interviews as much as I do. We might start with a general topic or something that I hope we cover, but the interviews are not based on a formal set of questions. The interactive nature of the interviews also builds relationships through our conversations (Ellis & Berger, 2002; Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Madriz, 2000; Reinharz & Chase, 2002).

CASA staff members Judy, Becky, Maria and I smoke and talk on the porch just like new friends in the disclosure phases of our relationship, bonding and sharing stress release. I quit smoking years ago, but lately at CASA I’ve been “chipping,” or what I’d call bumming a smoke, occasionally. Sometimes I wonder about this chipping, which reminds me how tenuous my control is over an acknowledged, self-destructive habit. My mother is debilitated and on oxygen 24 hours a day because her lungs no longer function. Minimizing the problem in my mind because I only smoke at CASA, I’m probably addicted to the camaraderie more than the nicotine.

In Clarissa's office, we sit close, knees almost touching. Her office is the size of a large, walk-in closet at the back corner of the work area. The space is tightly crammed with two tall gray filing cabinets, a desk, two chairs, a computer, and a closet. Recently promoted to the position of Shelter Coordinator, Clarissa needs a private office for her new supervisory and planning responsibilities. My opening comment is general, asking how things have been since my last visit. Clarissa tells me about her promotion and the difficulties of being a new supervisor of other advocates. She freely tells me the details of her challenges supervising personnel. She trusts me, but I must be careful how I write about it because there could be legal ramifications to personnel decisions.
“Clarissa, people are responsible for their own behaviors. When I was a supervisor, I tried hard to remember it's not the supervisor's fault if an employee loses his or her job,” I say empathetically, “especially if you provide coaching and support for the person.”

“That's just what Ellie, my supervisor, says!” Clarissa grins and I'm pleased to have reinforced her supervisor’s advice. “She's a super boss who helps me learn. She's tough too! She doesn’t miss a thing and she tells you about it, but I don't feel defensive. I try to really listen to what she's teaching me. I like to be out in the workroom with other advocates and helping them, but sometimes Ellie reminds me to let them handle their own problems. She tells me, ‘Don't try to fix it for them’ but that’s hard. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

“I know that role. Oh yes, I've been told several times that I'm a rescuer. I know it doesn't really help the other person, but it is just so hard to resist fixing things when you know just how it should be done!” I tell her in a playful, exaggerated, and arrogant tone. We both laugh spontaneously, grab each other's hands, and stomp our feet, laughing.

“Girl! You know just what I mean, being a fixer, a rescuer.” Clarissa seems glad I understand.

I am struck by an obvious, but critical insight, “You know, I'm thinking this all relates to the power and control model that I learned at CASA’s volunteer training. You try to empower women to take control of their lives. You let them make their own
decisions and learn from those decisions. The women who experience controlling situations need some help, but not more control.”

“That's what we are trying to do, not only with the residents, but with staff. You know most of us were victims, then we became survivors, and now we are working for CASA. We want people to make their own decisions, but they need to be accountable, too. Remember when you and Deb came to talk to us the first time about the research project and there was the woman by the door who was sullen, wouldn’t sit at the table, and didn’t speak the whole time. Remember?”

“Yes, Deb and I wondered about her silence and body language. I haven’t seen her since that meeting.” I’m glad we are starting to talk about the meeting because I need to write my quarterly report on the UCI grant project. Yet I think the conversation on supervision is important, too, because I need to understand the organization overall. The concept of empowerment connects the internal staffing issues, the services to shelter residents, and collaborative research.

“It wasn't you. She was having problems with me because she was so defensive about her work problems, so she didn't say a word the whole meeting.”

A telephone call for Clarissa interrupts our conversation and I discretely step out of the office for a cup of tea. The hot water pot is almost empty, so I refill it. I want to look like I’m a part of the group, not just a guest, yet I know that in many ways I am still a visitor who is welcomed into CASA. I wander to the round table and scribble in my notebook as I listen to Becky, one of the advocates, take a crisis-line call. She runs one hand through her short, brown hair as she talks in a low voice; her small body is cramped
forward, listening intently. When she completes the call, she turns, stretches, and explains, “Callers often have multiple issues that surface in the midst of the crisis. We need to help them sort out the problems, so we can give appropriate referrals and they can consider their options. With our empowerment philosophy, we don’t say ‘you must’ or ‘you should’ do this or that. We ask questions, especially about safety planning. We also answer their questions about available resources and options. Crisis calls can be tough, and sometimes they don’t call back or come in. Then I wonder if we’ll read about them in the newspaper. Of course, all the calls are confidential, but staff often can identify the situations reported in the paper. We seem to gravitate to the chocolate jar after tough calls like the one I just had.”

Did she know I was listening? Was she reminding me of the confidentiality, helping me to learn the work, or did she just want to chat? I reply, “I know what you mean. I reach for chocolate as my stress relief, too!” To my ears, my attempt to commiserate falls flat because the stressors are so different. Making a mental note, I decide to bring chocolate for the staff the next time I visit.

The red light blinks off the phone bank as Clarissa finishes her call. Back in her office I remind her, “We were talking about the staff at meeting. I remember the woman with crossed arms because we were worried she was negative about the research project. I'm so glad it wasn't that. As I said in my e-mail, today I want to talk with you and the Shelter staff about your impressions of that first meeting. A report is due for the grant, and I want to reflect the perspectives of all the partners.”
Clarissa replies quickly. Our conversation has an easy, fast-paced rhythm. “Well, when we heard about that first meeting the staff was unsure, but not completely hostile. You got past Linda, our executive director, so that said a lot. We know that she wouldn't let you into CASA unless she was comfortable. You see, we trust our leaders. Your project went through two levels before that staff meeting. Linda talked to the directors' team, as part of the chain. But she didn't dictate the project, just asked us to meet with you and tell her what we thought. Kelly, the Outreach Program Director, was here that day as the representative for the whole directors’ team. Ellie, my supervisor and our Residential Program Director, was out of town that day.”

“I was glad that I met Kelly at CASA’s volunteer training a few weeks before our first meeting,” I reply. “The training helped me understand a bit more about CASA and domestic violence. Kelly seemed like a formidable person at the staff meeting. She had her arms crossed at her chest, and she kept asking Deb and me what we wanted to do in a very direct manner. I didn’t know the supervisory levels specifically at that point, but I knew Kelly’s opinion was influential from the looks at the table during the meeting.”

Clarissa smiles broadly, “Oh yeah, Kelly can be blunt all right. She speaks out, most of us do. I saw you hooking Kelly. You complimented her on her training at the beginning of the meeting. Then throughout the meeting you would validate her training by mentioning what she said. You acknowledged her role in the organization as a leader. You were definitely working her, girl!” We both chuckle.

Quickly explaining, I say, “I was sincere, I really was. Of course, I could tell she was skeptical, so I did try to find connections. Her stories about researchers sounded just
like Linda’s descriptions, with a distrust of academics organization-wide. Everyone was looking at her, deferring to her. Being unsure what CASA and DV were all about, I was acknowledging the expertise of Kelly and the group.”

“Kelly sure wasn’t buying it at first. You got that right! But when she relaxed, the others began to talk. You never got defensive when you answered Kelly’s pointed questions. You were calm. You didn’t change the tone of your voice throughout the meeting, except to laugh. You and Deb both laughed. You didn’t appear cocky or tense or formal. You were relaxed and not rushed. Deb took lots of notes, and you talked more than you wrote. Oh, and we noticed you used our names. You called each of us by name, even though it was the first time we had met. You remembered our introductions. You watched people, really looked at them and you seemed to listen so intently. At one point, you told us what you had written, like a summary. Then you asked us if we agreed with the summary. That was good! Yes, I really noticed how you treated the group with respect.”

Clarissa continues, on a roll now. ”One key to that meeting was when you told us about your friends who had been abused and you cried. Then we saw you as a person, not a researcher. You were someone with feelings who could understand.”

Clarissa’s memories and insights about the meeting touch my heart, as well as my head. I explain, "I was surprised by my tears, but you had the tissue box ready. I guess I was just so shocked and confused that my friends had never confided in me until I told them about CASA.”

67
“It’s that kind of place; we work with emotions every day. We recognize that when you do this work it’s 24 hours day. You see violence all around and people tell you things, personal things, because they know you won’t judge them.” Clarissa pauses. I chew on my pen, conscious of waiting and listening. She continues, “The thing that closed the bond, the super glue to the whole thing, was when you said, ‘We want to learn about you. We want you to tell us how we can learn about what it’s like to work against domestic violence, what it’s like to volunteer.’ Wow! We weren’t used to that approach so that’s when we all opened up and started talking. Most of the time, the experts are trying to tell us what to do or why we are doing things wrong. So we can be distrustful.”

I think back to the time Deb and I spent collaborating on our graduate studies and on our research relationship when we coauthored an article on collegiality (Curry & Walker, 2002) before coming to CASA. This was another backstage success factor in our first meeting because we drafted an informal agenda before we came to the CASA staff meeting; however, we also both recognized the need to be open to emergent issues. CASA allotted a short period of time for the first staff meeting, so while Deb and I had agreed on a basic approach, we trusted the process.

Clarissa continues, “The staff was pleased that you were volunteering and working on different days. You committed to spending lots of time with us and it’s easier to talk to you individually. Deb is so vibrant and she works so hard, with no attitude. Last week, she cleaned the closet, stocked the pantry, and went to the store. Deb eats lunch with us and acts like one of us. She fits in because she doesn’t act like she knows it all.”
Feeling somewhat defensive since I haven't volunteered yet, I say, “I was busy at first writing the grant proposal, and everyone agreed that was the best use of my time initially. Soon I’m going to help with sorting Christmas donations, but I’m not sure what else CASA needs. I’ll talk to the volunteer coordinator. She mentioned grant writing, but I’m willing to do any kind of job.” I emphasize any type of job.

Clarissa interrupts, “Yeah, when I saw you were going to do Christmas work I was impressed. Sorting all those toys and gifts is hard work, and we need people during the holidays because that’s a time when some volunteers are busy at home.”

“I was thinking of maybe helping with the crisis line because Judy and Becky said it was hard to get volunteers to try that. I know I would need lots of training, and with my Mom’s illness I frequently need to rearrange my schedule. I hate to be so unreliable, but Mom is in and out of the hospital, doctors’ appointments, and therapy. I never know when she’ll have a really bad night. Over the holidays, my sister will be in town to help with Mom, so my time will be more flexible.”

I am encouraged when Clarissa responds, "Oh, you could do the crisis line, because you listen! But wait ‘til the time is right. You should know that we understand family time and handling crisis time! And don’t forget that interviewing us and writing our stories for the booklet is part of your volunteering, too!” Her comments make me feel better because I re-focus on what I can do, rather than what I can’t do. I’m aware of how her reframing makes such a difference.

Bonnie, the house manager, knocks and peeks in the door, “We're ordering lunch; do you two want anything?”
We place our orders, and I ask Clarissa, “Anything else you remember?”

“Well, at the end of the meeting, after you left, we discussed it with Kelly and agreed to the project. Later, we talked about the research project in the advocates’ team, and people said it made them feel really special. Really special,” she emphasizes as she smiles widely, staring right into my eyes. She touches my hand. Her dark brown eyes sparkle and convey a deep message. “Most people are interested in victims. We listen to their stories, but we don't get the opportunity to share ourselves. We'll get things out that we don't normally have a chance to discuss. And we know the value of sharing—it’s a process of validation. This work changes you. I think perhaps it was God’s plan for me to go through all the abuse that I did, so I could come to this point. I’m a survivor and I remember that every day!” Clarissa says passionately.

When lunch arrives, I turn off the tape recorder, close my notebook, and say, "I'm going to make a note to follow up on that. Next time we meet, I'll tell you how I believe God led me here, too."

Clarissa and I join the other staff at the round table. Ellie, the Residential Program Director, comes down the stairs to have lunch with everyone. She has a kind, open face and a sweet voice. Her whole body radiates a calm, open spirit. Soon the table is full, and Bonnie, the House Manager, is sorting out the orders, passing sandwiches to Judy, Becky, me, Clarissa, Ellie, and others. Condiments, napkins, and utensils are scattered in the middle of the table.
Clarissa announces to the group, “Elizabeth is here today for a special reason. She came to see what we thought about the first meeting we had with her and Deb. She’s going to write a report.”

People are quiet and look around at each other. I say, “Working collaboratively means that whatever I write represents multiple views, not just my ideas. It is our story, not just my story.” I gesture around the table. “So there are no right or wrong answers. Just share whatever you remember.” Taking a sip from my bottle of Arizona green tea, I wait, and then take a bite of my sandwich.

Ellie begins, “Kelly was the representative for the directors’ team because I was out of town, but I heard about the meeting. People said that you and Deb were down to earth. Everyone was impressed that you had already been to volunteer training.” Her comments seem to open up the space for others.

Becky offers her thoughts, “We’re not an easy group, and it’s hard for some people to understand DV. Women get enough blame, so we don’t need volunteers or researchers adding to it. You and Deb seemed like you were going to ‘get it.’

Judy follows up to explain, “Yes, at CASA we use that phrase--those who get it and those who don’t. Frankly, we have felt used by other researchers and university students. They come with long surveys, lots of questions, and sometimes the questions don’t make sense anyway. We spend hours of our time on the project, hours we don’t have, and then we never hear from them again! Students don’t even tell us what grade they get on their projects! You said that you were committed to spending lots of time with us and volunteering. That was important to me.”
Looking around the table with a mock solemn face, I raise my hand. “I cross my heart and promise to tell you my grade--no matter what it is.” Then we all laugh. I recognize Judy’s story about researchers as a thread throughout the organization. It’s a story I’ve heard several times from various staff members.

Bonnie adds thoughtfully, “You treated us with respect, like equals. You used your first names when you introduced yourselves. You weren’t pretentious or judgmental. I’ve got my hands full keeping this house together. I don’t have any time to waste. So your volunteer time with the pantry and the supply cabinets and bedding makes a difference. You all know that you’ve got to wear roller skates to keep up with me.” The group laughs again.

I see more similarities to Clarissa’s comments. It seems likely that they have discussed this before.

Clarissa comments, “When you talked about CASA or the project, you used the words ‘we,’ ‘our,’ or ‘us,’ so it felt like we were all going to work together. You didn’t lecture us. You listened to us, asked us instead of telling us what to do--that’s like the way we empower residents at the Shelter. You believed in us and our knowledge.”

Ellie asks me, “Elizabeth, what do you remember most about our first meeting? I’d like to hear your observations.” The staff members nod and murmur their agreement. I am so glad Ellie asked because in my efforts to honor their ideas, I’ve neglected to share mine, which is not interactive nor does it contribute to relationship building. At the same time they express dislike for expert researchers, they invite me to give my opinion. We are creating a relationship of reciprocal respect for each other.
“I remember my first phone conversation with Clarissa to plan the meeting. She talked a little about the difference between working with substance abuse at Operation PAR and working at CASA in terms of helping, fixing, empowering. Excited by Linda and Clarissa’s comments, I was eager to meet everyone else, but also nervous. You turned out to be a very tough group!” They laugh. “I could definitely feel the resistance in the room. Kelly’s arms were folded.” I imitate the body language and there is more laughter. “People kept glancing at each other. You kept asking us what we wanted to do, trying to find out our agenda. I kept trying to say that we would work together. Finally, I remember saying that we wanted you to tell us how we could understand you and your work. At that moment, I felt tension subside in the group; I felt the trust blossom. I also remember tears when I mentioned the abuse of my friends. I was surprised by those tears, but it seemed alright at the time.” Clarissa gives me a knowing look. We had keyed into shared moments of meaning.

Judy jumps into the conversation, “That showed us you were human and that you had a connection to DV. Most of us or many of us have a personal connection with abuse. You’ll find out more about our stories as you interview us. We often tell our stories at presentations. I’ve been telling my story for about 15 or 20 years.”

I didn’t realize the importance of those conversations with my friends until much later, but I knew I wanted to learn more about CASA and CASA staff. “Yes, I want to hear your stories about being an advocate and why you do this job. Anyone who is comfortable sharing their personal stories, I’d also appreciate hearing those. I brought a summary of the UCI grant project proposal so you can see the general plan. You
probably have seen this before, but I want to review the goals one more time if that’s okay. I pass out packets with a summary on top:

*Lived Realities and the Meaning of Working against Spouse Abuse:*

*The CASA Story of Stories*

This proposal is for a pilot project to conduct an ethnographic study of CASA staff, volunteers, and former shelter residents. It focuses on the lived realities and meanings of those who work at shelters, an approach lacking in the literature. Since the 1980s, there has been much scholarly attention to problems associated with abuse. Yet this attention overwhelmingly has been from the perspective of “outsiders” who pathologize battered women. Research Assistants will volunteer, observe, and interview participants at CASA; recording their observations through a narrative perspective that emphasizes evocative texts that call the reader to feel and enter the experience. The project will:

1. Establish a collaborative relationship between CASA and USF, and document the process;

2. Conduct an ethnographic study of the CASA organization, staff, volunteers, and former shelter residents;

3. Study CASA’s use of stories to communicate abuse as a social problem and dispel community misunderstandings;

4. Assess the feasibility of a volunteer program between CASA and the USF Communication and Sociology Departments; and
5. Result in a booklet of stories to be used locally, statewide, and nationally with victims, scholars, families, community groups, volunteers, and related agencies in reframing domestic violence in our society.

I wait while people read the sheet. I continue, “As I mentioned, today I’m learning about how we are developing a collaborative process for the research project, that’s the number one goal of the grant. Eventually, we will publish a booklet of CASA stories from staff and volunteers, as it says under goal number five. Deb will write stories of volunteers and I’ll write about staff. Any questions or comments?” I wipe my mouth with a napkin and wait.

Judy begins, “This makes sense. The research could actually help CASA. For instance, number four would be good if we get more interns or good volunteers from University of South Florida like we have from Eckerd College. But I have a question about number one and number two--what does ethnographic mean?”

“Good question. Thanks for asking, Judy,” I say. “I just recently learned that myself. Ethno means ‘life’ and graphic means to ‘write,’ so it is a type of research where you write about life, the lives you observe and the life you live” (Tedlock, 2000).

Nodding Judy says in her schoolteacher voice, “Good explanation, but I just want to tell you that whatever you write, like the booklet, it must to be something everyone can read, not just statistics or charts and boring theories. You’re going to write stories, right? I’m not sure how that’s research, but we’ll learn as we go through the project, I suppose.”

“Yes, that’s the kind of research we do. We write stories. You’ll see that in the grant proposal we wrote a brief story about our first meeting with Linda when she told us
CASA’s frustrations with researchers. I can send some other samples of research stories if you like. For this UCI project, Deb will be coordinating the internship volunteer activities and I’ll be coordinating the booklet. I’ve already been working on a story about what it’s like to be a CASA advocate. Some good examples came from individual interviews, and next week I’m coming back here for a group interview about what people say when you tell them what you do for a living. Pizza lunch will be my treat and maybe some chocolate desert, too!” They clap and hoot with the offer of free food, as we all begin cleaning up our lunch mess.

Driving home from the shelter, I think about the first staff meeting and our conversations today about that meeting, embarrassed that I had underestimated their observation skills. I expected a brief conversation about the meeting in general. Clarissa, Judy, Bonnie, and Becky surprised me because they were so acutely aware of the meeting’s subtleties. They have honed their skills for many years, personally and professionally. For some of the workers who have experienced abuse personally, their ability to focus on the nuances of body language, tone of voice, and the meanings behind the words no doubt served as a survival skill during years of childhood and/or marital abuse. As a survivor of abuse, a substance abuse counselor, and an advocate against domestic violence, Clarissa has continued to hone these skills with a variety of support groups, shelter residents, and victims of all kinds. Daily, she and her staff cultivate the ability to communicate individually and in groups. My previous assumptions now seem so critical. I reframe my stance by focusing on the positive results of today’s meeting,
excited that the staff members are so willing to engage in what they call “processing” the
communication and theorists would call metacommunication.

The NCADV Discussion Group and Food for Thought

As the NCADV discussion about research relationships concludes, I understand
that CASA’s issues concerning researchers relate to so much more than just one person,
or one organization. Research has been done on those in the Battered Women’s
Movement; at times it has been done ostensibly for them, but less often has it been done
with them. This conference is a major move to bring researchers and practitioners
together to explore issues of ethics, research relationships, and relevance. I feel a sense
of anticipation for the next few days of the conference, tinged with euphoria at the
realization of the broader implications. This is a group of people who will understand our
goals, and I hope I’ll gain insights to help me frame my relationship with CASA.

When the group adjourns, a tall, slender woman with wispy gray hair wearing a
sleeveless, white-cotton pants outfit approaches me. “Hi, I’m Dr. Cara French from
Southern Coastal University. I’m on the faculty of the Sociology Department there.” We
shake hands and smile. “I would like to hear more about your research on DV workers.
That’s a fairly unique focus.” She glances at her watch. “Are you free for lunch?” I
readily accept her invitation, and we follow a small crowd to the hotel dining area.
Seeing Linda engaged in lively conversation at a large table, I wave as Dr. French and I
are led to a table in the back. As we wait in line at the soup, sandwich, and salad bar, Dr.
French tells me a little bit about her background and her teaching of community-based classes.

When we are seated, Dr. French asks, “So what is the topic of your dissertation?”

Surprised by her direct question, I reply, “Dr. French, the hard part is to find my focus when I have so much data after four years of research on site at CASA. I’ve been discussing the need to refine my topic with my major professor, Carolyn Ellis.” Pausing, I think back to my proposal and reply, “My dissertation is about university-community collaboration and the empowering aspects of research relationships. I’m exploring how we express individual and organizational experiences of empowerment, especially how we come to understand the concept as we story our lives.”

Dr. French listens, finishes chewing her bite of salad, and says with a grin, “Please call me Cara. You seem to have it defined fairly well. Empowerment and collaboration definitely fit with the philosophy of the Movement. I’ve read some of Dr. Ellis’s work and I assign it to my class, especially what she writes about stigma, caregiving, and death (Ellis, 1995, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2003). She has been a leader in qualitative research and autoethnographic work, which you already know. I can see her influence in your work.” She smiles. “You mentioned that your research was about the staff, or working at CASA.” Her statement is also a question.

I reply, “Yes, my dissertation topics unfold through my story of working with the staff members at CASA on their booklet of stories. The project helped me to understand how workers in DV frame empowerment and to reflect on how I construct the meaning of empowerment in my life. I thought it was more of an ethnography about the CASA
workers, but then it also could be considered an autoethnography of how I came to understand workers and domestic violence. It is a story of constructing stories that lead to new understandings. I think that everything we write is really about ourselves in some way if we acknowledge our subjectivity” (Acker, 2000; Davies, 1992; Denzin, 1989; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Smith & Watson, 2001). Unsure what she will think of my last statement about subjectivity and reflexivity, I pause.

With a calm, receptive demeanor, Cara nods encouragingly. As she adds dressing to her salad I continue, “A big breakthrough for me was in one of my classes when we discussed work by my professor, Jane Jorgenson, about the co-construction of the researcher’s identity and research relationships as communicative rather than elicitative. (1999). My dissertation is a storied example of sensemaking and reciprocal reflexivity. The narrative reveals multiple layers and frames within frames that are interdependent and demonstrate the research relationship as a multifaceted, social process” (Ceglowski, 2000; Ellingson, 1998; Ellis & Berger, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Gergen & Gergen, 1999; Jorgenson, 1999; May & Pattillo-McCoy, 2000; Milburn et al., 2002).

Cara leans forward, rests her chin on her hand, and clarifies, “So your dissertation is not specifically about domestic violence or Battered Women’s Movement, but domestic violence is important as the context. You are researching collaborative relationships that are constructed and communicated in this context. You position empowerment as the main theme, since empowerment is a core value of the Movement and critical to collaborative relationships. Right?”
I finish chewing a bite of my turkey sandwich and nod several times and listen. I admire her ability to summarize my explanation.

Cara continues, “So you acknowledge your subjectivity in creating the meaning of empowerment. I’m curious about why you decided to study this, how you position yourself in the research.”

*Subjectivity and Positioning the Researcher*

The issue of subjectivity, objectivity, and research relationships is critical in my work. I reply, “I see myself as a postmodern, experimental ethnographic researcher-writer. Hopefully my work will find a place in a democratic society that calls for ‘moral and sacred qualitative social science’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 17), with ‘the mandates for such work to come from our own sense of human community’” (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, p. 1062).

I warm to my thoughts, feel my words flowing. “When I look at other students, it seems obvious why they study particular topics. Their research is enmeshed with who they are and what they believe is important. My own path was harder for me to discern because initially I was looking at the places, methods, or issues in my research, rather than the heart of my interest. I started my doctoral studies by researching women in leadership. Now I see how that work basically revolved around coaching, collaborating, empowerment. My understanding flows from my life and establishes my subjectivity.”

Cara observes, “I find that connections are important to research, but focusing on a few main points is critical, too. I’m still not sure if you position this dissertation as your life story or as the story of CASA and the staff members.”
“I struggle with that question,” I reply. “My goal is to write a story that combines the story of relationships, my interpretation of the relationships, and the stories the staff tell about the research. In the past four years, we’ve worked on many different cooperative projects that grew from the UCI grant in the first year, but I plan to focus my dissertation on the CASA booklet of stories and the learning process that developed as a result of that endeavor. My writing mantra right now is, ‘One has to find the story in the experience, and not every experience is a story’” (Ellis, 2004, p. 107).

Cara sighs, “It all weaves together. Especially for those of us who were activists in the 60s and 70s, empowerment and giving voice to women was our work, who we were and are. The next generation is emerging in the leadership roles for NCADV. Some of us old-timers wonder if the values will change.”

“The foundations of my beliefs I learned from my mother, especially empowerment. She always saw the glass as half full and believed the glass would eventually be filled to the top. Mom had a truly incredible way of framing things in a positive light, but I didn’t always value or recognize her ability. In fact, during my early college days in my aggressive feminist period, I referred to her as a “doormat.” I guess I was struggling to distinguish between aggressive, assertive, and accepting behaviors. Years of experience, reading, and time spent caring for Mom led me to a different level of respect for her. Now I understand a way of helping others by believing in their decisions and supporting them in an empowering way. I might be at the place in my life where I turn around and say, “Oh my gosh, I’ve become my mother! And that’s a good
thing!” I can’t believe that I’m telling Cara all of this. I suppose I’m hungry for such
discussion.

She laughs. “Sounds like my daughter. I can tell that you were very close to your
mother and I know from personal experience that care giving is difficult. My dad
suffered a great deal before he died a few years ago.” We both pause for a moment,
acknowledging our shared challenges of care giving. I see that Cara understands by her
moist eyes. She says in a low voice, “Watching a loved one suffer can be an unspeakable
experience except among those who have shared such trauma.”

I say, “Working with CASA and at the same time watching my Mom suffer has
changed my outlook on life in the past four years. I’ve learned to find compassion for
myself as well as others. I have a different sense of what is important in life. All around
the world, nations are at war, and in our daily lives we hear arguments, disputes,
criticisms, and deficit discourse (Gergen, 2001; Tannen, 1998). The language of
possibilities (Friedman, 1993; Gergen, 1994), empowering belief in each other, and
positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2003) are what I want now!”

Cara agrees, “Working against domestic violence and traumatic experiences
change you in the same way, often altering your perspective on life and bringing social
justice to the forefront of our lives.”

Research Questions, Research Reflections

The chocolate layer cake appeals to us both as we cruise the dessert bar. I also try
a thin slice of cheesecake, and Cara adds two strawberries to her plate. When we return
to our table, she asks me, “So with qualitative research and narratives, how do you frame your research questions?”

“I have mixed feelings and thoughts about the big RQ--Research Questions--so I’m calling them RR, Research Reflections. I’m not trying to prove, predict, or control anything. I’m trying to communicate how lived experiences hold ambiguous, conflicting meanings for us and within our relationships. ‘Narrative is both a means of coping with contradiction and a way of communicating to others the concrete details associated with the experiencing of contradictions’ (Bochner et al., 1998, p. 53). Questions that have guided my reflections and writing are:

1. How do the CASA workers (including myself as worker/volunteer) describe or story life experiences in relation to their understanding of collaboration and empowerment?

2. Does the context of CASA and life experiences with domestic violence influence the workers’ framing of empowerment and collaborating?

3. What are some of the challenges and ambiguities the CASA advocates perceive in their understanding of empowerment and their daily practices?

4. How do I, as a researcher and collaborator, understand, practice, and reflect on empowerment in the action research setting, interactive interviews, and writing process?”

Cara sits up a bit straighter, stops eating, and leans her elbows on the table. “I understand your commitment to an invitational rather than controlling stance. It fits the feminist nature of your work; however, you do have a point of view. That point of view
is that you value narrative as a way of reporting data. Maybe your premise is that control is not the appropriate way to research empowerment and collaborative research, particularly in the context of domestic violence. Your point of view is in a positive framing, but you definitely have a point of view.”

I reply slowly, “Yes, I acknowledge a point of view in the subjectivity that I embrace. I offer stories of my connections at CASA and hope that readers find connections with their own lives. This issue relates to narrative ways of knowing, as well as narrative writing. Carolyn Ellis wrote a persuasive piece in which she countered the criticism against narrative. She wrote about the critical stance: ‘This style of communicating differences in perspective on inquiry has rarely, if ever, changed my mind; it certainly has never opened my heart or increased my tolerance. Usually it’s made me defensive’ (Ellis, 2002, p. 400). That’s an insightful commentary on the difference between seeking power over someone versus honoring power with or within. Collaborative power or empowerment is an individual and a relational communication inquiry where we are open to differences.”

*Narrative Method and Ways of Knowing*

We savor our desserts. It is obvious that we are not rushing to the next meeting. Cara signals the waiter for coffee, and I order decaffeinated herbal tea. She says encouragingly, “Tell me a bit more about your methods. You said you have written a draft, so I assume the methods and literature chapters are done. Did you do preliminary chapters in your proposal?”
“I’m still writing and rewriting various stories and constructing chapters, but the methods and the literature sections will be integrated into the narratives. My formal methods statement is something like this: My dissertation is an example of engaged scholarship based on participatory action research (PAR) accomplished through participant observation and interactive interviews written as ethnographic narratives, life stories, and autoethnographic stories.”

“Good summary!” she applauds. I add, “Of course, these methodological approaches are more than techniques; they are feminist ways of framing my research, philosophical ways of knowing, working, and learning.” Cara smiles broadly. “You have internalized your readings and your research. It shows. You model your theories.”

I am flattered, and I reflect on how much I am enjoying our conversation without any pressure to perform or conform to academic conventions. Cara has been a supportive coach. I haven’t asked much about her work, but she seems to be steering the conversation to my research.

Cara says, “I understand that narrative is a critical way of knowing, but I’m interested in the narrative formatting of your dissertation. Your professor is well known, but not everyone in our field will embrace this format.”

“I want to make a strong statement in my dissertation. I truly believe that narrative communicates most intimately and meaningfully for my work because the principles of participatory action research, engaged scholarship, feminist research, friendship, and strengths-based service all come together in the narratives and life stories!” I feel almost breathless as I continue. “The narrative captures or conveys
conversations, communication and the essence of our perceptions of relationships.

Narrative method is an enactment of the generative power of the stories we create and the language we use to tell/share our stories. Stories are created in the relational process.

Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner have been my mentors, modeling ‘rigorous and creative ethnography that is passionate, political, personal, critical, open-ended, enlightening, pleasurable, meaningful and evocative’ (Bochner & Ellis, 1999, p. 498). I remember their description of a good ethnography: ‘a meeting ground where heart and head can go hand in hand” (Bochner & Ellis, 1999, p. 498). I hope my work can fulfill this tall order in some ways. I don’t want to get hung up on labels, but I am looking for a succinct, unique description, maybe calling my work a “research novel.” Have you read Carolyn’s methodological novel, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Ellis, 2004)? It is a story about teaching qualitative research to a graduate class, so it is a textbook at the same time.”

Making a note of the title, Cara muses, ”I might be able to use that in my class,” and then looks up. “Maybe you could call your dissertation novel research.” We both laugh and pause.

Cara looks at her watch. Many of the tables around us are now empty. “Almost time to go to the next session, but I’m really enjoying the discussion. Hope you don’t think I’m putting you on the spot!”

“Oh, no. It was good practice for me. At this point, I’m totally absorbed in my dissertation. To have someone like you so interested has been a gift. I appreciate the time together.”
Cara smiles at my appreciation. “I understand and remember the process. I wonder about the connection to communication theory, since you said you are in the Communication Department, right? I have a bit more time before the second afternoon session. Do you?”

*Communication and Empowerment*

“Yes, communication is essential to empowerment, and I definitely position my research and methods in communication theory. Empowerment is considered a communicative study and I have found many different approaches” (Kalbfleisch, 2003).

Cara asks, “You’re focusing on feminist issues and gendered communication, I assume?”

“Yes, that’s important. The concept of empowerment can be ambiguous, particularly for women who are seeking new ways of defining power and empowerment. The third wave of feminism has emerged in a time when contradictions, ambiguities, and multiple identities are embraced (Bailey, 1997). Feminist organizational scholars reject the oppositional approaches that hinge on either/or thinking. I find it can be so easy to fall into those distinctions. Have you heard of reciprocal empowerment (Darlington & Mulvaney, 2002; Darlington, Mulvaney, with assistance from Awadallah, Leite, & Brill, 2003)? It seems to encompass the feminist ambiguities into a more cohesive explanation. The authors incorporate specific attributes into their concept based on their research: self-determination, independence, knowledge, choice, action, decision making with competence, compassion, companionship, and consensus, which they propose will create
an environment that fosters equality, mutual respect, attention, engagement, empathy, and responsiveness.”

Cara makes another note. “The term is so full of meaning, interesting.”

“I can send you the citations,” I say eagerly. We exchange e-mail addresses.

Cara takes a deep breath and smiles, “This is not the traditional dissertation format, but I like the organic, storied nature of your dissertation. What counts is how your committee sees your work, but I think you will pull it together. Rather than writing a separate literature review, you are incorporating relevant literature into each chapter, right?”

“I like your word—organic. I’ve used research methods like participant observation, focus groups, and interactive interviewing to collect data, and I choose to report my data in the narrative format. Empowerment is basic to DV, and as a relational communicative concept, it is linked to so many areas of study, like collaboration, compassion (Chödrön, 1994), respect (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000), trust (Kramer & Tyler, 1996), resilience, and strengths-based social work (Graybeal, 2001). These ideas are interwoven with narratives of empowerment throughout the dissertation to connect the ideas and elaborate on the meanings that people construct for empowerment. In my research I seek to avoid dualisms, embrace blurred boundaries, and privilege reciprocity. Through the stories of my interactions with CASA staff, readers will see how I reflect on the tensions of conceptualizing empowerment and living the philosophy.”
Cara puts her napkin on the table. “I look forward to reading your dissertation. And I’ll get a copy of the CASA booklet at the poster session exhibit. Now I think it’s time for the next program slot.”

As we gather our purses and tote bags, I say, “Thank you so much for listening, summarizing, and giving me your suggestions. Your feedback makes the whole conference worthwhile for me! You know, maybe I’ll reconstruct our lunch and use it in the dissertation.”

Cara seems surprised, then amused. “Another story within the story to tell. Be sure and send me a copy!” She walks out the door toward the main hotel, and I double back to the stairs to find the next session.
Chapter Four
Mutually Observing the Process

Community-based Research

Once again, I’m trying to find my way through a maze of hotel hallways and meeting rooms. Fighting my frustration, I come to a dead-end. I recognize Barbara Paradiso from the earlier discussion group, so I assume the program on “Asking the Right Questions: The Colorado Grassroots Action Research” is in the room with no sign. Barbara and one of her colleagues are having some difficulty with the computer and display equipment for the PowerPoint presentation. Another tall, thin woman with honey-blonde hair, dressed in a tailored, red blouse and black slacks is sifting through piles of different-colored handouts. I put my canvas bag on the seat of a chair by the door and approach the woman. “Can you use some help with the handouts?” I ask.

She looks up and smiles. “We do seem to have lots of different pages. I’ll put the DVRAC sheets and the invitation to the reception on the chairs. Then you can come behind me with the white PowerPoint packet and evaluation form.”

Walking among the chairs, piling handouts as we go, I introduce myself. She reciprocates. “I’m Elaine Enarson, from the University of Colorado, in Women’s Studies and Sociology.” We continue bending and piling from chair to chair. “What field are you in?”
“I’m in Communication, interpersonal, with some organizational and gender studies, but most of my work is in narrative interpretation. I’m studying collaboration and empowerment with DV workers, how we embody the Movement’s philosophies.”

“You’re focusing on staff? Great! That sounds interesting; maybe we’ll talk later. Thanks for your help!” With the task completed, Elaine moves to the front of the room, and I sit down.

Barbara Paradiso checks her watch and sits in a chair at the front of the room. Dressed in a full, black skirt and Birkenstocks, her presentation style is as comfortable as her attire. She tells us, “It’s time to start. We have a small group, but more people may come later, and we’re looking at quality not quantity. We’ll look at both qualitative and quantitative research this afternoon.” The group laughs at the research joke. She introduces the other panelists: Elaine Enarson, whom I met earlier, and Denny Webster from the School of Nursing, who is working with the computer display equipment. Though the presenters didn’t use any titles during the introduction, I notice their advanced degrees listed on the handout. Barbara asks the audience members to introduce themselves. Most of the participants are from academic institutions; a few previously had been practitioners, and they all still work with DV organizations in some capacity, as volunteers and researchers. There is an array of interdisciplinary connections, such as with health care, sociology, social work, education, public policy, and law. As the only person from the communication field, I wonder briefly how the other participants see communication’s role in activism.
Barbara Paradiso mentions that she was formerly the executive director of a DV organization, but during that time she had no collaboration with the local university because the community and academia functioned in very separate spheres. Now as director of the Program on Domestic Violence at the University of Colorado, Graduate School of Public Affairs, her goal is to bridge these worlds. Barbara begins her PowerPoint presentation, which is similar to the description in the program booklet. “In the post-VAWA [Violence Against Women Act] world, research on domestic violence is abundant. The critical questions are: Does the current research respond to advocates’ needs, or is there a gap between research and the work? Are researchers answering the questions that are important to our communities, our organizations--to survivors of violence? The Domestic Violence Research and Action Coalition [DVRAC] is a group of domestic violence service providers; university students, faculty, and staff; independent researchers; anti-violence activists; survivors; and other community members, who have come together to develop a community-based and action-oriented research agenda, uniting researchers and practitioners around common goals. Today, we’ll discuss the creation of the coalition and the structure of our pilot study, its results, lessons learned, and future plans because we believe that community-generated knowledge is a critical component of concrete social change.”

As Barbara Paradiso talks about DVRAC, I wonder if we could do something similar in Florida, maybe at the FCADV (Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence) conference. Possibilities pop in my mind, as I consider collaborative opportunities for researchers from various academic disciplines to work together with practitioners from
different community agencies. How could we formally or informally connect with DVRAC? Would Barbara Paradiso come to Florida and make a presentation? Would there be enough interest in the state? I scribble notes onto my “to-do” tablet, so that I will remember to discuss this later with Linda. Then worries about details invade my thoughts like termites swarming, because the amount of time required for starting a new project, along with community-based research and volunteering, could be overwhelming.

