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# RECURSIVE FRAME ANALYSIS: A Qualitative Research Method for Mapping Change-Oriented Discourse

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## **Prelude: Distinguishing the Primary Distinction**

In 1969 George Spencer-Brown proposed the groundbreaking idea that a “universe cannot be distinguished from how we act upon it” (1969, p. v). He was referring to how a universe – whether linguistic, mathematical, physical, or biological – comes into being the moment a distinction is made, that is, any attempt to distinguish or separate whatever is regarded, proposed, defined, perceived, found, decided, allowed, or intended as different. Furthermore, since “the boundaries can be drawn anywhere we please,” any reality is subject to change, “like shifting sand beneath our feet” (p. v).

To understand a change-oriented conversation, whether it takes place in therapy, counseling, social work, diplomacy, community relations, mediation, or elsewhere, we must identify the first distinction that sets in motion the subsequently elaborated network and weave of distinctions that eventually constitute a conversational reality. In the beginning of a conversation, a distinction is made that can serve as a foundational starting point. For example, a client begins by saying “I have a problem,” “Others say I have a problem,” “I am a problem,” or “My therapist says my problem is the problem.” All these variations of an opening utterance propose the primary distinction of “problem.” In the beginning of a conversation, an initial distinction is only a distinction. A practitioner can then re-distinguish the client’s distinction and enter into its theme, building up further discourse that maintains a focus on a problem-distinguished reality. Or another distinction can be offered such as “I like your shoes,” “Your middle name is longer than your first name,” or “I’m not sure we got enough rainfall last year.” These latter

distinctions are likely not to be associated with the client's initial distinction. If these variant distinctions are given further attention and elaboration, we drift away from a problem-distinguished conversational reality and possibly initiate the construction of an unexpected contextual orientation.

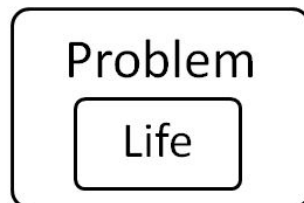
What one needs to know about any conversational reality is already present in the first conversational moves. Whether we feed (re-distinguish) or starve (ignore) a distinction helps determine where the conversation will go. How we participate and interact with distinctions contributes to whatever reality the client and practitioner both face. Specifically, the stage is initially set with distinctions and potential frames, and how we act determines what is distinguished, re-distinguished, extinguished, framed, and unframed. We are more responsible than we may have previously assumed for bringing forth a conversational reality. In the beginning, a distinction is made and we either accept it or we offer an alternative. Whatever the case, within seconds or minutes a distinction grows into something larger than a mere distinction – it moves toward becoming a frame.

A distinction that is re-distinguished becomes more distinguished than before; each subsequent re-distinguishing contributes to it becoming more “real” until it becomes experientially realized as “thing-like,” reified as more than a conceptual abstraction. For example, distinguishing that a problem is “truly” a problem leads to the further “hardening” of problem-distinguished discourse, whether it examines historical origins, social involvement, attempted solutions, fantasized solutions, or anything at all related to its absence or presence. As this activity of re-distinguishing or re-indication proliferates, the original distinction

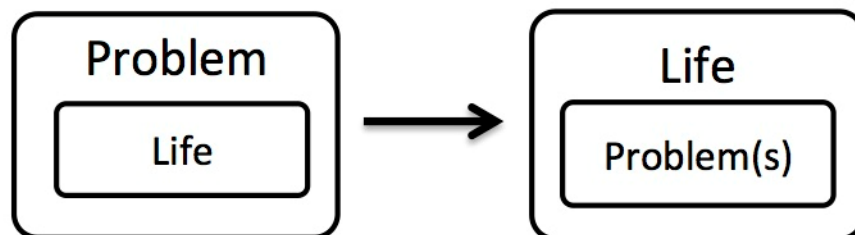


moves past being a mere distinction. It grows and becomes a contextual frame that holds all the distinctions of similar kind. In other words, a singular distinction shifts to being a class or set of distinctions. In this example, a problem distinction becomes a problem frame.

The problem with problems, whether regarded as internal or external to the agents experiencing them, lies not in their presumed nature, cause, or locale, but in their becoming contextual frames rather than distinctions. Existentially, life hosts the ongoing entry, exit, and re-entry of innumerable problems; suffering is unavoidable. As long as life is bigger than its problems, we are able to have more creative movement inside life. However, when a problem grows into being the primary contextual frame, we find our life unnecessarily constrained and impoverished. Drawn out with an illustration, clients often come to a practitioner with this framing of their life:



Without knowing it, they seek a frame reversal where life becomes the primary frame that holds its distinctions, including those that are named problems:



The above diagram is the simplest sketch of change-oriented conversation. It aims to de-contextualize life as held inside a problem (or impoverished, unnecessarily limited, or suffering) frame and move problems inside the more resourceful and expansive framing of the whole of life.

Recursive frame analysis (RFA) begins with the primary distinction that differentiates a distinction from a frame. The latter is the context for the distinguished communications that take place within it. Conversations begin with distinctions that can either remain distinctions or grow into frames. Any frame, once built, can be deconstructed so it returns to being a distinction. It can be re-contextualized inside a distinction it formerly held, or within a new one that arises outside the previous frame of reference.