As the panel continues and Elaine Enarson talks about their research design, she stresses reflexivity, interpretation, and listening as ways of building trust and collaboration. Their pilot project involved six counties and a series of six focus groups with a wide range of participants, including criminal justice workers, health providers, victims' advocates, counselors, and survivors. Elaine explains some of the lessons learned during their project and outlines the DVRAC principles of community-based research, which is community-driven and informed, as well as applied; concrete and beneficial to the local community; values the perspectives, insights, and skills of local practitioners/community members in equal partnership with academicians; recognizes knowledge gained from lived experience; builds collaborations; and informs social change (Paradiso, Enarson, & Webster, 2004). Our work at CASA is aligned with these principles, I think smugly. For a moment, I mentally critique the CASA project as a small local effort compared to the Colorado project. They worked with so many communities and agencies. Then I remind myself to accept the unique value of each project, to value each for its different accomplishments rather than compare them in a competitive sense.
Inspired and validated by Elaine’s presentation, I am reminded of a discussion with Linda last month about my dissertation, social action research, engaged scholarship, empowerment, and subjectivity in research relationships. At our first meeting four years ago, Linda expressed intense frustration with researchers. Now she has become much more attuned to a different type of relationship with researchers, as well as the use of narrative in research. During my time with the CASA staff and Linda, we’ve all been teachers and learners, sharing our knowledge, perspectives, and assumptions. The terms “insiders” and “outsiders” still surface, but the roles continue to blur, so we often grapple with words that inadequately convey the complexities. I think back to the evening a few months ago when I visited Linda’s home for dinner, and how we explored ideas on participatory action research as we floated in the swimming pool. It was an opportunity to reflect on the past four years of work together and discuss my dissertation as a way to share our successful collaboration.

Ideas Floating and Swimming Around

“A purple front door, I just love it! It’s you!” I exclaim, as I walk toward Linda and she welcomes me with a warm hug. Smiling, she stands on her porch in her bare feet, wearing a black bathing suit and gray, striped shorts, different from her executive-director attire at work.

“My favorite color,” Linda replies. “And that’s my piece of the west, my roots.” She gestures toward a huge cactus garden, towering about five feet tall and wide in the front yard. “I’m so glad you could come for a swim because there’s just never enough
time at the office to really explore ideas. So on a weekend we can relax and catch up on everything.”

As we enter Linda’s small, 1950s bungalow house, I am greeted by the vivid colors and interesting pieces of art, paintings, carved figurines, pottery, tapestry, fans, and baskets. “You’re a collector, just like I am,” I remark.

Linda hesitates and explains, “I don’t think of myself as a collector, but I find mementos when I travel.” As Linda leads me back to the porch and the pool, she asks, “How did your writing work go today?”

“It isn’t easy trying to pull my ideas together. I’ve been working on organizing the relevant literature, reviewing my field notes, and re-reading the transcripts, so I can draft my outline. I’ve been listing the stories and themes, but most importantly, I’m writing stories about experiences that have been meaningful to me. After four years at CASA, my challenge will be what not to include.” We laugh. “Sometime tonight I want to explore ideas with you on my dissertation and working with CASA. I want to float some possibilities by you.”

Our swimming plans temporarily delayed by a summer shower, we settle into two teal-colored Adirondack chairs on the porch. Linda introduces me to her special Orangeade juice made from tart oranges picked in her neighbor’s yard. As we munch on chips and hot sauce, our conversation jumps from subject to subject: staffing, budgeting, the board meeting, and the upcoming annual meeting and award ceremony. Drifting from topic to topic, we cover shopping, church, exercise, music, and our social lives, as well as news of family, sisters, nieces, and nephews. Forging a very personal bond, we
share the stages of grieving for our mothers who died about nine months apart, but we
don’t dwell there long.

When the light rain stops, Linda asks if I’m ready for a swim. “This pool was my
50th birthday present to myself, and I designed it,” she explains proudly. Terra-cotta
bricks surround the pool, with mauve and teal tiles around the edge. A vintage Florida
stone table with a colorful mosaic top flanks the pool. Palm trees and ferns flourish
around the outside of the screened enclosure like a tropical sanctuary. “I’ve been a
swimmer since I was a kid. Now it’s good exercise, and it relaxes me after the stressful
days at work.” Pointing to panels along the roof, Linda says, “A solar heating system
warms the water year-round.”

“Never been much of a swimmer because I sunburn so easily” I admit. But I love
the sunset at the beach--or by the pool!” When I slip off my shift I reveal my bathing suit
with shades from bright electric blue to dark green. I feel comfortable, even with pale
skin and puckered cellulite on my thighs. As I ease into the warm water, Linda pulls out
floating pool chairs. We talk as we effortlessly paddle and float.

“On the phone, you said you needed to talk, so tell me about your dissertation
ideas and where you are now,” Linda invites. “I feel like it’s a joint project, but you do
all the writing work and I get to talk about it.”

“And you give me feedback after you read the stories, which I really appreciate!
I’ve decided that my dissertation uses collaboration in action research and the
empowering aspects of participatory action research. I brought you an article to read
later, but you’ll recognize the ideas. Some of the things you were so emphatic about
during our first meeting are basic to participatory action research, so I’m going to use the UCI project as an example in my dissertation. Action research is not just a method or technique, but more a way of framing research, a philosophical way of working and learning (Stringer, 1999). Of course, there are lots of ‘brands’ or types (Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Lincoln, 2001; Reinharz, 1992; Stringer, 1999). In general, we say ‘AR’ as shorthand--or ‘PAR’ (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). That’s participatory action research, not the substance abuse program!” We laugh at the shared understanding of acronyms that could have different meanings in different contexts.

I continue, “AR is supposed to be ‘democratic, equitable, liberating and life enhancing’ (Stringer, 1999). It’s a form of ‘communicative inquiry,’ the way researchers and community members work together to co-construct meaning (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Instead of talking about researchers and subjects or insiders and outsiders, AR talks about collaboratively working together because everyday knowledge is important--like your knowledge of the kind of research you wanted and needed at CASA.”

Linda and I float down the length of the lap pool, sometimes twisting, turning with languorous strokes. The water gently ripples. She replies, “Yes, I like that! That language fits! In many ways, you’re an insider now.”

Recognizing this as a compliment because CASA definitely makes a distinction between insiders and outsiders, I’m also aware of the subtleties in this categorization. “And you’ve become more research-oriented, so perhaps you’re an academic insider now.” We both chuckle, and I continue. “The feminists and AR folks definitely challenge the notion of objectivity in favor of reflecting on our subjectivity, including it
in our research by observing ourselves, and being aware of the tensions during the process. I think we need to move away from either being an insider or being an outsider and acknowledge that we adopt different roles as needed for the project. Researchers talk about ‘working the hyphen’ between self and other, that which separates and merges our identities (Fine, 1994; Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000). The categories aren’t so clear now for me or for us because we share common goals.”

“Good point. As an activist, I’m used to looking at who supports us and understands our cause versus those who we are fighting against,” Linda explains.

“I know what you mean, but AR is about practical knowledge and research that can be used to solve problems, make our world a better place to live, and support social change in the broadest sense (Fals Borda, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). In many ways, it’s like how you ‘process’ things at CASA. Everyone becomes a co-researcher to define the research questions, design, implementation, analysis, and reporting, as well as subsequent actions. People play various roles, but the participatory worldview is the heart of the approach” (Stoecker, 1999).

“As you talked, I could identify the ways you did that with the CASA project.”

Linda holds up her hand and counts off her ideas on each finger. “At the first meeting, you all really listened to me, and we came up with a direction for the project, something I really wanted, but you helped me to see it. You asked me to be co-principal investigator, which was cool. I didn’t know the protocol, but you made it easy for me. At the staff meeting, you asked them to give you their ideas for how you could learn. You wrote the stories, but staff really felt a sense of ownership because you would share drafts of the
stories with us and ask for feedback. It’s hard to define that sense of openness, but all the little things add up!”

“I wish I had a tablet now to write all this down, but I don’t want to get out of the pool. The ideal is participatory equity, but there are always different roles, skills, and degrees of perceived power. People need to get the chance to participate at the level they can or want to be involved” (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000).

Linda swirls around and splashes water onto her shoulders. “You know, another problem with researchers is they don’t stick around long. You and Deb committed to getting involved on a long-term basis.”

“As I recall, we committed to one year, but it stretched out much longer.” Linda smiles as I continue. “Time is essential in AR and PAR. A collaborative, reflexive process takes time, and researchers need to develop relationships. You could say that PAR and feminist research are about communication and relationship building in order to develop community. Community doesn’t form overnight (Ceglowski, 2000; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Lincoln, 2001; Milburn et al., 2002; Naples, 2003; Stanley & Wise, 1991). Just like feminist research, PAR definitely challenges more traditional forms of research.”

Linda observes, “When you were talking, it sounded like the 60s and 70s to me, so I think I can see where it all comes from.” Sliding off her floating chair, she slowly treads water. I imitate the same move, which feels good because I didn’t realize how long I’d been sitting in the webbed floating chair. Linda continues, “I consider myself a
feminist, and that’s the impetus for the Battered Women’s Movement. But not everyone at CASA wants to be identified as feminist.”

I nod, “Yes, I know what you mean. I remember the 70s, the feminist movement, consciousness-raising groups, the natural food cooperatives, Free Schools, campus activism. . . . I was thinking the other day about how even my library work has always included a strong, collaborative community element. That’s probably why I’m so excited about my research now. My everyday knowledge informs my scholarship and vice versa. But in the feminist research literature, the authors make a clear point that there is no one, monolithic feminism. They use the plural term, “feminisms,” stressing that there are many different philosophies and ways of seeing and being in the world (Block, Engel, Naureckas, & Riordan, 1999; Collins, 1991; DeVault, 1999; Maguire, 2001; Reinharz, 1992; Skeggs, 2001). At the risk of simplifying, I think feminists have a commitment to social justice and fighting oppression to effect political, social, structural, and personal transformations (Maguire, 2001). Feminist research is much more than the study of women’s lives.” I wonder if my last comment sounds so obvious that it is condescending. Maybe that’s how Linda feels when she explains domestic violence to me. Building a common information base is part of the relationship in which we learn each other’s language and culture, the academic and the DV worlds.

“Look!” Linda holds up her hands. “I’m shriveling a bit from the water. How about you? Can’t stay in the pool much longer.” Examining my hands, I shrug and respond, “Yes, I’ve got raisin fingers, too, but it’s so relaxing!”
Linda continues. “We can eat dinner anytime--soon. But first, go back to the PAR-feminist controversy you mentioned. I’m really interested. Some days I still think about getting my doctorate, applying to the Communication Department myself.” We both move to the same side of the pool to hang on the wall and gently kick underwater. I’m not sure who is leading or following. It’s like we just move together. Her comments about returning to school are a compliment to our research process. She talks very differently about research, now that we introduced collaborative action research in the UCI project.

As I kick, I feel my body warming a bit. “I’ll give you the quick version of the feminist research issue that has informed AR, with similarities in such areas as the critique of traditional research, the analysis of power relations, social justice concerns, valuing diversity, an emphasis on local knowledge, and silenced voices (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Feminist research and AR are not competing frameworks, but there’s some controversy and different perspectives on that. One of the feminist AR trailblazers argues that AR without taking gender oppression into account is absurd because we should consider multiple identities and interlocking oppressions (Maguire, 1987, 2001). There’s agreement on common values between feminists and AR, but much of the AR and PAR work has been conducted without including an analysis of gender (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). Of course, not all feminist research is AR, either. So the call is for more AR or PAR that is feminist, which sounded great for my dissertation and a CASA project on empowerment! Sorry I rambled on--it was really helpful for me to try to articulate all the things I’ve been reading.”
Linda stands up in the water and says, “Honestly, I enjoy this! Floating around the pool is just the right place for playing with new ideas. Are you ready for some spicy food? Over dinner, we can talk more about your dissertation. You know, I hope your dissertation becomes a book, the CASA book--our book! It would be the sequel to our booklet of stories.”

Cooking up Feminist Ideas

Linda pulls a plush, white terrycloth robe over her sleek, black bathing suit and hands me a similar, dark-green robe. Walking through the sliding glass doors to the kitchen, Linda says, “Let’s leave the doors open. The weather is finally cooling off, and my pool area is an extension of my living space.” Opening the refrigerator to refill our orangeade, she continues, “I don’t cook much because I’m so often at a luncheon or special event. But tonight I’ve made beans and spicy chicken with lots of stuffing for a tortilla.” Linda starts to chop vegetables. When I offer to help, she says, “The kitchen is small. Just sit at the counter, and we’ll talk while I throw this all together.”

“Just let me know what you want me to carry to the table, or I can chop, too.” She waves me to the counter.

“Did we finish the feminist research? It all seems to tie together, but not sure I could repeat it.” Linda deftly peels and slices avocados, then chops onions and black olives.

“I just found some new articles with feminist threads on AR, PAR, and collaborative research projects specific to domestic violence organizations.” Linda cocks
her head and nods as she shreds the cheese. I continue, “Well, I had a few articles from
when we began the UCI project, and then just yesterday I found six or eight more in a
journal called *Violence against Women* (Block et al., 1999; Campbell, Dienemann, Kub,
Wurms, & Loy, 1999; Gilfus et al., 1999; Lennett & Colten, 1999; Levin, 1999, 2001;
Nicholas & Feltey, 2003; Riger, 1999; Shapiro & Rinaldi, 2001; Urban & Bennett, 1999).
Not much has been written on the research of the collaborative process and domestic
violence, so these articles are a great start, but they’re not narratives.”

“I think I used to subscribe to that journal, but it was a bit too academic for my
needs. If you think those articles would be helpful, I could read a few—-not 10--a few.
And you can tell me about the others.”

Looking toward the ceiling, I try to remember the articles. “Many of the authors
reiterate the feminist research and PAR ideas. Each is partly theoretical and also very
much an exemplar. The main point is the collaborative process, which the authors
approach reflexively. Several talk about what didn’t work--at least as planned--like the
collaboration with the welfare-to-work program and welfare workers (Levin, 2001). One
study is a workplace project that the employers, employees, and advocates feel was
successful and meaningful; however, the researchers express some frustrations with
unforeseen events and differing goals and values among partners. They also discuss
ways to be sure that communication flows in all directions, finding effective ways to hear
many voices in collaboration (Urban & Bennett, 1999). Another article is about feminists
who interview survivors and the need to be open to multiple truths and perspectives,
valuing the unique insights of survivors (Nicholas & Feltey, 2003). That was a hot one!”
A timer bell dings. “Speaking of hot ones, check to see if the tortillas are hot enough, OK?” Linda gestures with her spatula, as she turns chicken in the skillet.

I add a few minutes to the timer. “Other collaboration articles, even on program evaluation, are very grounded in feminist research issues, including trust, control, power, duration of time, different organizational cultures of university and domestic violence organizations, emotional aspects of domestic violence work, theory versus social action, terminology, changing expectations during the process, valuing lived experience, and all the multiple layers of collaborative projects (Campbell et al., 1999; Gilfus et al., 1999; Lennett & Colten, 1999; Levin, 1999; Riger, 1999; Shapiro & Rinaldi, 2001). Two major issues are the attention to group process and the blurring of roles or spanning of boundaries, with the evolution from partnering to collaboration when roles blur and the work becomes more inclusive and multidimensional (Block et al., 1999).

Linda affirms, “In the past four years, we’ve addressed the major issues you’ve mentioned. Sometimes collaboration is so much harder than people realize--or they find out when they try shortcuts. I need to be more patient with the process than I am. Look what happened with our projects!” Linda pauses briefly and then says, “OK, let’s eat. Floating and treading water gave me an appetite!” Linda hands me earthenware plates, silverware, and magenta-print napkins to set on the glass-top table in the corner of the porch near the kitchen.
Dissertation Dinner

Darkness surrounds the porch, and only dim lights shimmer around the pool. The overhead fan lights our dinner table. The neighborhood is quiet, and the air feels like a soft, summer caress. We layer our tortillas with vegetables, beans, and chicken. “This is delicious!” I exclaim, as I finish chewing my first bite. “I’m famished from the swim, relaxed, and energized all at the same time. Thanks for letting me talk so much about my dissertation.”

Linda replies, “I enjoy exchanging ideas and adding my thoughts. Like you said, we are in the process of blurring our boundaries, as I learn more about research and you learn about domestic violence.”

I swallow and say, “Let me try out another idea. All the reading I’ve done on engaged scholarship, AR, PAR, and feminist research pointed me in the direction of collaboration and empowerment. By resisting the idea of finding a problem, criticizing, and tearing down, I want to demonstrate the distinction between separate knowing (critical, adversarial) versus connected knowing (looking for the right) and collaborative knowing (Clinchy, 1996). As we’ve discussed, I’m not positioning myself as a critical, outside expert.”

Linda interjects, “Of course, you can be critical as insider or outsider!” We both laugh.

“Right about that!” I continue, “You might be interested in something else based on affirmation rather than critical methods. It’s called Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which starts by posing the ‘unconditional positive question.’ Recently, I found material
connecting AI with AR, which is an exciting combination (Cooperrider, Sorenson Jr., Whitney, & Yaeger, 2000) that builds on theories about vocabularies of possibilities instead of a language of deficits. For instance, you don’t ask, ‘Why is morale low?’ but rather, ‘What would it be like if people felt great about their jobs?’ You see what I mean?” I look at Linda.

“You define yourself by what you talk about. That’s very much in tune with how we work and the practice of empowerment.” Linda nods. “I like it!”

“In our communication classes, we talk about expanding the conversation and providing space for marginalized voices. The AI and AR combination is based on the ideas of one of my favorite theorists, Kenneth Gergen, who identified five consequences of the critical stance, which he believes: (a) contains the conversation, (b) silences marginal voices and fragments relationships, (c) erodes community, (d) creates social hierarchy, and (e) contributes to broad cultural, organizational enfeeblement (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001, p. 190-191). These five are my mental outline. In my dissertation, I want to engage in work with a collaborative, appreciative spirit that expands the conversation, provides space for many voices, builds a web of inclusion, and encourages communities of learning.”

Linda takes another tortilla from the basket lined with a purple napkin. “Those all definitely resonate with the Battered Women’s Movement, but with CASA staff, I’m concerned about how we maintain our philosophy on a day-to-day basis, especially as CASA grows. Staff recruitment and turnover have been an issue. CASA operates on an empowerment model, not a clinical model, so that means we promote acceptance,
validation, interdependence, support, voice, advocacy, risk-taking, incremental steps, and conflict resolution (Parsons, 2001, p. 167-169). Some staff members want to help; they care, but they want to fix the women and families we serve. Without realizing it, they are buying into the concept of DV as an individual pathology, even victim blaming, rather than dealing with structures in society. We all bring individual frames to the work, based on our experiences. With this work, empowerment is critical because it’s an issue of control, maybe even re-victimizing women who have been controlled by an abuser. We want to create an environment where women can learn that they are capable of solving their own problems, managing their own lives.”

I reply, “Linda, you know I’m willing to work with CASA in whatever way you need me. Maybe after my dissertation is finished, we can plan some staff retreats or brown-bag lunches to talk about these issues. Talk can be very powerful! Gergen says that as we describe and explain, so do we fashion our future . . . and he also says that there is an unlimited number of descriptions or interpretations for every situation (2000). That idea is similar to the multiple interpretations associated with feminist theories (Stanley & Wise, 1991). I remember when you addressed a question at CASA's volunteer training about self-esteem, and you described the women as “courageous.” That made a real impact on me, an example of language and perception. You turned the issue upside down--and reframed it in an incredibly empowering way!”

Taking a second helping of the spicy chicken filling, I continue, “I was drawn to CASA when I heard you talk about empowerment as a core value in your work. I thought about how I understand empowerment personally in my teaching and living. The
managers in my leadership sessions struggle with the difference between the idea and the implementation--just like CASA staff.”

Linda elaborates on that point. “Language is so important, just like the stories we tell. I was skeptical, but also hopeful when we first met and talked about a booklet of CASA stories. Now the staff really enjoys talking to you and having you write for them because they trust you. I trust you.” She pauses to roll another tortilla and then asks, “So your dissertation will be more stories, right?’’

The emphasis on trust touches me, and I reply, “The dissertation will focus on the UCI booklet of stories, which was the catalyst for our relationships. You shared the stories as a way to help me understand DV and the daily practices of CASA. At the same time, people found new understandings themselves. It’s based on consciousness raising, co-creating a sense of reality through conversations and relationships, and collective dialogue as a way to re-conceptualize ideas” (Baldwin, 2001; Barrett, 2001; Naples, 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

“This is the right time for CASA to focus on our philosophy, really focus on it. In the Movement, there are many discussions of our founding values and what that means to current services, so your dissertation will be timely. We’ve seen lots of changes, from the grassroots movement to established, regulated service organizations with multiple funding sources. Personally, the idea of reflecting on empowerment has been thought-provoking for me since our earliest discussions. I know that I want to be empowering, but maybe I do or say things that staff members don’t see as empowering. I try to send the message that it is OK to make mistakes and learn. I try to model that with my
managers, but there’s never enough time to coach the new ones. We’ve talked about this before, and this year I have arranged workshops for my managers on supervision, human resources stuff. They love it! I forget that some have been managers for only a short time with little training. They tell me the workshop discussions have led to several new ideas for staff orientation and a completely new team approach to covering the night schedule.”

“When I visited the Shelter, they mentioned those workshops several times. Sounds like just what they needed and wanted. Empowerment can be such a struggle to understand and live. I’m struggling with how to write stories that will show empowerment within our collaboration.”

Linda pauses. “I want CASA to be seen as excellent. We’ve come a long way in 10 years, but when I go out to get funding from other agencies, donors, grants, etc., CASA’s credibility rests on our reputation for excellence.

We take our last bites of the meal. “Let me pose this to you: The staff may interpret your emphasis on organizational excellence differently than you do. Maybe your emphasis on excellence makes it harder for staff to take risks. I hear you talking about the organization. What if you talked about helping staff members grow and learn? You’ve told me that the work is emotionally very demanding, which is another factor to consider.”

“We have so many different funders and requirements, evaluations, and so on from each one. Our new, centralized client database should significantly improve our statistical reportage. Everyone is excited, but a bit resistant or worried at the same time.”
“I’ve been to the Shelter near audit time, so I sort of know what you face. You’d still be moving toward becoming an excellent organization, but from a different perspective, maybe a more empowering one. You can keep telling people what to do, or you can let them learn from both risks and mistakes.”

“I hear you, but it’s hard.” Linda stands and announces: “Now it’s time for ice cream, if you have room.” After we work together to clear the table and stack dishes in the kitchen, Linda reaches into the open shelves over the sink and pulls out two small, black bowls with shiny and matte designs. When I admire the distinct designs on each bowl, she tells me they are from her trip to Japan. As we savor our vanilla ice cream and chocolate syrup, Linda asks, “So how does all your reading and writing and thinking become a dissertation?”

“Lots of hard work, lots of thinking. I need to create spaces to reflect on all the interviews and notes I have accumulated. And lots of flexibility, which is also the key to PAR because all of us--researchers, CASA staff, and co-researchers--shape the project as we collaborate, modeling the practices that we discuss. I’ll just keep writing and getting feedback from CASA, and from my professors, of course. Writing is a method of inquiry, so I’ll learn what I think as I write” (Richardson, 2000).

“Sounds like you have a great start. Do you want more chocolate syrup? I do!” Linda jumps up to grab the bottle from the counter, and we devour our dessert. Our conversation winds down.

I glance at my watch and see that it’s much later than I thought. It has been a comfortable visit, even though it’s the first time I’ve been to Linda’s home. Linda
dismisses my offer to help clean up and gives me directions back to Tampa. As I’m
easing my way out of the subdivision, I concentrate on the directions, so I won’t get lost.
Once I’m cruising along the interstate, I have an idea--the last one of the night. I can
hardly wait to e-mail Linda.

Messages of Friendship

From: Elizabeth Curry
To: Linda Osmundson
Subject: Thanks--ideas
Monday September 15, 2003
Linda,
Thanks for the swim and dinner. It was such a relaxing time. The warm water
and the warmth of your friendship were both great! Thanks for listening and
connecting ideas. You inspired me! I'm writing a narrative--a story of our
conversation about action research and ideas for the dissertation. I still have lots
of work to do, but I'm energized now!

From: Linda Osmundson
To: 'Elizabeth Curry'
Subject: RE: Thanks--ideas
Elizabeth!
You are amazing. I had a lovely evening and I am so glad you could come. I really enjoy our friendship. I love talking with you! You help me to think through issues and explore how to make things better, too. After the dissertation is done I want to work together on facilitating staff workshops related to Appreciative Inquiry and empowerment.

From: Elizabeth Curry
To: Linda Osmundson
Subject: swimming story
Monday, September 22, 2003 8:58 p.m.

I finished our swimming narrative. I even inserted our follow-up e-mail in the text. I took a little literary license, since I didn’t tape record the whole evening ;-) but I think it’s basically what we talked about. And it demonstrates that action research is about a research relationship. I also just found an article on friendship as a method of research (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). There are examples of social action research projects that I think definitely fit our CASA UCI project. The author was one of Carolyn's and Art’s students who wrote a book about being a Midwest conservative woman who ended up close friends with members of a gay softball team when her husband was invited to participate. She’s an activist and professor now. Anyway, the first draft of the swimming story is attached. As always, I'm interested in your reactions, revisions etc.
From: Linda Osmundson  
To: 'Elizabeth Curry'  
Subject: RE: swimming story  
Friday, October 03, 2003 1:52 a.m.  

Elizabeth:  

I finally finished your story and I love it. I think this process is very interesting, and I am delighted to participate. Makes me feel important. It is so different from most academic work, which is so dense and virtually unreadable for anyone but another academic. This just flows and is almost lyrical. Of course, it is intrinsically interesting to read about oneself. I loved how you wove our dinner into your thinking about the research. One issue I think is important is that there is often not an acknowledgement that the very fact of a researcher being in our environment will change the environment. While there was a possibility that the environment could have gotten worse with the UCI project, I think your approach made a very positive difference.

Empowerment and collaboration do seem like very basic themes, but there’s a lot involved. Empowerment is a concept that even some staff members probably don't fully grasp, and I am hopeful that they will begin to understand the concept better. I think there is the inherent tension of needing to produce certain products or results that produce statistics for our funders vs. the process of letting staff members grow and even make mistakes. Another tension that is probably
inherent in our work particularly is that we are dealing in an environment that could be high risk. Some mistakes we cannot afford to make that would result in injury to a woman from a batterer or even injury to women and children caused by another woman or child in the shelter. After all, we don't know the people who walk in our door, and they could be potentially dangerous, as well as in danger. Thanks for coming into our CASA lives!

From: Elizabeth Curry
To: Linda Osmundson
Subject: RE: swimming story

Thanks for your feedback. Your point about changing the environment is great. We use the term “recursive,” meaning that as someone changes the environment, they are changed by the environment as well . . . reciprocal change. I just found an article on “reciprocal empowerment” and women that seems to be directed at us (Darlington & Mulvaney, 2002; Darlington et al., 2003). I’ll share more about this with you the next time we meet!

NCADV Empowering Conversations

At the NCADV program sitting on the straight back chairs of the hotel meeting room, I fidget and think back to my conversation and visit with Linda. Was I conducting a research interview with Linda, the executive director of CASA or having dinner with a friend? Maybe Linda was interviewing me because she is interested in how my
dissertation will represent CASA. I decide that our time together was a highly interactive interview where the roles merged, and it didn’t matter who is interviewing whom. We shared the power and the control in an empowering relationship as part of a collaborative project.

After the panelists finish the presentation on the grassroots project of Colorado and DVRAC, a discussion on getting feedback from participants ensued during the question-and-answer period. Several examples showed that people found it easier to discuss their reactions than to submit written feedback about the findings. This also has been the case at CASA, where staff members enjoy the discussion, but only a few want to write comments on the pages I give them. The dialogue seems to bring out more ideas. I find the verbal exchanges to be richer. The interaction seems to spawn new ideas as people build on each other’s thoughts.

People from the group linger after the program to discuss community-based research, and I feel a sense of community with this group. Soon it’s time for me to meet Linda at the exhibit hall to decorate the poster about the UCI project and CASA booklets. As I leave, Barbara Paradiso waves to me and says, “We’ll see you at the reception tonight!”
Chapter Five

Poetic Activism: Many Faces, Many Voices

Sharing the CASA Booklet of Stories

The exhibit hall, or what NCADV calls the Vendor Marketplace, is quiet when Linda and I meet at the table designated for the display of the CASA UCI project. Linda asks brightly, “How was your day? I saw you at lunch, and it seemed like you were having a serious conversation. I didn’t recognize the woman with you.”

Replying with enthusiasm, I answer, “I met Dr. Cara French at the discussion group on researcher relationships. Then she asked me about my dissertation, and I droned on for a couple of hours. Thinking out loud, talking through ideas helps me to organize my writing, so it was a wonderful opportunity. She actually seemed to be very interested. Barbara Paradiso’s session on community-based research was about action research, like we have discussed with UCI. You were right--she has an exceptional program! Later, maybe we could explore some ideas for how the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence could hold a state conference like this one with researchers and practitioners.” Ideas tumble out in a rush of excitement.

Linda thinks a few seconds, “Maybe. We could see what the Board thinks. Not sure who has time to pull it together this year, but it makes sense.”

“Lots of work, that’s for sure,” I say, “but it could be the impetus for more research partnerships. We can put it on the list for next year or even the year after that.”
The sessions I attended here today were definitely relevant to my research and CASA’s interests, especially research relationships and collaboration! I didn’t meet anyone with a focus specifically on staff or life stories, but maybe tonight we’ll meet someone at the reception. If not, that just means that I’m researching something that needs to be done! How was your day?” I ask.

Linda replies, “I saw some old friends and had one of those great conversations in the hallway that energizes me. I was telling someone about the Open Spaces experiment you did at the state conference (Owen, 1997). I explained it as an organized way to have informal conversations.” We both chuckle at the idea of ‘organized informality.’ Linda hands me a business card. “Could you send her some information?”

“Open Spaces was a success because it provided space and time for people to connect on common interests in their own way. I saw a couple of people with experience helping newcomers, as well as some animated exchanges among the seasoned veterans. Of course, I think lots of folks just liked meeting by the pool and in alternative spaces other than conference rooms or ballrooms.”

“You know I vote for the poolside conversations!” Linda replies as she stuffs her tote bag behind the table and pulls boxes from underneath it. “Here are more copies of the CASA booklet, our new poster, newsletters, and brochures. Hope we have lots of people at the reception tonight because I really can’t carry any back home!”

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8 Developed 15 years ago, Open Space is a concept and technique that has been developed for meetings, events, and organizations, in which participants create and manage their own agendas of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance. For further information, see www.openspaceworld.org.
“I brought some sheets with our project title, both partners and our goals, and a few illustrations from the booklet. What do you think? We could put these on the display board. I brought double-sided tape and a small stapler, too,” I say, as I pull a file folder and baggie from my bag.

“You are organized!” Linda says, and we decorate the three panels of the foam-core exhibit board. The sign reads, “Many Faces, Many Voices Working Against Domestic Violence: The CASA Story of Stories.” The other table displays are modeled on academic poster sessions; they are more formal and sophisticated than I anticipated. I had expected a public relations, show-and-tell showcase. Wishing we had done more, but recognizing that Linda and I were both too busy, I accept our limitations. Reframing my dissatisfaction, I decide the signs I brought will enhance the visual appeal and highlight the booklets. Our exhibit is the only one with such a comprehensive booklet to distribute. The booklet contains the information we are trying to communicate. It is our research! Many of the displays have professional-looking graphics and summaries for their handouts. I wonder if I’m worried that narratives aren’t as good as other types of research, but I remind myself that this conference values qualitative research. Within seconds, I have framed and then reframed my outlook.

Linda suggests, “We can have appetizers and fruit at the reception; then see how we feel about dinner. We don’t need to be at the exhibit all the time. We can take turns circulating, be flexible, OK?”

I agree, “Sure, let’s go to the buffet before it gets too crowded.”
The Marketplace quickly fills with people, energy, and conversations. Our display is by the front door and the food table, so the area is packed. Already, many of the booklets we had on display are gone. Linda moves around the area chatting. She seems to know everyone. Standing by the poster exhibit is my way to meet new people at the reception.

A woman with long braids and a quilted vest approaches the display and says, “I already took one of your booklets, and I’d like to get several copies for my coworkers. Your project was grant-funded, right?”

I hand her three more copies of the booklet. “Yes, the University of South Florida awarded us a modest grant to stimulate a collaborative project. We studied people who work against domestic violence, both staff and volunteers, by becoming part of the organization and developing relationships. The booklet is one of our products from that grant. We want to use stories to help people understand domestic violence a little better.”

“That’s a fairly unique approach. The focus on staff I mean, not the stories. Stories have been so important to the Battered Women’s Movement. Many of us are survivors with personal stories to tell. We have our own Speak-outs at conferences, but I haven’t seen many stories written about staff.”

I answer, “We decided that the first section of the booklet should be from staff members who had experienced abuse and survived. It’s a testament to the grassroots nature of the movement. Other sections of the booklet include stories about working at the Shelter, outreach services, and youth advocacy. I’ve read one book about the Hubbard House in Jacksonville, Florida that focuses on the history of that organization.
and how services evolved (Warren, 1998). There are books about victims and survivors that sometimes give me insight into the work (Goetting, 1999; Lawless, 2001). Reading memoirs, life stories, and fiction also can help people understand abuse. A good book of short stories is *Women in the Trees* (Koppelman, 1996). Have you read *I Closed My Eyes* (Weldon, 1999) or *The Warmest December* (McFadden, 2001)?”

She takes out a tablet and writes down several titles. She thanks me again for the CASA booklets, as she moves down the aisle.

A very tall, attractive, African-American man with a bald head, wearing a suit like it was meant for him, comes to the table. “Hi, I’m Tony Porter,” he says as we shake hands. I introduce myself and offer him a copy of the booklet with a brief explanation. I’m regressing to my days as a marketing manager and exhibit coordinator. As Tony flips through the booklet, he stops at the portrait of a man. When I notice, I say, “The illustrations in the booklet were done by one of CASA’s staff members. He also shares his life story in the booklet.”

The man nods and says in a rich, deep voice, “A story is such a good teaching tool, a powerful way to get people to dig deep into their beliefs and question their assumptions. When I tell my story, I see men in the audience who have been there, too.”

Suddenly, I remember his voice. “You were at the Coalition conference in Florida. I heard you speak about the responsibilities of ‘well-meaning men’ and the role of men in the Movement, and I bought your CD. I hope I get to attend your session here, too.”
He looks at me, smiles, and says, “I hope to see you there. I’ve brought some new video footage of men’s groups I’ve been doing.” Linda comes over and greets us. She and Tony exchange hugs and begin to chat. I excuse myself to circulate among the other exhibits. I stop at several poster exhibits. *Ending Domestic Violence in the South Asian Community* describes participatory research, an empowering process linking personal experience to the politics of family violence. *Sheltering the GLBT Community from Intimate Partner Violence* brings together experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered victims. *Spirituality for Survivors Coping with Partner Abuse* is a qualitative analysis with implications for integrating spirituality into service delivery. *The Study of Children Who Experienced Domestic Violence Homicide* informs public policy and creates training for mental health workers. As I wander through the posters, I am struck by the diversity of the research on domestic violence and the many potential connections to the communication field. The ethical issues in the study about children and homicide disturb me, however.

A flier at the poster for *The Study of Children Who Experienced Domestic Violence Homicide* and a quarter-page announcement in the conference program offer victims $150 for two taped interviews. At first glance, I am deeply offended that the researchers are buying the stories, perhaps exploiting the victims. I can’t believe that NCADV allowed this! As I consider the issue from different angles, I see more of the gray areas and remember conversations with Linda. Researchers gain tenure and professional advancement from their work with interviews, so it might be more equitable for the participants to also gain something. This method of recruitment also allows
victims to make contact in a safe, supportive environment like NCADV. I buy pizza lunches at CASA when I conduct interactive focus groups, ostensibly to express my appreciation for their time and create a relaxed atmosphere conducive to conversation. Initially, there seemed to be a difference between paying $150 and buying pizza, but I’m not sure the difference is significant. Regardless of university or organizational rules that stipulate nominal amounts of compensation, the most important consideration is how we honor and respect the stories we hear.

Wandering to the cash bar for cranberry juice with lime, and then piling a small plate with cheese and crackers, I walk a few steps back to the CASA exhibit. A heavyset woman wearing glasses with dark-purple frames approaches. She shakes her head when I offer her a booklet. “Thanks, but I took one earlier. I teach sociology and a class on family violence. I want to hear about your method of researching staff and collecting stories, using first-person narratives.” She’s not wearing a nametag and her manner seems abrupt, almost confrontational.

I feel like I’m back in class and search my thoughts for an answer, “I think that the stories we tell shape our reality. DV advocates and activists engage in ‘poetic activism’ as they advocate for victims in courts, community presentations, and even with the victims themselves. My research is also a form of poetic activism, writing stories as a way of shaping the perceptions about working against domestic violence. Poetic activism falls under generative theory, which focuses on the power of language to create alternatives, open possibilities, and offer different ways of perceiving and understanding the world (Gergen, 1994, 2000, 2001). In generative theory, action and discourse are
integrally linked. ‘Talk is how we can most effectively create change’ (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 169). We use discourse as a way of relating and creating meanings that guide our actions.”

The professor with the glasses replies, “I agree that language can be powerful, even the words ‘domestic violence,’ instead of the words ‘battered women,’ ‘wife abuse,’ ‘spouse abuse,’ ‘abused woman.’ Now, I’m trying to change my language to say ‘woman who has experienced abuse’ because that means the woman is more than just her abuse. Words count. We have long struggled to redefine the meanings that are produced, maintained, and often reproduced within traditional organizational structures. Our concern for communication empowerment starts by looking at how women are silenced” (Luthra, 2003). The feminist ways of knowing feature stories and giving voice to those stories.”

Our conversation seems to be finding common ground, and her tone is warmer. I continue, “Poetic activism moves us from deficit discourse to a language of possibilities and empowerment. One example of poetic activism is the strength-based approach to social services, which is relevant to my research.” I’m not sure how she’ll react to the strength-based concept, which some activists tell me is still clinical. The DV workers strongly resist any language that represents victims as people who are sick and need treatment. In a sense this blames the victim. I keep talking. “Some social workers see clients as people with deficits, so the workers responded by assuming paternalistic roles as benefactors, liberators, or expert healers. With the empowerment model, social workers relate to clients’ strengths by responding as nurturers of self esteem, facilitators,
and mobilizers (Blundo, 2001; Graybeal, 2001; Simon, 1994). The move from deficits and a critical stance to a strengths-based view is the essence of empowerment.”

She comments, “The movement has always centered on strengths and empowerment, but now there are new meanings being used. Social workers are developing a system out of the strengths perspective, but sometimes it still seems almost clinical (Blundo, 2001; Cohen, 1999; Cox, 2001; Graybeal, 2001; Malekoff, 2001; O'Brien, 2001; Washington & Moxley, 2001; Werner-Wilson, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 2000). Even the word ‘client’ bothers me. But I can see that you use narratives as activism.”

“One of our goals,” I say, “was to produce a tool that could be used for social change, a booklet of stories. In the process, we also found that the act of sharing stories made a difference to the staff. The booklet can be a training tool for different audiences.”