RFA requires no previous explanatory expertise. It is built entirely upon the distinction between “distinction” and “frame”. However, this distinction can act upon itself to create different distinctions about distinctions, frames, their interaction, construction, deconstruction, linkages, and transformation. As we delineate more complexity in the methodological application of RFA, keep in mind that the basic form of distinction and frame is only recycling itself. Here different orders of recursive re-entry arise and further perpetuate a self-verifying original form.

Whereas G. Spencer-Brown’s *Laws of Form* (1969) reveals a new calculus of mathematics, RFA introduces a new way of tracking how distinctions and frames account for the anatomy of any conversational performance. Here the distinctions that are produced in the conversation itself are sufficient in and of themselves to

account for the realities they construe. No outside narratives, explanatory devices, or interpretive maps are necessary. The latter are simply external discourses that are separate conversations from the conversations they purport to explain. In this sense, explanations, narratives, and interpretations are fantasy discourses that claim to be “about” another discourse. Like all discourses, they are only self-referentially involved with their own constructions. There are only distinctions and frames, and as they recursively interact with themselves, they self-reflexively verify their own participation in what they bring forth.

Science, like Zen, invites bare bones knowing. With Occam’s razor, a close shave only permits the least required number of distinctions to account for the production of other distinctions. In the case of conversation, the distinction of distinction is all that is required to trace the constructions of a discourse. A distinction that sufficiently re-distinguishes itself becomes a frame, a context that holds the ongoing re-entries of subsequent re-distinction.

Gregory Bateson (1972) suggested that science was like a pincer tool with one side holding the data and the other with the formalisms onto which the data can be sorted out. RFA reveals the barest structural forms that construe and organize a conversational performance. With it no psychological or social science explanation is needed that carries unnecessary inflations of abstraction, or what Bateson called “dormitive principles.” Here the underlying form is enough to account for the held performance.

As will be seen, RFA invites research and practice to become two sides of one performer who creates and discerns distinctions and frames. Anything beyond this

is also the enactment of constructing, deconstructing, linking, and unlinking distinctions and frames. Here the primary form of communication is not description, but injunction or prescription. “Data” become “capta,” as R. D. Laing (1967) suggested, where a distinction is set to capture a world. More accurately, it catches the recycling of its own form, where the whole of what is caught is regarded as a contextual frame. Paraphrasing Spencer-Brown (1969), like cookery and music, what we score in RFA reveals a recipe that helps re-construct the original experience. An emphasis upon our participation in creating an experiential world orients us to look for the recipes, prescriptions, directions and injunctions that bring it forth. What RFA offers is a way of distinguishing the essential prescriptions (the distinguishing and re-distinguishing) that called or conjured something into being.

The conversational arts too often degenerate into thinking they are handling maps, narratives, and interpretations without recognizing that *doing so is the act of creating that which they assume they are explaining*. It is action that is primary, and unless we remember that it is we who are drawing the distinctions, we blame others for bringing forth that which is assumed to be separate from us. RFA asks us to bring ourselves more fully inside the realities we are working with, and in so doing, take more responsibility for not blaming outside entities – whether genomes, bloodstreams, brains, relationships, family constellations, or cultural narratives – and instead act in order to serve differences that foster transformative growth in others and ourselves.

It is important to recognize that a recipe is not a “map” of a territory. The radical shift offered by Spencer Brown (1969) is not an invitation to proclaim that

since we only have access to maps (description) that we live in an interpretive universe where narratives constitute experiential reality. Bateson (1972) pointed out that neither map nor territory is to be preferred, but instead the difference between the two is utilized to inspire, irritate, transform, and generate other differences. We act to make a difference that sets in motion other differences or distinctions that actively build a phenomenal world. Here action takes precedence over indication, or more precisely, indication is simply recursive action – acting (re-distinguishing) upon previous action (distinguishing). We shift from emphasizing description to composition, narration to performance, and interpretation to action. Mapping, description, narration, and interpretation are regarded as illusory epiphenomena. With extensive re-indication, it is easy to be deceived into thinking that the recycled distinction is “as real” or “more real” than the hand or voice that constructed it.

We first draw a distinction and if we continue to re-indicate it, two things happen. First we forget that it is we that first drew a distinction and that all our subsequent indications are also drawn by us. In other words, we are always acting to bring something forth. Secondly, as we continue re-indicating a distinction, the cascade of indications may condense and give the illusion of being thing-like. The recursive operation of re-entrant distinguishing is the very process of reification, giving abstractions an unearned (misplaced) concreteness. Sometimes the construction of objects is useful, but at other times it leads us astray.

We easily create a world of suffering if we forget that we are creating the distinctions and frames that comprise our world. Then we believe that wrong or bad

interpretations need to be exorcised, attacked, or corrected, and that there exists a liberating narrative, story, interpretation, explanation, map (or form of storytelling, interpreting, explaining, mapping) that can lead us to the Promised Land. As various wisdom traditions have taught, story-making about life-as-story is a source of suffering. A Zen slap in the face aims to empty the fossilized verbiage that clogs the natural flow of life's streaming.