“I might be able to use it with my class,” she responds with the first hint of a smile. “I’ll think about that as I read the stories. Tell me a little bit about how you developed them.”

“We spent several years observing, interviewing, and volunteering before we completed the booklet. You’ll see that I focused on paid staff and my colleague focused on volunteers. I have over a hundred hours of tapes and many notebooks of transcripts. From those experiences I created the stories. It’s a way of reporting the data. Some stories are life stories of individual staff. Some are vignettes linked together. Some are stories of one night; others span many years. One story in the booklet, Small Talk with a Big Voice, is a composite from focus groups and interviews.”
“Well, I have the booklet, but I haven’t read the stories yet. I’m assuming I can make copies for my class, but I notice the copyright for each story,” she says in a questioning, almost challenging voice.

I am momentarily surprised again by her assertiveness, and I feel defensive about responding. “Feel free to use the stories for your class, but please cite us. We copyrighted the stories to protect the intellectual property, but we want people to use the stories, especially in an educational setting.” I think about how we tried to talk about copyright during our planning meetings. Most people didn’t seem to care at that point, but I remember one person who didn’t. She was concerned about copyrighting the stories of the workers. I was worried that I might not be able to use what I wrote in the booklet for my dissertation. Now I wonder how I could have presumed to copyright stories that others shared with me, even if I did the creative work to interpret their experiences and compose those experiences into stories. Whose stories are those in the booklet? Thankfully, the woman with the glasses doesn’t pursue the topic.

As she moves to the next exhibit, I think back to how the CASA staff responded to the first composite story I wrote and shared with them, *Small Talk with a Big Voice*. After several focus groups, informal observations, and individual interactive interviews, I had so much information that I decided to fictionalize the framework of a story to incorporate various examples. My goal was to see how the CASA staff reacted to my interpretation of their work and introduce them to a social science method of storytelling that blends art and science (Banks & Banks, 1998).
Composite of Experiences

The pizza boxes are lined up on the counter. We’ve separated the meat-lovers’ special from the veggie-lovers' specials and the plain extra-cheese pizzas, all of which serve as a metaphor for the CASA staff’s diversity. As we settle into eating our lunch, Clarissa says, “Let’s thank Elizabeth for the pizza.” People clap and mumble their thanks with their mouths full of pizza. “She came today to get our reactions to the story about being an advocate, Small Talk with a Big Voice, so I’ll turn our lunch meeting over to her.”

“I’m not going to talk too much because I came to listen,” I begin. “Thanks for sharing your experiences and opinions that have taught me a lot in the past months. A couple of you told me, ‘This work changes you. You start to see DV everywhere, and you wonder why you didn’t before.’ Now I understand that it’s almost like being in a club that is a secret unless you are a member and you understand without judging or blaming. People tell me intimate details of their lives and abuse once they know I’m associated with CASA. The first time we met, I told you about the disclosures from two of my old friends. Since that time, my classmates have told me about their daughters and sisters and aunts.” I sip my green tea and continue, “My plumber asked me what he could do to help his neighbor. Almost all of my mother’s caregivers have revealed previous experiences with abusive relationships. Yesterday morning, I got a call from the Healthcare service saying that Mom’s regular daytime caregiver, Fran, was sick. Not long after that, Fran called to tell me that she was at the hospital with her pregnant
daughter, who had been the victim of abuse. Fran was ashamed to tell her boss, but she said she knew that I would understand. I reminded her that CASA could help, but I don’t know if she’ll call.” Silence permeates the room, and I pause before continuing.

“Now I realize more than ever before that domestic violence is pervasive and the CASA booklet of stories could be an important agent of change. I sent you a copy of story I wrote. Everyone received a copy, right Clarissa?” I inquire, and she nods. Several people have a copy of the story with them, but others look nervous, like they haven’t done their homework. I suggest, “Would you like me to read the story to you while you eat lunch? Then you could give me your feedback.” The group agrees.

“Anyone else want to help read?” I ask. Their silence clearly indicates that they want me to present the story to them.

A Composite Story: Small Talk with a Big Voice

Maggie is driving her 10-year-old, silver-blue Honda Civic along the interstate. She’s on her way to the dedication and ribbon cutting ceremony for the Sun-Fest Community Center and a photo exhibit, Focusing the Lens: Portraits of Our Community Heritage. Her mind wanders as she weaves in and out of traffic. ‘What a day! I am so drained!’ she thinks. ‘Where am I going to get the energy to press the flesh tonight? Well, the photos could be interesting, and I might meet some potential donors there.’ Maggie sighs, and then remembers her stress-reduction breathing.

‘Why did I get into that awful discussion with Kathy this afternoon? Me and my big voice! People tell me I have a big voice, and that’s not necessarily a compliment.
Not everyone likes it. I need to have a big voice in the type of work I do. People don’t always want to hear it, but the message is important. I give voice to the women who otherwise don’t get heard.’

Maggie stops at a light and thinks, ‘Oh, that conference this morning was intense. There we were, talking about careers and leadership roles for women, but abuse is still an issue. An engineer and a marketing manager were on one side of me, and an accountant was on the other side. While the marketing manager was presenting her segment of the panel discussion, the accountant was whispering in my ear about how she finally left her abuser. It was in front of an audience of 200 people, and she’s whispering in my ear. I tried to pay attention to what was going on, and I was thinking about my speech. The woman’s story of abuse was a powerful one. I wanted to listen to it, but perhaps this wasn’t the best setting, in front of so many people. Of course, those stories don’t happen in perfect settings. It was weird that she felt it was okay to tell it to me in the middle of this panel of presentations, where we’re talking about how we got our jobs or how we got into the leadership roles. She was sitting there telling me how her boyfriend broke two ribs when he punched and kicked her. She knew I’d listen and understand, and wouldn’t judge her.’

Maggie pulls into the parking lot. ‘Ahh, here we are, the Sun-Fest Community Center. Let’s see if I can find a parking space. Here we go. Not too far, the short walk and the early evening air might clear my head a bit.’ Maggie flips down the visor, applies light lipstick, and fluffs her short, dark, naturally styled hair. She rummages in her purse. ‘Yes, I’ve got my invitation, good.’
Stepping into the entranceway, she hands her invitation to the greeter, who gestures down the hallway tiled in burgundy, teal, and gray designs. A statuesque woman in an expensive-looking navy business suit greets Maggie. She extends her hand and pulls back her lips in a practiced smile, “Welcome. I’m Janet Fenworth with TopKnot.”

She is one of the lead sponsors, Maggie remembers from the invitation. “I’m Maggie Pace, nice to meet you. Your company has certainly demonstrated a commitment to community building with this project.”

“Yes, we are very pleased with the center and our opening exhibit,” Janet replies. “I was the coordinator for the project. And who are you with?” She leans forward to look at Maggie’s nametag. Her eyes have the vacant look of someone trying to recall a name.

“I work at CASA, a domestic violence organization.”

“Oh.” She pauses. “That’s interesting.” Janet’s response is perfunctory. “So you have a shelter for women who don’t have anywhere to go?”

“The shelter serves any woman who needs a safe, confidential residence. They can escape the immediate abuse and develop their safety plan. It’s also open to men, but the majority of reported abuse and our residents are female.”

“Oh, I see.” Janet nods several times, but doesn’t pursue the conversation.

Maggie elaborates, “The shelter is only one of our programs. CASA's mission is to advocate for social change by providing community education, outreach support, crisis intervention, and safe environments for survivors of domestic violence and their
children.” Maggie recites the message easily and with fervor. Her instinct tells her that Janet is not interested, but Maggie is an optimist. Any organization could be a potential donor.

Janet scans the crowd and smiles. “Well, be sure and enjoy the photos and the refreshments. I must greet some new arrivals.”

Maggie walks toward the crowded room and clusters of people talking and munching. I don’t see very many familiar faces,’ she thinks. ‘I’ll get a cup of punch, so I can clutch it as I mingle.’

Maggie wanders toward a table elaborately draped in metallic-gold cloth with a large ice sculpture of a Sun, surrounded by fruit, cheese, dips, and vegetables. Two women are standing near the table, discussing the photographs. As Maggie approaches, they look up and smile. After exchanging comments on the spicy dip, they introduce themselves. Jennifer is dressed in black with heavy silver jewelry. She has a trendy outfit and a serious demeanor. Ann Marie is dressed in a brightly colored jumper accented by flowing scarves.

Jennifer dabs her mouth with a cocktail napkin and says, “We both work for the Open Technologies Group; we just moved the offices to this area. Where do you work?”

“I’m an advocate for people who are abused by an intimate partner. I work at the CASA shelter.”

Jennifer looks concerned. “That must be very depressing work. Isn’t it?”

“Actually, this is probably the most exciting work that I’ve ever done in my life. I watch people make fantastic changes in a very short period of time. They take incredible
risks. You watch light bulbs go off every day. We help them by acknowledging the impact on them and their children, by sharing information on how they can be safe. We show them that they’re not alone. Generally, they just need to hear from somebody who believes in them. It’s about empowering women.” Maggie is impassioned about empowerment.

Before Maggie can ask about Open Technologies, Jennifer immediately responds, “But really, doesn’t it get to you on some days?” Maggie hesitates, sips her cold fruit punch, and continues in a calm voice, “Well, yes, I’ve been moved to tears by the brutality I’ve seen. I’ve cursed the court system that puts the abuser back on the street 24 hours after he breaks his wife’s arm, or that takes children away from the mother because she’s been abused.”

Jennifer sighs, “How do you cope with it all?”

“In the end, I guess I get my energy from knowing we can make a difference for individual women and our society. This work changes you, changes your life. It’s not just a job for me.” Maggie sips her cold fruit punch and takes a breath.

Ann Marie is twisting the end of her fuchsia and purple scarf around her finger. She shakes her head sadly, “I really feel sorry for women with such low self-esteem. It must be awful to endure such abuse.”

“Actually, we see them as courageous women. They may be victims of domestic violence, but they are courageous women. Sometimes their courage is in staying in the relationship because of the danger. You worry that he will find you and then hurt you, or he might take your children. Sometimes courage means staying until you have a plan to
leave that’s safe enough. The most dangerous time is when the abuser thinks he is losing control of you and that you are leaving. You can’t imagine the strength it takes to leave and make a whole new life. Of course, the effect of the abuse can be debilitating. It’s like torture; it can wear a person down. Women resist by surviving.” Maggie wonders to herself, ‘Maybe I’ve gone too far now for the social scene. The image of torture makes people uncomfortable. Oh well.’

Ann Marie, Jennifer, and Maggie pause; then Ann Marie opens her eyes wide and says, “Well what about your safety? Aren’t you afraid that one of the violent men is going to find out where the shelter is?”

“No, I’m not really afraid, but we’re also very, very careful to make sure that they don’t. I guess I just deal with it. You can’t live your life being afraid. The world has gotten to the point where we could be afraid of everything. We could be afraid to go to the mall or anywhere. This is just another place to be careful because there is a heightened danger in this kind of work. I believe that we must act as a community to eliminate the violence. If other women aren’t safe, then am I really safe?”

Maggie chats with Jennifer and Ann Marie for a while, and then they wander apart to look at the photos. Maggie stops to reflect on a large photograph of a group of women who were from the first class at the Dant Secretarial School of Business. They are dressed in long skirts with cinched waists, and their hairstyles are pulled tightly off their faces. The next photograph shows a vacation beach scene with women and men in modest suits covering their knees. A young couple approaches the picture. Michelle and her partner Ed joke about the differences in the amount of material in contemporary
bathing suits. They turn to Maggie and introduce themselves as members of the neighborhood group that fought for three years to get the community center built.

As Maggie finishes her introduction, saying, “I work for CASA, a domestic violence shelter,” she hears a deep voice in the background comment, “Oh, she’s one of those!”

Maggie turns to see a heavy, bald man in a dark-charcoal-gray suit nodding in her direction and talking to another man huddled near him, with his arm casually slung over his shoulder.

The second man looks over his shoulder and replies, “Who? What do you mean?”

The bald man almost sneers, “You know, the feminist, man-hating type!”

Michelle and Ed look a bit startled at the comment they overheard.

Michelle asks Maggie in a whisper, “Did you hear them? What does that mean?”

Ed looks uncomfortable and shrugs.

Maggie feels anger building in her stomach and struggles to control the sensation. “Well, there’s a misconception that women who do this kind of work are man-haters or home-wreckers. We’ve been called lesbians, dykes, feminists, femi-nazis, and that’s only the polite name-calling. There are all kinds of stereotypes and misconceptions out there. Some are ignorant, and some are really ugly. In truth, I’ve met the most diverse, tolerant, and dedicated women working at CASA.

“Do you think they feel threatened?” Michelle wonders.

“Abusers blame us when their wife, girlfriend, or partner changes. It’s all our fault at CASA; we put those ideas into her head. ‘You’re brainwashing my wife!’” We
hear that all the time. Some people think our main goal is to break up marriages. Some have religious beliefs about the sanctity of marriage, obeying your husband, and so on. Some people just seem to think domestic violence is different, since it’s violence in the privacy of the home. Historically, a woman was considered to be her husband’s property, so I guess we’ve made some progress.” Maggie mentally shivers and glances back to discover the bald man and his crony have disappeared into the crowd.

Ed runs his hands through his sandy brown hair that just touches the top of his collar. “You know, there’s one thing I just don’t understand. Maybe you can explain it to me. . . . Why doesn’t the woman just leave if the guy keeps hitting her?”

Maggie can see the real sense of confusion. It’s so complex, so hard to explain in a sound-bite setting, she thinks, as she begins her answer. “You know, a lot of people ask that question, but I’d like you to think in terms of a different question. Why does the abuser repeatedly belittle, curse, isolate, humiliate, and injure the woman? He wants power and control, total control. Why do we as a society tolerate this violence? We call it domestic violence, so we sanitize it and make it somehow more distant--it’s a crime!”

Ed furrows his brow, “I can see your point, but it just doesn’t make sense. Any sane person fights back or runs away from pain. It seems kind of dumb to stay in a bad scene.”

Maggie firmly responds, “It is a very complex issue. When we ask why she doesn’t leave, we are blaming the victim. Some women leave. Some stay. Some are killed. A few kill their abusers. What the woman wants is for the abuse to stop. She stays for a variety of reasons, and she leaves for a variety of reasons. There’s fear and
shame for starters, severe economic limitations, no job, no childcare, isolation from family and friends, slow legal response. She’s often afraid she’ll lose her children.

There’s the social, spiritual, and family pressure to keep the marriage together, not to fail. Some women feel that they need to help their partners through their depression, addictions, anger, or whatever. Abused women try to make excuses for the behavior because it doesn’t make sense. You must remember that the women love or loved their husbands, boyfriends, or whatever. Their abusers also profess love and express their affection. You’re right, domestic violence doesn’t make sense. You may think it’s confusing, but the women are confused, too. It isn’t rational for someone to say he loves you and then beat you!”

Michelle’s eyes are open wide, and she’s biting the edge of her lower lip. Maggie realizes that she had been talking louder and more intensely. “Sorry, this really is intense for a social setting, but it’s important that people understand the complexity. I guess I’m on my soapbox pretty much 24 hours a day. Domestic violence is a huge social problem with incredible effects on children and the family. It’s a health issue. It’s even a workforce development and economic issue.”

Michelle and Ed exchange looks. “I’ve never thought about all that. Maybe you could speak to our community group sometime,” Michelle suggests.

Ed nods. “We meet every month and try to focus on a wide variety of community issues and projects.” They exchange phone numbers and e-mail addresses before Maggie moves on.
Maggie checks her watch, calculating when she can slip out without seeming too rude. She checks her reception program and notes that the formal dedication ceremony will begin soon. She decides to get a quick bite at the dessert table, where she encounters Carl, a slender man in a tweed sports jacket and khaki pants. His red hair and goatee set off his open face.

Carl glances at Maggie’s nametag. “Oh, I see you are from CASA! That’s a great organization.”

“Thank you, that’s so nice to hear.” She smiles, pauses, and looks at Carl, inviting him to continue his comments.

“Well, my sister was a resident at your shelter a few times. It was a horrible couple of years. I was so shocked at first, but CASA helped her to rebuild her life. I’d say you saved her life.”

Maggie feels some of the day’s tension being released from her body as she talks to Carl. “So she’s safe now?”

“Yes, she’s safe, but she had to move to a different city and find a new job. She still lives with the fear that her husband will find her new address. He threatened to teach her a lesson by taking the kids and disappearing. Her three children, my niece and nephews, are still struggling to make sense of the things that happened. I try to spend as much time with them as I can. Some other family members still blame her for everything, so we have lots of family healing to do.”

Maggie smiles, “Carl, it’s been a very long day, and I can’t tell you how much your story means to me. I’m energized by every survivor’s accomplishments. Thanks again.
You’ll have to excuse me. I want to go to the ladies room before the ribbon-cutting ceremony begins.”

Carl chuckles, “Yes, I feel certain there will be some long speeches! Nice to meet you. You know, if you ever need any free legal work for a woman from the shelter, call me. Here’s my card.”

“Fantastic. Here’s my card. I’ll e-mail you about our volunteer training, and put your name on our mailing list. Maybe we can meet for lunch some day.”

Maggie walks briskly down the hall into the women’s restroom. Standing at the tall vanity mirror, she washes her hands, applies fresh lipstick, and combs her hair with her fingers. A slender woman in a simple black dress with her blonde hair in an upswept twist approaches her. She comes to the vanity, washes her hands, and briefly looks at Maggie in the mirror, then turns to face her. As she wrings her hands with a paper towel she says, “I heard you say earlier that you are from the shelter. Well, I was wondering if I could ask you a question? You see, I’ve only been married for two years, and he’s a little older than me, and he’s much more sophisticated. Anyway, Robert has lost his temper a few times. It’s not really like abuse, but I’m not sure what to do. He’s under a lot of stress with his new company, and he can’t help it. He’s always really sorry afterwards, really, really sorry. I’ve tried to be a good wife, but sometimes I feel like such a failure. I can’t seem to do the right things. I make him mad.” She discards the wadded paper towel and grips the counter, arms locked against her body.

Maggie marvels to herself. The stories are often so similar, but the pain is so fresh each time. She looks directly at the woman and gently assures her, “The most important
thing I can tell you is that no one deserves to be hit or threatened. No one deserves to be physically, verbally, or emotionally abused. NO ONE. And it’s important not to blame yourself for what he does. It’s not your fault. It’s all about his need for power and control. Let me give you this card with our hotline numbers. Call anytime you need to talk, ask any questions, get information, or find safe shelter--24 hours a day. Put the card where he won’t find it.” Maggie knows that domestic violence is a complex social issue, but the first steps are to help the victim understand the options and focus on ways to stay safe. Tears are crowding in the corners of the woman’s eyes, but she is trying to smile, an embarrassed smile. “Are you going to be okay?” Maggie almost whispers.

The blonde woman nods with a determined jaw, turns to the mirror, and dabs her mascara expertly. She picks up her purse and slips the card into her make-up case. Her heels click on the tile as she turns and walks out the door. Maggie hesitates a minute before she follows. She cringes at the familiar voice she hears when she opens the door. She stops.

“Where have you been? It’s almost time to start the ceremony!” The slender, blonde woman is met by the heavy-set, bald man. “You’re always late. Are you trying to embarrass me, for God’s sake?” His voice is hard as he hisses at her. He grabs her arm and hustles her down the hall.

Maggie leans against the cool tile wall for a few more seconds, and then she leaves the restroom and walks slowly to the auditorium. An usher hands her a program, and Maggie drops into a seat on the back row. I’ll slip out as soon as the speeches are over, she thinks. Maggie hears the microphone booming, “Welcome to the new Sun-Fest
Community Center. It’s my honor to introduce the man who made it all possible, Robert Chadwick.” Maggie becomes numb when she looks at the stage and sees the bald man in the dark-charcoal-gray suit shaking hands with the man at the microphone. Maggie doesn’t hear the next words. The voices and the applause fade into the background of her consciousness. She picks up her purse and leaves the auditorium swiftly, without wondering if anyone notices.

Maggie slides into the car, kicks off her shoes, and locks the door all in one fluid move. She sighs as she starts the engine. Her mind is racing, and her body begins to feel deflated. ‘I hope Mrs. Chadwick is okay. I hope he doesn’t find the hotline card. If only people had any idea what some of these community leaders did at home! The sad thing is that people know. How can they ignore it? Well, I guess the reception wasn’t too bad overall. Did I seem too argumentative? Was I too serious? I wonder if other people were watching or listening. At least I didn’t get too angry, but I feel like I’m always giving a lecture. I’m not sure it makes any difference at events like this reception. Everyone thinks he is an expert when it comes to family. Why doesn’t she leave? Ahh, I remember when I thought we could educate the world. . . . If people just knew the facts, we could stop the violence. Information would set us free. If people knew that women were abused, battered, and tortured, we could stop it. I guess it’s easier to blame one woman than to look at how we might change the way we think about the society we have created.’

Watching the speed limit as she turns off the interstate highway, Maggie is still thinking about the event. ‘Don’t they realize that when they are talking about those
women, they are talking about us? If they think battered women are stupid, weak women who lack self-esteem, what do they really think of the shelter workers? I’m glad I didn’t tell them that I was a victim of abuse myself--a survivor. Not tonight. I couldn’t take it tonight, too much explaining and too much pain. Maybe I should have told Mrs. Chadwick that I was a survivor, but the moment was so brief. Funny how the women’s restroom becomes a sanctuary for snatches of illicit conversations!

‘We have to speak out! I want to give voice to the horror of it all. Sometimes it’s just too personal and comes with so much baggage. Sometimes being a victim doesn’t fit their image of me being a professional woman. Unless, of course, they think I’m not conforming to the feminine role. Yeah, your big voice is so feminine, the mouthy feminist. I’m just so weary. I know what will help. I need a hot bath with lavender salts.’

Later, at home, as the hot, steamy bath water, diffuse candle light, and calming lavender scent of aromatherapy begin to calm Maggie’s spirits and refresh her body, she reminds herself of the starfish parable that guides those who work at the shelter: “You can’t save every starfish that washes up on the beach, but you make a big difference to each one of the starfish that you can throw back into the water.”

Whose Story Is It?

There is spontaneous applause around the CASA lunch table. I see smiling faces when I put down my papers. “Thank you! Thank you!” I say. “I guess you liked it.”
We all laugh. “Did the story seem accurate? What would you change? Did you like certain parts? Just give me your reactions to anything in the story.”

Becky starts, “I really liked it, especially the part about the women’s room. But I couldn’t figure out whose story it was. I guess Maggie is a fake name. Is she Linda? Sometimes Linda talks about having a big voice as an advocate.”

Judy jumps in before I answer, “I know we’ve talked about how community leaders, wealthy business people—the big shots—are often abusers. People don’t think you can be an abuser if you dress well or have money! This story shows it. So much of the story rings true, like presentations I’ve done. Almost always, a couple of people ask for help at any event where I speak. But I don’t remember the event in this story.”

Clarissa interjects, “That’s the truth! They always ask the ‘why doesn’t she just leave’ question. They blame the victim.”

Bonnie interjects, “That part about feminists, lesbians, and home-wreckers is such a misconception, too! That’s not who we are, but we hear it all the time. We’ve been called much worse!”

Becky adds, “I still don’t know whose story this is.”

I explain. “This is a composite technique. I created a story that is based on everything I learned during individual interviews, our pizza lunch discussions, observing at the Shelter, and volunteer training. Remember when I asked you if your work was depressing and how you explained how it wasn’t? You told me what people say to you. So this story is like a patchwork quilt, or a stained-glass window, because the pieces form the overall picture. This is everyone’s story.”
Clarissa commends, “Great job” and starts the applause again. Then she says, “You really get it! This is what it’s like to do this work. I particularly like the way you showed the advocate was a survivor. Sometimes we reveal that and sometimes we don’t. People talk about survivors as if they are very different, but they are all around. Most people just don’t know.”

Becky concludes, “You made the point that violence can happen to anyone. That’s a major point to understand.”

Judy challenges me, “I have one important question.” She pauses and everyone looks at her, “What grade did you get? You promised to tell us.” Everyone laughs.

“I haven’t turned in my paper yet,” I reply. “But I promise I will let you know.”

Judy smiles and says, “Tell your professor we gave you A-plus. And we want this story to be in our CASA booklet of stories.”

Remembering the CASA staff members’ reactions to Small Talk with a Big Voice makes me smile because it was the first composite story I wrote as research. Narratives that I had written for other qualitative projects usually had one or two characters based on interviews. The composite technique allowed me to incorporate information from many different interviews and observations into one story. The feedback from the CASA staff members encouraged me to pursue a narrative approach to communicating what it is like to be an advocate against domestic violence and abuse. If people understand the work maybe they will develop a deeper understanding the issues.
NCADV Poster Session Closes

The reception is almost over, and the crowd has thinned out at the exhibits and the Vendor Marketplace. The noise level is quieter; the aisles are clear, and the pace is slower. Linda leads me to a booth with turquoise jewelry from Colorado. As a memory of the conference, I purchase white, dangling earrings with black lines running in all directions, crisscrossing throughout the stone, just like our relationships as stories. Linda buys an exquisite blue turquoise necklace to add to her collection. As we leave the exhibit hall, we decide to walk down the block together for a light dinner because tomorrow morning there is an early plenary session. I feel full of ideas from only one day at the conference, yet I’m also hungry for more.
Chapter Six
Life Stories: Moments Of Meaning

NCADV Plenary of Stories

The next morning starts with stories and the stories continue throughout the day. Before attending the plenary session, Linda and I check the exhibits and replenish the supply of CASA booklets. Linda exclaims, “I’m so glad people are taking the booklets! I heard great responses last night. People who have been reading the stories think the booklet really represents our work!”

I reply, “I remember when you said that you wanted CASA’s own Women in the Trees (Koppelman, 1996), which was your vision the first time we met. This conference has brought back lots of memories about my work with CASA.”

“I didn’t really know how our collaboration would turn out, but stories are a critical way to promote our work, which makes the booklet so powerful. We need to be the ones who tell our stories!” Linda replies as we walk into the ballroom.

I’m feeling a bit more comfortable with the space and the conference during this second day. The NCADV conference is different, but also similar to the library conferences and communication conferences I’ve attended. I’ve even seen several people
whom I’d met previously at the state conference, which makes me feel like I belong to this community.

The crowd quiets as the NCADV director walks to the podium, greets everyone, and then opens the session. “This morning we have three parts to our plenary session: First, we’ll present awards to our sponsors; second, we’ll hear our keynote speaker on the rape culture, particularly the prison-industrial complex; and finally, we’ll memorialize the Colorado victims of DV with a song by country-western performer, Rachel Proctor.” The audience claps with the energy of people ready for another day.

“The Wireless Foundation and the Body Shop are two of our long-time supporters, and today we have special awards for them.” She calls representatives to the stage to accept sculpted, glass statues. The representative from the Wireless Foundation offers a heartfelt acceptance of the award and shares impressive figures about the number of phones and the amount of funds raised. I connect CASA’s cell phone program with this national effort. I’m glad Deb’s story about volunteering to sort cell phones, The Cell Phone Girl (Walker, 2002), is in the CASA booklet because it means readers might donate their phones. Next, the Body Shop representative steps to the microphone and tells stories of how the company has partnered with customers to increase awareness, contribute products, and raise funds to aid victims of domestic violence. “We had a campaign to buy gift bags specifically to benefit organizations working to stem domestic violence. A man bought 200 bags. He said if people had cared more, maybe his sister’s abuser wouldn’t have killed her. A 16-year-old boy donated $100 and said he would never forget how his dad beat and belittled his mom. During a Mothers’ Day
promotional campaign, a woman purchased $293 of merchandise, but when the Body Shop clerk asked the customer if she wanted to make a contribution to stop domestic violence, she donated her entire purchase. The customer said that she realized other women needed the products more than she did.”

I am moved by these stories and I see, hear, and feel the ripples of impact that undulate across the rows of the audience. There is some sadness, but also a sense of hope in working together to change things. The applause for the sponsors is more than polite; it is strong, loud, sustained, and heartfelt.

The NCADV staff member returns to the podium to introduce the keynote speaker. “Alissa Bierra is an experienced activist and grassroots organizer, who is currently Executive Director of Communities Against Rape (CARA) and on the steering committee of Incite! Women of Color Against Domestic Violence, an organization that works to end all forms of violence against women of color and in our communities. Today, she will discuss the culture of violence against women in our society, our prisons, and the military.”

Alissa Bierra begins with a strong, loud voice that captures our attention. She has a PowerPoint presentation on two large screens. “I want to talk about oppression, specifically 1.) Objectification, 2.) Dehumanization, 3.) Disempowerment, and 4.) Isolation. Much of this discussion is based on a book entitled *Transforming a Rape Culture*”(Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993). Bierra tells stories of a society that accepts sexual violence against women on many different levels, as evinced in the media, entertainment, music, advertisements, the workplace, and even educational institutions.
Some of her examples remind me of how violence can become so pervasive that we don’t recognize the assault on our reality. As the CASA staff warned me, you see it everywhere once you open your eyes. The speaker challenges us, “We must transform attitudes of sexism, racism, ableism, and classism. The rape culture is incredibly broad and perpetuated in so many ways. We must ask: What are our values as a society when our president is trying to marry off welfare moms as a solution to domestic violence and jobs?” The audience applauds spontaneously. The speaker continues, “The rape culture extends to prisons and military. The world is shocked by the photos from Iraqi prisons, but women around world are abused, tortured, raped, and killed by their partners and families every day.” The audience applauds again and again throughout the presentation.

The speaker lowers her voice, “I want to conclude with a call for all of us to embrace values that liberate, such as peace, humanization, self-determination, connection, empowerment, and community. We must examine our own organizations and look at policies that objectify or dehumanize women. We must work together to let the world know and to change the rape culture with its sexist language, pornography, sexual harassment, date rape, and battering intimate partners. Society tolerates, if not encourages, male aggression and accepts violence against women. This conference is our chance to talk about what we are going to do.” People in the audience are on their feet, clapping.

When the applause stops, the NCADV staff member thanks the speaker and says, “Now we do have time for questions and comments. I ask you to go to the microphones in the aisles so we can hear you. While we encourage people to identify themselves, I
want you to know there is a reporter here this morning, so you may choose not to identify yourself for reasons that we all understand and honor.” At CASA, I learned that confidentiality is very important to DV work. Abusers often stalk their victims, even after separation or divorce, which can be the most lethal period of time.

As women line up in the aisles to speak, I wonder about my role as researcher. At first, I was taking notes just because I am a scribbler; it is how I listen. But soon I find I’m taking field notes about people and my feelings, not just facts. I wonder if I am part of the movement? Am I one of them, so it’s OK? Other researchers are in the audience; I wonder if any of them plan to write about the conference. Is this my story or their story? Is this an ethical issue? I continue to scribble, but I’m careful not to be too specific in reporting on those who speak at the microphones. Just like the DV workers, I want to adhere to the highest level of confidentiality. Many of the speakers do not identify themselves. One woman says that her daughter is a U.S. soldier defending our country and tells the story of how her daughter has been raped by other soldiers. The woman sobs as she recounts the traumas of the military’s failure to protect her daughter from this abuse. I feel overwhelmed and start to feel angry and frustrated.

Then it is time for the last segment of the plenary session. The NCADV staff member says, “Now we want to end our session by remembering the victims who have died as the result of domestic violence here in Colorado.” As the names of the murdered victims are read, women march down the aisles carrying large signs on poles, each with a black silhouette. They fill the front of the room. The room is very quiet.
When all the names have been read, the singer, Rachel Procter, comes on stage. She is a young woman with long, blonde hair, tight jeans, and a flowing, strapless, floral blouse. She says, “Here is my song about how violence can affect women and children. It’s called *Me and Emily*. I’m contributing copies of my CD to all the organizations working to stop this violence and pain in families throughout America.” After the applause, her keyboardist and guitar player begin a country-western beat. She sings with a delicate soprano voice:

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Floorboard's filled with baby toys,
An’ empty coke bottles an’ coffee cups.
Drivin’ through the rain with no radio,
Tryin’ not to wake her up.
Cell phone says “low battery,”
God, what if I break down?
I'm just lookin’ for an exit with a lotta lights,
A safe little interstate town.
Just a cheap hotel,
With a single bed,
And cable TV
Is good enough for me an’ Emily.
Some day, when she's old enough,
She’s gonna start askin’ questions about him.
Some kid at school brings his Dad for show an’ tell,
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An’ gets her little mind a-wonderin’

“Where's my Daddy? Do I have one?”

“Does he not love me like you do?”

Oh, maybe I'll find someone to love the both of us,

An’ I'll tell her when she’s old enough to know the truth.

Will it break her heart?

Will she understand,

That I had to leave?

That’s what was best for me an’ Emily.

That house was never clean enough

His dinner never warm enough.

Nothing I did was ever good enough to make him happy.

So, I guess, he gave me what he thought I deserved,

But it would kill me if he ever raised his hand to her.

Big rigs are throwin’ rain on my windshield,

An’ I feel like they’re laughin’ at me.

Fin’lly the storm is lettin’ up,

An’ the mornin’ is breakin’ free.

It’s a brand new day,

It’s a second chance.

Yesterday is just a memory,

For me an’ Emily.
Floorboard is filled with baby toys,

An’ empty coke bottles an’ coffee cups.

Least there's one good thing that he gave me,

An’ she's startin’ to wake up. (Proctor & Tompkins, 2004)⁹

As Rachel concludes her song, the audience applauds and the singer bows and gestures to her fellow musicians. The song rings true to me. I don’t know if this song is autobiographical, biographical, or fictional and perhaps it doesn’t matter. This young singer is sharing a story in her music just as the sponsors, keynote speakers, and audience members told their stories earlier in the session. The stories spark understanding and meanings that are remembered and retold. In the same way, CASA staff members share their stories in the booklet we created for the UCI project. Thinking back to the day we finalized the stories and drawings for the CASA booklet, I remember the chaos, camaraderie, nurturance, and mix of emotions in my life, and in the lives of the staff and those they serve.

Telling Stories

“It’s Elizabeth,” I say into the buzzer by the front door, which unlocks immediately. I note that I identify myself using only my first name, and I don’t say who I’m meeting or for what purpose. In the past year, I have become a regular at the Shelter, not just a special visitor. The line between insider and outsider continues to become fuzzier.

⁹ © 2004 Castle Street Music, Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission.
“Hi! Judy, Bonnie.” I see other staff on phones, but I don’t interrupt them. “I brought some goodies for you to give to the Shelter residents,” I announce casually, as I pile my bags on the large, round communal worktable.

Bonnie swivels her chair from her desk over to the table and looks in the bags. “Wow! Two cartons of cigarettes! We can use these! No one ever brings us cigarettes. There was one man who used to bring cigarettes, but we haven’t seen him in a long time. This is great!” Bonnie hugs me. “Thanks, Elizabeth.” Bonnie’s face is as animated as her voice. She rummages in the second bag, “Oh, bubble bath, and this stationary is gorgeous. It’s just what we need!”

Judy looks in another bag, “What’s this? Whitman’s Chocolates. Wow! And my favorite--mints!” Judy knows the mints and chocolate are for the staff because bringing them has become a ritual each time I visit.

“The Whitman’s chocolate sampler is from my mother. She said I had to tell you it was her gift to the staff. She likes to hear about my work at CASA and what I write, so she feels like she knows you.” I feel so pleased that they are enthusiastic about my donation. It is one way I express my admiration for the staff members’ emotionally demanding work. In a small way, I hope these donations make their work a bit easier and let them know they are valued and appreciated. “I overheard two residents the other day talking about sharing a pack of cigarettes.” I say. “Nicotine withdrawal at the same time you are facing potentially life-changing decisions would be awful! Bonnie, the stationary cards are for you because the last time I visited, you were writing notes of encouragement and acknowledgement to the residents for extra chores they did. It made me think of the
cards that I receive from my friends and the cards mom used to send to me. A card can brighten my whole day! My aunts, Mom’s sisters, send her a get-well card every day. Every day! This started about a year ago. Those cards have been like a lifeline, since Mom is homebound. When a card comes, you know somebody cares about you. You aren’t forgotten.”

Bonnie, the House Manager, is sorting the piles. “You got that right! And at the Shelter a card can say, ‘I think you are a person worth the attention.’ Sometimes if I’m too busy to write a card, I’ll tell the woman who is helping with extra house chores, ‘I appreciate you.’ That might be the first time they’ve heard gratitude in a long time. My job at the Shelter is a little different from the Women’s Advocates or Youth Advocates, but I still care about the families. I organize all the supplies, toiletries, donations, food, cleaning, and repairs. I keep the whole place working, from plumbing to pantry, from blinds to windows, from the garage to the playground--and more! Everyday, I put on my roller skates, and sometimes I add a superwoman cape just so I can keep up.” Bonnie laughs, but she has a serious look on her face. “My main job isn’t the counseling, but I try to make myself stop and remember what our real purpose is here. There’s something wrong if I can’t find a few moments to speak to a resident or offer encouragement. The advocates help the women develop safety plans and sometimes restructure their whole lives. I try to get beyond the everyday tasks to bring them some happiness and maybe a few moments of tranquility. They need balance between the stuff they have to do and the things they also need to heal their spirits. Having to go out and find a place to live, get birth certificates, maybe change your name, having to do so much, and every day you’ve
got to be achieving something. Well, I tell the residents ‘do something for yourself.’ In order for you to do well tomorrow, you need to take care of yourself today. Soak in a bubble bath, listen to some music, read a book, eat a snack. I can’t function in a crisis environment if I don’t find some time for me, so they probably can’t either.”

I nod eagerly; glad to hear Bonnie talk about her work because she’s been too busy for an extensive individual interview yet. “It’s a simple gesture that means so much! So just let me know when you need more cards, okay?”

The phone rings, and Judy answers it efficiently. I’m surprised when she says, “Elizabeth, call for you.” Immediately assuming that there’s an emergency with my Mom, my heart starts beating faster, and my face flushes from the stress. Then Judy says, “It’s Homer.”

A deep voice with a slight lisp says, “Sorry, Miss Elizabeth. I’ve got a problem at Transitional Housing, an emergency job, so I can’t come to the Shelter this morning.”

I ask, “Can you come later today? I must leave by two o’clock.” Stress begins to foment into frustration, as my stomach churns and my jaw tightens. Mom’s caregiver only stays until three o’clock and my schedule is overloaded. Anger spouts and I think, ‘Why didn’t he call me before I drove all the way out here?’ Then I remind myself that CASA functions in a crisis-oriented environment, which means flexibility is critical. Homer is illustrating the CASA booklet, in addition to all his regular work as Maintenance Technician. His reading difficulties contribute to his uncertainty about this process and my expectations. I’m worried about my academic deadlines, but the booklet
is really for them, it is our project, not my project. Automatically reframing with positive statements, Mom’s influence clings to me.

When I get off the phone, Judy and Bonnie look up. Clarissa walks into room and I explain, “I was supposed to meet Homer this morning to go over ideas for drawings in the booklet. But he’s got a crisis…”

“Oh yes,” Clarissa interrupts me. “Looks like an abuser broke a window at Transitional Housing. We had to call the police last night, or I guess it was early this morning.”

Judy peers over her glasses as she sets aside her notebook and files, “We have an extremely lethal situation here today. Clarissa, I got the church to donate four bus tickets for Pamela and her kids. Becky has called the Shelter in Fort Lauderdale; we have to get Pamela out of town as soon as possible.” Judy turns to me. “We have a full house today and some very serious safety issues.” I nod, but before I can reply, we hear a screaming child in the hall.

Becky comes into the office holding an infant, and says, “Don’t worry! Kristin is taking care of Justin, but we have another mom in crisis.” Two phone lines ring.

I reach for the baby. “I can’t answer the crisis line, but I can baby-sit. Zach is a chubby baby swaddled in a washed-out blue sleeper. He still has his baby pimples on his face. Staring into his black eyes I watch his fat, little tongue slide in and out of his mouth. I cuddle him on my shoulder and walk around with a slight bounce in my step. Zach feels warm against my body as he slobbers, chewing on my shoulder.
In the midst of all this, a group of volunteers and donors want to tour the Shelter. Two staff members from another Shelter come to observe, and the plumbing contractors want to check the work needed before providing a cost estimate. The atmosphere doesn’t calm down until around noon. Homer calls to tell me that he is on his way. His harried voice matches the tone of the day.

At lunch, everyone is excited about Homer’s drawings and the booklet. Becky says, “I didn’t know what to expect when you kept talking about a booklet, but I really like the story, Someone Stole My Paper Plates (Curry, 2002). That’s my story isn’t it?” I nod as I take some cheese and crackers from a communal plate. Becky, a former resident, is now a CASA advocate, and she knows that anger can be one phase of healing. Residents sometimes direct their resentment at the staff or other residents when their anger really is about their abuser or their situation. Once residents feel safe and powerful at the Shelter, their pain and anger might erupt. It can be a complicated, emotional environment for staff, as well as Shelter residents.

Clarissa says, “I picked the drawing I like for my story. I told Homer what I wanted. He’s so talented!” Surprised because I haven’t seen any drawings yet, I nod. Staff members received copies of the stories to review, but the final layout with the drawings hasn’t been done yet. My assumption has been that I would select the drawings today, which now seems naive and controlling.

“I picked mine, too,” adds Judy. “I can’t believe you wrote such a wonderful story from the hours that I rambled on and on! I want my daughter to read it.”
“Wait ‘til you see how Homer drew me in a superwoman outfit on skates! But he has to change my head now that I’m shaved. Now we have a bald superwoman!”

Looking at Bonnie’s beautiful smile and the colorful head scarf, I think back to the months of pain she experienced with her skin condition and her agonizing decision to shave her head. She told me of her illness during an interview, but stipulated it was confidential information, which I respected for months until she decided to reveal her baldness. Later, we all celebrated on the day she first came to work without her wig.

Another staff member says, “You didn’t get everyone’s story in the book. Are you done, or will you do a second booklet?” Her question makes me feel uncomfortable and defensive.

I reply, “You’re right. I didn’t get to interview everyone individually for your life stories, but I did invite everyone to group interviews about working at CASA. I’m not sure yet about future projects. We’ve got to finish this one first for the grant. Hopefully, everyone will remember that these stories represent the big picture, CASA, other Shelters, and those everywhere who do this work. In addition to being personal stories, these have broader meaning, too.” No one contradicts me, but I’m not sure they agree.

Homer arrives with a Big Mac hamburger in his hand. His bulky frame and nervous laughter fill the room, as he sits with us and quickly finishes his burger. He pulls out his drawings for the booklet, which are not what I expected, based on samples of his previous stylized work. The illustrations for the stories have more detail, and Homer has drawn full scenes, trying to show the whole story. I don’t agree with all the staff members’ choices, but decide to honor them. Trying to focus on the positive aspects of
the unexpected as Homer and I negotiate the project, I pencil a rough sketch to show a possible close-up of one illustration. My interest in detail excites Homer. We find a bond in discussing his art and his expertise, especially when I tell him I wanted to be an art teacher, but I didn’t have the talent or drawing skills.

As we finish and decide on a date for the final sketches, Homer says, “You know, I have a story, too, but it’s bad. I thought it was too bad to tell, but then when I read Clarissa’s story, I thought it might be okay to tell my story. I thought you might write my story. I’ve been ashamed of my missing tooth from my gang days, but then Miss Bonnie was brave enough to show her bald head, so I don’t worry about what people at CASA think.”

“Mr. Homer, I would be glad to include your story, since you are working so hard on the drawings. So be sure to do a self-portrait, too. We’ll record your story when we meet next time, if you want. We’ll talk, and then I’ll write something for you to read. You’ll approve it before we print anything.” Adding Homer’s story will create many hours of extra work for me to avoid a delay with final layout and printing, but this is my gift to him, since he is doing so much for the booklet, and because he trusts me with his story. I don’t mention the time to Homer.

Homer looks hesitant, but says, “I want to tell my story, just like Clarissa, Bonnie, Judy, Becky, Ellie, and the others.”

When I return home, I begin work on placing the drawings into the stories. I feel honored by their trust. They shared their vulnerabilities with me in their stories, and they
showed how people could be survivors. The following stories were adapted from the stories in the CASA booklet.

Clarissa’s Story:

Mother Couldn’t Braid My Hair: Remembering and Breaking the Cycle

I was born in abuse. My Mother was a victim of domestic violence. My Father was the abuser. The only thing I ever saw was abuse. So I knew nothing but abuse. To me that was normal. I never knew what was normal. I grew up in a very dysfunctional family and learned how to be comfortable with walking on eggshells. You never knew from one minute to the next when the violence was going to break out. My Father, early on, taught me about mental, verbal, and emotional abuse, as well as physical. He was an alcoholic. And I’m not saying this to justify this behavior because it didn’t. Today, in my position with CASA, I teach issues about both substance abuse and domestic violence. But there’s no justification for abuse--none at all.

There were eight children in my family, and I was the fourth. Out of eight of us, there were four siblings with dark skin--like my complexion. Four had lighter complexions. We grew up with prejudice in my family, where the favorites were those with light skin. The message was, “I look better, lighter, but you’re nothing, you’re black.”
While growing up we were very isolated. We didn’t have a lot of family or many friends. Other families didn’t come around. My Father was about 6’6” and weighed 250 pounds. My Mother was about 5’3” and was a very small woman. It was pretty sad because I had to watch him beat her continuously for whatever. She got beat because she wanted to work; she got beat because she was there. I would never forget that, and now I really understand how survivors from other states can be very isolated. Well, my Mother left Florida with my Father to go to Chicago near his family. The abuse got very bad there because she had no family support.

Even with all my very traumatic experiences, I will never forget the beating my Mother got when I was three years old. My Father beat my Mother with a baseball bat—literally beat her with a bat. She was blocking the bat from hitting her in the head, when he split her fingers. She had to get stitches. I remember this so clearly because she couldn’t braid my long hair, and she had to get the babysitter to do the braids. I was three, but I still remember that time.

Another traumatic experience was during the heat of my Father’s madness in Chicago. We stayed in a high-rise on the 16th floor. I will never forget that my Father took my brother and dangled him out there to get my Mother to do something. He told her, “If you don’t do it, I’m going to drop him.” I remember that because I witnessed it.

My Mother and Father came back to Florida. We traveled a lot because he was in the military, and this abuse was still going on within the home while he was in the service. We were just people who he commanded to do stuff. It was like he was a sergeant within his house and whatever he said, he meant us to do. If you didn’t do it,
then there were repercussions. I was the middle child. I was the caretaker. I wanted to make everybody happy, and I wanted to be this super-achiever. I wanted to do everything perfectly. In my family, if you didn’t do it perfectly, there were big repercussions. There were consequences. In my home, it was unacceptable to spill milk and then clean it up. If you spilled or wasted anything in my house, it was devastating because you knew you were going to get harshly disciplined. A common mistake wasn’t tolerated. So I grew up thinking I had to be perfect, and I couldn’t make a mistake.

My Mother worked, and she took care of us. When she was 34, her oldest child was 13 and the youngest was a year old. At that time, coming from a rural area, a lot of the women of color that I grew up around worked on farms. They either worked as maids in hotels or as farm workers. I looked at my Mom, and I said, “I will never, ever do this.” But what was she going to do? Where was she going to go? Who was going to marry her to take care of eight kids plus herself?

Years and years and years ago, we didn’t know about shelters. We really didn’t know there was a place to go. I truly feel that if my Mother had known of a place to go, she probably would have gone. Thirty-five years ago, my mother didn’t have a shelter and services like CASA.

I was determined to go to school and get an education because I did not want to work on a farm or be anyone’s maid. I watched my Mother work hard and be abused almost every day. I was determined to do better. I’ll never forget when I was in high school, I was walking past this hallway, and I saw this class with nothing but white people in the room. I asked one of I was determined to go to school and get an education
because I did not want to work on a farm or be anyone’s maid. I watched my Mother work hard and be abused almost every day. I was determined to do better. I’ll never forget when I was in high school, I was walking past this my classmates, “What’s that? None of us are in there.”

And they said, “Oh, that class is too hard, it’s short hand.” That was a challenge for me. Nothing is ever too hard for me. So I took that class with my friend because I needed support, so we could do homework together. We proved that we could learn. I came out with honors in that class. And as a result, it paved the way for me to be able to break the cycle within my family structure. I was going to be a secretary. I took every class that I needed to have a decent job. Back then, years and years ago, a secretary was a prestigious kind of job. Out of eight of us, I was the first one to graduate high school and go to college because I was determined to be the one to make a difference within my family.

But my life took some hard twists and turns that I never expected. I ended up in several abusive relationships. I couldn’t believe it was happening to me, but I lived a life of fear and pain. Along the way, I developed a substance abuse problem. I drank. I always said that I would never let alcohol or anything destructive in my life because I was going to be somebody. Well, it took a long time for me to truly break the cycle.

I found a place with a substance abuse program that helped me change my life. Eventually I started working there because they saved my life, and I wanted to thank them. I wanted to give back something that somebody gave me, which is my life. This place gave me back hope, it gave me back my self-esteem, and it gave me back my self-
worth. Someone to love me until I was able to love myself because I didn’t love me, I hated me. I worked for that organization for many years. I was secretary for the administrative assistant and then was promoted to become a drug counselor, which I was for 12 years. And as a result, it paved my way to the work I do now.

I started working for CASA as a substance abuse advocate. I would just do whatever I needed to do, educate the staff, and just share whatever about me that I had to give. As a result, I think about a year ago, I was promoted to the Shelter Coordinator, where I supervise the everyday operation of an emergency shelter. And just recently, my position changed again to Residential Operations Coordinator. I’m now responsible for the shelter and transitional housing.

I’ve always wanted to help others because I’m a caretaker. I try to help people like me. I don’t have a problem sharing my story of abuse because it is over. As a result of reaching out to women, I gained love and support. I never had that before. When I grew up, culturally, a woman was not your best friend--she was your enemy. So, I never had a lot of women friends. I had a lot of men as friends. Today, there is power in the women’s friendships in my life.

Judy’s Story:

He Pulled the Strings: My Job Was to Protect Her

I grew up in the forties and fifties. I would say that I didn’t grow up in a home with domestic violence, but I really did. It wasn’t my home, but it might as well have been. I witnessed lots of domestic violence because I spent probably half of my life with
my Aunt. My Mother shared me because my Aunt could not have children. Family lore says that the day I was born, my Aunt was in the hospital with my Mother, and she looked at me and exclaimed, “She’s mine—not yours!”

I was raised to make life better for my Aunt. “If you’re there, she’s less apt to be hurt. He doesn’t pick on her so much whenever you’re there. You have to help her.” They didn’t use the word “abuse” back then, but said, “He’s mean to her.” As a small child, I was told, “Do not come out of your bedroom after you go to bed. Lock the door and don’t come out.” At my Aunt’s house, you locked all the bedroom doors, but at my house you didn’t. A locked door never stopped my Uncle anyway; he kicked it in. Although he never came after me, it’s very scary for a child to hear someone they care about screaming for help, crashing, and banging. You don’t know what you’re going to find. When you do go out, you may find blood, splintered doors, unconscious people. Once I found my Aunt unconscious in the hall. Another night, she very quietly tapped on my bedroom door after he had stopped beating her and had gone to bed. I had to go get tweezers to pick embedded glass out of her foot. He’d thrown a glass at her as she was running. She did not consult the doctor because he knew my Uncle. If she had sought medical help, she would have gotten another beating even more severe.

I traveled with my Aunt and Uncle every summer from the time I was five. I traveled around the world with them and got an education from that life that I never got in school. My Aunt and Uncle were wealthy, so they offered me certain advantages. A kid likes those things, so I wasn’t exactly forced to go, but I learned to take all the baggage that went with the situation. I learned to be independent because many, many
times on trips after he would beat her up, he would disappear for two or three days. He disappeared for three days when we were in Paris. He had all of our passports, he had all the money, and there we were stranded in a hotel. I was 15 and had learned to cope with all of it. I never actually had a safety plan because back then they didn’t talk about plans like we do now. You learn to make safety plans in your head. He left, and I thought he might not return because that always was in the back of my mind. I decided that I would wait as long as possible, then find the American Consulate, call home, and they would wire some money. I was socialized to be a helper, a protector, from the beginning.

I grew up like a lot of children of domestic violence, thinking that this was how families act. I also grew up around alcoholism--my Aunt was an alcoholic, my Uncle was an alcoholic. Everybody in my family but my Mother was an alcoholic. My Father would be labeled an alcoholic, but we had years and years and years when he didn’t drink. Then he’d have a couple of binges, and then he wouldn’t drink again. But on both sides of the family, I had a history of alcoholism. Why I grew up still able to trust some people--I don’t know. Children from homes with domestic violence and alcoholic homes usually don’t trust others very easily.

There were no shelters. Many, many people knew that my Aunt was being abused, but no one ever stepped forward and offered to help. Had she chosen to leave, my Aunt had nowhere to go. There wasn’t anybody that would help her. She had psychiatrists, but they didn’t know anything about domestic violence in those days. They didn’t deal with it, and she wouldn’t have told them he was beating her up because he might know the doctor or say something. A typical abuser, my Uncle had her declared
incompetent and thrown in the psychiatric ward a couple of times, which then enabled
him to legally take back the house in his name and take all of her assets he had given her
for forgiveness after beating her. Years later, her sisters would beg her to leave and live
with them. But she would say, “He’s got so much money that he will find me.” “He’ll
destroy the family and he’ll fire everybody that works for him.” “I’m doing it for my
family.” These were some of her excuses. The only difference in their dynamic that I
can see is that he allowed her to have her family around her on a daily basis. Most
abusers don’t do that. When they isolate, they isolate completely. She could not have
friends, only family. She wanted to join the garden club because she loved gardening,
but he said, “Absolutely not!”

My aunt liked the wealthy lifestyle that she chose for herself and was willing to
take the abuse that went along with it. So when she had scars, we went to plastic
surgeons and got them fixed. When her eyeball got stomped on by the heel of his shoe,
we got an eye doctor out in the middle of the night to take care of it--one who was not
going to go call the police. And if abusers were killing a lot of women in those days, you
didn’t know about it. It wasn’t all over the media; it wasn’t all over the newspaper.

My Aunt did not die from the abuse. She died of cancer. But while she was in
the hospital dying for a month, he visited dutifully every evening after dinner. He would
walk into her room, take his gun out of his pocket, lay it on the nightstand, and sit down
and chat. Then he would go out with the girlfriend he had at the time. People in this
town thought he was a wonderful person. He did do good things for people, but a lot of
abusers do. There were a lot of people who knew he wasn’t very nice. It was still
something you didn’t talk about. People with money and position have power, and they can cause problems for you. He was an abuser who needed power and control in every aspect of life. He was a cruel man.

I took psychology in college and learned a few things, but when I went to CASA they started teaching me the philosophy and dynamics of domestic violence. Then it all fell into place. It was like a light bulb went on and I’m thinking, ‘Oh my God, she was so typical and he was the classic abuser.’ When I was growing up, I guess I did blame the victim at times because I didn’t know a thing about all this. I lived it, but didn’t understand it. I’d think, ‘If my Aunt would just go to bed now, we’d be OK. He’ll forget it. He won’t hit her.’ But deep inside I knew that he didn’t really need a reason.

In the very beginning, I didn’t think too much one way or the other about CASA because I was working with little kids. It was just a job taking care of kids like my previous job in a daycare center. But as soon as I began working at CASA, I knew it felt right. When we would get into arguments, sometimes my husband would say, “Well, you sure have changed since you started working at that CASA place.” And I would reply, “Yes I have, for the better I think.” I began standing up for myself after I came to CASA. For a long, long time I was sensitive, maybe too sensitive about everyone else. But I have learned from being here to be more assertive with my opinions. It doesn’t always get me anywhere, but I feel better because I’ve at least said what I believe. But I didn’t used to be that way so much because, in my growing up, my Uncle did not allow me to have any opinions. They had to be the same as his. He was right no matter what. I knew
I stopped talking when I was six years old. I became speechless. There was so much abuse in my family, so much pain, that I just couldn’t talk. When I stopped talking, I put a lot of my anger into my drawings. For a long time, I didn’t talk to anyone about the abuse, but I overcame it. I would never want to see that happen to anybody, not my kids or anybody’s kids. I would never want to see them go through what I went through.

I always had the artistic ability to draw my anger. I could express myself in my artwork. When I’d get mad at somebody, I would draw. So in a way, my pain inspired me to develop my creative abilities that I use today. Some things I wouldn’t show you now. The pictures are too awful, violent. One day, when I was a kid, I was showing some real graphic stuff to my friends, and somebody said, “What’s going on?” “Why are you doing that?”
I said, “This is what I am; this is what I draw.” They couldn’t see what was going on, even though it was right on the paper. They couldn’t see what was happening to me.

All the things I went through, especially with my alcohol and drug use, have made me stronger and thankful for my life, my wife, my children, and my job. I know that I could have been dead a long time ago. I just thank God that I’m alive. I started drinking when I was nine years old. I used to mimic my Father when he would drink. My Father was an alcoholic. After my Mom and Daddy had parties at the house, my brother and me would go around and turn the bottles over and drain everything out of them. We could eventually get a good shot and get drunk that way. Back in those days, my older brothers were also drug users. I grew up with drinking and drugs in my family. My Father’s children from another woman moved in with us. The oldest boy tried to dominate me because I was the oldest son on my mother’s side. It was real, real, real hard dealing with that. It was just more abuse; I never felt safe. That was probably one of the hardest times in my life.

I got stronger--physically, so it wouldn’t happen to me again. I got into weight lifting real early in my high school days. I played football and wrestled in high school. They called me Stump because I wasn’t tall, but I was big. I wanted to protect myself. That was, in my thinking, you know, that I wasn’t going to get hurt any more. My drug use started when I was about 16 or 17. I started smoking pot in high school and doing all kind of drugs that got me high in the late 1970s. I had problems in school. A lot of times I would read backwards, and that’s been a problem for me ever since. I was really
punished a lot because I couldn’t read. I was embarrassed a lot by teachers. But I learned how to deal with that, and I knew that my art was really blue-ribbon, high quality.

You know, the beatings that my Mom was getting made things very hard. So many times we just had to get away. We were in and out of schools when Mom would leave my Dad. We were basically running all the time, just trying to get away. We would go to other towns, but she would eventually go back. And that was the part that really upset me about my Mom. There were times when I really, really hated the fact that she was going back. He would call, and he would want to talk to us, and then we would say, “Daddy, why?” “Why did you do this to Mom?”

He’d say, “Daddy was drinking,” and he would always blame the drinking. But now that I’ve been working in the domestic violence field, I know that drinking is not the problem. Drinking wasn’t the problem; it was just something he did. It’s not the alcohol; it’s just total control of the person and getting that person to do whatever you want that person to do. I think those men are cowards. They’re very insecure about themselves, and I think that they’re not real men at all.

When I went to the training for CASA, I could see things from my life. I know what it feels like in a family when your Mom and the kids have to get away. I know how the kids feel the fear. I’m a survivor. I’ve been through it. I could relate. One time, my Dad was trying to kill my Mom, and he got the ax and was chopping down a room door. He was beating her, and then he went after my brother with the ax. Another time, there was beating and fighting so my Mom got the gun and chased my Dad in the house. He picked me up and put me in front of the gun. One time my Mom stabbed him, and he fell
on the ground in a puddle of blood. He tried to drive his car, and he passed out close by
the next street. The ambulance came, and the doctor explained that the knife was two
inches from his heart. He almost died, but he kept hurting my Mom for years, kept
hurting us all.

My Father doesn’t hurt us now. He died last year, and the abuse was something
in the past. I think my substance abuse program helped me deal with the pain and the
memories. I was able to express a lot of feelings. I was able to cry about it. I was able to
give that pain away by telling somebody else and not holding on to it anymore.

My drinking and the drugs were to get rid of the pain. I would say it helped me
forget a lot of my past. At least I thought it did at the time. I started drinking more, and
then I became like my Father; I was real violent. Like one time on 22nd Street I was in a
brawl, and I ended up in the hospital for 21 days--7 days in intensive care. I got stabbed
twice and got shot once--all in the same night. But that didn’t stop me. I was working for
a drug dealer, being a bodyguard, selling everything in my home. I ended up getting
arrested. It was like an awakening, where a higher power came in and showed me life. I
was strung out, hallucinating and real sick. I saw my life and death. I was in a casket,
buried, and I was able to see the crease of my Dad’s pants and the colored little dresses
and the flowers and all. I was tired of drugs; I was tired of being in the streets. I was just
totally tired. All of the strength I had put into drug use became the strength I needed to
help myself. I tried to reverse that strength. As the arresting officer began to read me my
rights, a feeling came over me like I was being enriched with the Lord--like I was being
washed off. And I cried and I cried. Then he said to me, “I’m going to try to get you some help.”

And I kept telling him, I said, “I’m not a bad person. I just need to get off the drugs, and I just need help.”

He said, “Well, I’m going to do this: When you have your court date, I’m going to write to the judge that you want to get help with your life and change your life.”

I got help, and I changed my life. I did an AA program. I went through some parts of GED. I went to church every Sunday in jail. A counselor from PAR’s substance abuse program helped me turn it around. I was 38, and I was finally able to find out who I really was. I learned to understand anger and feelings of rejection. I learned tools that were the life skills, like classes in childcare and parenting. I had the opportunity to work with crack cocaine babies and to take care of that baby and to see the struggles that baby goes through just to suck a bottle or to see the baby’s eyes not moving properly like a normal baby’s eyes do. I was also able to become a role model, speaking to groups and helping others.

I have four kids: three boys and a seven-year-old girl. My oldest is dating a schoolteacher, and he’s doing great things. I took him to some AA meetings, and he’s heard me tell my stories. I’d be crying, and he would be crying. He said, “Dad, I didn’t know you was like that--I’m so sorry.” I wanted him to understand what I went through and what drugs can do to you. Fatherhood is very important to me. It’s real important to have values, listening, friendship, and quality time with my kids because my Dad didn’t give us that.
I’m the only man that works at CASA, and I feel a sense of respect there. We have partnership and teamwork. I feel like they really enjoy having me working for CASA, and it’s a good feeling that people want you to be around and show that they care. They give a lot of compliments—a lot of smiles and thank-yous, and hugs and stuff like that. Today, I don’t have any shame or embarrassment about telling people what I went through. I’m no longer a small, terrified, speechless little boy. I’m a proud man with a voice.

NCADV Interlude on Life Stories

The NCADV session concludes as I wrap up my memories, thinking of the CASA stories and how much I learned from them, how our lives recursively inform our work. I relate to Clarissa’s need to be perfect for her father, never good enough and always striving. I understand her bold determination, and I see it in her work at CASA. Admiration for Judy unfolds when I consider how she was taught to keep up appearances, guard secrets, and silence her opinions. Judy has the gentle heart of a caretaker behind her matter-of-fact exterior. Sometimes she seems brusque, but Judy’s honest and perceptive explanations taught me about CASA. Bonnie is an asset to CASA because she sees herself in others as she nurtures and values people. Organizing in a crisis environment means she’s a superwoman on roller skates. Homer maintains his sense of hard-won pride and expresses himself creatively, but still worries about being judged or blamed. Something that isn’t in these stories is their sense of humor, which comes from a deep appreciation of life.
I started my work at CASA thinking that I was different, believing that I didn’t have a connection to domestic violence. Eventually I realized it was all around me. Rather than seeing myself as different from victims of domestic violence and the workers, I began to see our similarities and to truly believe that DV could happen to anyone.

The NCADV conference has been more thought-provoking than I anticipated, with the memorials both days, the keynote presentations, and programs. I am struck by all the stories today, from the sponsors, the audience examples, the poetry, the song. It all ties back to the CASA booklet and my dissertation, both about narrative communication.

As we file out of the plenary session, Linda says, “I’m going to the caucus for formerly battered women. It’s a closed meeting, only for those who self-identify. But let’s meet at the session on de-politicization and feminist empowerment. The facilitator is one of my favorites. She’s got skills like yours.”

“No problem, I remember the closed meetings from FCADV. I think I’ll go back to the room. I brought some work with me, and I’m feeling inspired to make some notes for my dissertation. Meet you later.”

Back in the hotel room, I kick off my shoes and begin pulling files from my briefcase. Sitting near the window, looking out over the mountains, I scribble ideas on a tablet balanced on my knees. I’m not trying to outline, organize, or formulate answers, instead allowing myself to be open to the “peripheral vision” that Mary Catherine Bateson described: “The process of spiraling through memory to weave connection out of
incident is basic to learning” (1994, p. 11). That’s what I’ve been doing with my experiences and relationships at CASA, and now NCADV has become a sense-making event, a place to reflect and see ideas coming together. Making time for reflection is difficult personally, and in CASA’s crisis-oriented environment, it is particularly problematic for staff. The UCI project discussions and stories provided an opportunity for us all to discover some of our own peripheral visions.

As I scribble my notes, I remember reading the book *Nickel and Dimed* and sharing a powerful epiphany with the author, a female journalist who tries unsuccessfully to live on minimum-wage jobs (Ehrenreich, 2001). She is faced with a demeaning and confusing dilemma when a supervisor unfairly accuses a coworker of stealing ketchup packets. Ehrenreich feels powerless, yet ashamed, as she accepts this situation for fear of being fired. Recognizing that she has morphed from a confident, assertive, articulate journalist into a fearful, powerless worker, she wrote her story of how poverty and abusive environments can affect anyone. Ehrenreich’s descriptions contributed to my understanding of many of the obstacles that the women served by CASA face.

My work at CASA, conversations, and reading all have spawned “moments” of meaning for me, such as those Denzin describes, in major everyday activities, cumulative experiences, minor events, and reliving similar moments. These moments of meaning not only mark our lives. “They alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person’s life” (Denzin, 1989, p. 70). Making notes, I find myself drawing circles around ideas and lines to connect the circles. This “mind map” of meaningful moments will eventually
become my dissertation, a web of relationships in stories shared and more meanings created.

Sitting in the hotel room, I pull out a power bar, so I won’t chew on my pen anymore because it looks disgusting with a mutilated end. Munching on the granola bar and staring out the window, I contemplate my interpretation of the web of CASA stories. In some ways, I’ve been preparing for this project for most of my life—as a reader, teacher of literature, librarian, trainer, consultant, and now researcher. As an avid reader of fiction and non-fiction works about life and lives, my own life has been shaped in both small and significant ways by what I have read. The challenge for me now becomes how to structure the writing and presentation of CASA stories. Some lives are written as short stories in edited collections with varying degrees of analysis, but yet are still very moving and evocative (Bateson, 1989, 2000; Chase, 1995; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Goetting, 1999; Koppelman, 1996; Lawless, 2001; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1995, 2000). Some are written in longer-life versions, with more events covered and in very different styles (Bateson, 1994; Duneier, 1999; Ellis, 1995; Frank, 2000; Fremont, 1999; Hamper, 1986; Knapp, 1996; Lamott, 1993; Pitts Jr., 1999; Slater, 1998; Tillmann-Healy, 2001; Weldon, 1999; Wink, 1996). Life stories might be short or in-depth, comprehensive or situational. They can be topical, naturalistic, reflexive, introspective, oral histories, layered accounts, or experimental, to name just a few categories (Plummer, 2001). Forms blend and blur, with over 52 terms or genres catalogued (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 183-207). I’m looking for how I will communicate my interpretation of the CASA stories and what kind of labels will apply to my work.
Tearing a page off my tablet I write ‘life story method--immersion rather than dissection’ and stare at the words (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 101). That makes sense for how I’ve approached the UCI project, the CASA stories, and my dissertation. Rolling around the idea in my mind like the first sip of a glass of wine, I savor it. Suddenly, I hear a knock at the door, and the door opens as a woman loudly announces: “Housekeeping.” I am surprised and glance at my watch. “That’s fine. Come in. Come in.” It is time for the next program. I had gotten into the flow of work, but now I’m going to be late meeting Linda. I grab my tote bag and hurry out the door, wondering how long it will take to find the next meeting room.
Chapter Seven

Becky’s Story: An Advocate Needs Shelter and Sanctuary

Empowerment Is Personal and Political

I’m a few minutes late for the program, which I really hate. Maybe it’s not such a big deal. ‘I’ll just slide into the back,’ I think to myself. Winded, I open the door to find the largest room and biggest crowd I’ve seen for any NCADV program thus far, except the plenary sessions. A huge semi-circle of chairs lines the perimeter of this double meeting room. Another semicircle of people are sitting on the floor in front of those in chairs, facing the facilitator and the flip charts in the front of the room. I carefully tip-toe to the inside of the semicircle and squeeze into a small space on the floor, not too far from Linda. This audience seems younger than those at the other programs I’ve attended thus far at NCADV, perhaps due to the topic, “Depoliticization of the Domestic Violence Movement and the Reformation of Feminist Politics.”

A young woman speaks, “I think we have become too concerned with intervention, and we’ve lost sight of the political struggles of our Movement.”

Another young woman with short, cropped hair offers, “What I wonder is, how can we be a social service agency in our community, taking money from United Way and the city and the legislature, while at the same time, we must advocate against their policies, which are harmful to victims or just don’t make sense in the DV context?”
Comments continue, as I twist and turn to settle into a comfortable position. Being at NCADV is like my time at CASA: It is not always comfortable, but it challenges my assumptions, stimulates my emotions, and engages me in forming new perspectives.

“I think that we have lost sight of our struggle for social justice because we spend so much time focusing on shelters, visitation centers, policies, staffing, and funding,” says a participant.

“I wonder if the Battered Women’s Movement has become more about our organizations than the cause,” muses another participant.

I turn when I hear Linda explain, “In the early days, the shelters were a true collective of women helping women. I have some concerns about losing our focus on social justice and feminist politics, but I also think we must remember that providing shelter to women experiencing abuse is a political act as well. Shelters were radical at the time the Battered Women’s Movement began. It’s clear that depoliticization is a very real problem, but let’s not lose sight of our grassroots tradition and ideals.”

An older woman lifts her hand to get a nod from the facilitator and says, “It’s still also a question of funding. If I had to do it over again, maybe I would put less emphasis on the shelter. We’ve grown into organizations providing more than just crisis shelters.”

Linda jumps in, “I wasn’t arguing against the need to rethink our emphasis on shelters. I’ve visited other countries where they are looking at solutions to violence in intimate relationships very differently. They have the benefit of seeing our development. At CASA, the shelter is only one service. We have already expanded our outreach
program and educational activities significantly, which is part of our social justice efforts to change the way people see domestic violence.”

A woman on the floor interjects, “Our state coalition is our vehicle for political action. We work through the coalition to lobby for legislation and funding, as well as state-wide awareness. That is a partnership between practitioners and lobbyists. Many of our programs use community members to speak out. These people may not see themselves as part of the movement, but they are reshaping acceptable norms. They are a political force, too.”

Another woman replies in a gentle, but firm, voice, “Perhaps it’s a question of individuals in pain and in lethal situations. At the same time, the whole society needs to change the way it sees violence against women. Do we look at the stars instead of the sky or can we separate them? I think we must we see them both!”

The moderator moves to the flip chart, “So let me summarize briefly. The 70s were a time of radical, grassroots work when we developed shelters. In the 80s, funding became more of an issue, and it converged with our push for credibility and professionalism. In many cases, this pushed out survivors, who were no longer hired as staff. In the 90s, we were confronted with welfare reform, men’s rights, backlash, immigration reform, and VOCA [Victims of Crime Act]. So now we have 2000 and beyond to shape. Two key questions are entwined. First, can a publicly funded program of service be effective in a highly political environment? Second, how are the political issues acted upon in direct service--our shelters, crisis lines, visitation centers, support groups, youth programs, legal advocacy, transitional housing, and outreach?”
Another woman comments, “I think all our programs are political because we create a new standard for what is considered normal, with our training, our support groups, our work with victims.” As the woman talks, I am reminded of the term “poetic activism,” which sums up the process of creating new ways of understanding the world (Gergen, 2000).

The group is quiet for a moment, and then a woman says, “We’ve been talking about empowerment since 70s, but I’m not sure we are clear on what it means. I thought it was about honoring women’s choices. Now I hear people say things like, ‘we want to help women make better choices.’ Better by whose standards? Have we become another agency that constructs images of women as problems? Are we trying to fix them? Empowerment might be about individual choices, but it is also the structure of society, power, the distribution of resources, and poverty. Empowerment is how each one of us chooses to make a difference in society.”

The facilitator reminds the group, “Empowerment is political and personal. The battered women’s movement is personal and political. This has been the essence of our feminist movement for years.”

My butt has lost all feeling and my back aches. I’m leaning sideways on my arm on the hard floor. Squirming, I shift positions to cross my legs. Balancing my portfolio to write notes, I realize that I don’t see anyone else taking notes and wonder if they notice me writing. I’m glad we discuss the connection between how personal experiences test and shape our political beliefs, as I continue to struggle with the recursive relationship
between the personal and the political. This is a relational, nonlinear process of linking ideas.

As the NCADV discussion continues, I think back to how shocking and confusing it was for me and the CASA staff to confront the personal and the political when a staff member became a victim of attempted murder by her estranged husband. This CASA advocate was then a resident of the Shelter where she had previously been a staff member. A confusion of roles, the questioning of procedures, and deep emotions were the result.

During my research at CASA, I experienced and observed many different emotions. My field notes show that on many days the workers and I experience a list of emotions including: empathy, compassion, sympathy, sadness, frustration, anger, fear, appreciation, pride, joy, passion, and humor. I challenged myself to probe my assumptions and understanding of the workplace feelings at CASA. When I began discussing emotions with the CASA staff, they responded in their typically articulate and self-aware manner. The complexity of the topic emerged and questions spiraled when Becky was attacked. After that time, I developed a heightened sense of the way that the staff at CASA managed the ambiguities of emotions and complex relationships.

“Emotions are key factors in forming mutual understanding by cueing empathy, gaining insights into expectations, building shared interpretations, and understanding life histories” (Putnam & Mumby, 1993, p. 51). CASA workers are confronted with the ambiguities of working in an environment that is highly emotional, where they must strive to understand their own emotions and the emotions of coworkers and Shelter
residents. When one of their coworkers and one of my co-researchers became a resident, the emotions were deeply disturbing. We experienced ambivalent emotions and faced the disjunction between our political philosophies and personal emotions.

Unexpected and Emotional Violence at CASA

“It’s me, Elizabeth. I’m just dropping off copies of the last story I wrote.” A brief silence, an atypical hesitation, makes me wonder if I interrupted a meeting or something. The CASA staff has told me that I don’t need to make an appointment any more to come to the Shelter. I usually call, but I’ve become increasingly comfortable just hanging out, observing, chatting, and learning. Once in awhile, I’ll clean out the kitchen pantry or something, but my main job seems to be writing stories about the staff and their work.

Judy and Clarissa are absorbed in paperwork when I come into the office. The environment seems unusually subdued. Clarissa looks up and asks somewhat absently, “Elizabeth, are you doing an interview today?” Clarissa and Judy glance meaningfully at each other briefly, but I don’t know what that glance means yet.

I reply, “No, I’m just bringing you copies of the latest story for the staff to read. I know it’s busy around monthly report time, so I’m not staying long. Class tonight starts at five o’clock, so I’ve got to get over the bridge before traffic gets clogged.”

Judy says in clipped sentences, “Well, can you wait a minute? I want to talk to you. We’ll have a cigarette break on the porch. Wait right here.” She and Clarissa leave for a few minutes. When Judy returns, she gestures toward the back door.
We sit on the bench, and Judy offers me a cigarette. I shake my head no. She lights up and then says brusquely, “We had a crisis. Becky’s husband tried to kill her.” Judy pauses then explains in a gentle tone, “She’s a resident here now, with us.” Silence hangs around us like the vines from the hanging planters on the porch, which are twisted and entwined around the posts, like the way my relationships with CASA workers have grown and become intertwined.

I stare at Judy’s face and then tap a cigarette from her pack without asking. I light it, inhale deeply, and ask in a low voice, “What happened?” I feel my eyes filling with tears before she answers, but I struggle to keep the tears from spilling out.

“He broke into her place while she was sleeping on the couch, and hit her over the head with a pipe, choked her, smashed her arm. Ellie went to the emergency room that night to help Becky. Things have been in turmoil. Clarissa and I had to ask her if it was okay to tell you because of our confidentiality policy.” Judy’s words pour out.

I murmur, “My God. Oh my God.” I’m cold and feel like a part of me has left my body, as I try to process this information. I shrink inward and away from this horror. Then I think of the whole shelter, all the staff, Becky, and the residents. I come back into my body to speak. “I guess this has been really hard for everyone.”

Judy nods and exhales. “I did the intake into Shelter. It was chilling. Becky’s hair was still matted with blood. Ellie was worried about me. I said, ‘No, I’m fine. I’m concerned for Becky and her feelings.’ Becky is a former resident of the CASA shelter, and I remember when she left her abuser eight or nine years ago. Then later she came to work at CASA as a Youth Advocate. We’ve been coworkers for the past few years. So
when I interviewed her for intake into the Shelter this time I felt like I was invading her privacy by asking her the questions that we always ask women coming into Shelter. Funny that we don’t look upon the questions as invasive with the strangers we interview. Becky was very forthcoming with her answers and descriptions. I think she was still in shock. Sometimes she was laughing, trying to make a joke of some of it. I don’t know what medications they gave her. She was really hyper in a strange way.”

“Flooded with adrenaline, I guess, ” I comment and take another long drag of my cigarette.

Judy continues, “When I went to bed after hearing Becky’s story, I kept waking up with quick starts all night. My first thought was, ‘Is that how you wake up when somebody hits you in the head with a piece of iron?’ Becky was so graphic during the intake. I’ve heard stories like this from other women, and it hasn’t affected me the same way. This seems more real somehow. For days, I would wake-up with a start and my first thought was being hit in the head. I got over that. I mean, I realized it wasn’t happening to me at my home. I’m still not over it; we are all struggling with it. We thought you should know.”

“Thank you for trusting me. I’m shocked, not sure how to react. Tell Becky I’ll come visit soon, and I’ll bring her cigarettes and chocolate. Tell her to call if she needs anything.” I want to help Becky, to do something, but I feel at a loss. Judy and I both know that as a volunteer, I’m not supposed to bring anything for just one individual resident. I can bring things for all the women to share or to be added to the supply cabinet in case a resident needs something. As a colleague and researcher, I can bring
goodies to the staff. If I’m a friend of a resident I can provide things to help her, but I
can’t come into the Shelter. The policies, rules, and my identity aren’t clear now.