We must remember that as the conversationalist describes conversation, he himself is also constructed of it. As Spencer-Brown (1969) states: "Thus we cannot escape the fact that the world we know is constructed in order (and thus in such a way as to be able) to see itself" (p. 105). Continuing his argument, we are required to chop ourselves up into a "mutilated condition" in order to have "at least one state that sees" and "at least one other state which is seen" (p. 105). Though we can only see, hear, and sense a part of ourselves, we can't forget that the whole can never enter the scene. More dramatic is the fact that we are required to distort the world – make it false – in order to see it. The "universe *must* expand to escape the telescopes through which we, who are it, are trying to capture it, which is us" (Spencer-Brown, 1969, p. 106). In other words, it is as if the world is playing hide-and-seek with itself – what it reveals will be concealed, but what is concealed will again be revealed. Poetically speaking, the moving life of conversation is found in its oscillation, vibration, or breath. RFA brings us back to what we knew in the beginning – when the first distinction was cast in a conversation – before we were lost in the assumption that any indication is more concrete and primary than the constantly

changing performance that keeps on acting in order to distinguish what is being distinguished.

Heinz von Foerster (2003) was not quite correct when he said we act in order to know. More specifically we act in order to distinguish again, until we catch ourselves caught inside a frame. Now the former commandments to construct become regulated instructions to maintain the indicating and naming. The latter seduce us to believe that reality arose before our participation in bringing forth our relationship with it. The word “universe” is etymologically derived from *unus* (one) and *vertere* (turn). As Spencer-Brown (1969) concludes, “any given (or captivated) universe is what is seen as the result of a making of one turn, and thus *is the appearance* of any first distinction, and only a minor aspect of all being, apparent and non-apparent” (p. 105). RFA reminds us of how we are participating in creation and that we are never outside narrators or map makers who can escape the responsibilities of imposing ourselves on everything with which we converse. We both emerge from our conversations and we converge ourselves into the conversational space. As we go back and forth in discerning and performing this seemingly twofold presence, we may get a glimpse that this is actually neither one, nor two.

### **Invitation to Response-Ability**

Recursive frame analysis provides an invitation to nontrivial situational ethics. It is a radical call to take responsibility for facing the fact that it is impossible to not influence, distort, and chop up whatever reality of which one is a part. There is no retreat from action and intervention in research, analysis, hermeneutics, or

any form of practice that engages with another. As soon as we arrive at the action scene, we intrude. RFA shows how we are present, whether we intend to be or not, and how our presence either helps expand or constrain the expression of all participants, including ourselves.

This radical “interactional presence” (rather than “interactional view”) asks that we show up absent of preferences for any habits of distinguishing and framing. The same paradox that befell the medieval Inquisition applies to all strategies that arrive at the scene already knowing what to say and how to understand. If you bring a habit of punctuation (i.e. a habit of distinguishing), you are already set to maneuver the other into your preferred way of being with others. It matters not how committed to justice, solidarity, liberation, equality, healing, and humane expression you are. If you are set to cast pre-formed forms, you are potentially overbearing (and arguably violent) by the very attachment to a preconceived conscious readiness to steer things your way, even if the latter denies the singularity of your importance. The darkest blind spot for all change-focused agents of conversation is not seeing that one does not see how she is imposing a canon of conduct upon others. The servant of transformative change does not identify herself with any school or orientation, whether therapeutic or analytical. If you know how you will generally interpret and act with a not-yet-met client, then you are a conquistador no matter how many times you utter words of post-colonialism, liberation, or justice. Imposing any orientation, including those that claim to emphasize liberation, places the tool of the oppressor (a predetermined way of working on or with the other) into the hands of the self-anointed liberator.



RFA asks that we show up for a conversation without a clue for how to act, understand, or participate. Only “know” that you cannot escape drawing distinctions and constructing contextual frames, and therefore must take responsibility for how you participate in setting a reality in motion. This is true whether one is conducting research or engaging in transformative practice.

Ethics is more than a moral code that delineates what should and should not be done. When a model of practice or research maximizes certain metaphors and ready-made statements while minimizing others, it only serves verifying the truth of its preferred ways of replicating a performance. However, an openness to being moved by the situation at hand frees us to introduce any distinctions and framings, including those that might be regarded as habituated or clichéd. For example, a therapist-researcher wanting to liberate a client may choose to contribute discourse not readily recognized by others as liberating. In the same way, clichéd liberation talk is not necessarily liberating in every situation. It may be inauthentic and do little more than politically serve self-verifying the practitioner’s ideology.

As you approach RFA, we invite you to do so as if you have amnesia for whatever you have been taught about the nature of communication, knowing, helping others, intervention, and change. Act as if you don’t know any of these notions. If you think you know, you only know that you think you know and this knowing can dull you to other possibilities of performance. Also consider reframing interpretation as little more than the act of re-distinguishing, as it redundantly indicates whatever has been distinguished before. The comfortable feeling of being

at home with what is recognized is little more than recycling what has already been indicated.

That which startles, confuses, and even upsets may be more likely to bring some news of difference. Pay more attention to the unknown and unspeakable, while respecting uncertainty. Remember that newsworthy change is (by definition) found outside a frame rather than inside a self-replicating setup. Avoid the all-knowing not-knowing of clichéd rhetoricians, and instead follow the lost-in-order-to-be-found state of affairs that can deliver a transformative surprise. Whatever you think you know or don't know, do everything possible to learn more about the not-yet-articulated knowing that sets you free to invent and change experiential realities.