Both Judy and I pause, drawing inward. We crush our cigarettes in the ashtray
and walk back inside. “Take care of yourself,” Judy says, as she holds the screen door
open for me.

While I gather my canvas bag to leave, Clarissa cautions, “We have serious safety
concerns because Becky’s husband knows where the Shelter is located. His bond was set
pretty high, but he’s out now.”

As soon as I get into my car, I lock the door and tears start dribbling out the
corners of my eyes and down my cheek into the corners of my mouth. I taste the salt.
Driving to the university from the Shelter, I sob as I cross the bridge and gaze at the
endless, blue horizon of water and sky. I feel alone, yet I’m surrounded by other cars.
The horror invades me and seems both real and unreal, incomprehensible. Concentrating
on traffic is difficult. Once I park on campus, I blow my nose several times, wipe my
eyes, and compose myself, until I get to Carolyn’s office. Sobbing again, I can’t talk
because I’m crying so intensely. I’m usually the one with the long fuse and the even
keel. Carolyn, looking confused, asks me gently, “Did your mom die?”

I shake my head no and gasp, “I went to CASA...” Carolyn waits as I sob and
talk, sharing what little I know of Becky’s story with her. Handing me the Kleenex box,
Carolyn asks a few questions and lets me sit quietly, dabbing my eyes and blowing my
nose. I feel empty. “It’s just so brutal,” I whisper. Domestic violence is becoming more
real to me. Later, I will wonder if I broke confidentiality by telling Carolyn. She is
involved in the project with CASA, but perhaps this is a different level of confidentiality. Judy and Clarissa specifically asked Becky if they could tell me she was a resident. At CASA, confidentiality is a way of life and I’m still learning. This is an intense lesson.

The next day, I make arrangements to visit Becky. We go out onto the deck along the side of the Shelter, next to the playground. Becky has a cast on her right arm and a splint on her left wrist, and her hair is shaved where they put in the staples. We hug, but very carefully. I give her a floral gift bag with four packs of cigarettes, several bags of chocolate kisses, and a small pewter angel medallion inscribed with the word “healing.” Becky smiles when she opens her surprises and says, “I’m going to share the cigarettes and chocolate with the residents. They will appreciate these. But I’m not going to share my medal.” She holds it in her hand and rubs it like a worry stone. “Did you know that I collect angels?”

“No, but I figured you could use an angel about now.” I smile at her. “This might be a dumb question, but how are you?”

Becky sighs, takes a drag off her cigarette, and says, “It was indescribable the first day when I came in, and horrible the first week. I was pretty messed-up looking, and I felt waves and waves of emotions. It is bizarre being here as a resident. Uncomfortable as I am here, I don’t think I would want to be anywhere else because CASA’s the best. I’m glad that I’m here with my co-workers. They are like my family, better than my family. My sister’s husband is abusive, and she won’t admit it or do anything about it. My mother just can’t face it because she’s not strong. I’m surprised at the anger the staff
has for Steve. I guess they want to protect me. CASA is full of special people, and I
don’t think I would have been comfortable anywhere else.”

“I am very touched that you let them tell me,” I say softly.

“You know, we always say that it could happen to anyone, but this is
unbelievable.” Becky clenches her jaw. “I just didn’t think he would do something like
this. How many times have I heard that from victims! At first I felt like an idiot. It was
so embarrassing! I know that’s victim blaming. I know it’s not my fault, but I wonder if
I should have seen it coming.” She lowers her voice. “Ten years ago he had some
violent outbursts, mainly when he was drinking. But we got counseling, and there hasn’t
been anything for the past eight years. When we separated, he still helped with the kids,
and things were friendly. He was drinking again sometimes. He would pressure me for
sex, but I thought I could handle him. I should have realized that he feared losing control
when I told him I wanted a divorce.” I don’t know what to say, and it seems like Becky
needs to talk, so I nod, and sip my bottled water.

Becky continues, “I was worried about my job. How can I advise, counsel, and
advocate for women if I can’t control my own life? There I am blaming myself again.
This was a shocker for the residents. One day I’m their advocate; the next day I’m a
resident.” She smiles, “They have been very nurturing to me. This helped a few of them
see what can happen. Now they are ready to take out injunctions.” Becky vacillates
between a soft, tired voice and an assertive, take-charge tone. I don’t know how to talk
about her abuse, but I can talk about health, injuries. “You need time to heal. Does your
arm hurt? Did you get a concussion?”
“Yeah, there’s lots of pain now. I can’t sleep very well. The experience at the emergency room was like watching a horror movie in slow motion, except that I was in the movie. The doctor or intern, a man, asked me what I did to make my husband so mad. Normally, I’d be really angry if I heard a comment like that, but I really wondered if I heard him say it. I felt so thankful when a female nurse told him, ‘There is no reason for this.’ All the EMTs [emergency medical technicians] were men and the police officers were all men. When they got to my house, one guy said the place was a mess, and another commented that I was very calm. I was in shock; so weak I couldn’t stand, sitting in my t-shirt and panties with blood pouring out of my head. There was blood everywhere. Before the police arrived, I had to keep Steve calm or he might finish the job and kill me. In the face of death, you can get very calm. If I was screaming or something he would have panicked.” Becky is chain-smoking, lighting one cigarette from another. I’m not smoking today, but my body craves the nicotine as I catch whiffs of Becky’s cigarettes.

“How are your kids?” I ask, recalling the photos of her three children she passed around during one of our lunch meetings.

Becky replies, “Oh, thankfully, they weren’t home when the attack happened. They were at an overnight church camp out. They’re here with me now, but they want to go home.” She stares out to the playground. “My own kids didn’t believe me when I told them what their father had done. That’s actually a common response that I’ve seen many times. This time it’s personal and hurtful, but we are working through things. The youth advocates are fantastic!” She stares at the playground again, and I just wait and
“I think Steve is following the bus from school. The kids say they saw him. I was
supposed to be notified when he got out of jail, but I wasn’t.” Her tone gets an angry,
hard edge. “It’s hard to prove that he’s violating the injunction to stay away from the
Shelter, me, and the kids because he knows the limits of the law. He might drive by here
to scare me, but he’s gone before I can call the police. I’m documenting absolutely
everything for when we go to court, even though he’ll deny it all.”

Hampered by the cast and splints on her arms, Becky awkwardly pulls a large
wad of folded sheets of paper from her pocket. “I brought this for you. It is the
description of that night, the entire intake report that I did.” She hands me the pages and
looks at my surprised face. “You might want to write about my story. I want this case
prosecuted to the fullest, with a charge of attempted murder. The State’s Attorney will
want to plea down, go for aggravated battery, but that’s not right. Steve planned this, and
he almost killed me. It was attempted murder, and I want him to be responsible for his
actions. My story might help other people understand.”

I feel unsure about writing her story. It feels invasive, ghoulish, to think of
writing in the midst of tragedy. Then I realize that giving voice to Becky’s life would
probably help her. It would give her some control and the sense of being a helper. I
reply gently, “I would be glad to visit and interview you. We could document your story
together, but you need to let me know what you are ready to discuss, when. It’s your
story, and I don’t want to push you.”

“I want to tell this story,” Becky reiterates firmly, and I nod, listening. “You
should probably talk to Ellie and the staff because they are having lots of trouble dealing
with it. Sometimes none of us can believe it is real.” Becky’s voice sounds deflated and her earlier bravado has weakened.

I am surprised at her suggestion, but when she goes upstairs to rest, I slip into Ellie’s office. She readily agrees to an interview. “We are all trying to process this, talk about it. . . .” Ellie shrugs wearily. I think of how this interruption of the on-going flow brings an emotional response to sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and the ambivalent emotions that are a disjunction between the expected and the experienced (Lane-Timmerman, 1999).

Ellie continues, “Let me start at the beginning. I knew Becky was a survivor, but she convinced me that she could do the job, and she has been a terrific advocate. I also knew that she was having trouble with Steve recently. She even told me that she had called two other shelters, just in case she needed to escape. Becky said they wouldn’t take her because she was an advocate at another shelter, but we don’t really know what happened during their screening process. Becky might not have pushed hard enough or maybe the other shelters didn’t understand the situation. Linda is going to talk with the directors of the other shelters because this has created real controversy.”

“Becky told me that she had a safety plan, but it seems like she waited too long or underestimated Steve’s volatility. I don’t mean to say I blame her; things just erupted. When Becky called me at four o’clock in the morning, I was shocked, but not completely surprised.” Ellie pauses and then says, ”I was not prepared for what I saw at the hospital, and I’ve been to ER with victims plenty of times. The blood was pumping out of her head, covering her face, her shoulder, her body. Her arms were limp and she looked so
drained and pasty grey. Linda came to the emergency room, too, and she’s Christian Scientist, you know. Becky started to explain, but Linda understood. One of the first things Linda said was, ‘Don’t worry, you’ll still have a job.’ Linda knew that Becky would wonder if we blamed her. Vulnerable in so many ways, Becky didn’t even have any clothes because everything was taken for evidence. I brought her one of my nightgowns, which wasn’t a perfect fit.” We both chuckle wryly because Becky is so petite and Ellie is tall and full-figured.

I say, “Becky told me that her mother was sick, in another hospital, and she couldn’t count on her sister. You are like a mother figure to her. Now Becky seems like she really wants to tell her story. This may be her way of gaining control over a horrible incident, a weird turnabout from advocate to victim-resident with an uncertain future. She asked me to take notes on her story and come back again next week.”

“Telling the story can be a powerful healing tool. Becky trusts you. We all trust you. I have been worried about Becky because she has so little support from her family. At CASA, we stress that people need to have a life and support outside their work at the shelter. One sign I didn’t take seriously enough was Becky’s reliance on us to be her family. We develop close bonds because we work in such emotional surroundings, and people who don’t work in domestic violence have difficulty understanding this world.”

I think about how this situation demonstrates emotions as collaborative social performances (Fine & Buzzanell, 2000; Meyerson, 2000), which are essential to the process that workers use to negotiate their shared realities, especially in professions that
involve caring for others. Becky’s attack pushes the boundaries of sensemaking and challenges the bonds of work and friendship.

Ellie continues, “But we need outside interests and lives to stay healthy. Compassion fatigue is one of the biggest hazards in this type of job. We’ve talked about this before, but there’s a difference between understanding the concepts and living them. CASA was the only place Becky felt accepted, competent, and in control. I have to be careful not to blame myself either.”

“It seems like the attack on Becky and her becoming a resident here have been very hard on all the staff, from what I’ve heard.” I pause and invite Ellie to continue.

Ellie nods slowly. “When or if you write about this, I know you will be respectful. Staff members are angry, confused, frustrated, sad, and scared, and are experiencing all kinds of other emotions. Becky’s situation challenges everything we believe. Our staff meeting was very difficult for Clarissa; in fact, she asked Linda to come and help. Some staff members were very honest. They started to blame Becky. Then they realized what they were saying and got frustrated. The staff members understand that victims react in different ways. We don’t try to proscribe a way of coming to grips with the violence, even if we see similar patterns.” As Ellie pauses, squinting in thought, she puts her hand on her chin. “Becky’s reactions puzzled some staff. They believe in empowerment and practice it everyday. We respect the choices women make, even if we disagree sometimes. Recently, Becky went back to her house, even though her abuser now lives with his parents a few blocks away. She said she had to get the mementoes she saved from her baby, who died years ago. On one hand, we can
relate to her emotional needs, yet she put herself in great danger. This upset her coworkers who care about her.” Ellie wipes a tear from the corner of her eye.

In the past I had wondered if CASA’s philosophy had an element of emotional labor as defined by Hochschild’s (1983) book on the managed heart because there is so much discussion on how to manage compassion fatigue. Talking to Ellie, I come to understand that as an organization, CASA supports individual staff engaging in “work feelings” that are co-constructed, relational feelings, which acknowledge the ambiguity of emotions.  

Ellie continues, “A few staff members think that it is unethical for us to have Becky here because the combination of professional and personal relationships could create tensions and perhaps inadequate care. They compare it to a doctor operating on a family member. On the other hand, when staff found out that two other shelters wouldn’t take Becky before the attack, they were insistent that she shouldn’t go to one of those now, even if they would take her. They were concentrating on her emotional well being, but physically, she would be safer somewhere else, in a secret location. Some shelters espouse a much less empowering philosophy and a more medical, clinical approach, which would be much worse for Becky.” Ellie sighs, “There are no clear choices. We are just trying to process it all.”

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10 Work feelings are those emotions that emerge from human interaction, rather than being imposed by instrumental bureaucratic rationality (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). “Human interaction in this case is concerned with developing mutual understanding through messages that emerge from the co-construction of meaning. That is, work feelings aid in negotiating meanings about roles and relationships rather than conforming to predetermined display rules or to prescribed norms. So in opposition to overt or covert control over emotional displays, work feelings are emergent.” (Putnam & Mumby, 1993, p. 49-50).
Ellie’s comments lead me to think of how ambivalent feelings (Pratt & Doucet, 2000), dialectical tensions, and conflicting emotions (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998) are shaped by individual differences, and/or environmental conditions. Ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox exist in gendered organizations, but ambiguity is more concerned with interpersonal meaning, contradiction with social structure, and paradox with social process (Hearn, 1998, p. 3). CASA staff members deal routinely with the ambiguities of domestic violence on an interpersonal, political, or social level, and now they face the ambiguities of DV internally with one of their own. Research on alternative ways to language the work of emotions and to acknowledge it as real work that requires competency applies to CASA (Meyerson, 2000). Accessing and joining our emotions, rather than controlling or managing them, we can re-conceptualize emotional work from a relational perspective (Fletcher, 1995, 1998). Feminist ways of knowing are often at odds with the rationalistic approach because rather than looking to authority, we look to experience and emotions to guide our development of knowledge (Fine & Buzzanell, 2000).

I agree and empathize with Ellie. “There are no easy or clear-cut answers to this one. As you sometimes say about the Shelter, ‘tonight the house is in crisis.’ Only this time, it is the staff in crisis more than the residents.”

“Right, and actually, the residents are being very supportive. It confirms for them that abuse could happen to anyone. Becky’s comments are helping us examine some of our rules from a fresh viewpoint. Communal living is tough for some people, so we have to establish boundaries, but there are ways we can improve. As a resident, Becky sees
the effects of some of our practices, routines, and even things like the height of the wall phone in the hall, which is a problem for people who are injured.”

We finish talking, and I stand up. “Becky says she wants me to tell her story and the stories of her co-workers. I guess I’ll just come visit each week and interview folks. Of course, I’ll bring chocolate.” We smile grimly, Ellie gives me a hug, and I head down the stairs.

After Becky leaves the Shelter and takes disability leave from CASA, we routinely meet at the pancake house for brunch, my treat. Becky likes recording our conversations with my new omni-directional microphone and doesn’t care if the waitress gives us funny looks. Becky updates me on her health, her family, and the legal case against her husband. She alternates between being angry, sad, afraid, frustrated, and happy at her small steps toward recovery. We share our lives during very emotional times. While she is dealing with the issues of abuse, her mother is also seriously ill. At one point, her mother moved into a house with Becky and her children. My mother is in and out of the hospital several times, and Hospice is called to help prepare for her death. Becky and I often talk about our mothers and how we both see ourselves as the strong helpers in our families. Our brunches become a time of friendship and sharing, as much as an interview. I don’t come with a prepared set of questions, but I am ready to record her observations about the events of her life.

When Becky’s disability leave ends, she returns to work at CASA, but the splint on her arm is an on-going reminder of her emotional and physical injuries. We continue our taped conversations at the Shelter occasionally. Becky describes how her estranged
husband stalks her, vandalizes her car, and even smashes the windows of her house. He rides by the house drunk and throws beer cans in the yard. Becky requests police surveillance, but they can’t catch him in the act, so Becky moves several times and worries about the effects on her children. Becky’s health, finances, and emotions are in shambles, but she is determined to have Steve held accountable for his attempted murder. Struggling with lawyers and the courts for many months, the knowledge of the legal system that Becky gained working at CASA bolsters her determination and effectiveness in advocating for the full penalty. Eventually, her husband is convicted of attempted murder and sent to prison. I take Becky out to dinner to celebrate at her favorite restaurant, Red Lobster, but it is a sad celebration because while he’s in prison, Steve wants visitation with the children. So the emotional turmoil for Becky and her family continues.

When Becky initially returns to work at CASA, she is happy to be once again helping other women, but recapturing her former life proves difficult, even after Steve is convicted. She is wired and edgy, as well as tired and dull from lack of sleep. Her appearance becomes disheveled and her weight plummets. “I can’t sleep in the bedroom, so I lay on the couch in the living room to watch television,” Becky confides at lunch. “But I can’t sleep on the couch either because I get so scared. Then I get angry and all churned up! One part of my brain knows he’s in jail, but the other part of my brain thinks he’s going to sneak into my place at night and hit me again. I hate this!”

Any suggestions about sleep that come into my mind, like warm milk, hot cocoa, reading, or a hot bubble bath, seem like useless platitudes, so I don’t offer any advice to
Becky. I simply say, “I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine how awful that must be. I’ll pray
that your guardian angel watches over you, and I’ll ask my Mom to pray because I think
her prayers are closer to God than mine.” Becky barely smiles. I continue, “You collect
angels so maybe they will be there for you. And now maybe this will make you feel
better. I brought some chocolate for dessert.” I hand her a box of candy, but I feel
impotent. The only way I can help Becky is to let her know I care.

The next week, while shopping at a discount store, I see a huge, three-feet-tall
stuffed bunny in pink and lavender crushed velvet fabric. I know that I must buy it for
Becky. It will be her good dream bunny, like the story I wrote for the CASA booklet of
stories before Becky’s attack, based on her interview about hopes, dreams and
empowerment.

Good Dream Bunny

“He never behaves this way at home, really he doesn’t,” Jean, a Shelter resident,
explains to Becky, the Youth Advocate, in a plaintive tone. Jean turns to the boy and
sternly says, “Eric! Eric, didn’t I tell you to stay in bed? I don’t want to tell you again.
Get under those covers and go to sleep. It is way past bedtime for a five-year-old big
boy! It’s very, very late!”

Eric wrinkles his forehead, as he shrieks, “No! No sleep! I don’t want to sleep! I
won’t sleep here! I want my Batman sheets, and my toys. I want to go home!” He is
crying and his body is rigid with fear. Eric slides off the bed defiantly, sits on the floor,
and clenches his fists across his tiny chest. Jean’s shoulders slump in defeat. Her eyes
plead with Becky, “Please help me! I just can’t take anymore.” Jean hangs her head and rubs her forehead to hide the tears that are forming in her eyes.

Becky sits down on the floor near Eric and waits. Eric’s breathing slows, and his eyes are furtively moving from his mother to Becky. He sniffs from the tears and wipes his nose on his t-shirt. Becky looks at Eric. Very softly she says, “It can be scary to be in a strange place. But you are safe here. That’s why your mom brought you to the Shelter. You know, I think you could sleep better if you had a good dream bunny. My daughter loves her good dream bunny. Did you ever have one before?”

Eric shakes his head no. Becky waits. Eric asks in a small, tentative voice, “What’s a good dream bunny?”

“A good dream bunny is very special. He will give you good dreams so you can sleep. I’ll start off by whispering two good dreams in the bunny’s ear. Then he’ll make up dreams for you. In fact, every night, you get a different good dream! I have a good dream bunny downstairs that I’ll let you take to bed. He can be your very own bunny to sleep with every night. Do you want him?”

Eric’s large, brown eyes are open wide. He sees his mother smile, and he nods as he stands up, leans on the bed, and grabs the blanket tightly.

“In the morning, you can tell me the good dreams you get tonight. We can go outside on the playground, too. But first you need to sleep. Can you try to think of a name for your good dream bunny?” Becky asks as she stands up.

Eric replies, “I’m going to call him Wiggle the Bunny. Mom says I’m a wiggle boy sometimes.”
“I’ll be right back with your good dream bunny. Your mom will help you get into bed, and by the time you’ve kissed her goodnight, the bunny will be in your bed with you, OK?”

Eric stands up, hugs his Mom’s legs, and nods. Jean gently touches his shoulder. “So are you ready, big boy?”

After Eric is snuggled in bed, Jean turns to Becky. “Thanks. I just don’t know what has gotten into him tonight. Usually bedtime is no problem. Really, he’s a good boy.”

“I believe you,” Becky answers. “This behavior, or something like it, is common for most of the kids who come to the Shelter. He is acting out now because he feels safe enough to react. It is normal to be nervous or afraid of a new environment, especially after what he has been through and what you have been through. I imagine at home he might be afraid to have a tantrum around his father.”

Jean nods and gazes down, as tears slide down her cheeks.

“We’ll talk more tomorrow in the support group. Tonight, why don’t you take a nice long shower and get some rest, OK? I’ll be here to help you figure out your safety plans in the morning. Here’s your bag of toiletries with a nightgown and more blankets, in case you get cold tonight. Try to snuggle into bed and rest. You’re safe here. We’ll get you some clothes tomorrow, too,” Becky encourages Jean.

Jean looks into Becky’s eyes. “Thanks again. I do feel safe here for tonight.” She hesitates, smiles, and says, “I just wish they had good dream bunnies for grown-ups.”
The next morning, as the advocates on the morning shift start their day, Judy reviews the logbook where Becky has noted the previous evening’s events. Judy saw the good dream bunny mentioned. She smiles and says, “So, Becky, tell me more about the good dream bunny. How cute! I didn’t know we had those!”

Becky chuckles, “Actually, I got the idea years ago, when I invented a good-dream blanket for my daughter. I guess it helps kids to have someone tell them that things can be better, less scary. They need to believe in good dreams.”

“Don’t we all!” Judy replies. “You know, we need good dream bunnies for the women who become residents at the shelter.”

“Maybe we are their good dream bunnies,” Becky wonders aloud. “Our job is to help them believe in themselves, to dream of a better life.”

They both chuckle and shake their heads, “Yeah that’s what we are, good dream bunnies. I can hardly wait to tell Ellie that! She’ll need a good laugh by lunch time.”

I see the good dream bunny as a metaphor for how CASA advocates try to empower the victims who need a vision of possibilities for change.

Becky Needs Her Own Good Dream Bunny

When I give Becky her three-feet-tall, pink and lavender bunny, tears form in her eyes. I don’t have to tell her why I bought it for her. When she opens the bag, she exclaims, “You got me a good dream bunny! The colors are perfect, and it is so soft!”

She hugs the stuffed bunny tightly and buries her head in it quietly for a few seconds. Becky composes herself and adds, “Maybe this will do the trick. I’m going to sleep with ‘bunny’ tonight. My kids will want it, but I’m not going to share.” We laugh and Becky
hugs me along with her bunny. The crisis line rings and Becky sits down in her chair with the bunny in her lap to answer the call.

When Becky was off work on disability, we met frequently, but when she returned to work, our schedules didn’t match very well. Several months later, I am surprised, but not shocked that Becky decides to leave CASA. She says, “It is just time for me to move on to other things. I still think CASA is the greatest organization around, and always will be.” Feeling guilty that I haven’t talked with her more, knowing that she has been struggling, I regret the distance I feel between us.

Becky finds it difficult to get and keep jobs, especially with her on-going medical problems, arms in splints, and physical therapy. Eventually, she confides in me that her painkillers have been affecting her life, but she finally finds NA (Narcotics Anonymous). On-line, she joins a community of people who participate in NA discussions. NA offers her a renewed sense of purpose. When we meet in a new place for brunch, Becky is animated as we talk about her new friends on-line, people who understand her, people who see her as a strong helper and seek her advice. She feels like a strong advocate with these new NA friends.

In the following months, we still talk on the phone and e-mail occasionally. Each time she moves, I wait for her to give me her new phone number or to e-mail me when she changes her Internet provider. We find different brunch places, and Becky begins to talk about writing her own life story. She always assures me that she wants me to write this chapter of her life first. I tell her that I’ll help her write her life story. Late one
evening, Becky calls to tell me she is moving to Texas with new friends to live on a farm. Our call ends with her promise to send me her new address, but she doesn’t.

When my e-mail messages to her previous address bounce back to me, I wonder whether our story has ended. Then one night, about a year later, Becky surprises me with a call to say that she is back in town, working as a live-in caregiver. Just as we start to chat, her employer needs her, so Becky says in a rushed tone, “I’ll call you back later. Gotta go now because Mrs. Hadley needs me.” I remember the many times I said something similar when I was caring for my Mom. Becky doesn’t call me back that night, or the next. As I write this story and my dissertation, I’m still waiting for Becky’s call. I hope she calls again, and I wonder about her.

I question my ethics in describing Becky’s attack because she has not read the story. Others at CASA have given me their feedback, and in many ways, this is their story as much as Becky’s. Someday I’d like to write a more complete story of Becky’s life and work together with her to create it.

NCADV Helping Hands

The NCADV session on depoliticization concludes, and people are mingling. As I stretch and prepare to stand up, it feels like thousands of pinpoints poking my legs. I roll to my side and get to my knees, but I’m wondering how stable I’ll be if I stand. A woman holds out her hand and steadies me. “My legs are asleep,” I say lamely and grimace, as the feeling returns to my legs.” Linda waves and beckons to me. She chats
with the facilitator. When I approach, she introduces me to Nancy Meyer and we shake hands.

Nancy greets me and says warmly, “Linda tells me you wrote the stories of CASA workers. I look forward to reading the CASA booklet.”

“Thanks. I really enjoyed the discussion you facilitated today, except for the hard floor, of course.” We chuckle.

“It’s fun to facilitate a group of such passionate and articulate people. Of course, it keeps me hopping to record and summarize it all,” she replies. “What points meant the most to you?”

“I loved the comment about the stars and the sky. Then I was reflecting on the connection of the political and personal, which led me to thinking about emotions, cognition, and rationality.” I wonder what she’ll think of my comment.

“Yes! Interesting ideas! In our movement, we face the anger, passion, and ferocious advocacy at the same time we embrace diversity, compassion, and empathy. Emotions are a big issue.”

“It’s time for the next session,” Linda says, as we help Nancy pack up. “It’s Ellen’s session on Visitation Centers.”

Nancy replies, “That should be an intense group. Lots of debate there.”

I think about how Linda describes the big voice of activists. The program lists sessions on ferocious advocates who work with bureaucrats, as well as sessions on spirituality, art therapy, and compassion fatigue. The plenary sessions and memorial sessions have been full of emotions like anger, sadness, frustration, outrage, and
compassion. The juxtaposition of being an adversary and a compassionate, empowering advocate intrigues me. Suddenly, I see that the underlying value is that emotionality is accepted and honored.
Chapter Eight

Advocating for Kids: Empowering and Compassionate Framing

Issues Knotted and Tangled

When we leave the discussion on depoliticization and feminist politics, my head feels like Coca Cola poured into a tall glass too fast, bubbling, overflowing with ideas. At a brisk pace, Linda and I walk to the next session on visitation centers. We turn a corner, look down the hallway, and find the Colorado Room, where the chairs are arranged in a loose half-circle, as they’ve been in the other meetings I’ve attended so far. A room with neat, straight rows of chairs evenly placed at measured intervals would be too impersonal and hierarchical for NCADV participants. The circular seating symbolizes their philosophy of equality, openness to diversity, and commitment to making space for all voices. The room is a strong statement that everyone’s voice is honored. Flip-chart pages covered with colorful print from the morning session on this topic are taped on the walls and windows around the room. Gazing absently at the ideas listed, I hear Linda ask, “Did you get some work done this morning?”

“Oh, yes. I wish I hadn’t been late for the last meeting, but it was worth it. The ideas are coming together like harmonic convergence or something,” I laugh. “Maybe this trip has set me free in a way. It’s certainly given me some introspective time, so I
can see the dissertation taking shape. I’m feeling good about my writing, passionate and focused.” Pausing, I ask Linda, “How was the caucus meeting?”

Linda becomes animated, “It was great! We drafted a position paper. I really enjoyed watching some of the new younger members shape their concerns into a statement. Giving them space to express themselves makes me feel like a mentor, cultivating new leaders in the movement. They’re excited about presenting their statement to the membership. Here, we already had copies made.” She hands me The Battered and Formerly Battered Woman’s Caucus, Statement for NCADV Conference 2004.

“Thanks, sounds like a productive meeting. Isn’t it amazing how sometimes the most powerful or empowering thing we can do is to hold back, not take center stage, and listen instead?” I scan the two pages and see some interesting points that seem to sum up the conference and the collaborative research theme. I read aloud, “As a movement, it is in our best interest to consider survivors’ wealth of knowledge and resources, as well as those who have been silenced. . . . We will not be defined as having a psychological malady that caused, created or attracted abuse to us and to our lives. . . . Stop using clinical language, and mental health/social work models . . . revictimizing, stigmatizing, disrespecting and demeaning Battered Women. It has also inadvertently aided batterers to persecute Battered Women, in areas such as child custody hearings” (Garrity & Payne, 2004). Slipping the pages into my portfolio for later, I turn toward Linda and say, “You know, I think mentoring and coaching are all about how we empower the next wave of
leaders, entrust them with the future, let them try new ideas, and even make mistakes as they learn. It isn’t easy to make room for the new leaders sometimes.”

Linda replies, “Yes, mentoring within the Movement is a lot like empowering those we serve. We need to make space for their voices, offer validation, and provide resources or support.”

Opening the conference program, I comment to Linda, “At first, I was surprised you were coming to this program on visitation centers, because it sounds like a practical topic, more about direct service and less about political issues. Now, after the last session, I see how the philosophy is deeply embedded in the services. Seems obvious, but it’s like my proverbial light bulb!”

Linda explains, “There are lots of controversial issues related to this service. Women are often re-victimized by their abusers, who manipulate them through their children and court-ordered visitation. The children also can be victimized. There are very difficult and emotional issues involved.”

“I’ve met the CASA visitation staff, but I’ve never been to the visitation center. This will be a good introduction for me,” I comment.

Linda elaborates, “The facilitator, Ellen Pence, is one of the mothers of the Movement. You remember, I told you about her work on developing the power and control mode. These days, I don’t always agree with her, but she’s been an important leader.”

Ellen arrives and greets Linda. She walks to a chair in the front of the circle, welcomes the participants, and summarizes the earlier session. Ellen conveys a strong
presence in her voice, but at the same time, she opens space for dialogue. “So now in part two of this topic, we have more time for discussion. Let’s take a straw poll of your opinions. Should children from families that have experienced domestic violence get to see their fathers, the abusers?” People hesitate, and Ellen continues, “Yes, I know some abusers are women, but I’m dealing with generalities now, and most abusers are men. Don’t hesitate to raise your hand and voice your opinion. This is just to start the discussion.” After Ellen has gone through the process of getting us to respond, we see that opinions are about half in favor and half opposed. Ellen invites comments from the group.

A woman starts the discussion by commenting, “I strongly feel that children should not see dads who demonstrate violence. Those men are negative models, teaching children violent, criminal ways of dealing with anger.”

A woman sitting in the opposite corner comments, “Children suffer if they don’t see their dads. They know that they have a father, even if they also understand that he did bad things.”

“Let’s acknowledge that there ends up being contact anyway,” another woman counters. “I just want that contact to be in a safe place. Without visitation centers, women may be re-victimized by abusers when they must interact with them. The visitation center can be much safer for children, too.”

Linda jumps into the discussion, “CASA’s visitation center started because a cop was the abuser, and the woman was afraid to have contact with him. Yet, she faced court sanctions if she was uncooperative. When we started supervised visits at CASA, he
stopped coming because he wasn’t really interested in his children. He was using them to hurt her. We see this all the time! Visitation centers weed out the manipulators looking for more contact and control versus the dads who really want to see the children.”

A participant adds, “I agree. Courts continue to order visitation and uphold fathers’ parental rights—even if he has been abusive. I know of a case where the court ordered visitation between a father and a 13-year-old girl. The father had raped this girl when she was five-years-old, but when he got out of prison, the court ordered visitation.”

The room becomes quiet. I’m incredulous, and then angry when I think of this example. I can almost feel the fear and anger the young girl must have experienced. Then the participant continues, “This young girl came to our visitation center, put on her headphones, and listened to music during the entire visit. She felt safe because she was at the visitation center.” I feel some hope in this example, but I imagine the story doesn’t end there.

Then Ellen summarizes, “This is a very complex issue, as we explored in the earlier session. Let’s not forget that some of the visitors at our centers are women. In some states, the domestic situation results in a woman being accused of battery as well. She may shove, grab, or slap her abuser. If she loses custody of her children temporarily for any reason, the visitation center is essential for her and the children.”

The discussion continues, “I’ve seen cases where the mother leaves the abuser, but is then accused of child abandonment if he reports her. Abusers work the system. One service at our center is that we offer parenting classes that are often court-ordered for the moms.”
“Children don’t just witness battering; they experience it as they see it. It hurts emotionally, developmentally, and even academically.” Participants share more stories about kids and I feel the emotionality of this session linked with the analytical issues. Sometimes sorting through these issues is like trying to untie knotted and tangled yarn. Just when you start to make progress, you find another knot. You pull one strand, and it yanks the knot that you just opened. It reminds me of the complexity of relationships.

Linda announces, “Now we face the failure-to-protect laws in Florida. We’ve convinced the courts that abuse hurts children as well as moms. How does the court respond? They want to take children away from moms who get abused. It is ridiculous! He hits me, so I lose my kids because I have nowhere to go, no money, and no job! How can we get people to stop blaming and punishing women?”

As the discussion of this issue intensifies, I think once again about how the personal is the political and the political is the personal. At times, I wonder about whether my work is action-oriented enough. Will my research make a difference? How do I balance the personal and the political? I think back to my time observing the CASA Youth Center and Youth Advocates. I found myself challenged to align my beliefs and actions. By reflecting on my framing and reframing, I recognize Hochschild’s “pinch,” a discrepancy between the emotions I experienced, what I wanted to feel, and what I thought I should feel (Hochschild, 1979, p.56). I found that engaging in empathy and reflexivity opened me to more positive framing (Brehony, 1999). “Empathy builds on self awareness, the more open we are to our own emotions, the more skilled we will be in reading feelings” (Goleman, 1995, p. 96). I embrace an empathetic stance in my
research. Often researchers use this term to describe a dialogic relationship with the knower and the known, researcher and subject, or researchers and co-researchers.

“Empathy becomes an attitude of attention to the real world based in an effort to connect ourselves to it rather than to distance ourselves from it” (Josselson, 1995, p. 31). These connections allow for more empowering attitudes. The following story shows the complexities of an empathetic stance, the emotional pinch, and how I came to understand the empowerment philosophy while working at CASA as a youth advocate.

The CASA Youth Center and Youth Advocates

Opening the gate to the playground at the new CASA Youth Center, I notice the colorful slide, swings, and climbing poles. A young woman with very short, brown hair and five hoops in each ear answers the heavy steel door, after I push the buzzer several times. “You’re the one who wrote the booklet of CASA stories,” she exclaims with a big smile and an upbeat aura after I introduce myself. “I’m Robyn, the Youth Coordinator. I just started working at CASA, and reading the stories helped me get oriented. I love the story about the Good Dream Bunny!” (Curry, 2002). Thinking back to how Becky’s smile brightened her haggard face when I gave her the “good dream bunny,” a wave of sadness washes over me. There have been a lot of changes at CASA since I started volunteering. Robyn came to work at CASA after Becky left, and I’m not sure if she has heard about the attack on Becky. The Good Dream Bunny story holds different meanings for each of us.
I also feel a surge of pride that comes from making a difference in a meaningful way. “Thanks for telling me your reactions. Our goal for the project is to serve lots of different audiences, so I’m glad that the booklet is useful to new CASA staff members like you.” Scanning the long room of the new Youth Center, I notice the fresh, white paint on the brick walls, tall book shelves with leopard-print chairs in a reading corner, art supplies, an old piano, a huge doll house on the front stage, and a row of computers along the wall. “It looks like you have really created a special space for the kids!” I observe, as I munch an oatmeal cookie from the reception table full of goodies. Not too many people have arrived yet for this Open House reception. Each time someone enters, we hear the security buzzer at the back door.

Robyn smiles, “We open next week. I guess you remember when this building was the CASA Thrift Store. We worked with volunteers like the Girl Scouts, who helped us to paint and clean up. The girls put up such cute borders in the bathrooms! They donated lots of games and books. We got the couch and TV from the Thrift Store, and some cribs, too. Let me show you the infant-toddler room.” She heads off to the room with the divided doors. As I follow, Robyn says over her shoulder, “Then I’ll show you the teen room”

The infant cribs, playpens, changing table, rocking chairs, and colorful murals are bright and hopeful. Robyn says, “Look at these murals that Homer painted. Aren’t they awesome?”

I reply, “He has a special talent. I think his drawings made the CASA booklet come alive. Everyone comments on the illustrations!” We cross through the middle
room, called the activity room, to the teen room with the pool table, Fooz Ball, and ping-pong table. I ask Robyn, “Where did you work before you came to CASA? I’m curious about how people come to domestic violence work.”

“I worked at CASA as an intern from Eckerd College. I just graduated,” Robyn replies.

“I’m an Eckerd College alumni too.” As the words jump from my mouth, I realize that I graduated before she was born. It’s a strange, surreal sense of age, but I chuckle, “It was a long time ago, in the 60s. After I graduated, I worked with the Sunflower School, an alternative Free School, where lots of the professors sent their kids. I taught visual arts and language arts. That was before I became a librarian and then a Communication student.” I feel like I’m telling her more than she wants to know.

A broad smile lights up Robyn’s face, “Really? I didn’t know that! I’ve heard of Sunflower School.” She asks brightly, “Can you help us with arts and crafts for the kids? We need volunteers, and you’ve already done CASA’s volunteer training. I’m good with outdoor games, support groups, and other stuff, but not as much with crafts. We could really use someone like you.”

It’s an unexpected request, but I’m surprised I didn’t think of it. Volunteering at the Youth Center, not just observing, but also working closely with CASA staff members, would enhance my participant observation research methodology. It feels like the right time for me to volunteer. My Mom has passed away, and I’m settled in a new house, with new routines.
“Robyn, you asked me at just the right time,” I respond. “I think I’d enjoy working with you and the other youth advocates. I’m finished with my coursework, so my evenings are open. Thursdays and Fridays I usually travel for my consulting work. When do you need help? Tell me about the schedule, so we can see what we can work out.”

Robyn explains: “The Youth Center is designed to help families in CASA Transitional Housing, sometimes Shelter kids, too. Once families get to Transitional Housing, they are on the way to self-sufficiency. You know, the moms are in school or job training and get subsidized housing for two years.” I nod. I’ve heard this explanation before, when I attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony of the new units. However, I want to hear Robyn’s description and give her a chance to explain her new job. She continues, “Our kids are special and need lots of attention. They’ve experienced intense traumatic violence, but they are survivors. Here they feel safe. After school, we meet the bus and the kids come to the center for snacks, homework, tutoring, and activities. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, while the moms are in support groups until eight o’clock, we have groups with the kids and feed them dinner.”

As people arrive and circulate at the reception, especially around the food table, I realize that only staff members are at the reception. When they invited me, I assumed that it was an event for volunteers, donors, board members, and community supporters, but that reception will be later. Staff invited me to this preview party, and no one seems to think it is strange. In the last three years, my insider-outsider role has continued to
evolve. They still see me as a researcher, but also as a participant, a volunteer, a helper, and someone who has a history with the organization.