RFA teaches what you already implicitly know, but have consciously forgotten. It does not negate the self-verifying truths of any model or orientation of practice or research. It only shows all of them to be the same form: recipes for constructing an experiential reality. More basic than either practice or research, the construction of reality underlies whatever name we later use to indicate whatever arises in the handling of distinctions and frames.

## Chapter One

### **Introduction to Recursive Frame Analysis**

The origination of recursive frame analysis (RFA) was partially inspired by the limitations found in the ways practitioners talk about what transpired in a therapy session. Abstract generalizations are too frequently postulated, such as “I recently saw a bipolar client . . .,” or “an enmeshed family system whose passive aggressive father . . .,” or “a teenager with an eating disorder whose siblings are codependent . . .” These recitations of diagnostic categories provide no detail as to what transpired in the practitioner’s communication with the client during their real-time interaction in a session. A film-maker or director of a theatrical performance would be unable to recreate the action scene when given such a paucity of description. Practitioners need to adopt a different kind of post-hoc discourse that indicates what specifically was performed during the therapeutic hour. In these accounts we must forego interpretations and theoretical speculation and only admit the actual discourse, metaphors, and description of other actions that were expressed in the session’s live performance.

When pressed to recount the important actions that took place in a session, practitioners may err in the other direction, getting lost as they attempt to articulate too many details. This easily leads to extraneous verbiage that is both time consuming to report and obscures more than clarifies. Unfortunately, practitioners have been given little know-how for construing a brief, clear account of what takes place in a therapeutic session. They either provide a diagnostic label of a client with little to no description of their interaction with him or her, or they get lost in the

details, with little attention paid to what is organizing and steering the flow of action.

This challenge exists for all conversational domains that concern change, whether it be psychotherapy, teaching in a classroom, exercising diplomacy in foreign relations, mediation in labor management, social service casework, nursing, doctor-patient communication, homiletics of delivering a sermon, political theatre, literary composition and analysis, persuasive discourse, rhetoric, among others. In contrast, various shorthand means of distilling a concise summary of a discourse have been exercised in the performing and literary arts. Students of literature (and other academic disciplines) may draw upon brief summary accounts of literary classics through “Cliffs Notes” or “Master Plots.” The latter in particular provides basic reference data, plot synopses, as well as the time, type, and locale of the plot, along with some concise critical notes. Similarly, producers of films require that a screen-writer give them a brief synopsis that requires an effective presentation of the whole story in. This is accomplished by a storyboard, a brief outline of the major themes that the film will traverse in its plot, from beginning through middle and end action scenes.

Syd Field (1984), an American writer who became a popular screenwriting leader in the movie industry, achieved acclaim for his workshops and training seminars that taught the art of writing an effective screenplay. His most important contribution was what he called the paradigm of a “three act structure,” with a clearly demarcated beginning, middle, and end. What distinguished his contribution was his insistence that each act be given ample time to become established before

advancing a transition to the subsequent act. He went as far as to prescribe the formula of introducing the midpoint on page 60 of a 120 page screenplay. What he tapped into was the importance of establishing a believable and engaging presence inside each scene or act before initiating a plot point or change to another act. Accomplishing this in an aesthetically satisfying way requires both technical skills and artistic talent.

Our interest is in a method that illumines whether there has been movement in change-oriented conversations. In other words, we are marking whether change takes place, paying attention to tracking the performed discourse. The metaphors of a session are indicators of the contexts that frame its content, and at the same time may become the content that lays waiting for alternative framings and contextual reorganization. Recursive frame analysis maps the shifting contextual frames that hold performance. It is an analytical tool for mapping therapeutic communication, discourses of change, and transformational performance.

#### *History of RFA*

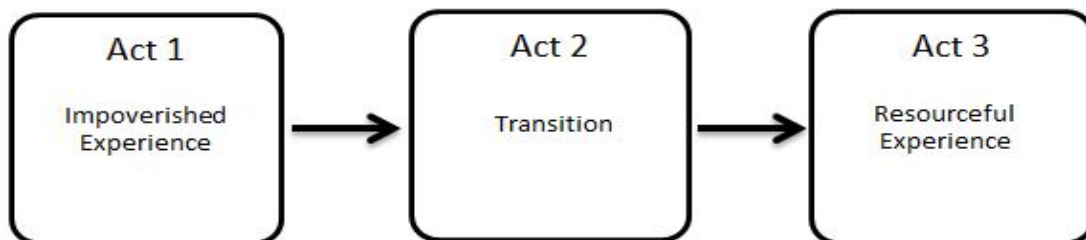
In the early 1980s, Bradford Keeney spent nearly a decade as a scholar of therapeutic communication. Hired by the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, one of the historical bastions of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and family therapy<sup>1</sup>, his position was that of a “communications analyst.” This invented professional title referred to being an observer and critical commentator on what takes place in therapy sessions. Keeney would film major therapists at work, and then repeatedly and exhaustively observe the recordings while discerning any relevant patterns that

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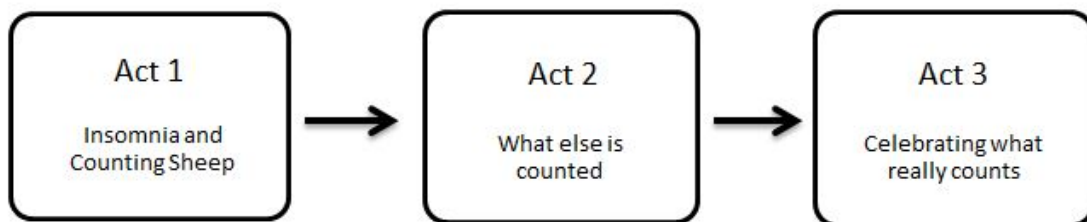
<sup>1</sup> In family therapy, both Nathan Ackerman and Murray Bowen, among others, were originally affiliated with the Menninger Foundation.

emerged. He continued doing this at the Ackerman Institute for Family Therapy in New York City, the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic, and for the clinical work of well-known practitioners that included Olga Silverstein, Carl Whitaker, Luigi Boscolo, Gianfranco Cecchin, John Weakland, Jay Haley, Nathan Ackerman, Salvador Minuchin, and H. Charles Fishman, among others.

The first presentations of this work included outlining the movement of therapeutic themes in a case conducted by Olga Silverstein (Keeney & Silverstein, 1986), followed by an analysis of major schools of systemic therapy in *Mind in Therapy: Constructing Systemic Therapies* (Keeney & Ross, 1985). Subsequently, a book series was launched with the Guilford Press entitled, *The Art of Systems Therapy* that aimed to analyze the communication patterns of renowned systemic-oriented therapists. The first volume, *The Therapeutic Voice of Olga Silverstein* was published in 1986 and was to be followed by volumes on Carl Whitaker and other therapy notables. Instead, Keeney abandoned the series in favor of developing a qualitative research method he called “Recursive Frame Analysis” (Keeney, 1991). This method provided a concise way of presenting a single session or whole sequence of sessions as moving from an impoverished beginning to a resourceful ending, generally sketched as follows:

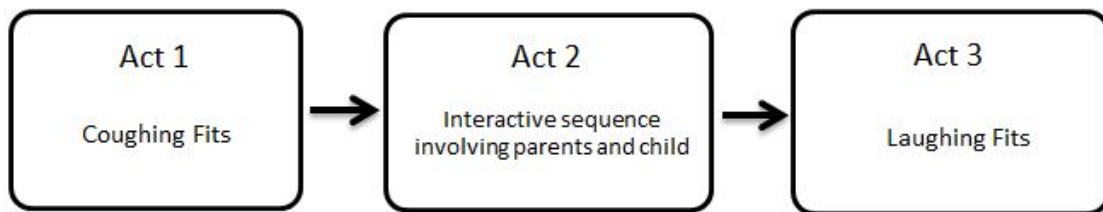


For example, in a case where a client suffered from insomnia (act 1: insomnia), it was found that he stays awake in the middle of the night worrying while trying to count sheep. The discussion shifted to an exploration of other things in his life that were regularly counted. In this middle act, focusing on “what is counted,” the client was amused to recall all the things he kept regular tabs on including the number of times he had been invited to social parties, how many lottery tickets he had purchased, counting calories, to frequent checks on the status of his earned interest in his savings account. The final act in this session was a change from counting to considering what counted most in his life. Inside this contextual frame, he prioritized what really mattered to him. This enabled the practitioner to suggest that the client take 5 minutes a day to celebrate what counted most to him. He was advised to not worry about counting sheep, but to celebrate the things that really counted to him, whether he found time to do this in the middle of the night or for only five minutes during each day. The man’s insomnia went away. He no longer worried about sheep and sleep, but learned how to utilize any spontaneous idle time that may arise as an opportunity to be grateful. A simple sketch of this session follows:



As another example, a family presented an asthmatic child they described as having “coughing fits” (the first act). The systemic therapist proceeded to find that

the asthmatic episodes occurred inside a repetitive social sequence where spousal conflict was calibrated, detoured, or disrupted when the couple joined together to attend to the child's symptomatic crisis. Here the second act was a shift to the sequential pattern holding the symptom – one that included the parents. The final act involved prescribing other ways of performing the family dance, in this case, a recommendation for them to have an evening joke-telling session, to see if they could help their child exercise his lungs by having a laughter fit rather than a coughing fit. The comedy session was scheduled during a time when the couple had previously argued the most. A simple sketch of this classic family therapy session would look like:



With these simple three-act outlines that trace the movement of change from a beginning to a middle and end, a practitioner can readily present the basic structure of what took place in a session. Any additional detail about what transpired may then be kept organized by pointing to where it resides on the map. Of course, if no movement took place, the map will clearly indicate this and be a reminder that a session needs to be more focused on mobilizing change, considering whatever it takes to help a client move out of an impoverished beginning contextual frame.



This means of “scoring” a case (similar to a musical “score”) enables a shift from describing therapy to *prescribing* it. Noting whether you are moving or not moving in a session provides a compass that helps orient therapeutic interaction. With this discovery, Keeney abandoned the post hoc mapping of other therapist’s work, and instead, turned to the invention of therapies (Keeney, 1991). First called “improvisational therapy” (Keeney, 1991) he later changed the name to “resource focused therapy” (Ray & Keeney, 1993) followed by “the creative therapist” (Keeney, 2009) to emphasize the creative performance of the therapist rather than any model of therapy. In this phase of the work, he was inspired by the essentially model-less work of Milton Erickson who was free to invent a unique therapy for each particular session. Though general stylistics and principles are in play, what matters is the freedom from generalized constraints that interfere with flexible utilization and improvisation.