Becoming a Youth Volunteer

The first few weeks of volunteering to work with youth advocates is challenging, like any new job, as I explain to my sister, Peggy, during a late night phone call. “I’m just too old! I’m exhausted,” sighing as I sink into the familiar folds of my green leather couch. “My feet hurt, my whole body aches. Volunteering at the Youth Center is harder than teaching one of my all-day leadership seminars when I’m constantly on my feet!”

Peggy replies, “Well, you are there almost five hours. That’s a full day, and kids have much more energy than middle managers.” She laughs.

I laugh with her and reply, “The good thing is that now I’m sure I’m not in shape to be a foster mother.” Peggy doesn’t say anything, so I pause before continuing. “Every once in awhile I still have that fantasy because I always thought I’d have kids. I used to say that I wanted six kids!”

“We all thought you would be the one with kids. I guess God has a different plan. Maybe you were supposed to help others, like taking care of Mom all those years or maybe being at CASA. Don’t forget that you are my counselor, too! You know Mom always said you were the Big Girl,” she laughs.

“How did I get to be Big Girl when I was only 12 months older? How convenient! In my Family Communication class, we looked at how we create roles in
families by how we act talk and the stories we tell (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1998). You were ‘poor little Peggy’ and I was ‘Mommy’s Big Girl’.” We both laugh.

“I know, that social construction thing. Frankly, I don’t see how Mom did it with three kids under three! I guess you were the helper, so we could all survive. So how many kids are at the Youth Center on Tuesdays?” Peggy asks, changing the subject back to CASA.

“It varies from about 12 to 25 big and small bodies, from babies to teenagers. It seems chaotic at times. That’s typical for kids, but we have all ages, lots of kids and not enough staff. Many of the children have difficulty with the art projects I plan. I need to simplify and reorganize my activities. For some of them, the problem is age, for others, it’s a lack of experience or confidence. They find it very difficult to concentrate. Children exposed to violence may experience a long list of documented effects, like difficulties with problem solving, low self-esteem, shyness, self-blame, low empathy, anger, anxiety, and delayed learning (Barnett et al., 1997). The staff told me that many of the children are about two years behind in school, too!”

All Peggy can say is, “It’s not their fault; they can’t help it, but they blame themselves. Then it just gets worse if they aren’t doing well in school. Makes me want to just hug them all!”

“These kids have known violence and fear,” I say, “but they often crave personal attention. Some hug you the first day, and others take months to trust you. Three of the girls--Zena, Shani, and Laura--are really artistic, and they will sit all evening with me to do arts and crafts. Other kids are done with the art activity in 10 minutes. I’ve seen a
few kids who take art supplies and pocket things or stash them in their storage cubby.
The same thing happens with food. I’ve come to realize that this behavior is part of their survival mentality. It is something that has been ‘good’ for them. These kids have experienced hunger and deprivation, living in an uncertain, chaotic world. It doesn’t mean that they shouldn’t learn new behaviors; but you have to understand their worldview to be an effective staff member or volunteer.”

Peggy replies, “Short attention span, following directions, and sharing with others are always issues for kids. I guess the CASA kids have incredible obstacles to overcome, and so it’s even tougher for them.”

“Yes, it seems difficult for these kids to focus. I saw one tutor who was being so stern with a little guy who was having trouble writing his letters. She kept telling him to stay on the lines. I really didn’t like her approach. I could see him getting frustrated. But I’m just another volunteer, and at least she’s willing to come and help. One boy, Malik, was so wiggly while doing his homework. He’s smart, but can’t stand or sit still very long. Malik looked at me with a serious face and said, “I think I could concentrate better if I could sit in your lap. He just melted my heart like a chocolate bar on the dashboard of a car in the middle of summer.”

Peggy laughs, “You are a goner! I hear it in your voice! Remember how Mom would set up homework or crafts at the dining room table every afternoon until Dad came home? She had as much fun as we did!”

Tears come to the corners of my eyes and I reply, “Yeah, we knew she’d be there to help us. And remember our “on-the-bed surprises?” We would be so excited when we
came home from school and there would be little goodies waiting for us every day. I
guess we were lucky!”

Peggy agrees, “Maybe it was just Mom’s tricky way of getting us to run into our
bedrooms to drop all our stuff?” Then Peggy inquires, “So how can you make time every
week to go to CASA?”

“It’s part of my dissertation. This is how I observe staff and learn what it is like
to work there. Besides, they desperately need volunteers. Often there are only two full-
time staff and one part-time person, who leaves at six o’clock. The babies and toddlers
need one person’s attention and the other staff person is cooking dinner! We really need
volunteers late in the evening, but most them leave after dinner, too! After dinner, it gets
really crazy, and I’m not sure why--too much stimulation, or not enough to do, not
enough staff, or not enough staff planning. The rooms are large, maybe too long; there’s
lots of space. It’s hard to keep track of all the kids, and I think it’s a little too wild, even
for them, sometimes. They get wound up and start chasing each other through the rooms,
sometimes running in circles through doorways. The chases often seem to end up in
fights. Some of the kids have trouble sharing and taking turns, so games work better if an
adult is involved. ”


“We could use more staff, more volunteers, more supervision. These kids need so
much special attention. I’ve seen a couple of staff members yell, and then the kids would
quiet down for a while. In my opinion their yelling shames the kids and yelling at them
to ‘behave’ doesn’t work. I’m not sure the kids see what they are supposed to do. They
just know they made someone angry. Anyway, those staff members don’t last long, which is for the best all around. Sometimes a staff member still threatens to take the kids to Miss Bonnie, the boss, or to the support group in front of all the moms. It’s hard for me to watch. But then I find myself yelling and threatening, too, when I just don’t know what else to do! I understand the need for flexible rules, but maybe the standards of behavior should be more consistent. The Youth Center is relatively new, so we are in the process of figuring out routines. I talked to a supervisor who reminded me that there are cultural issues to consider. Yelling in some communities keeps children safe.

Peg replies, “You’re always saying we change the world one day, and one project, at a time.”

“I’ve been thinking about planning activities with food if the CASA staff approves. Kids always love to cook or just do food projects. Many of these kids probably remember times when they didn’t have enough to eat, too. During cooking activities, they can learn skills like cooperation, sequencing, problem solving, and self-esteem, but in a fun way. My students at Sunflower School used to love cooking, and I remember Adam was thrilled to make macaroni and cheese when he was little!” We laugh at memories of my nephew’s weekend visits with me.

Later, in bed, I find it hard to sleep, with images and ideas swirling in my head from the Youth Center. I wonder if I can continue volunteering at the Center because of the chaos. Realizing that I’m becoming a policewoman some nights, guilt makes me toss and turn. I’m often focusing on the negative with the kids, “Don’t do this, don’t do that, stop running, stop arguing over computers.” I find myself becoming negative about staff
members, too. This negativity doesn’t fix the situation; rather, it festers like an infected wound. I know we should tell the children what they can do, rather than always focusing on what they can’t do.

Twenty years ago, I directed an after-school program, and my mind drifts back to memories of that time, as I think of ways to reorganize the CASA program. Then I remind myself that I’m just a volunteer with a limited amount of time. I’m not in control. I’m not in charge. “Work from within, lead from within,” I often tell participants in my leadership seminars. Can I take my own advice? To make a contribution, I need to pick one thing that might help. My decision is that I’ll bring one or two activities each week and spend time with kids, giving them attention in an environment that feels safe for them and not chaotic. Recognizing the staff’s dedication, respecting their efforts, and acknowledging their constraints, I’ll be part of the team. By volunteering to work with the advocates, I’ll learn more about the realities of their challenges. The issues keep swirling, and all night I dream of untangling knots of yarn jumbled in a pile with strands of bright primary colors: yellow, green, blue, and red.

Collaboratively Cooking Worms in Dirt

Several months later, I’m feeling much more comfortable at the Youth Center. The work is still challenging, but my efforts are directed in a more positive way. Driving to the CASA Youth Center along the interstate, I think about meeting a new volunteer last week, Miss Julie, a retired teacher. “I’m used to good children, who at least listen
when you tell them to do something. I don’t know if I can work with these kids,” Miss Julie whispered while we were volunteering together last week.

At first I was shocked, then angry at her words. I replied slowly in a low, controlled voice, “Sure, I get frustrated sometimes, too, but these are good kids. They have been through traumatic experiences we can’t even imagine. That trauma affects their actions every day, and I’m trying to learn what helps them the most.” Miss Julie acknowledged my point, but we didn’t have much time to talk because we needed to help serve a dinner of hot dogs, chips, and fruit punch. With good intentions, the desire to help, and willingness to commit her time, I think Miss Julie just needs assistance to see kids in an encouraging way, to understand their behavior and work in an empowering way. Thinking about her leads me to discover my own goal of developing a more affirmative viewpoint, too. As I lock my car and carry my box of supplies across the play yard at the Youth Center, I am determined to notice positive behaviors tonight, with the staff, the volunteers, and the children.

“Snack, Homework, Reading—15 minutes,” announces the list on the bulletin board above the storage cubbies. The staff is trying to organize a new schedule. Volunteering only one day a week means I need to check for any changes each time I come to the center. Several teen volunteers are here to help with reading and homework, so all the younger children get individual attention today. Zena is packing her completed work into her backpack. Seth is sitting in the leopard print chair reading. Along the back wall, two very young boys, Hector, and Jay are sitting in a gray, molded plastic chair at the computer. They are engrossed in the computer game on screen, and their thin legs
barely reach the floor. Technically, according to the Youth Center rules, these boys are too young to be on the computer without adult supervision, but I’ve learned that the rules are not enforced consistently. The kids have learned this, too. Instead of chastising the boys, I walk over and say, “Hector and Jay, I’m so proud of you two for sharing the computer station. I see you cooperating instead of fighting. You are acting like the older boys, so you can continue to use the computer without an adult helper.” Jay looks up and smiles with a grin that shows his missing tooth. I’m not sure if this is the right way to handle the situation, but I feel good and the boys seem happy.

It’s time for what we call “cooking,” which is really just creative food fixing, since there is no stove--only a microwave oven. We’re making Worms in Dirt today. I ask Miss Julie, if she’ll help me with the group. She looks surprised and worried when she sees all the ingredients and utensils that I’m unpacking. I say, “When we first started these groups, the kids would grab things. Now they are beginning to trust that there will be enough for everyone. They know I’ll make sure that each person gets a turn. I stress they must cooperate or we can’t make our goodies!”

As the group assembles, I remind the kids, “Time to wash your hands. Please walk, don’t run. We will wait for everyone!” The children scurry to the sinks, then hurry back and eagerly stick their hands in my face. They screech, “Miss Elizabeth, Smell my hands! Smell my hands! Smell my hands!” Miss Julie steps back a little and watches with a somewhat skeptical look on her face.

I reward the children by saying very dramatically, “Oh! Mmmmmm! I love the smell of soap! Yes, that soap smells so good and clean!” We all giggle. It is our ritual,
which works better than yelling at them because they have dirty hands or they didn’t use soap in their rush to get finished quickly.

Today I ask Seth, an older boy who has not participated in previous groups with me, to be my helper, “Because I have a difficult recipe today, I need an older assistant to organize, count, and divide our worms.” He looks uncertain, but he joins the outskirts of the group. I explain the project to Seth, who organizes the number of cups needed and divides four packages of candy gummy worms evenly. After much checking and double-checking, Seth announces, “We have enough for each person to get three worms.” He grins with accomplishment.

The group listens to me describe our recipe. Some can read better than others. We organize into pairs for the first step of making pudding. I ask Miss Julie to help one pair of children and Miss Robyn, the lead CASA Youth Advocate, supervises while helping another pair. Since I’m only at the Center once a week, I feel that it is important to have a staff member work with me. Soon, I’m glad to see a new volunteer, who introduces herself as Miss Delene, join the group. She floats effortlessly and helps where she is needed. It is hectic making sure everyone has the supplies they need, opens the pudding boxes carefully, measures the milk fairly accurately, and stirs without spilling too much. “Don’t forget to take turns and share. Hold the cups and bowls for each other. You’re a team,” I gently remind them. There is chaos, happy and creative chaos, all around. The kids are concentrating. No one shoves, throws anything, punches a partner, gets frustrated, or storms away from the table. No one is crying or stubbornly holding
something without sharing. “Aren’t they doing a great job? They are super cooks!” I say to Miss Julie, Miss Robyn, and Miss Delene, loud enough for all the children to hear.

“I see lots of cooperation,” says Miss Delene.

Miss Robyn looks pleased, “Looks delicious. You’re great cooks!”

Miss Julie is smiling. She looks surprised, but still a bit nervous. The kids seem amazed when I explain the next step. “We are going to make our dirt by pounding the vanilla wafers and chocolate cookies into pieces. Then I ask,” What will happen if we don’t seal the Ziploc bags carefully?” They answer at the same time, with their voices blending: “Big messes!” “The cookies will fly out!” “The table will get dirty!” “The floor will get dirty!” I suggest we help each other by checking each other’s bags. When I give the “1-2-3 go” signal, the pounding is a cacophony of little fists, so loud that other children come to see what’s happening. I worry about the table’s durability and how I’ll get the group to stop. Waiting, the group eventually stops when they have pulverized the cookies. I’m wondering if I have made a mistake, when I catch Miss Delene’s eye, “Great kinesthetic activity!” she says with a smile.

I ask the group to decide where we should put the worms, on the bottom, middle, or top of our pudding cups. We listen to lots of opinions. Someone says, “Let each person decide for themselves.”

Miss Delene comments to me in an aside, “Offering controlled choices for the kids is so good because it lets them make decisions for themselves, gives them a sense of control within boundaries.” Controlled choices, the phrase flits through my mind like a butterfly moving from flower to flower. Controlled choices means that while I enhance
their awareness of the resources or the possibilities, they make the decision. This reminds me of how CASA’s advocates help the families in an empowering way. I realize that Miss Delene has been encouraging and coaching me, as I’ve been doing the same with the children. Connections form in my mind, just as there are connections among all these relationships.

Clean up is hectic and haphazard. Several children pitch in without being asked, and I praise and thank them for their extra efforts. I think perhaps we should ask the kids to take turns doing clean up, volunteering or being assigned chores. I decide that lesson can wait for another time. As I walk to the sink, I see the two little boys back at the computer. Hector looks at me and says, “Look at us, Miss Elizabeth. Look at us! We are still sharing and helping each other.” I smile and say, “Yes you are, and I’m so proud of your behavior, and you are having fun! By the way, dinner will be very soon, so look for a good place to stop the game.”

Now it’s time to set up for dinner. By recruiting several helpers, we make this an activity for the children. One child counts the plates, one folds the paper towel napkins, and another lays a fork on top of the napkin. Two kids cooperate to pour the orange drink from the large, plastic pitcher. When Deb Walker, my research colleague, arrives with dinner they proudly announce, “I helped get ready!” After she unloads the large foil pans of barbeque chicken and rice from her car, she listens to each child explain their role in preparing for dinner. Since Deb has volunteered to bring dinner every Tuesday, staff members have more time with the children, and the routines go smoothly. We enjoy dinner and our Worms in Dirt pudding dish for dessert. Pulling worms covered in
chocolate pudding from the cups the children revel in the messy experience. They scrape their plastic spoons along the sides and bottoms of the cups so that they don’t miss a drop of pudding. A few even use their fingers to get one last mouthful. Staff members and volunteers liberally distribute napkins and praise the cooks, who all have smiles on their faces! The children, staff, and volunteers share a sense of accomplishment.

After dinner, Miss Robyn takes some of the children outside to the playground, so they can work off some of their bottled-up energy. I marvel at her gentle, but firm rapport with the kids. Her positive attitude is infectious, too. I set up an art project for those inside the building; lots of paint, colored paper, paper plates, glue, and string are involved in making paper-plate puppets with wide mouths and long tongues. My samples, the “snake-man” and “teddy bear” puppets, cause giggles. Three tables fill up with eager children. One table has several young children who need lots help because they can’t cut or glue without help. Miss Delene is taking care of the infants, and the other volunteers have all left for the evening. I wish I could clone myself, or magically create a volunteer to help with the art project. Another pair of hands would make things so much less chaotic and help the children feel more successful. I take a deep breath.

Tired and thirsty, with throbbing feet and an aching back, I haven’t had time to go to the bathroom for hours. I observe one table of older children working together without any arguments or grabbing. Leaning over the table of these older children, I compliment them, “Thank you for sharing the materials and demonstrating directions to each other. You are doing such a good job. It really makes a difference, so I can sit and help the
younger kids now. Let me know if you need anything and be sure to show me your crazy creatures when you’re done!"

As I turn to go to the table of younger children, Zena touches my arm and says, “Miss Elizabeth, can I tell you something?” I stop my rushing and find a calm space inside, so I can give her my attention. Zena looks right into my eyes and says, “Thank you for noticing.” All the children at the table smile, and so do I. My feet don’t seem so sore, and my spirits flutter gently like one of the purple butterflies Zena likes to draw.

About an hour later, when all the moms have picked up their children and I sign out of the volunteer logbook, Miss Robyn says, “I really can’t thank you enough for bringing the worms tonight. We all had so much fun, and I can see the kids learning. It was a great night! Everyone—staff, volunteers and kids—all worked together!”

“I wasn’t sure if the table was going to survive the pounding,” I joke, “but it did get their attention.” We laugh together at the memory of the little fists pounding cookie crumbs.

Driving home, I feel better about working with the kids, more optimistic. Small steps, small successes will lead to a greater sense of empowerment and confidence for the kids. For instance, Seth finally participated in the cooking group by being in charge of the worms. Chuckling to myself at the idea of being in charge of worms, I sense the positive change in the kids and in myself. We are all feeling capable, appreciated, and motivated, even Miss Julie. I think about how my Mom would always see and stress the positives. She would have loved Worms in Dirt night!
Helping or Harping at the Volunteer Meeting

Six months later, I feel like an old timer at the Youth Center. In that time, I’ve shadowed staff members, worked with staff, learned how the Youth Center operated, met several volunteers, facilitated activities, and also come to understand the challenges.

When I receive an e-mail message inviting me to the formation of a new Youth Advisory Committee, I’m optimistic. However, there is also disturbing news. Just when things have become more organized, they decide to change the staff working at the Youth Center. The new schedule rotates staff from the Shelter and Youth Center for continuity between the Shelter and Transitional Housing. That seems disruptive to me but I remind myself to give the idea a chance, and to respect the staff’s effort to integrate the Youth Center with the Shelter. I realize that I’ve been with CASA almost four years, which means I’ve been here long enough to see many changes evolve. CASA has moved into new buildings. Staff members have come and gone. Some staff members have changed positions at least once and some have changed responsibilities or locations two or three times. I’m an old timer now.

Waiting for volunteers to arrive for the first Youth Advisory Committee meeting, I join Robyn at the conference table. We want to finish our meeting before the kids return from school, so the volunteers can go to the Youth Center. Robyn is reviewing her list and the agenda.

I comment, “I hope this meeting doesn’t become a time when we all start telling staff what needs to be fixed. I’ve seen that happen, and it just makes more work for staff,
rather than offering to help. Sometimes mobilizing volunteers to action and making them part of the team can be tough.”

Robyn confides, “One volunteer sent a very discouraging memo to the volunteer office. It criticized just about everything we do. I’m trying to be open to hearing ideas from volunteers. One of our biggest problems is that we need volunteers to help, but we also need to get better prepared to train volunteers. Here, I’ve pulled together an outline of some basics to help volunteers.” She hands me two pages.

I read over the list of operational rules, some I didn’t know before. “This is a good start,” I offer. “It will be good to clarify expectations.” Thinking of all the years I coordinated volunteers for libraries and non-profits, I remind myself to offer help, but not take over.

Soon the group is assembled, and introductions are made around the table. One retired teacher begins talking about her concern that the children do not behave because there isn’t enough structure. I agree with her in some ways, but she is so negative that I pull back. Another person is more constructive, suggesting that the children need activity stations, like in school. I understand, but I doubt it will work because the children look for interaction and even vie for personal attention. One idea sounds possible, using headphones and listening centers for books on tape, but I know that the kids will need adult help to successfully use the equipment. I feel defensive and try to remind myself that these women are relating to what they know about their classrooms or work. They care enough to volunteer, even if they don’t completely understand the kids at CASA. I wonder if I need to be more open.
Miss Delene introduces herself to the group as the new intern from Eckerd College. She has long, brown hair, a full figure, and an earnest face of an age older than Robyn and younger than me. Miss Delene identifies herself as both a child who grew up in the foster system and a mother who takes care of foster children in her own family. She works with kids who have been abused. Miss Delene offers her ideas, “Research shows kids need choices--controlled choices. Especially kids who have experienced family trauma need a sense of stability and structure.” She emphasizes, “they need to feel that they have some control. This leads to responsibility. Elizabeth’s cooking group is a good example! I’ll be volunteering this semester, and I’m willing to assist in any way, but I do have experience training parents, volunteers, and staff to work with children.” As she talks, I feel comfortable with the balance she offers. She is respectful of kids and the staff, not critical. Flattered that she mentions the cooking class, I hope to get better acquainted with her and learn more about how to work with the children’s special needs.

Soon we are discussing the difficulties of schedules and communication with volunteers in a crisis-oriented environment. I feel the staff getting defensive, as the meeting becomes a litany of “why can’t you” between staff and volunteers. I struggle to reflect on my own need for more organizational structure, while understanding how crisis work requires flexibility. I try to move the discussion to a point where each person says what he or she can do. I comment, “Let’s ask staff what they need. I think one major issue is the lack of adequate staffing. There are just not enough staff or volunteers to do certain activities. I propose that at our next meeting, we discuss what we could do if we
have three volunteers each night and how we could find those volunteers.” The staff looks relieved by my comments and suggestion.

“We could work toward consistency for the kids by offering training for the volunteers at the Youth Center specifically about kids who have experienced trauma,” Miss Delene adds. “I’m willing to work on a training manual and facilitate the training.”

After we select the date and time for the next meeting, Miss Delene and I walk across the street to the Youth Center. We agree to coordinate our schedules and work together on projects. It seems like a collaborating and empowering philosophy resonates with the both of us.

Driving home from the Youth Center later that night, I think back to the meeting and the past six months of volunteering. The moon lights the dark sky, as I drive across the bridge. The future possibilities for resolving the difficulties of DV work, and particularly the youth advocates’ challenges, seem brighter for me now, like the headlights shining on the highway, diffusing rays of emotions, frustrations, crisis orientation, reframing, and empowerment that all radiate from CASA.

The NCADV Visitation Center Program Ends

The NCADV session on visitation center issues is coming to a close. The group is finishing a discussion on the pros and cons of using armed police on site. There are many diverse ideas about the impact of police presence on children, the abuser, and both the workers’ and the children’s safety. Ellen thanks everyone for readily sharing their
concerns and proposes that we stay open to all the ideas that were generated during the session.

Ellen concludes by mentioning the Buddhist practice of Equal Regard and Loving Kindness, asking us to consider each parent and each child with compassion. It is a brief comment, but it sets off a burst of ideas in my head like the way the first taste of tart candy spreads in your mouth. I’ve been exploring Buddhist practices in the past year because my professor, Art Bochner, recommended a book that he said “changed his life”: *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living* (Chödrön, 1994). If loving-kindness for oneself is the beginning of compassion, this is an important beginning for staff and volunteers who are DV workers seeking to live an empowerment philosophy. I always thought of myself as a compassionate person, but I have come to a deeper personal awareness in the past four years. Caring for my terminally ill mother at the same time I became involved with CASA broadened my perspective on empathy and compassion.

I wonder whether the domestic violence that many advocates have personally experienced helps them find this sense of humanness. I wish we had more time at the NCADV program to discuss Ellen’s comments about Buddhist philosophy, but the discussion flags. 11 It’s lunchtime, and people are ready to leave. Linda and I linger for a few moments after Ellen adjourns the session. As we stand, my stomach grinds and growls, so I say to Linda, “I’m starved! Do you want to grab some lunch before the next session?”

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11 There is further discussion of Eastern and Western views of compassion in the Coda of this dissertation.
Linda replies, “Yes, but let’s just get a quick sandwich. I don’t want to miss the presentation about ‘Collaborative Inquiry: Constructionist Research for Organizational and Social Change.’ The description in the program sounded like it would be applicable to CASA. Luckily, I have my own researcher with me!” We both chuckle, as we walk briskly out of the hotel and across the street.
Chapter Nine

Empowering Staff and Organizations

Collaborative Inquiry at NCADV

After lunch, Linda and I sit on a bench outside the hotel to enjoy the warmth of the sun. The dry heat of Denver feels nurturing compared to the oppressive, humid heat of south Florida. The last NCADV conference session of the day is one that both Linda and I have been anticipating, “Collaborative Inquiry: Constructionist Research for Organizational and Social Change.” I review the program description and say, “This sounds a lot like what we’ve done together, collaborative inquiry as an approach to creating possibilities and strategies for organizational and social change. This program might give us some ideas for the organizational development and staff training projects we’ve been brainstorming.”

Linda tilts her face to the sky, “Yes, the strategic planning retreat last year was even better than I hoped. We got so much accomplished. We refined our goals and outlined objectives, but what was equally important, or more important, was that we forged bonds among trustees, volunteers, board members, and staff. We needed that relationship building, and your facilitation style worked so well. You are organized, focused and fun--to say nothing of being free! Now, I think it’s time for us to work on our internal operations and some of the staff issues.”
Shading my eyes from the sun, I reply, “Thanks. I learn so much from each session I facilitate, and it’s a way I can contribute to CASA. So count me in for the next phase!”

Soon we leave the sunny bench and head for the Aztec Room. When we arrive, we meet the two presenters. Rose Pulliam, a tall, slim woman wearing a long, lime-green dress is from the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Assault. Her delicate face is framed by long, black dreadlocks accented with gray. Rose greets Linda and introduces Dr. Susan Roche, from the Department of Social Work at the University of Vermont. Susan, a short woman with blonde hair, is wearing a casual, salmon-colored blouse and pants. Rose and Susan both had taken copies of the CASA booklet from the conference exhibit, and they offer compliments. We chat for a few minutes about CASA and the UCI project. “The stories I’ve read so far seem so real,” Rose explains. “I like the way you use the term DV ‘workers’ to mean paid staff and volunteers.”

Susan says, “I’m interested in your study of staff and your narrative methodology. Have you published any articles yet?”

“I’m working on a book chapter with a colleague,” I reply, wishing I had more publications. “The booklet, and the collaborative process of creating the booklet will be part of my dissertation. I’m calling it a ‘research novel’ because I present my research in stories.” Our conversation is cut short because it is time for the session to begin.

The circle of chairs faces a wall covered with long strips of flip-chart paper. When the presenters ask us to identify ourselves by category, about half of the 15 attendees self-identify as service providers and half as researchers or students. The group
is a mixture of ages and ethnicities. Rose begins by outlining the background of their project. “I was the executive director in Alabama before I took the job in Vermont. It was quite a change!” The audience chuckles. “I went to Vermont to work on some significant problems with our coalition. We desperately needed a planning process to pull the organization together, unite various factions, and answer questions about what kind of organization we wanted to be in the future. Most of you probably are not facing such extensive problems, but I think the process could help any organization. My first step was shopping for a researcher. Luckily for me, I found not just a researcher, but a collaborative project partner, Susan.”

When it is Susan’s turn to discuss the project, she explains how she found time to work with the coalition. “I was sincerely interested in the project, but I had a full teaching load so my time was limited. Time can be a significant issue for collaborators. For our project, the coalition provided funding to cover overhead and hire an adjunct to cover my classes for two semesters.” Envious murmurs erupt from the audience. She continues, “This gave us the time to take a comprehensive approach to our organizational challenges. Research is a process and a relationship that develops, not just a method of finding answers. Research means that we work together to get people to reexamine the ways things are or might be. We use a constructionist approach, which is based on the idea that there are many ways of knowing, so we must create time and space for people to express their ideas, listen to divergent opinions, entertain possibilities, and be reflexive.”

Susan and Rose model their relationship, acting as co-presenters to chart the similarities and tensions that can arise between researchers and practitioners who may
have different goals, needs, experience, and expertise. Rose tells the audience, “Researchers and practitioners speak different languages, and therefore, we must learn both languages.” She emphasizes, “The results should be published in both the language of academia and the language of domestic violence advocates.” I’ve heard this many times from Linda and the CASA staff, so I gently nudge Linda and smile. When Susan mentions Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Linda glances at me and raises her eyebrow because I’ve introduced her to these ideas and related theories. We both feel like we understand the academic, as well as the practitioner’s, information. Rose closes the program by saying, “This process worked because it was a collaborative relationship. It was a journey we took together. The project was transformative for all of us. Our staff members and our organization experienced tremendous change. Susan and I were changed. These transformations mean that we can all pursue social change and social justice more effectively.”

As the audience asks questions, I think about how my tenure as the executive director of a multi-type library cooperative and my consulting work have shaped my relationship with CASA. In each collaboration, partnering, planning, and facilitation skills have been important. Communicating a sense of openness and respect has been critical. I also think about how I’ve changed by working with CASA, by taking a journey with them. So many staff members have said those words, “CASA changed me.”

As the applause fades, Linda says, “I’m inspired! Yes! I definitely want to undertake a planning process. It’s time to go through a process internally with the staff. We can start with a survey and then have groups. If you have time, I’d like you to work
with us. When I get back, we’ll talk about organizing dates.” Linda is full of enthusiasm and determination, as we discuss the possibilities again. With each conversation, the ideas have been building.

“I’m excited, too, and I’d like to work with you. I could see using empowerment as our overarching theme or cornerstone for the project. From what you’ve told me and what I’ve learned at CASA, different people interpret or practice empowerment in various ways. We could build on the meeting we had with the program directors and coordinators. With all the staff changes, it seems like the empowerment conversations got put on the back burner. Remember what Rose said, ‘Use the process to connect the values and understanding with the action.’ Changes in understanding complex concepts don’t come overnight. A process takes time.”

Linda laughs, “Yes. You know, I’m more action-oriented than planning-oriented. That’s why you and I make a good team.”

Her statement leads me to think back to our meeting last month at CASA with the program directors and coordinators.

CASA Meeting to Explore Empowerment

We are meeting at the “new,” two-story CASA building downtown that houses Administration, Outreach, and the Thrift Store. Linda and I are in the conference room, sipping cups of coffee and peppermint tea, as people begin arriving for the meeting. There are hugs all around, as Clarissa, who has been promoted to Residential Program Director, enters the room with her broad, full-faced grin. Clarissa’s long, black braids
contrast with her hot-pink print outfit and huge Lucite earrings. Maria, who became the new Shelter Coordinator when Clarissa was promoted, has a quieter aura and a serene smile that radiates to her eyes. Her long, golden hair flows down the back of her soft, sage-green blouse and sweater. Each person arrives in her own way and settles into a place at the table. Bonnie, who moved from the Shelter into the position of Transitional Housing Coordinator, carries an overflowing canvas tote bag and muffins. Her dark, shaved head is covered with a beautiful peach and turquoise scarf that coordinates with her matching outfit and shoes. Bonnie greets us with her smooth voice and worries that she is almost late. Kelly, who has continued as Outreach Program Director for the past four years, jokes in a loud voice about all the noise we are making in the community room, as she walks across the hall from her office, balancing her notebook portfolio and large coffee mug. Her short, reddish-blonde hair is styled to attractively frame her face.

Linda begins the meeting. “I imagine that we all have lots of questions and ideas. Today’s meeting is the beginning of a process and eventually a project where we will focus on CASA’s philosophy of empowerment. I know that we are all excited about working with Elizabeth,” Linda says and nods to me. “For the past four years, Elizabeth has been working with us, and I feel that she understands and supports CASA. But we are also looking to Elizabeth to help us question some of the ways CASA works. We’ve grown so much in the past few years that it’s time to look at our internal operations, particularly our staffing, training, and related practices. So, Elizabeth, I look to you to facilitate our discussion today.”

240
I smile and nod. I reach over and turn on the tape recorder. “As usual, I’ll be taping our meeting, OK?” Everyone assents nonverbally. They don’t even worry anymore about how their voices might sound. It’s routine now. “Well, I am so glad that you all have expressed support for this idea. Over the years, I’ve met with you individually and in groups. Recently, we’ve begun talking about CASA’s growth and changes. I have informally proposed a project that looks at empowerment as a core value of CASA and the Battered Women’s Movement. There has been positive feedback about the idea in general from my informal conversations with the staff. Now we’ll explore ways we might shape this project. I respect the work you all do at CASA, and I want to be part of developing it.” I pause. “You’ll notice there are no action items listed on the agenda. This is a preliminary discussion. It is what I call an ‘idea meeting,’ and we’ll have a follow-up meeting to discuss process and scheduling. I’d like each of you to start by sharing your thoughts on what we might accomplish with an empowerment project—whatever the project turns out to be.”

“Before we do that, I’d like to clarify something,” Kelly interjects. “You sent us a packet of information before this meeting. Lots of fun reading!” The group chuckles. “The piece on action research was great; I liked the story of you and Linda swimming. The articles on strength-based social work (Blundo, 2001), Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2000), and the domestic violence narratives (Wood, 2001) were challenging, but good. I especially liked your one-page summaries.” There are more laughs. “But I’m still not sure what the project will be.”
I reply gently, “Kelly, think back to the very first meeting we had. Just like at that meeting, I’m here today to help you shape the project. I’m not here to tell you what to do. Today we’re going to begin building a framework for the project.”

Kelly laughs with the group. “Okay. It’s hard to shake old habits! We’re going to design it together. Got it!”

I suggest, “Let’s sift through some of your ideas and scribble on the flip chart.”

Kelly gestures with her finger, “I have one more question. I guess I’m wondering if this going to be your dissertation project.”

“My dissertation is going to be about the past four years, and the UCI project, including the CASA booklet of stories. Overall, my dissertation will be about how we use communication in collaboration and empowerment. Our discussions today are relevant, but this is a new project. I’m still writing my dissertation, so I think this meeting might provide an ending chapter, if that’s OK with the group.” Heads nod silently, so I continue, “This project signals the next phase of working together. You can shape the process to meet your needs. Just think of me as your volunteer consultant, like at the strategic planning retreat.” I take a bite of my zucchini muffin and wait for any other questions. “OK, let’s talk about the potential benefits of a project that focuses on empowerment. What do you want to get out of it?”

Clarissa starts the discussion. “I’m looking for a way to train new staff and maybe retrain some existing staff.”
Maria is next. “The first booklet of stories was so successful. We use it with new staff now. So I’m looking forward to another booklet of stories just about empowerment. I think people learn from stories, not just from rules and policies.”

“I think we need to refresh ourselves on how CASA defines empowerment and learn to understand it as a group,” Bonnie offers. “Participating in the project will also help me personally as a worker, a mom, and a wife, and in all my roles in life. Things get so hectic I can’t think sometimes, so I need to be reminded about empowerment. And we can all use help thinking through the tough situations, too.”

Linda concurs, “I agree. On a personal level I think that it would help me to be a better manager-supervisor-coach. There will be benefits for the organization as a whole. As we’ve grown, I’ve been concerned about how we can maintain the values that guide our work. In the beginning, the Battered Women’s Movement was a grassroots cause shaped by a commitment to empowerment. Today, sometimes we are hiring people who don’t have that background.”

Then it’s Kelly’s turn, “I agree. I’d just want to add that it has the potential to bring the staff from different departments closer together. I also hope that maybe we could use our process to design workshops to help other shelters and organizations.”

After some discussion and filling several pages from the flip chart, I summarize our work by circling and underlining key phrases on the pages: “To develop a process of understanding the empowerment philosophy by constructing, maintaining, and applying empowerment through training, conversations, examples, and stories. Does that work as a preliminary working statement?” Heads all nod as they copy the words.
Kelly continues, “Now, Elizabeth, you’re so good at listening to us, but today I’d like to hear more from you.”

“Personally, I’m interested in the ways we interact and communicate with each other that seek to support rather than control. I’m fascinated by the power of conversation to generate our sense of reality (Gergen, 2000). Just talking about strengths, instead of deficiencies and blame (Gergen, 1994, 2001), can make such a big difference. I think empowerment is about believing in the best people have to offer.” They all look at me waiting expectantly. “Collaboration rather than competition is something that relates to teaching, friendship, family, volunteering, work, and even political decisions affecting our community. Empowerment is important to my life as well as my studies, research and work.” I pause and look around again. “Empowerment is a major topic for all kinds of organizations. However, I think that CASA is unique because your core value relates so directly to your work with those you serve, as well as your coworkers, colleagues, and partners. An important moment for me was when I first heard Linda talking about how she perceived the women who experienced abuse as courageous. That’s what inspired me to write *Small Talk With a Big Voice: Poetic Activism* (Curry, 2002) and to look at the way language affects our work.”

The group nods. “Now, let’s take a quick break, and then we’ll talk about what we think empowerment is or isn’t--and begin our process of defining what it means for us. There is no right or wrong answer.”
Conversations Constructing a Social Construction

After a quick break to warm up our coffee and tea, we reconvene at the table strewn with papers, napkins, and mugs. I suggest, “Let’s discuss what empowerment means—to each of us. Our project during the coming year will focus on defining and exploring what CASA staff members mean by empowerment. Today, I thought we’d begin the dialogue.”

“I can answer this one,” Clarissa says eagerly. “I was in a substance abuse program, and then after I finished the program, I worked there. Well, that program was not empowering. It was all about control! The difference was that the courts sent you there. Women come to the CASA shelter of their own free will. I didn’t know the empowerment verbiage when I came to CASA because I came from a clinical model. I had almost ‘abusive’ traits back then, very controlling. I thought I was the expert who could make people follow the rules and change their lives. Now I understand so much more about supporting people in the process of making their own decisions. CASA has empowered me to learn about empowerment!”

Maria nods. “A lot of it is in the way you talk to people, communication skills. On the crisis line, I wouldn’t say, ‘you have to do this’ or ‘you should do that.’ That’s what a woman hears from her abuser. I’d tell her what resources are available or ask her if she feels safe. Does she want to work on a safety plan? But I guess we use those words because we believe in advocacy and empowerment. I’m just more conscious of it now at CASA and in my life.”
Bonnie says, “With all the staff turnover, it makes things crazy. I wish there was some way to tell people how empowerment works. They want to help people, but some of them don’t know how to be empowering. They want to fix people or rescue them. Of course, occasionally we get someone who just wants a job and thinks CASA would be a nice, helping place to work. Those people don’t usually last long! They burn out or don’t fit, or get too frustrated to stay.”

Kelly explains, “I need self-motivated, hit-the-ground-running types in the Outreach Program. The word ‘empowerment’ may mean something to us, but CASA has grown so much I’m not sure that all the staff sees it as our value. The most important thing I think we need to remember is that learning empowerment is a process, not just a one-day workshop. The training can inspire you or raise your awareness, but we need to model the behavior, talk about it, and discuss examples. The time and the process are what we need. This has to be a sustained effort with lots of follow-through--when we get to that stage of the project.”

“It seems like the right time for this project,” Linda agrees. “Empowerment springs from our recognition that we are no better or worse than those we serve. We don’t distance ourselves as different. We don’t blame the victim, and we understand the strength of the women who are courageous in the face of terrible circumstances. Sometime I’d like to talk about power, too, and the uses of power in social change. Maybe I’ll start a series of discussions like a ‘Brown Bag Lunches with the Director.’ I know, that’s an action item.” I record Kelly’s and Linda’s action ideas in our “parking
lot” of ideas for later implementation. Linda continues, “So we are looking at defining empowerment. Elizabeth, tell us what you’ve been reading about empowerment.”

“I’ve been reading till my eyes are crossed and my brain hurts!” I pull some pages from my notebook. “I’ve been trying to look at how we socially construct empowerment in society (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 1994, 2000, 2001; Hacking, 1999; Lincoln, 2001). I’ve been reviewing how we constructed empowerment in the Women’s Movement, Battered Women’s Movement, social work, and even in research and teaching.” Linda, Kelly, Clarissa, Bonnie, and Maria are listening intently, but I feel the need to clarify the issue of social construction. “I’ve also been looking at the social construction of workers and clients.” I put my hand up to stop objections. “I know you don’t use the word ‘client’ because of the hierarchical relationship it connotes--I agree with you, but just bear with me, so I don’t get confused. Basically, we can trace the shifts in perceptions of charitable and helping work from (a) the view that clients suffer due to their own moral failings, to (b) clients as victims of societal and personality problems, a medical model, to (c) clients as survivors with strengths and resilience (Blundo, 2001; Graybeal, 2001). Workers or helpers respond to clients whom they see as people with deficits by assuming paternalistic roles as benefactors, liberators, or expert healers. But with the empowerment model, workers relate to clients’ strengths, so then the workers respond as nurturers of self esteem, facilitators, mobilizers, and/or reformers (Simon, 1994).” I pause. “Does that sound like it makes sense?”

247
“Yes, the different categories are clear. It’s like PAR [a substance abuse program] thought we were moral failures, and they diagnosed us so they could fix us with their expert rules.” Clarissa seems pleased that she’s made the connections.

“I can almost see how different staff members act in certain ways. It fits,” Maria adds with a pensive expression.

I’m feeling good about the discussion. “I’ve been reading social work literature, which talks about moving from the traditional service model to a strength-based model (Adams, 2003; Baldwin, 2001; Blundo, 2001; Cohen, 1999; Cox, 2001; Graybeal, 2001; Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998; Malekoff, 2001; O'Brien, 2001; Simon, 1994; Washington & Moxley, 2001; Werner-Wilson et al., 2000; Wood & Roche, 2001). There seems to be a lot of similarities to the empowerment philosophy you espouse, particularly from the materials you gave me, Linda (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence Battered/Formerly Battered Women's Task Force, 1992; Schechter, 1982). I understand the feminist connections to empowerment, but I’m not sure how the strength-based model, empowerment, and CASA fit together. Is the strength-based system of care idea being discussed by domestic violence folks in Florida or nationally?”

Linda nods, sits up in her chair, and uses her advocacy voice, “Yes, well, we hear about ‘strength-based’ concepts from our funders, but not from the DV movement. I think that’s because at least those of us who subscribe to the feminist philosophy always have come from a strength-based perspective, long before social workers coined the term. We say that a woman who experiences abuse is a strong, courageous person for getting to CASA or some other place for help. We talk about her well-developed coping skills and
even that the things that she does that might not be considered good in another context have served her well in keeping her alive. Let me share a quick story with you.”

Linda looks around the table; “I worked with a woman from a rural area who called the sheriff to stop her husband after hours of violence. The sheriff did not come because he was a buddy of her husband, the batterer. She finally escaped and went to the Suwannee Swifty, a 7-ll type store, and cleared off a whole shelf of mayonnaise and pickle jars that crashed to the cement floor and broke, making a mess. Then the sheriff came and carted her off to jail. The next morning, the good judge made the sheriff bring her to our shelter in Gainesville, and two deputies transported her themselves. She was ‘sentenced’ to community service at our shelter. We praised her many attempts to be safe and keep her children safe. We encouraged her resourcefulness and even supported her creative solution to escape.”

Linda continues, “I do not buy the image of the ‘poor, damaged creature who is too stupid to make it on her own without our help’ theory that is promulgated by the batterer and reinforced by many non-feminists and even social workers. We do not believe that most battered women need therapy, just information, encouragement, and safety planning. I acknowledge that the effects of trauma can lead to other problems, from addiction or brain damage to symptoms labeled posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD]. However, the woman who has been abused and the staff simply do not have much time. The woman needs to survive, figure out how she can escape with her life, find housing, arrange childcare, and get a job. We only have about 45 days with her at the Shelter. Later, at Transitional or with Outreach, we can start to work on other
problems. We are currently trying to root out all of the mental health/social work jargon that creeps in with our funders’ language, such as: case management, case plan, recovery, client, counselor, clinical manager, staffing, clinical supervision, therapeutic play, therapeutic groups, etc.” Linda ticks off the words on her fingers.

She continues, “All of these are words used by the dominant culture, in this case, the culture of social workers and mental health workers, to separate us by our education and prove that we are different from the women we are assisting and that battering could never happen to us! Even ‘system of care’ seems to imply that we have a woman (client) without strengths. ‘Advocacy’ is a word that is so much more powerful and makes us feel like we are doing this together. The skills that social workers bring are welcome, but the effort to blend them with our culture is a challenging one. The basic philosophy is that we want to be a Movement started by battered women where battered women can still get jobs and have their voices represented in the leadership of our work. The addictions ‘movement’ started in a similar vein with grassroots addicts. Now they have to have college degrees and credentials that keep the original alcoholics and junkies from working in the movement they started. We are consciously working to keep from going there, although lots of tensions are pushing us there in spite of ourselves.”

I make a note to follow up on the idea of the movement versus a mainstream or governmental model. “I’m so glad we are taping this meeting. I could never get all that in notes! Thanks for clarifying that point, which we’ll address even more as the project develops. Language is so important to how we see the world and create our reality. I
learned early in my visits to CASA that you are very aware of language. In the future, we might use some of the strength-based ideas, but we won’t call it a ‘system of care’.”


Everyone smiles, but I sense they are tired of the abstract. They want to jump into action. In a crisis environment, that’s often the way you must operate.

Empowerment Stories, Blame, and Ethics

Thirty minutes later, the conference room is littered with papers, files, notebooks, coffee cups, soda cans, and pizza boxes. I slide the vegetarian pizza toward Maria, who shakes her head no. Bonnie and Clarissa consolidate the leftover pieces, careful not to mix the veggies and the meat in deference to the vegetarians. Bonnie takes the box to the staff break-room kitchen. Linda has finished returning phone calls, and Kelly has come back from her cigarette break on the back step.

“So is it nap time?” I joke and join everyone in a groan. “OK, I’m turning the tape recorder back on. We are going to look at empowerment stories, blame, and maybe disempowerment. When we really start sagging, we’ll have an afternoon treat.” I pause to get reoriented. “Before lunch, we talked briefly about why we are pursuing this project, possible outcomes, and we began exploring what empowerment means to us. Let me share a broad definition that encompasses several important categories in empowerment as a process, not a product: ‘Empowerment for women includes personal, interpersonal, and culture-changing thoughts and actions that together bring about real increases in the personal and political power of women’ (Gutierrez et al., 1998, p. 35).
The author focuses on the right and ability to express oneself and concludes that empowerment is ‘Speaking the truth of one’s life in one’s own voice, and working collectively to create that possibility for all’ (Gutierrez et al., 1998, p. 35). This seems to fit with what we discussed this morning.”

“It fits with our emphasis on voice in the DV Movement,” Linda adds.

I continue summarizing, “One similarity I notice is that the strength-based folks are just like some of the CASA staff. You both talk about empowerment as more than a technique, model, skill, or a goal. For many it is a way of life, and a way of being (Blundo, 2001; Gutierrez et al., 1998).” As they nod their heads, I think about how much non-verbal reinforcement I get from them during the meeting. “For some people, the empowerment philosophy can mean a fundamental change in the way they think and view the world. However, one article explained that people often talk about empowerment or strength-based practice and try to add it to their existing models. In other words, instead of shifting their existing view or frame, people try to add empowerment as a philosophical attachment to their current frame, without really altering their world view (Blundo, 2001). I think this may be the challenge you face with new staff and to some degree with existing staff.”

Bonnie concurs, “It is a way of life. This work changes you. So what you just said makes a lot of sense to me. We should talk about that more with the whole staff.”

“Yes, because when we hire people, we need to be really clear on our philosophy of empowerment!” Clarissa adds.
Maria agrees, “I’m looking forward to listening to some of our newest staff members as we all discuss empowerment. They may be able to help us understand the process of acclimating to CASA.”

I distribute several sheets of paper and say, “These are from the FCADV workshop on empowerment. I thought you might find it interesting, as we look at creating our training model, materials, workshops, or meetings. FCADV describes empowerment as having different levels, moving from cooperation, coordination, and collaboration, which I’ve seen in other literature (Mattessich, Monsey, & with assistance from Roy Cornna, 1997; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). I think this might make sense for some staff. Cooperation could mean that a person abides by rules and procedures. Coordination might mean participating in support groups or activities that are expected or required.”

“Collaboration would mean sharing the power,” Kelly adds. “We offer resources and classes or counseling, but the women decide what best fits their needs. Internally, it could mean how different programs work together on a project. You know, I like this workshop outline, but I think, well, our materials should be more comprehensive.”

“I agree, Kelly,” I say, writing on the flip-chart page with the heading “parking lot.” “Perhaps we’ll develop a really useful and extensive training package. Maybe the Outreach Program could take the lead in that activity.”
Re-storying Empowerment

“I want to shift our conversation just a bit with critical questions related to how staff members use stories in empowerment,” I say, and then query, “Do CASA staff members promote a CASA version of abuse? Do workers make space for or encourage women to produce their own stories of abuse? Do workers accept different versions of the story from different women? Empowerment might mean that stories other than CASA’s fit the situation. Do we teach staff the CASA rules and viewpoint, or do we help staff learn a philosophy that is open to many views?” Research has addressed these questions (Loseke, 1987, 1992, 2001), and I think it is important for the staff to think about the ramifications as we explore empowerment.

The CASA staff members look confused, at a loss for words, waiting for someone to make the first comment. There is a long silence. Their eyes dart from person to person and down to doodles on their tablets. Finally, Linda speaks, “I’ve heard similar questions, and there are several answers. Empowerment is all about letting women make decisions for themselves and honoring those decisions, even if we might feel that different choices would be better. We need to question our assumptions about ‘better’—in whose opinion and for what reasons? Our philosophy is about supporting victims as they try to regain a sense of their alternatives in life. We must respect them to create an empowering environment. At least this is what we believe we are doing, but we may still be trying to convince the woman that our way is best, instead of supporting her way. We are trying to keep her safe. But I acknowledge that these women rarely get to tell their story or their full story. And when they do tell their stories, people may not hear or
understand them. The police, the courts, and social services all have their rules and regulations. To get certain kinds of help, the women’s stories must fit into the established categories. Even to get into CASA’s Shelter, we have some guidelines. Women learn what to say to get services and resources.”

“We do tell women that no one deserves to be abused. That might be the CASA story,” Clarissa offers hesitantly. “In the support groups, women often find that they have similar experiences. We see certain patterns of abuse.”

“I guess it is important to remember that there are similarities, but each person is unique. I do see women who have been virtually brainwashed by their controlling abusers. The trauma of years of abuse can be very difficult to overcome. One of the first steps in our advocacy is validating their experiences,” Maria explains. “We see that as empowering, not coercing a certain story. Some women really think that abusive relationships are normal, or that they deserve to be hit, kicked, whatever. Some women never used the word ‘abused’ before; they never defined it before. We offer her new words to describe what’s happened to her.”

“Yes, a researcher named Parry wrote about that,” I comment thoughtfully. “The discovery of a person’s own voice for telling a story occurs when she feels heard, and thus validated (1991, p. 44). He also explained how we must balance validation with respectful questioning, which helps people re-story their lives.” I add, “The article I sent you by Wood (2001) talked about romance narratives that infuse our society and reinforce the notion of men’s superiority and dominance, along with women’s deference
and dependence. These stories serve to normalize violence in intimate relationships. The CASA story seems to challenge that.”

Maria comments, “I really like the idea that we offer women an opportunity to re-story their lives. Maybe that’s part of our empowerment project. We are reinforcing the ways we can re-story our work and those we assist.”

“I guess I’d say the CASA story is how we can help women be safe and that takes many different forms. For some women, safety is staying in their current relationship. We know that when a woman leaves is actually the most dangerous time and potentially deadly,” Clarissa says.

“The CASA story is that community action can stop abuse. Our story is that domestic violence does not need to exist, and it is detrimental to women, children, families, communities, and workplaces. But our empowerment value means that we respect the women and support their choices,” Linda summarizes.

“Would you say that you offer women a chance to revise their stories, to change their lives?” I ask. “First, you give them a chance to tell their story, to speak the often unspeakable. Then you encourage them to create a story of a different future, right? Heads nod so I continue. “At the CASA Annual Meeting and awards ceremony, I admired a vase that a former Shelter resident had painted for one of the awards. Then she told me about spending 13 years being punched and kicked any time she didn’t please her husband, until she finally found a way to leave. This woman lost count of the number of times he gave her a black eye, but she still remembers the first one. For some reason, I was initially shocked that she told me her story after only a few minutes of chatting.
Then I realized that my shock might have been because I somehow blamed her for her beating, or maybe thought she should feel a sense of shame. Maybe it was the sudden intimacy; I’m not sure. Later, I decided that her comment was certainly appropriate in the context of the CASA event, but I’m still puzzled over my reactions. The woman also told me about her volunteer activities and how she wanted to tell her story to help other women. Her sense of empowerment was palpable. She has a different story or at least a new chapter to the story about how she sees herself and her experiences with violence. She’s a survivor, an artist, a volunteer, and a helper. I know her story is complex, but in that short conversation, I saw many of the things we are discussing about empowerment.”

“That’s a good example,” Bonnie affirms. “Those are the kind of stories that make us feel like we have made a difference in their lives.”

“I’m excited that many ideas that I’ve studied about how we story our lives seem to fit this project. You call your work ‘advocacy,’ but there is an element I might call ‘cooperative counseling,’ or ‘collaborative constructive counseling’ (Friedman, 1993), but I know you don’t use the word ‘counseling.’ CASA advocates work together with people to create a story of possibilities. Something called generative theory is about how we create or generate our lives. Stories don’t simply represent or mirror what has happened; rather, we create stories to explain our experiences. We create the meaning of those experiences through our words and interactions with others (Gergen, 2001). Let me find Parry’s article, which has a great quote.”

I rummage through my pile of notes, “He says that a story is, ‘A tool for enabling clients to shake off constraining beliefs so that they can live their stories henceforth as

257
they choose. Their stories need no longer live them. . . . A story is not a life, only a selection of events about a life influenced by that person’s beliefs about herself and others. . . . Beliefs are embedded in the story; change the story and old beliefs are shattered’ (1991, p. 43).

One more key point, which might lead us to discuss blame: We are all characters in each other’s stories. Our stories are connected to other stories, so the story becomes huge! And there is no one viewpoint or lens that is privileged. All we have is our point of view and a ‘universe of points of view’ (p. 51) from others.”

I’m feeling a bit frustrated with the limited time and my attempts to share the academic theories without sounding too pedantic. I want to be sure that the staff members see the connection to their work. Suddenly, the rear door opens, and a staff member delivers a tray of cookies, which signals that it’s time for a break.

Twenty minutes later, I reconvene the group. “Let’s jump back into the discussion now that we’ve had more sugar, caffeine, and nicotine.” Maria and Kelly laugh because they just returned from a cigarette break outside. “We have two topics left to touch on today: (a) blame, or maybe a broader term is relational responsibility, and (b) disempowerment issues. I want to preview ideas on blame for our next meeting because we don’t have much time to really dig into it today. I guess this whole meeting has been an overview of sorts. I think that blame may become one of the most critical conversations we have with staff. I’ve struggled with it myself in terms of domestic violence. Wood (2001) wrote about how women blame themselves because of society’s
expectations. I’ve heard you all talk about how abusers isolate and control victims to the point that those being abused blame themselves.”

“Right, they keep trying to iron the shirts correctly or cook dinner perfectly so he won’t become enraged. They are sure it’s their fault,” Maria comments. “We try to help them see that there might be other reasons he is violent, and at the same time, we acknowledge that not all men or all relationships are violent. Some women begin to believe that abuse is just the way it is.”

“The abusers blame the victims, and intimidate, belittle, threaten, and isolate them. Society blames the victims and asks why don’t they leave. So when we advocate for victims, we create an empowering environment, where they can stop blaming themselves or thinking they deserve the abuse,” Kelly adds. “We balance the scales of justice a bit.”

“But do we then blame the abusers? Or do we blame our communities and society for tolerating such abuse? If we blame society, does that mean blaming individuals--blaming ourselves?” I query.

“We have different messages and different responses based on need. When the most women first arrive at the shelter, they need help to stop blaming themselves. We show them how the abuser has treated them in an effort to control them and get power. We use the Power and Control Wheel to get them to think about their situation,” Clarissa jumps in. “Yes, there are times you might say we blame the abuser. It may take years, I mean years, before you are strong enough and ready to look at the abuse in the bigger
picture! That’s not where you can start. I’m still working through my stuff, the feelings I have about being a victim of abuse as a child and a woman!” Everyone is quiet.

Linda leans forward and says, “There is the day-to-day survival part of our work and the long-term part of our work. Until women are safe, they aren’t looking at the big picture. It’s a hierarchy of needs. After they have their own lives stabilized, survivors often become supporters and advocates. Then they begin to understand the political context of abuse. That’s the basis of the grassroots movement—women helping women. CASA and the Movement have always included sheltering victims and social justice work, such as community outreach, training, and policy work. I think our name change from Center Against Spouse Abuse to Community Action Stops Abuse is a strong message. More and more men are becoming part of the Movement to promote the message that violence is unacceptable. You saw that during several programs at the state conference. There are programs that work with the batterers, but that’s not CASA’s focus.”

“Yes,” I respond, “and at the CASA planning retreat, there was a strong community emphasis, which was great. At our next meeting, I hope we talk more about relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). If we talk in terms of blame, then we create right-wrong, win-lose scenarios. And I realize that domestic violence work can be about life and death. Even the relational responsibility theorists acknowledge that in the case of domestic violence, safety is important (p. 215). They don’t suggest that we stop talking about social justice, but they do propose that we seek to replace a language of blame with a language of possibilities, transformation, and awareness of relational
responsibilities (Gergen, 2001). It’s about being open and listening to others because we believe that we are all involved in a complex matrix of relationships. I think a culture of blame can destroy the possibility of empowerment, because empowerment is based on respect for others. It ties into reciprocal empowerment, which we have discussed in the past. Another term we could use is ‘relational empowerment.’ Blame and trust could be crucial issues internally at CASA in staff relationships--something we want to explore.”

Unsure of where to go from here, I pause. It made so much sense when I was reading, but it’s harder to explain in practical terms. I think about how often the theorists propose applying the ideas outside the academy.

Kelly comments, “I’m still trying to understand all this, but the article on Appreciative Inquiry that you sent us made sense. I especially noticed the example of how an organization approached a ‘morale problem’ in a different way. Rather than talk about all the problems, they proposed beginning with a discussion of what the organization would be like if people wanted to come to work (Ludema et al., 2001). I’m still going to need to think more about how it applies to our work, but it’s interesting. I like the positive approach.”

“That’s a perfect example. I think it can be very effective to discuss what you want, rather than what you don’t want. . . . which leads, strangely enough, to the idea of disempowerment. Disempowerment was one thing several people mentioned to me during informal chats. Do you have the interest or the energy to talk a bit about disempowerment?” I ask the group.
“Yes, I actually think this is the toughest part of our job, even though discussing disempowerment is a bit on the negative side of things,” Bonnie quips.

“I agree. What do you think? Should we pursue this or skip it?” I ask, willing to let them direct the flow. Clarissa, Maria, Linda, Kelly, and even Bonnie agree that they want to discuss the topic, so we continue. I start, “I guess I see two aspects to this issue: (a) how workers disempower the victims—maybe without meaning to, maybe with the woman’s best interest in mind, maybe because the worker thinks she is the ‘expert,’ and (b) how workers themselves may feel disempowered by the type of work they do or by a supervisor or by organizational constraints. There isn’t that much written about domestic violence workers, compared to research about abusers and victims. But Donileen Loseke (1992) from the University of South Florida wrote about how society has constructed the definitions of battered women and how shelter workers face the practical realities of defining clients and managing shelter life. Another academic who worked in a shelter wrote an ethnography of women who escaped, and she included her observations as a volunteer researcher (Lawless, 2001). She wrote about feeling ‘stymied, frustrated and angry’ (p. xxi) because she felt so helpless in the face of the empowerment strategy that emphasized respecting the victims’ decisions, even if they face dangerous consequences. Lawless’s other concern was in the ways victims’ stories changed so that they could get services. Could it be that sometimes our empowerment strategies are disempowering as well?”

Clarissa quickly comments in an emphatic tone, “Definitely, and it may depend on how you personally define empowerment and disempowerment. We realize that the
women who come to CASA may die because of decisions they make. That’s why it can be so hard to respect some of their decisions. Some women are faced with making a choice between being homeless and losing their children or staying in an abusive relationship. What is the right answer in such a case?”

Maria adds, “Some women refuse to make a decision because they don’t know how, have never been allowed to decide things, or are emotionally numb from trauma. Sometimes it’s hard not to think that they are just lazy, or maybe we failed to motivate them. That’s the blame thing.”

“Ultimately, our empowerment yardstick is that we are not the experts in control of their lives; they are. But we also acknowledge there are times when a woman might need or want extra help when she’s stuck. We’ve all been stuck at different points in our lives. If we believe we are working collaboratively, then we should know when to nudge a little, question a little, open new possibilities, or pose consequences. In some ways, we are helping women learn to make decisions, and sometimes the stakes are high,” Linda explains.

“What about a woman who doesn’t seem to want to be empowered? Can you empower someone who isn’t interested?” I pose to the group.

“We can create an environment, but we don’t empower someone. We don’t do it to them or for them. We do it with them, while they do it for themselves. Probably the most empowering part of our interaction is that we don’t shame, embarrass, or blame them. They will decide what they need to do and when, but it is important that they know we are here, so they don’t give up,” Clarissa explains.
Maria says, “I got frustrated with some of the new advocates. It’s like some of our new hires just look at things in black and white. They don’t have any common sense. They are so focused on the rules that they forget to think of the women’s needs. One advocate told an elderly Shelter resident that she had to walk down the block to get her ride. It was the rule; but it didn’t make sense for the elderly woman. Of course, that advocate didn’t stay long at CASA.”

Clarissa agrees, “We have a great staff now. We are building a solid team, but hiring new staff members has been difficult. It’s hard to teach them our philosophy.”

“Right, which is what led us to this meeting--to look at how we can help everyone on the staff sustain the philosophy of empowerment,” Linda summarizes. “From what Elizabeth has shown us, conversation and sharing stories are powerful ways to reinforce organizational values” (Kreps, 1990; Meyer, 1995).

“So what about disempowerment of staff? Are there aspects of the job or the organization that are disempowering?” I ask. “I learned a lot when I wrote a paper on vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue, and I think internal issues will surface during our project discussions with the staff.”

“You have to find your own sense of empowerment from the work. Maybe it’s that reciprocal empowerment you’ve talked about. I’m a helper by nature, but I had to learn a way of helping women, sort of indirectly. I can give them resources, opportunities, and encouragement, but then they help themselves. Some days, I still have to work on my own issues of control, wanting to fix it,” Bonnie offers. “I try to
remember the parable about giving someone a fish that feeds the person for a day. Teach someone to fish and they can feed themselves for a lifetime.”

“As a victim of childhood abuse, I spent my life trying to be perfect; lots of victims do. I’m a survivor, and sometimes I get frustrated when the women don’t work hard on their stuff. I want to help them so much, but I have to remember how long it can take. And at work, I know that sometimes I look at the problems first--I want to solve them! But I’m trying to learn more from Linda about being a manager and empowering those I supervise,” Clarissa shares with the group.

“I guess we had some disempowering situations when we were so short-staffed, the turnover was high, and the Shelter was full. Working conditions were making it hard to do a good job. People were demoralized. Lately things have been better, and we’ve been working on solutions together,” Maria adds. “I feel empowered when we try new ways of solving problems.”

“Elizabeth, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma are a major area of discussion in the DV field. It might be time to have another workshop on that for new staff,” Linda muses and scribbles a note.

I glance at the clock again. “It’s almost time to adjourn. We’ve covered a lot of ground today. During our next meeting, we’ll talk more about schedules and process. We’ll start with notes from our parking lot sheet. We are officially adjourned, but I’d like to switch gears just a bit and clarify a few things about my dissertation. I need your help. I have an important question for you.”
Who am I? Insider, Outsider, Collaborator?

I’m trying to decide how I want to write the overall story of learning about CASA. Each of you has signed a consent form, and we’ve discussed certain protocols. But I’d like to consider what would happen if there is an outcome we didn’t anticipate, something that makes you uncomfortable. Maybe I write something you disagree with. Maybe we have different conclusions about the project. What would happen?” My serious tone affects the group. They look to Linda.

She speaks slowly, “Basically, I trust you. We trust you. After almost four years of working together, I think we all know how you write and even more how you frame things. You have a very empowering way of working with us. And you have described your work as social action research, which I understand means we are working together. I do acknowledge that there are risks, but I believe we can negotiate any difficulties. We are part of this project because we want to take a look at what we’ve been doing and how to do it better.”

Kelly looks at bit more skeptical, “So what would we do if we disagreed with you? What are our options after we read the dissertation?”

I pause briefly and reply, “First, I’ll give you some simple ideas; then we can talk about more complex issues. One option might be to not identify CASA by name. I can use a pseudonym. People could still guess it was CASA, but the organization would not be specifically identified.”
“That might work, but I agree people would still know,” Kelly replies. “I’m having a hard time thinking this through. Can you give me an example of a problem that might occur in research?”

“Let’s suppose that at the end of the project, I wrote a chapter about how CASA staff talk about empowerment, and my observations are that certain staff members don’t practice empowering conversations in the workplace. Maybe I have examples of programs and events that are disempowering.” I pause and look around the table at their confused faces.

“But you always gave us drafts of your papers in the past. Couldn’t we tell you that we disagreed with you, that maybe you got it wrong?” Several people giggle at Clarissa’s question easily imagining her setting me straight.

“Yes, you could. I might agree with you, or I might not. Actually, what I would probably do is write your ideas and our follow-up conversations into the story or the analysis. I would reflect on why or how we interpreted things differently. But I might still write that I saw moments of disempowerment. Now I’m not saying that I have. I’m just posing the possibility that we interpret things differently.”

Linda jumped in, “I remember when Carolyn wrote a chapter in her book about difficulties in community-based research (Ellis, 2004). Carolyn sent her draft to me, and I responded with comments by e-mail. She didn’t change everything, but she inserted my words and talked about how we saw things differently.”
“Yes,” I said. “Carolyn shared your e-mail with me, and we discussed that process. That’s an example of representing different points of view. I could get copies for anyone who wants to read it.”

Maria said, “I’d like to read it, and I would share a copy with others. Elizabeth, I trust you after all these years, but I’d like to hear more from you about your ideas on this. I imagine this comes up frequently for researchers.”

I take a breath and begin, “Yes, this is a major ethical issue for researchers and for my dissertation. With my work on narratives, I’m not doing surveys or trying to claim that I’m objective. I’ll acknowledge my subjectivity because my feelings, opinions, and past experiences do affect my perceptions. With narrative research people might be identifiable in the stories. We’ve talked about questions such as: Whose story is it? And for whom is the story written? The two main research issues are social responsibility and representation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The collaborative relationships we’ve developed are the foundation for our work and will continue to be important as we work more on empowerment.”

Maria looks around the table. “I definitely agree that we have an incredible research relationship. You are more like one of us.”

“Yeah, you get it!” Clarissa adds, pointing her finger in my direction and looking around the table.

“Thanks.” I smile and feel the warmth of their support. “Discussions of researchers and those being studied often describe being an insider or an outsider and many different variations within those categories” (Acker, 2000).
Linda interjects, “I don’t believe that researchers are ever totally objective. None of us are, even if we claim to be. I like the action research, feminist ideas of working together, rather than separating researcher and those researched. You and I have discussed the idea of blurred boundaries, Elizabeth. Why don’t you talk some more about that now?” Linda suggests.

“Many people agree with you,” I say to Linda and look around the group. “Many researchers have moved from the ‘we-they’ mentality to the idea that we all have multiple identities, multiple roles that blur during research (Davies, 1992; Fine, 1994; Fine et al., 2000; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Reinharz, 1992). It’s funny because sometimes when you introduce me to people, you have hard time deciding what to call me—volunteer, researcher, story writer, friend, facilitator, arts and crafts person, or, best of all, the person who brings pizza and chocolate,” I clown, as group laughs.

“You’re just like part of our family now,” Clarissa says.

“The most important thing I can do as a researcher is to recognize the multiplicity of my own roles and interpretations and include those in what I write. I want to be open to conflicting interpretations, and strive for reflexivity that mirrors my lived experiences in my dissertation (Borland, 1991; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). Again, that doesn’t mean we will have conflicts,” I reiterate.

Before I can continue, Bonnie stops me. “I’ve heard you use that word, ‘reflexivity,’ before, but I want to be sure we’re all thinking the same thing. So explain a bit.”
“Thanks for asking, Bonnie. It means looking at what you are doing--reflecting, maybe like what you call ‘processing.’ One of our texts defined reflexivity as ‘the process of personally and academically reflecting on lived experiences in ways that reveal the deep connections between the writer and her or his subject’ [italics in original] (Goodall Jr., 2000, p.137). But we must remember that people may experience the same event and still interpret that event differently, and tell the story differently. You discussed that at the staff meeting when you looked at how staff framed the residents: how we all filter things and bring different meanings to our experiences.”

“Yeah, we used coffee filters to demonstrate how our backgrounds, education, families, and other things affect the way we see our work!” Clarissa affirms.

“That makes sense,” contributes Kelly, and others nod.

“Any other questions on this topic?” I ask and pause. “I feel comfortable with our relationship and our approach to working together, but I wanted to be sure we discussed the possibilities. In my first class with Carolyn, we read a really powerful article she wrote about the quagmires of researching people’s lives and communities. She wrote of her relationships and how people felt about what she wrote. Carolyn concluded that research should emphasize how our lives are connected rather than set apart; how we should be conscious of ambiguities and multiple roles; and how we should exhibit empathy, community, and a sense of responsibility in our research (Ellis, 1995, p. 94). I’ll use her example to guide my work.”

“That’s why we fit together--because we have similar values,” Maria observes with a smile.
The meeting adjourns so Clarissa, Kelly, Bonnie, and Maria can return to their offices. I ask Linda if she has time for some debriefing. Since she would be attending a community event later in the evening, she is “between shifts.” After we settle into the comfortable, cream-colored couch in her office and kick off our shoes, I ask, “So how was the meeting for you? Do you think we are ready to move to the next step?”

“I enjoy your visits and conversation so much! You get us thinking in different ways, so yes the meeting was great,” Linda replies. “We need to talk more about the logistics and scheduling meetings with staff.”

“Yes, remember this is still the planning stage. Maybe we should have focus groups with staff to see what they think. We can work on process and then action items and we’ll have a plan,” I reply and shift on the couch. “I really want to work on this, but I must complete the final draft of my dissertation in the next few months.”

“Well, summer isn’t a very good time for new projects at CASA because we have people on vacation. You and I will be in Denver for the NCADV conference. I’m also going to Australia to give the keynote address at a conference there, and then my friend is going to meet me for vacation time. Looks like we should revisit this project in the fall. After I return from Australia, I’ll also have time to read drafts of your dissertation chapters, whatever you have.”

“My biggest challenge right now is organizing the outline. I’ve tried a few approaches, but I’m not satisfied yet. Writing in a narrative format is actually very difficult because you must find ways for all the chapters to flow together with a
framework or a plot.” I feel a bit of frustration creeping into my voice. “But it will be
great to have you as a reader!”

NCADV Winding Down

The NCADV program on organizational change and research collaboration
concludes. Suddenly I’m exhausted, like a light bulb that just burned out. It is the end of
the conference, the last program. I’m weary, spent.

Linda turns to me and says, “We can talk more about our CASA organizational
staff project later. Let’s go back to the room and rest a bit. Tonight there’s a social with
a talent show and an informal dance.”

I hadn’t seen these events in the conference program, but I’ll find the energy to
attend because I want to soak up the NCADV culture. As we walk toward the elevator, I
reply, “Sounds like fun, but I need to put up my feet for awhile. I’m fading.”
Chapter Ten

Conclusion: Looking Back and Flying Home

Considering Criteria

The hotel breakfast bar offers Linda and me a feast of muffins, pastries, jams, fruit, yogurt, eggs, meats, and cereals to indulge our appetites and stockpile energy for the long day of travel ahead. After breakfast, we lounge in the lobby, satiated and waiting for a shuttle bus to the airport. Our flights are on different airlines, but with close schedules, so we decide to ride the shuttle together.

Linda inquires casually, “So what did you think of your first NCADV conference?”

“The social and the talent show last night were a hoot, lots of enthusiasm and clapping, but I’m not sure about real talent!” We both laugh. “The impromptu dance was a fun way to end the conference. It was neat how people brought their CDs and took turns volunteering to be the DJ, organizing the whole thing informally. All the ‘goddesses’ were dancing: young and old, couples, groups and individuals dancing to assorted beats and styles.”

Linda replies, “It’s become a tradition at each conference. I enjoy the freedom of letting loose! There’s such sheer joy in dancing!”

“Yeah, an embodied celebration! I needed some release after the intensity of the conference! I’m glad you invited me, but my head has been whirling with ideas,
connections, and flashbacks to my CASA experiences. I had no idea what to expect because, truthfully, I had been so busy that I hadn’t read the materials very closely before I came. The combination of the research track and the practitioners’ track has been a catalyst for my thinking about my dissertation. The programs included so many issues!”

Linda nods, “I always feel refreshed somehow after these events. I get a renewed sense of energy and dedication to working harder for the Movement and social justice.”

“The plenary sessions on the rape culture and human trafficking featured intense presentations. I noticed the combination of socio-political commentary and emotional stories at the plenary sessions, which reflected the personal and the political feminist philosophy. The singing sure set an emotional tone as well. The memorial to Susan Schechter affected me the most dramatically, in part, because I felt like I knew her after reading her book. But even more than that, I was intrigued by the testimonials describing her as a compassionate advocate and mentor.

“Yes, DV work is emotional, so our conferences have emotional elements as well. In our work, we are dealing with horrific abuses of power. That’s what can make advocates so angry. We balance the compassion of our work with our outrage. As part of a feminist philosophy, we honor and acknowledge expressions of emotion. At the same time, we try to take care of ourselves, and each other, so the vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue doesn’t overwhelm us. That’s probably why we try to see the strengths and hope in our work, too. We desperately need to believe in the possibilities and nurture that hope.”
I muse, “Stories were a big part of the conference. From my readings and our discussions, I knew that voice and stories were important, but during this conference, I experienced narratives in a unique way. The plenary sessions were full of stories from speakers and respondents; even the sponsors told stories. The memorials and songs were stories. Every session conveyed some kind of narrative thread.”

“That’s why I wanted to showcase our CASA booklet of stories.” Linda smiles. “We brought hundreds of copies, and we ran out. I heard lots of interesting comments, although some people weren’t sure what to make of the focus on staff. It’s not very often that we turn the lens on ourselves. You know my response is that to understand our work and the Movement, people must understand us.”

“I heard lots of discussion about cultivating new leadership. I think the stories might be a good way to communicate your philosophy to others,” I observe.

Linda proposes, “I’m ready for more stories when you are. Maybe we can get another grant.”

“I must finish my dissertation before I can start any new project. Writing narratives has become easier for me, but the process of mapping out a 200 to 300-page book and trying to weave together multiple layers, plot lines, and characters has been almost overwhelming at times. I have done all kinds of outlines and notes, so now it’s time to write. I’m experimenting with creative ways to communicate academic literature and theories in a dissertation. Including this conference in my dissertation might be a way to balance the research and the practices. Maybe I’ll make some notes about the conference on the plane.”
Linda asks, “With an experimental form, how will you know if you’ve done it well? What’s the criterion for judging the narrative when you have completed the dissertation?”

“Right now, it’s not only what I think, but what my committee thinks and, eventually, what my readers think, as well as what CASA staff think--lots of readers and thinkers to please!” I joke.

Linda says in serious voice, “I know you aren’t going to use statistics to prove something, so I’m really not sure what the academic standard is for your work.”

“You might call my work ‘poetic social science’ (Bochner, 2000) or ‘poetic activism’ (Gergen, 2000). The stories I’ll use won’t be just data that I’ll analyze and include as snippets in a long, factual analysis. The narrative that I write will be my interpretation of the meaning. My goal is to show the readers of my work the events, characters, and ideas involved in the project, rather than to just write about what happened in the project. I want to paint pictures that will draw people into the scene and engage them--make them feel like they were there. Of course, much of being there involves conversations about our work, since CASA likes to ‘process’ the work. I want readers to be sitting with us in those conversations!” My voice is getting louder, and I’m using my hands to gesture, as I lean toward Linda.

“I can almost see it now,” Linda jokes. “That’s what the booklet of stories did for us. It helped us look at ourselves and our work, as well as making our work feel real to other people not directly involved in DV work.”
“One criterion for my dissertation project is that it needs to address the goals of action research, by working collaboratively with a community organization on a project that relates to social justice. Last week, I was talking with two colleagues of mine about what we wanted. One said she wanted to get a job and make enough money so that she wouldn’t always be a broke grad student. The other woman said that she wanted to be known for excellent work; she wanted to be the best. I said that I wanted to be known as someone who made a difference. I need to make money, and I need to feel like my work is recognized, but most of all, I need to be socially relevant, to make a difference. Maybe that’s just the old hippie in me!”

“Well, you can check that one off your list,” Linda assured me. “You have made a difference with CASA. And you’ve been with us for a long time, which should give your research credibility. I know it does with those of us in the domestic violence field.”

“The rapport with CASA that has developed over time certainly adds credibility to my study; however, the criteria for the qualitative research and narratives I’ll write don’t focus so much on credibility or validity; or rather, these terms are defined differently in narrative methodology. The goals are very different from those associated with the ‘predict and control’ model. With social change and narrative work, the goal isn’t to show what’s wrong with CASA, but to promote an understanding of the tensions and difficulties. The goal is not necessarily to resolve problems per se, but to look deeper into the issues and seek commonalities (Ellis, 2002). Of course, with the action research slant, the project itself is designed to help CASA. The narrative methodology supports the feminist theory that the personal is the political, and so personal stories can lead to
social changes. Some people contend that narratives are just introspective navel-gazing, but various academics, including Carolyn, have written about the power of narratives in social change (Ellis, 2002). One academic, Laurel Richardson (1995), specifically used the word ‘empower’ and wrote, ‘Narrative structure . . . will empower individuals, contributing to liberating civic discourses, and support transformative projects’ (Richardson, 1995, p. 214). I really like that phrase ‘liberating discourses,’ and she is one of the narrative trailblazers.”

“A criterion I’d like to suggest is that whatever you write must be readable by those involved in the work. Much of your work is engaging and accessible, but I hope it stays that way in the dissertation. Or are we going to have to skip the beginning and end sections, like we do with some of the papers?”