Decades later, Keeney partnered with his wife and professional colleague, Hillary Keeney, and returned to elaborating this orientation to transformation and change in their works, *Circular Therapeutics: Giving Therapy a Healing Heart* (H. Keeney & B. Keeney, 2012) and *Creative Therapeutic Technique* (H. Keeney & B. Keeney, 2013). This collective body of work completes the radical proposal boldly suggested by Keeney (1991) in *Improvisational Therapy*, though first called for in his earlier book, *Aesthetics of Change* (Keeney, 1983). Namely, he called for therapy to be contextualized as an inventive art form, belonging more to theatre than social science. In this setting RFA could provide a means of scoring performance for both analysis and enactment. The emphasis upon non-interpretation and cultivation of an

anti-narrative sentiment in favor of performance, improvisation, utilization, recursivity, embodied paradox, interactivity, polyphonic expression, and complexity, reached for a non-evidence oriented, non-science-practitioner oriented, and at times pataphysical orientation to therapy performed by aesthetic provocateurs and evocateurs, marking the work as a truly postmodern contribution<sup>2</sup>.

The years between Keeney's initial formulation of RFA and its most recent advancements were marked by the scholarship of Chenail who continued advancing its implementation.<sup>3</sup> In that period, numerous dissertations and articles were published, while Chenail advocated its teaching in various universities and academic journals, both as a contributor of original articles and as an editorial board member, editor, or founder of journals, programs, and conferences concerned with qualitative research. This book marks a reunion of the cast of characters who have been most

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<sup>2</sup> Most claims to be "postmodern" in family therapy are bewildering given that their moralistic and ideological constraints on practice have little to do with postmodernism. Calling yourself "postmodern" has as little to do with being postmodern as saying "systemic" means you are systemic. Not surprisingly, many of the therapists who formerly called themselves "systemic," only to later call themselves "postmodern," were arguably neither. They were more like "faddists," marketers of fad names, without concern for demonstrating any reasonable relation of the name to the performance named. Incidentally, RFA is useful as a tool in revealing the latter phenomenon, detailing how the interaction and discourse taking place in a session may or may not be traceable or authentically related to the therapists' stated theoretical orientation.

<sup>3</sup> Recursive Frame Analysis (RFA; Chenail, 1990/1991, 1991, 1995, 2005; Gale, Chenail, Watson, Wright, & Bell, 1996; Keeney, 1991) has been used to study a variety of phenomenon including domestic violence (Keeney & Bobele, 1989; Stewart & Valentine, 1991), therapist-client interaction (Chenail & Fortugno, 1995; Rambo, Heath, & Chenail, 1993), therapist-supervisor consultations (Rudes, Shilts, & Berg, 1997), and family discussions regarding their children's cardiac diagnoses (Chenail, 1991; Chenail et al., 1990).

intimately involved with the conception of RFA as well as its ongoing evolution and application to diverse domains of communication venues.

### *Purpose of RFA*

The purpose of recursive frame analysis is multifold. First, it provides a simple way of case note keeping, whether used in social work, counseling, therapy, mediation, business consultation, international diplomacy, labor negotiation, or the literary arts. It significantly extends the way in which the screenplay paradigm or three act literary form has been useful to discerning simple plot lines. With it, note taking can be done in real time during a session, or afterwards. It can be as brief or as detailed as the practitioner desires. This contribution alone helps avoid the confusion in which practitioners of change-oriented communication too easily find themselves. It facilitates brief, concise, and precise articulations of what is going on and not going on in a conversational episode.

When RFA is elaborated with finer distinctions that underscore the dynamics that enable a plot line to be advanced, regressed, or modified, we find a powerful qualitative methodology that enables patterns of change to be clearly identified, marked, and analyzed. The science of the art of effective, transformative communication has been retarded by not having an appropriate means of referencing the patterns that indicate the changes of interest. Whenever discrete behaviors are counted or questionnaire responses are tallied, a more complex pattern that includes interaction is lost. These latter tools provide no pathway that can take the investigator to the sequences of interaction that held the data collected.

Such research too easily gets lost in its own misplaced abstractions and arguably becomes far removed from the phenomenon of interest.

RFA enables patterns to be indicated in its maps or scores of the shifts, transitions, and changes that take place in conversation. Wherever discourse is expressed, RFA can analyze its structure, whether it is the transcription of speech or the text of theoretical exposition. Most simply understood, we are providing a way of tracking the discourse associated with communicative performance, enabling us to assess whether it moves, changes, or transforms. Most interlocutors of communicative performance question whether their participation is making a contribution, whether they are teacher, therapist, negotiator, or entertainer. Unfortunately, we rely upon their assumptions or that of the audience to make this evaluation. A declaration of presumed change is not an empirical demonstration that change has taken place; nor is any numerical tallying or statistical computation that involves self-report. There must be an empirical demonstration of change, a rendering, mapping, and tracing of the movements that take place.