“Great point,” I respond. “CASA staff have emphasized it on numerous occasions. I’m trying to write a narrative, integrating the theory, analysis, and literature within the story, rather than using the academic parts as bookends of theory at the beginning and end. That is another issue often discussed in articles about criteria. I hope to write something a bit experimental, literary, and accessible, and I know the CASA staff will give me feedback on that.” I grab a file folder from my bag. “I’ve been pulling together lists in preparation for this section of the question. I ascribe to an idea of writing as inquiry that proposes writing as a way of discovering and knowing (Richardson, 2000), so I’m not sure about the final format at this point, but writing as inquiry is a method of knowing, investigating, and constructing our world, ourselves, and others
Writing as inquiry is significantly different from traditional social science, where data collection and reporting are separate.”

“If it’s all integrated, that will mean that both the academic and the community readers will be experiencing both worlds, or maybe you are creating a new space for all of us,” Linda says, almost like she is thinking out loud.

“Richardson also outlined something called CAP--Creative Analytic Practices, which holds that narrative research should meet the following criteria: (1) contributes to our understanding of social life, (2) demonstrates aesthetic merit, (3) includes adequate self awareness and reflexivity, (4) impacts the reader emotionality and/or intellectually and causes reactions, and (5) expresses embodied sense of reality, lived experience (p. 937). But what I really like is her metaphor of crystallization as an alternative to traditional notions of validity. Richardson supports the idea that there is no one single truth; rather, truth is like a prism, reflecting multiple dimensions, patterns, and colors that continually change. What we see depends on the angle from which we view the crystal” (p. 934).

“The crystal metaphor is just perfect.” Linda’s face lights up. “Maybe we can use that as part of our empowerment training, one of your memory anchors.”

“Oh yes, perfect!” I exclaim and pull a tablet from my briefcase to scribble notes. “I’m lucky to work with Carolyn and Art because they are leaders in our field, and they have written extensively on criteria for narratives (Bochner, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2001; Bochner & Ellis, 1999, 2003, 2002; Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Bochner et al., 1998; Ellis, 1995, 2000, 2002; Ellis & Berger, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 1992, 2000;
Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). But it is a bit overwhelming, too, because they have high standards. Here, read these two quotes.”

I hand Linda a sheet from my folder. “What makes narratives believable is the sense of reality they create, their intimacy, economy, accessibility, verisimilitude, and their capacity to evoke and promote identification, feeling, empathy and dialogue” (Bochner & Ellis, 1999, p. 492). I point to the bottom of the page. “We seek . . . a meeting ground where heart and head can go hand in hand, a rigorous and creative ethnography that is passionate, political, personal, critical, open-ended, enlightening, pleasurable, meaningful and evocative” (Bochner & Ellis, 1999, p. 498).

“Writing evocatively is actually much more difficult than most people think.” I sigh.

“Just outline your goals, from your heart,” Linda encourages.

“One researcher says that it’s not worth doing any work that doesn’t break your heart (Behar, 1996). Some days, CASA breaks my heart, but it inspires me on other days. I think the staff feels the same way. I want to write stories about the daily lives of CASA workers, sharing their dilemmas of enacting empowerment with readers. I also want to share my own feelings about empowerment and working with CASA. Co-constructing multi-voiced accounts of interpersonal experiences and moments of understanding will encourage multiple interpretations, full of vulnerabilities and contradictions. Hopefully, we’ll stimulate people to reframe some of their assumptions. Oh yeah, I’m not setting the bar too high!” I laugh and gesture with my arm over my head.
“You can do it. I’ve read your work, and I think you will meet all those goals. You’ll make a difference, not only for CASA, but for other domestic violence programs in the state and the country.”

“Thanks, I appreciate the encouragement. I need it. I’ve come full circle from being an old literature major and English teacher, to someone writing grant proposals, technical reports, newsletters, and marketing copy and back to a creative author again. You know, I also hope that my dissertation will be useful to all kinds of organizations and people who are trying to find their own sense of empowerment and strength. One of the first books I read in my narrative classes was by an author I had cherished in college in the 70s, Robert Coles. He’s an activist, storyteller, and prolific author from the medical field, who invites the reader to see how powerful stories are in our lives.” He writes, “There are many interpretations to a good story and it isn’t a question of which one is right or wrong but of what you do with what you’ve read” (Coles, 1989, p. 47).

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Watching people in the lobby for a while, Linda and I chat about the people she knows, and people I’ve met during the conference. We pause, each in our own world of thought for a few minutes. To me, our comfort with this silence shows how we can co-exist, near each other, without conversation, in a space of acceptance.

After a while, I turn to Linda and express my thanks. “This conference has been memorable. Thanks for inviting me and showing me around. The last few days have been bursting with connections and very thought-provoking ideas. I’ve been feeling the
ambiguity of being an insider and an outsider. Even at CASA, sometimes I’ve felt like I don’t really belong because I’m not a survivor of abuse, but there is a deep resonance philosophically.”

Linda explains, “The movement is in a difficult phase. It is important that we keep space for survivors and the experienced, grassroots advocates. We are concerned that people with social work, criminology, or even business degrees often get jobs when they don’t understand the philosophy. Shelters are becoming social service agencies with big budgets, but we want to preserve the social justice mission as well. Someone like you brings the philosophy of compassion and empowerment to our work. This conference has been about collaboration, which is what we have achieved.”

“I remember one moment that shaped my sense of belonging in the Movement--a light bulb moment of meaning at the state conference.” I continue, “At the final awards ceremony banquet, I was sitting at the CASA table feeling like an insider, someone who belonged there. As the awards were presented, each person told his or her story of personal experience with abuse. It was beautiful and touching to see their triumphant spirits making a difference in their work. However, I began to feel like I could never truly fit into the work because I hadn’t experienced domestic violence in my family.” I pause. “Then the last award was for youth advocacy. In her acceptance speech, the award recipient revealed that, unlike others honorees, she was not a survivor; however, her inspiration came from her supportive, loving family. Embraced by the warmth of her family, she wanted everyone to have that gift of love. Her speech was a poignant
awakening for me because I felt the same way. I just didn’t realize it until I heard her award speech.”

“I think you got your heart from your Mom. I never met her, but the way you cared for her and talked about her showed great love,” Linda observes in a gentle voice.

“Mom had a special way of seeing the possibilities, seeing strengths in people. I experienced that as a child, and even more when she was terminally ill. Watching my Mom slowly and painfully die at the same time I became involved with CASA made me think about chaos and control of our lives, or the illusion of control that we have. I spent a lot of time trying to give Mom choices--empowering her by not taking over her life even though I was caring for her.” I start to feel a residual sadness infuse me. “You know, Linda, it meant a lot to me that you and the CASA staff members came to Mom’s funeral.”

“I don’t go to many funerals, but I’m glad I heard your cousin’s eulogy. He celebrated your Mom’s personality. I could see how she was the family ‘rascal with a big heart’ and you’re like her!” We both laugh. Linda continues, “It took your Mom such a long time to die, and my Mom went so suddenly. You’ve been a good listener since my Mom died. It helps to talk about all of it with someone who understands the grieving process.”

I reply, “I remember that you said you argued with your dad because he tried to control you, but your mom tried to set you free. That was beautiful.”

Linda muses, “We’ve been through a lot in the past four years. So much has changed. Your mom died, my mom died, Homer’s dad died. Clarissa got married.”
I add, “There have been lots of staff changes, too. People have been promoted, or left. New staff was hired. I miss Ellie. Her retirement was difficult, but I understood she had to take care of her dad.” We are both quiet again, until I say, “I had no idea that our first meeting would end up like this.”

Linda laughs and says, “I didn’t either when I first went to talk to a room full of academics about why I don’t like researchers! I’m glad we found our common ground.”

Sanctuary for the Vulnerable: Above the Clouds on the Airplane

The airport shuttle bus arrives, and the hotel bellman calls in a loud voice, “Ten o’clock bus is now boarding.” We scurry to pick up our briefcases, computers, carry-on bags, and purses, lining up as the bellman loads our luggage. Gazing out the window with a hypnotic stare as we cruise along the interstate highway, I watch the mountains in the distance. The ride is quiet, with people thinking of where they’ve been and where they’re going.

After the hustle and bustle of checking into the airport and the long lines where passengers play hurry-up-and-wait, I settle in for a long flight across the country. The wide, smooth, leather seats in the first-class cabin make me feel happy I used my frequent flier points for an upgrade. When we are flying high above the clouds, I close my eyes and think back to a story about CASA and my mom’s illness that was in the CASA Booklet. One day Bonnie asked me if “my” story would be in the booklet. At that point in my life, it was very difficult to write about my mother, but the story I wrote showed how much CASA helped me through those difficult times. CASA members shared their
personal and organizational stories with me, opening themselves to me so they were vulnerable to the researcher. In this story, I become vulnerable to them and open to receiving their compassion.

Sharing Pain and Laughter

I feel relief flood my body, as I walk up the sidewalk to the CASA Shelter. The sun is shining. The air smells fresh. CASA is my “shelter” today from the illness, hospital, operations, and worry. I pour a cup of coffee and pull up a chair at the large, round conference table. Judy and Clarissa are reviewing paperwork. Clarissa looks up and says, “You’re here for Bonnie, right? She’s in the garage sorting donations, but she’ll be in soon.”

“No problem, I’m a bit early. It’s nice just to sit for a minute,” I reply with a sigh.

“We’ve missed you, but we know that you are taking care of your Mom. So how is Mom?” asks Judy casually.

I shake my head slowly and murmur, “Not too good, not too good.” I look down at the table and take a deep breath to stave off tears. I know that the CASA women are accustomed to emotionality and pain, but I just don’t want to start crying again. Judy waits, and I explain, “Good news and bad news. The good news is that Mom survived the operation, even though the doctor told us there was a 75 percent chance—or more—that she would die. The bad news is that they can’t find the right kind of medication to control her pain. She has been hallucinating for days. The other night, the nurses called me at 2:00 a.m. because Mom wanted to get out of bed and come home. She must lie still
or her hip won’t heal properly. But it’s hard for her to breathe unless she sits up straight. I’ve been staying at the hospital about 16 hours a day and some nights. I’m finding it’s wrenching to watch my Mom suffer so much. She can’t hear or see very well, so she’s scared and confused.” I feel like a balloon that has deflated. I try to switch to a different mode, “You know, I had to drop my summer class, so coming to CASA is a treat for me! Today, Mom’s regular daytime caretaker is with her at the hospital. I’m hoping that Mom will relax with her there, but I’m not sure how she will react.”

Judy nods her head. “Let’s go out on the porch and have a cigarette.” When we get settled at the wooden picnic table she continues, “My mother had bone cancer, and she came to live with my family before she died. I remember the pain. Toward the end, I slept in her room each night. It was rough because I had two kids and was working full-time at the daycare center--talk about juggling priorities!” Judy and I chat about mothers and illness, care giving, and death. I feel a deepening and new kind of bond with her because of our shared experience. She understands something that I often find too painful to discuss except in generalities. Mom’s impending death and myriad medical problems seem unspeakable, except to those who share this experience.

Clarissa sticks her head out the door, “Bonnie says she’s running late. Will you stay for lunch and then interview her afterward?”

“Sure, I love to lunch with y’all.” We chuckle and walk back to the conference table to check the take-out menus, add our orders to the list, and put money into the envelope. By now, the lunch routine is familiar to me--casual, but effective.
Ellie, the program manager, greets me and says, “Elizabeth, can we chat for a few minutes while we wait for lunch?” She smiles and squeezes my shoulder.

I nod, and she leads me into the small, private intake room. She looks into my eyes and says, “We are worried about you and your Mom. Clarissa mentioned to me that things have been difficult for you lately. I hope you are taking care of yourself.”

I am deeply touched by Clarissa’s anxiety and Ellie’s almost motherly concern for me. She really cares, and she is also very serious about her suggestion to take care of myself. I remember our interview about vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue, when she explained how staff members at the Shelter must keep themselves mentally and emotionally healthy. Her approach to me is so much like how the staff describe her as a manager. I reply, “Thanks, I have been letting myself get wrung out. The lack of sleep and the worry have taken a toll, but coming here has been my respite. You are my fun time in the midst of it all!” We both laugh, recognizing the irony of my statement, because the work at the Shelter is often very intense and painful. Ellie and I talk for a while about caring for parents, my Mom and her aging father, and then a knock on the door lets us know it’s lunchtime.

We go through the convivial chaos of matching the food with the person who ordered it. As we all sit to eat, Clarissa stands and waves her hands, “Everyone, give me your attention. I have some special music for today’s lunch. This is especially for Elizabeth, but also because we all need support and inspiration.” Clarissa sits next to me and tells me, “Last night I was just so beat down, my spirit was at the bottom. Then I listened to Yolanda sing on this CD and I was revived!”
“Girl, you just know it,” Bonnie says from across the table, “That music gets to your soul! I listen to Yolanda in my car when I need to feel lifted up!” We all munch our food with music in the background. After lunch, Clarissa and Ellie are standing by the tape player, and we’re talking about how music can affect us. Ellie, a middle-aged Caucasian woman with white hair, wearing a conservative denim jumper, gestures with her hands and her hips, “I always wanted to sing ‘Respect’ R-E-S-P-E-C-T! You know what you mean to me!” We all laugh at her imitation of Aretha Franklin’s dance steps and singing rendition.

Clarissa jangles her arm bracelets, flips her long, black braids over her broad shoulders, and hugs Ellie. “Well, I want to be a Black Betty Boop!” Clarissa smooths her brown, beige, and black leopard-skin outfit down her full hips. “And karaoke, I love karaoke! Hey, we could be ‘Ebony & Ivory’!” The two women clown around, dancing and pantomiming, as the rest of us laugh. This play is typical of the way that each of us shares and releases our stress at the Shelter. The play doesn’t last long, but the spirit is there.

On the way back to the hospital, I stop at the music store to buy Yolanda Adams’s CD, *Through the Storm*, and whenever I listen to Yolanda in the car I think back to the debut of Ebony & Ivory at CASA. “The storms of life will blow. They’re sure to come and go….While riding through the storm Jesus holds me in his arms. I am not afraid of stormy winds and waves. All power’s in His hand” (McKay, 1990)

I remember sharing the laughter and pain that fills us in times of suffering. Sharing our emotions connects us and uplifts us. At lunch, the melody conveyed comfort
and support, but later I read the spiritual, religious words in the CD liner notes. I feel like it is a message from my Mom because her faith is so strong, but her body is failing her.

Now two years after my Mom’s death, flying across country, I am looking forward and creating a future from the past. As my memories of the Shelter fade, I stare out the airplane window at the expanse of blue sky and white clouds. The engines’ hum soothes me. In order to shake off the sadness that clings to the memories of the story and Mom’s death 16 months ago, I slide my briefcase from under the seat and pull out my tablet. The long flight offers me time to review my conference notes, record additional observations, and find the CASA connections to the NCADV sessions.
For months after the NCADV conference, I write and revise sections of my dissertation each day, pulling together connections, refining the language of my stories, and checking citations. I steep myself in the process of writing, taking time off from volunteering at CASA, except for occasional informal visits and social dinners with Linda. Soon I can see the completion on the horizon. Waiting for feedback from CASA staff and my major professor, I begin wondering what the next phase in life will be, what kind of job I will pursue.

One morning, shuffling into the kitchen for a cup of steaming tea, I peer out the back windows at the lake, which is obscured in a dense, smoky, ethereal fog. Glancing at the clock, I decide to attend morning church services. Cautiously navigating through the foggy road, I drive with limited visibility on the road ahead. St. Mary’s Church is a small, cozy, comforting church, decorated respectfully, but not ornately, with only about 40 rows of simple, wooden benches. Not all churches comfort me like St. Mary’s. Some churches are majestic and awe-inspiring; others are bright and modern; some are formal or imposing monuments. St. Mary’s Church is homey.
I grew up at St. Homer’s Church and School, but rejected organized religion in my twenties, until returning home to care for my Mom over 20 years later. I still think of St. Homer’s as my Mom’s church because she was a founding member. In the 1940s, St. Homer’s Church started with a simple, wooden structure. Then it grew to a large block building, and eventually it became a wealthy parish featuring a huge, magnificent church with a gold roof and incredible, stained-glass windows. Sometimes my mind wanders during a lackluster sermon and I compare the two churches: the buildings, the services, the rituals, and the people. In the end, one isn’t better than the other, just different.

After my Mom died, I moved across the bridge from St. Petersburg to Tampa to avoid the long drive to the university. The church closest to my new house has Mom’s name, Mary, which seemed like a sign she was still with me. St. Mary’s isn’t my Mom’s church, but I feel like Mom is with me when I’m in church—like I’m visiting her. So one foggy morning at St. Mary’s Church, I find myself praying for guidance, but I’m not sure from whom. Mom always taught me not to pray for anything specific, but rather to pray for the strength to accept and work through life’s challenges. I meditate on being open to what the world has to offer, rather than trying to control the future, a life-long struggle for me. Being present in the now can be much more difficult that setting goals to shape or control our future.

Staring at the altar meditating, I visualize myself swimming against the current and getting tired, thrashing in the water, but not making progress. There is no fun in this swim, just frustration. Feeling overwhelmed and empty, I decide to change my strategy and float down the river in harmony with the currents. Progress is swift and I gain
strength. Swimming in this way is not giving up, but accepting and flowing with the
forces, using the current to enhance your strength. Rather than fighting the currents, I
have found that the currents often take me to places that help me grow. A few of my
friends think this metaphor is crazy, but others share my understanding of the paradox of
releasing control and finding power in the energy flowing around me.

Kneeling in church, I pray for openness and feel thankful for the goodness in my
life, which is another lesson from Mom--appreciating the gifts we have, rather than
focusing on what we don’t have. My sister and I call it the “aren’t we lucky” club, as we
remember the blessings and opportunities in our lives. My faith isn’t anywhere near as
strong as my Mom’s, but her example inspires me. People argue that the church is a
patriarchal hierarchy, and there are definitely times when the gender inequities upset me,
but, selfishly, I find comfort in church. I grew up going to Catholic school and praying
with my Mom and my grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Now when I go to church and
spend an hour thinking about living a meaningful life, I feel lighter and energized. In the
middle of the service, when people in the congregation hold hands and pray, then offer
the sign of peace to each other, shaking hands, hugging, and smiling, I am filled with a
sense of hope. At the end of the service, the priest says, “Go in peace to love and serve
each other through God,” and I’m inspired by these words, a lofty and optimistic charge
for the day. Of course, some people forget this by the time we try to exit the congested
parking lot, but the words of peace sustain my spirit.
New Horizons Bridging Boundaries

After the church service, I am energized, even as I struggle with writing the last chapter. My self-imposed schedule calls for writing until 1:00 p.m. As the printer churns out the latest draft, I open the office blinds. The fog has cleared with the sunshine, and I gaze across the water to watch the ducks glide across the surface. The phone rings, and I’m ready for a break.

“Hi Elizabeth! How’s your dissertation coming?” Linda asks when I answer the phone.

“I’m working on the last chapter, which is not flowing smoothly yet. I just keep writing. Thanks for your feedback on the chapters I sent to you. I’ll be working on revisions in a few days hopefully.” I respond.

“Have you heard anything about the job in Jacksonville? Made any decisions on what you want to do?”

“Yes, I just heard that someone else got the library director’s job in Jacksonville. The headhunters haven’t notified me yet, which is so tacky. Luckily, the grapevine works quickly.” I sigh. “I wanted to live near my sister, but now I don’t know if I’ll look for a university position, continue consulting, or what. I’m just treading water for now,” I reply, feeling tense about this question, which my friends and colleagues have been asking me over and over. “I guess I don’t know what I want to be when I grow up,” I joke. “I’m usually more goal-oriented, but for now I’m going with the flow.”

“Sorry about Jacksonville because I know that family is important to you. But if you are staying in the area for awhile, Elizabeth, I need you at CASA. I want to create a
new position, something like Chief Operating Officer or Director of Operations. With CASA’s growth and staff turnover, the organization is at the stage where we need a position to do more planning and coordinating. Fundraising should be my priority and I can’t be so involved in the operations as well.” Linda pauses. “Are you interested? Maybe in a few years you could move to Jacksonville.”

As Linda talks, I wander around the house with the portable phone, eventually stopping at the sliding glass doors leading to the lake. The strange timing of this call is creepy. I know Linda had a spiritual upbringing, and she’s active in her church, but we have not talked extensively about faith. “Linda, you won’t believe it, but this morning I went to church to meditate on being open to opportunities. I guess the path is getting clearer.” I think back to the first e-mail message I received from my professor inviting me to meet Linda. That message also came after a day in church, when I had prayed for an open heart.

Linda chuckles, “I’ve been thinking about this for awhile, but I wasn’t sure when to broach the subject with you.” Then we discuss salary, responsibilities, and my concerns about completing my consulting contracts during the coming year. We work out the details so I can do both, CASA work and consulting with libraries. Even more importantly, the start date at CASA would be after I’ve finished writing my dissertation. “This feels like a good fit, and we’ll make a great team,” I say. “I just have one more concern.” Linda waits as I pause. “Now I’ll still be driving across the bridge, only in the other direction now! The fates just want me to be commuting back and forth.” I laugh. “Seriously, I’m used to the drive, and I’ll use it as thinking time.”
“You can make your own schedule, and avoid rush hour on most days,” Linda suggests. “Everyone will be so excited! Now you really are one of us!” she exclaims, as we hang up.

I wonder if I have “gone native” (Tedlock, 2000). Will this impact my research or my credibility? Shaking my head to dispel those thoughts immediately, I remind myself that I have worked for years to blur boundaries, rather than engaging in either/or thinking. Questions of going native assume a distinction between the subject and the researcher, the observer and the observed. With a foundation of feminist research principles, I have worked with CASA staff as co-researchers, colleagues, and friends, in roles as a volunteer, a writer, a consultant, a coach, and a trainer. Creating a new space where researchers and practitioners collaborate to engage in empowering work has been my goal. The story continues with my new role in an ever-changing interplay of relationships that bridge the distinctions.
Coda Thinking About the Stories

Fitting the Pieces Together

I hesitate to summarize for the reader, or write about the stories. I find labeling difficult, since I have worked to blur boundaries, acknowledge the interplay of ideas, and embrace ambiguity. The narratives are the research and the theories in my research novel. This Coda is an acknowledgement that people find meaning in different ways. The conversations, presentations, people, ideas, stories, and memories from the conference overlap and build on each other like colorful toy Lego blocks of different shapes that all connect. There are many different ways that Legos can be combined to create cars, boats, trucks, planes, towers, castles, cabins, forts, houses, monsters, and other shapes. Like the Legos, the pieces of my stories could fit together in many assorted ways, and I expect readers will piece together unique and personal meanings. That’s the source of both joy and frustration, which is similar to my effort to create a structure for my dissertation. After months of searching for the way I wanted to frame this dissertation about CASA, the conference inspired me to create a layered account, integrating the conference and my experiences.

Broadly this dissertation includes stories representing three areas. First, the narratives demonstrate feminist research principles in the form of engaged scholarship, action research, or, more specifically, participatory action research and social action.
research. Within this first category, the topic of research relationships is a strong element with a foundation of collaboration. The second major area of focus is framing and sensemaking, particularly Kenneth Gergen’s (Gergen, 2000) Poetic Activism. Included in this category is an emphasis on connected knowing, Appreciative Inquiry, the language of possibilities and strengths-based service, which emphasizes reframing. CASA demonstrates how important framing is to empowerment. The third concept is the use of narratives and life stories as a method of knowing and communicating. This dissertation is an experiment in thinking with the story, not about the story and erasing the boundaries between analysis and narrative.

Studying collaboration in the context of engaged scholarship between the university and the community is the impetus for my research, while understanding the lived realities of domestic violence work is the context. Empowerment, a value of the Battered Women’s Movement, is a major theme because it is also essential for engaged scholarship, participatory action research, and feminist research. The resulting dissertation models collaboration and empowerment as both a process and a product.

Engaged Scholarship in Feminist and Action Research

The issues, challenges, and experiences during my participation in the UCI project to compile CASA stories and my work with CASA for the past four years were communicated in this novel research’s narratives. The following list summarizes the ways in which empowerment is essential to collaborative work in participatory action research and feminist research.
1. Committing significant amounts of time, extended duration at research site
2. Respecting research that is context-bound in everyday situations
3. Maintaining an orientation to social justice and action
4. Honoring the CASA “insiders’” lived experience and expertise
5. Promoting a diversity of ideas and making space for multiple voices
6. Considering issues of gender and the social construction of abuse
7. Actively developing the process at all stages, from defining the project through analysis
8. Encouraging the communication flow in many ways, to and from all levels
9. Paying attention to affective components, relationships, and conflicts
10. Writing accessible reports and other products based on the research for multiple audiences
11. Recognizing and embracing the ambiguity of permeable boundaries and roles
12. Acknowledging subjectivity and engaging in reflexivity
13. Embracing flexibility and emergent issues

Lisa Tillman-Healy (2003) referenced feminist research and PAR as a basis for her friendship as method. This method builds on the foundations of qualitative research, interpretivism, and seeking understanding, not control. Tillman-Healy’s friendship as method resonates with my experiences at CASA, as I developed relationships with the staff and the executive director.

Calling for inquiry that is open, multivoiced, and emotionally rich, friendship as a method involves the practices, the pace, the contexts, and
the ethics of friendship. . . . Although we employ traditional forms of data gathering (e.g., participant observation, systematic note taking, and informal and formal interviewing), our primary procedures are those we use to build and sustain friendship: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability.

Her list summarizes my goals for my involvement and research at CASA. My work and context are different but yet also similar to Tillmann-Healy’s. My friendships developed from the collaborative research, while her friendships spawned her research. During my research with CASA staff members, we’ve shared the lived realities of working against domestic violence, from the mundane to the emotionally charged. We’ve shared personal stories and new ideas. Research relationships developed that moved past just blurring the boundaries into creating new ways to define research and researchers, embracing the ambiguity of roles.

Ambiguous Emotions and Creating Sanctuary

The intersections of emotionality, organizations, and feminist research are related to my study. The ambiguous nature of emotions is evident in my experiences at CASA. Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (Hochschild, 1983) book on the “managed heart” led researchers to study “emotional labor” (EL) in many different jobs and settings, but there is limited research on communication and the day-to-day encounters of emotion among social workers. While CASA staff members do not use the term “social work,” I see some similarities in their ways of working. Social workers need support and
acknowledgement that their work is emotional, involving a personal capacity to feel and to feel for others (Meyerson, 2000). Emotions are a part of the usual routine for CASA workers. Meyerson’s words inspired me to honor the CASA staff’s emotions. “A social science that honors emotional experience would treat emotions as a legitimate realm of social experience. Narrative accounts that detailed the texture of human feeling in organization--joy and pain, fear and suffering, hate and love--would be central to social science. . .” (2000, p. 174).

Putnam and Mumby pointed to the possibility of this coexistence of EL and emergent work feelings, which I choose to interpret as ambiguity, the ability to balance the feminist “both/and” view. CASA workers use the communicative role of emotions to develop a sense of interrelatedness. This is a messy process, but these workers enact social support on a daily basis for each other, and Becky’s attack challenged this support in unique ways. They know such support is critical to their ability to do the work.

Putnam and Mumby described one case study in a way that also fits CASA; “Open expression of emotions facilitated the formation of community and developed a ‘sanctuary’ atmosphere where teammates provided emotional support. . .” (Putnam & Mumby, 1993, p. 53). CASA is a sanctuary that honors the heart, facilitates the sharing of emotions, and offers a safe place to explore ambiguous feelings. All these elements of sanctuary are important for the sense of empowerment, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and supporting others.
Defining and Framing Empowerment

The meaning of the term “empowerment,” both individual and collective, has been explored, defined, re-defined, and debated throughout the literature that I have discussed and illustrated in the narratives. I briefly summarize them here because I recognize different ways of knowing and learning. Pacanowsky’s (1988) early ethnographic study of an “empowering organization” concluded that distributed power, open communication, trust, and personal responsibility were as critical as embracing organizational ambiguity, all of which reflect the principles of engaged scholarship. Empowerment has been compared to the “emperor’s new clothes” (Argyris, 1998) because we discuss or praise it, but are unclear what it means. According to Rowlands (Rowlands, 1997, p. 8),

Unless empowerment is given a more concrete meaning, it can be ignored, or used to obscure, confuse or divert debates. The failure to define and explore in practical details how empowerment can be achieved considerably weakens the value of the concept as a tool for analysis or as part of a strategy for change. (Rowlands, 1997, p. 8)

A recent edition of the Communication Yearbook (Kalbfleisch, 2003) focused on theoretical discussions of empowerment through many different lenses, which informed my work (Aldoory, 2003; Brown, 1990; Coopman, 2003; Deetz & Mumby, 1990; Hammond et al., 2003; Jacobson, 2003; Kalbfleisch, 2003; Kirby, Golden, Medved, Jorgenson, & Buzzanell, 2003; Kreps, 1990; Luthra, 2003; Pacanowsky, 1988; Parker, 2003; Rogers & Singhal, 2003). My work extends the theoretical with narrative methodology. Hammond et al. concluded that emergent power and dialogue are not as
easy to observe and study as traditional power models and artifacts; however, research on
the contextual, social, and subjective cases could lead to better understanding of power,
dialogue, creative learning, and change.

The concept of empowerment can be ambiguous, particularly for women who are
seeking new ways of defining power and empowerment. My study contributes to the
body of feminist research as a product about feminist issues conducted with feminist
research principles. Life stories, as a method, are a feminist way of knowing that I
explore. Investigating the ambiguity of emotions and work feelings is also relevant to
feminist research. In the early 90s, Miller and Cumins (Miller & Cummins, 1992) were
among the first to reframe the approach and examine women’s perspectives of power
empirically. These authors concluded that women perceived society’s definition of
power as one that requires resources (money) and control over others, which they
generally attributed to men. The women studied reported that their own feelings of
power were based on self-enhancement and personal authority. The participants believed
that men and women understood power differently. Women rarely spoke of
empowerment, but mentioned personal authority, autonomy for themselves, but not
within context of relationships, especially sexual relationships. The authors called for
more research into the cultural and social contexts that affect women and men’s ideas of
power, control, and personal authority.

What I found particularly interesting was Miller and Cumins’s literature
review of feminist scholarship about empowerment during the late 1980s and
early 1990s. Empowerment was defined as “a process where each participant
enhances the other’s feelings of competence and/or power. Power is something to share, something to use for the enhancement of others” (p. 417). Miller and Cumins continued by discussing feminists’ move to shift the concept of power “out of the interpersonal mode (i.e. dominating, influencing, empowering another) to focus on more intrapersonal form of power” (p. 417).

Chiles and Zorn (Chiles & Zorn, 1995) elaborated on this shift in perspective and suggested that we consider both the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of empowerment. Their work on employee empowerment expanded on Bandura’s four influences of self-efficacy: enactive attainment, verbal persuasion, vicarious experience, and emotional arousal. Rather than a single focus on perceptions of either individual competency or personal control and authority, the authors asserted that both are required for empowerment. They strongly focused on human interpretive capacities and the relational aspects of constructing empowerment. Chiles and Zorn defined empowerment not only as a state of being, but also as the process of creating that state.

My dissertation illustrates much of the recent theoretical work on co-serving and reciprocal empowerment. Women are reclaiming and redefining the idea of serving and co-serving in a feminist context. This moves us past the idea that empowerment is something done for someone else, as is associated with the traditional nurturing feminine role.

Marlene Fine and Patrice Buzzanell (2000) proposed another feminist revision to the concept of serving, particularly in an organizational leadership context. They reclaimed the term.
Serving means more than just enabling others; it is also an ethical vision that creates what is worthy in life, develops avenues for living the vision, and revisits this core vision continually. . . . To serve is to articulate, and implement organizational visions that challenge the gendered organizational values, beliefs, and behaviors that pervade organizational life. (Fine & Buzzanell, 2000, p. 132)

Serving, in Fine and Buzzannell’s construction, is “a form of resistance that operates through dialectic processes to creatively incorporate the multiple commitments to self, others, community and principles so that we serve ourselves with and through our connections with others” (Fine & Buzzanell, 2000, p. 152). They positioned serving as a process of engaging in “co-serving.” Co-serving is a process of balancing all the needs, a dialectical interplay that is important to the commitment to lead in a deeply ethical manner. The authors acknowledged that the metaphor of serving might seem “oxymoronic to feminism,” and they explored paradoxes to the feminist act of reclaiming the term. In some ways, women who embrace the role of serving seem to be acting in stereotypical roles. Serving as a life commitment does not fit the traditional view of changing leadership styles in context pursuing strategies and techniques. In their view, however, “Women who successfully enact leadership as serving are threatening the status quo” (p. 151); they are willing to subvert the gendered social order, live by self-reflexive principles, and struggle for change. Fine and Buzzanell want to
reclaim and refocus the idea of serving in women’s lives and work to honor the mutuality and relational aspects of the experience.

In *Women, Power, and Ethnicity: Working Toward Reciprocal Empowerment*, Darlington and Mulvaney called for further research on empowerment, and ways to educate women about alternative models of power and languaging those models in a recursive process they call reciprocal empowerment (Darlington et al., 2003). Language, naming, and conversation are crucial for social research on how women construct, attain, define, and exercise power so that they do not necessarily recreate traditional models. Women may need to develop ways to describe the power they practice in order to understand their practices and those of others. The stories in my research contribute to this process. Writing about a collaborative project in an empowering way that resists critical dissection, I use a narrative style to open the conversation, rather than creating distance with an oppositional stance.

**Reciprocal, Vulnerable, Compassionate Empowerment**

Working on my dissertation leads me to reflect on how compassion intersects with empowerment and collaboration, which fits the notion of redefining concepts in feminist philosophy. Personal and reciprocal vulnerability and compassion are essential to collaboration and empowerment. I say “reciprocal compassion” because one theme that emerges is the idea of self-compassion as part of compassion for others. This self-compassion thus contributes to empowerment or reciprocal empowerment. Similar to empowerment, sympathy and compassion are often described in terms of power and
hierarchy, who is one up and who is one down, giving or receiving (Clark, 1997).

However, if we value respect as central to our relationships, then we seek symmetry, a sense of connection and trust on an equal level (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000).

Differences in cultural approaches to emotions, particularly from Eastern and Western standpoints, convey a distinction between rigid cognitive or affective approaches and those that are more synergistic and symbiotic to understanding emotions (Planalp & Fitness, 1999). In the *Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama explained that compassion may be seen as a burden in the West, but he knows it has a freeing, positive effect (Dalai Lama XIV & Culter, 1998). In *Ethics for the New Millennium*, the Dalai Lama called compassion the “supreme emotion,” not just spiritually important in the world’s major religious traditions, but also “fundamental to the continued survival of the species” (Dalai Lama XIV, 1999). The principle of loving-kindness should start with compassion for oneself, which then can be extended to others (Chödrön, 1994). This fosters a connection that avoids dualism, condescension, or a hierarchy of giving to others from a superior position. Chödrön called our sense of separateness, “a funny kind of mistake.” This resonates with CASA’s belief that any woman could become the victim of abuse. When I began this research and my relationship with CASA, I felt sympathy for the victims, but I thought they were separate from me. I didn’t realize domestic violence’s pervasiveness in the community, nation, or world or our connection to this abuse that surrounds us. I even think there were times when I benevolently blamed the victims without realizing that my sympathy was blame.
Pema Chödrön (1994) advocated for a change in how we view sympathy and compassion as the helper and the one in need of help. “In order to have compassionate relationships, compassionate communication and compassionate social action, there has to be a fundamental change in attitude” (p. 103). She summarized the importance of self-compassion as “. . . putting ourselves in someone else’s shoes—doesn’t come from theory, in which we try to imagine what someone else is feeling. It comes from being familiar and so openhearted and so honest about who you are and what you do that you begin to understand humanness. . .” (Chödrön, 1994, p. 101).

Karen Armstrong has studied concepts of compassion in all the major religions and defined the concept as entering into the point of view of others (Armstrong, 2004, 2005) and finding commonalities as a means of collaborating rather than focusing on differences. Like Pema Chödrön, Ruth Behar, Arthur Frank, and others, Armstrong asked us to look into our own hearts to find our pain--so that we can share others’ pain on an equal level (Behar, 1996; Chödrön, 1994; Frank, 1995). Kathleen A. Brehony concurred in her work, *Ordinary Grace*, which examined compassion and altruism (Brehony, 1999). She found that major factors were feeling a connection others, having faith in goodness others, framing service as a privilege, and having humility, a sense of humor or happiness, and an ability to turn negatives even suffering into positive energy (Brehony, 1999, p. 167-168). The CASA staff members exhibit a sense of work as a calling to a higher purpose (Dalai Lama XIV & Cutler, 2003). Further, CASA staff members use their vulnerability and highly refined sense of reciprocal compassion to frame their work against domestic violence in an empowering way. I had no personal
experience with DV, but I have a personal sense of reciprocal compassion and reciprocal empowerment that I could share with CASA workers. My experiences with the chaos of my Mom’s terminal illness also refined my understanding of vulnerability and control, which is related to an empowerment philosophy. An area for further study is the connection between empowerment and the framing of vulnerability, and individuals’ perceptions of the paradoxical nature of compassion for self and others.

An Invitation for a Journey

This work was constituted through a socially reflexive process of sensemaking. Weick would say that I chopped storied moments out of the flow of soup that is life and then found cues from those moments (Weick, 1995). The moments and cues are then put together into stories. Since sensemaking is an on-going process, it never stops or starts. Yet stories have beginnings and endings because we structure them to create some sense of coherence to the events in our lives. At certain moments within those stories, meaning comes together for an individual or groups of individuals. The meaning within the interaction becomes a memory moment that individuals create in the context of social activities. Goffman (1974) referred to framing as the “structure of experience individuals have at moments in their social lives” (Goffman, 1974, p. 8). In this research novel, I attempt to chop moments from the whole and share the meanings created within the social activity, storied moments, and the process of creating meaning. These narrative moments are examples of interruptions or disruptions, often with emotional reactions,
that spawned sensemaking. Readers will create their own meanings as part of their own sensemaking.

This dissertation invites readers to enter into a relationship with the stories, encouraging them to reflect on empowering ways of living, thinking, feeling, talking, knowing, learning, and relating to others in their lives and the world. Each person will bring something different to his or her interpretation of the stories, just as I bring my interpretation to the narratives I write. While the NCADV conference was a meaningful trip, it is also a metaphor for life’s journey. We meet people, talk about ideas, reflect, learn, grow, and tell our stories to each other so the process can begin again. “Their story, yours, mine--it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them” (Coles, 1989, p. 30). Life is not about the destination, but the journey, the conversations and stories we tell along the way.
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331


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About the Author

Elizabeth A. Curry was a teacher and an organizer of experimental education during the Free School Movement before she obtained her masters degree from Emory University in Library and Information Management. Working with local, state, regional and national organizations, Elizabeth has been involved in community outreach, partnerships and collaborative projects for over twenty years. As the executive director of a nonprofit organization she led a coalition of five counties and over 300 organizations, which built an electronic community information system. Her experience includes strategic planning, volunteer management, grant writing, marketing, and organizational training. She has edited and written numerous publications. She now facilitates leadership development institutes for non-profit and government agencies. For the past four years she has worked with CASA (Community Action Stops Abuse) as a volunteer and co-researcher. Curry’s research interests center on collaboration, empowerment, collegiality, compassion and using narratives to frame life’s meaning.