RFA enters the scene with an operational means of indicating whether a rhetoric of evidence is anything more than a mere claim. The scoring of a conversation helps indicate whether the scenes or acts ever changed. Were the conversationalists stuck in a beginning act, did they move a step forward but quickly retreat or divert in a lateral distraction, or was forward movement sustained? These questions, and those related to them, must assume responsibility for directing any discussion concerned with evidence-based practice. The latter requires

empirical demonstrations of what one is talking about, not abstractions without any meaningfully valid referential index.

As RFA is understood as analogous to scored music or a dance choreography score, the professional agent of change will find their understanding and practice transformed. When the medium is describable social communication – the production and enactment of conversation and discourse – a technical means is required for discerning its unfolding in time. Does it begin and then move somewhere? Or does it keep starting, with little to no progression? Where does it go or does it go in multiple directions? Is it going in a more resourceful direction? The progression of notes in music constitutes a melody while the underlying harmonic changes give it richness and complex interaction, all brought to life by rhythms that move it forward in diachronic time. Similarly, conversations have a plot line that rides over changing themes of interaction, all moved by the timing of the shifting metaphors. RFA provides practitioners with a kind of “sheet music” or “therapeutic score.” With it, all sessions and cases can be mapped or scored like music. The same can be done for past performances of the great masters of communication, from outstanding therapists to extraordinary negotiators, remarkable artisans of literary tales, and performance architects of dramatic stage plays.

On whatever stage communication is performed and through whatever voice is used to express its enactment, it can be scored, mapped, and indicated in ways that allow us to recognize whether it is standing still or taking us somewhere. The latter, typically called “change,” marks how conversing actors move from their present situation to another way of being in relation with one another. Whatever we

call act one, whether it is referred to as a problem, stuck scenario, conflict, or impoverished situation, is less important than acting in accordance with the desire or intention for things to change. The mission of change-oriented talk is to help break out of any frame that binds, that is, move to another frame that brings forth more freedom, resolution, enriched experience, and possibilities for living.

### *Organization of this Book*

In the next chapter we will set forth the basic methodology of recursive frame analysis. We begin with the key ideas of distinction, frame, and transitional linkages. The beginning function of communication, conversation, and discourse (we will distinguish these different orders of abstraction in the next chapter) is that of making a distinction. Distinction, in turn, derives its meaning and performance based on how it is framed - the context within which it resides. Getting from one frame to another - including beginning to end - requires a transitional linkage, a middle ground that enables successful movement from one form of situation to another. Already we see that there is more to a screenplay and the performance of communication than three acts. There are distinctions, frames, and transitional linkages required in order to construct any structure of beginning, middle and end.

We next will detail how a plot line is actually a constructed artifact masking the underlying dynamics required to produce its appearance. Most simply put: no conversation traverses a straight trajectory from beginning to end. There is a lot of going round and round, back and forth, and movement all over the place, before the experience of forward progression can be made. This is where recursion enters the scene. We are referring to the circularity that constitutes the shifting movement of

distinctions and frames, enabling them to enter one another. On one level a distinction is already a frame, while a frame is also a distinction. Either simultaneously or non-concurrently, a distinction and frame can readily change roles and either frame the other or be subsumed by the other, doing so with never ending possibilities for distinction-frame shape-shifting. More importantly, a distinction or frame can re-enter itself, that is, self-distinguish, self-indicate, and self-frame. This circularity marks the dynamic of recursion, where different orders of process and description arise as communication operates on itself. Here the topsy-turvy world of communication with all its self-reference and paradox fully emerges. Rather than run away from this complexity, we embrace it as the matrix that holds performance and meaning. RFA addresses this dynamic complementarity by both unraveling the circles that create the plot lines and showing how presumed narrative structure is a mirage, an epiphenomena of interactional performance that is sometimes useful, while at other times, an impediment.

As we delineate the methodology of RFA, we will discuss different orders of discourse that are available for it to address. In this discussion we find how to map the observer's participation in the observed, as well as how to pull apart and expose the ways theories and models enter the interactive domain, setting in motion the construction of self-verifying perspectives and practices. This consideration, historically associated with the concerns of so-called second order cybernetics, can be used to keep track of the "logical typing" or order of abstraction of one's discourse, whether in practice or research. Following Bateson, this is a descriptive exercise rather than a prescriptive injunction against confounding levels of

abstraction. The shift from “hierarchical levels of communication” to “orders of recursion” in itself marks the shift from first to second order accountability. We find that Bateson’s early articulations of meta-message and message, followed by Jackson, Watzlawick, Weakland, Haley, and other communicationally (and meta-communicationally) oriented practitioners, is outdated and in need of reform. In addition, it shows how a misinterpretation of second order constructs takes place when they are regarded as a return to interpretive indication, absent of any emphasis upon the circular interactivity of indicating that produced it (see H. Keeney & B. Keeney, 2012 for an elaboration of the misunderstanding of second order cybernetics and constructivism in the field of systemic and family therapy).

Following the methodology chapter are three case studies that demonstrate how RFA can analyze therapeutic discourse. Transcriptions of sessions are presented along with interspersed comments and diagrams (RFA scores) of the dynamics of change that orchestrate the session’s movement. These examples show how RFA reveals what is expressively happening in a session – the way communication is performed. It lays bare the structure, the anatomy of change that organizes a conversational occurrence.

The final chapter discusses our own further considerations of recursive frame analysis, including ideas about its future application and development. As the relation between observer and observed, listener and heard, actor and action, are made more evident, we find a liberating turn. What takes place as we recursively cross the difference between knowing and being, is that the roles of practitioner and researcher become more intertwined. In such a recirculation of shifting functions,



we catch glimpse of a practitioner whose research is inseparable from practice, or a researcher who cannot avoid helping her studied “other” transform, doing so while changing her own ways of participating, that is, becoming less separate from the subject itself. Here recursivity arises into full view, demonstrating itself to be the dynamic that both indicates and changes, doing so without concern for rigidly differentiating a separate role for either side of a distinction, including that of practitioner and researcher. This mutual participation in interactive engagement, again for both sides of the interacting conversationalists, brings forth a new way of acting in venues that concern themselves with change, learning, negotiation, organizational restructure, and transformation. In this dynamic is found the recursive performer, something more than a researcher distinct from a practitioner. With this shift, we become more than a plotting agent on a plot line. We become a performed change, indistinguishable from whatever arises in the interactions of all participants, accomplished with or without any regard for assumption, interpretation, narrative, or script. We enter the realm of human becoming where we are expressed inside a dance that circulates change.

#### *Simple and Complex Applications of RFA*

In summary, RFA is both a practical case note tool and an advanced qualitative research method that maps the structure of change-oriented discourse. In its simplest form, it presents the plot line or storyboard of a conversational session, indicating whether there is movement through a beginning, middle, and end phases. For instance, if a client presents a beginning complaint about a problem, the practitioner can move toward an ending that highlights problem resolution. Getting

from the start to the finish, however, requires a transitory middle phase that teeters between leaning back into discourse that serves problem maintenance versus performed communication that advances a successful outcome. This is not the only form a session may traverse; it is simply a common idealized structure for change-oriented work.<sup>4</sup> What is important is whether a conversation is moving anywhere different – hopefully in a more resourceful direction – or whether it remains stuck in the presenting situation or worse, goes backwards into a spiraling escalation of making things worse.

Again, practitioners easily get lost in conversation – both during and after sessions – and typically do not gauge whether the encounter is recycling the same order of discourse, understanding, and action for a client or whether it is responsive to promoting change. It matters little whether a theory or practice model advocates for or against the therapist performing as an active agent of change. Whether the intention is to be dynamically active or quietly passive, a conversation will either stay stuck in the domain a client presents or it will go in a different direction.

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<sup>4</sup> This is the same form as a fairy tale that begins with a setup of characters, proceeds to heroically take on a crisis, and ends with “they lived happily ever after.” All evidence-based models also aim to “prove” that they produce happy endings and are therefore organized by the same literary genre. On the other hand, a more existentially inspired conversation might regard this as naïve romanticism that does not recognize the absurdity of believing that life, or any of its episodes, can be solved. An alternative scenario might include experiencing the awareness that important existential concerns cannot be solved and that this realization is in itself a release from suffering brought about by thinking there is anything that can or should be done. In this case, there is still a progression of themes that begins with a problem to be solved and transitions toward an ending of being more humble about the difference between what can be changed and what cannot be altered.

Hopefully the latter will take place, one that helps the client escape the vicious cycle created by the continuous re-entry into (feeding of) pathological frames.<sup>5</sup>

RFA aims to map the metaphorical themes that contextualize the expressive action that actually takes place in the room. The latter includes all communication, from speech to nonverbal expression. However, the themes ascribed to live performance should not stray from the metaphors actually spoken by clients and practitioners, as opposed to hypothetical abstraction. In other words, if a client starts a session by saying, “I have a problem with laughing too much,” the beginning theme may be identified as “laughing too much,” or “I have a problem,” or even the whole utterance of, “I have a problem laughing too much.” On the other hand, it should not be named “working with an obsessive person,” “assessment and diagnosis,” or “a victim of oppressive cultural messages that tell women they should not be too gregarious” if these phrases have not been offered by the client. The latter are abstractions construed by an observer’s internal (meaning outside-the-

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<sup>5</sup> Note the inherent contradictions in practices that de-emphasize a practitioner’s responsibility for helping evoke change, preferring instead therapists “consult with” clients as more “equal” conversational partners. What is overlooked is that the client is motivated to change, and has most likely sought a professional who is paid to help them change rather than be a conversational companion who simply listens and reflects, further feeding clients’ stuck or impoverished frames. There is no “equality” when the client wants the practitioner to activate change while the practitioner refuses, all in the name of not imposing the practitioner’s worldview. It is more accurate to say that such practitioners are less honest about the ways in which their manner of interacting in therapy helps construct what takes place in a session. Also note that so-called non-active or “imperceptible” (Hoffman, 1993) orientations use case studies that have successful outcomes in order to demonstrate the validity of their orientation. What this implies is a different order of strategic method in their presumed non-strategic approach: act in order to not change in order to facilitate change.

interaction) narration, not communication expressed in real time. RFA limits itself to analyzing the performed communication rather than non-spoken interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

The subsequent interactions with a client presenting communication shape the form that the beginning of a session takes. If the discussion focuses on problem definition – why it’s a problem, who says it’s a problem, what solutions are attempted, and a history of the problem – then the session clearly begins inside a problem theme. However, if the conversation centers on “laughing” without attending to its problematic nature, the beginning quickly has less of a problem emphasis and more of a curious exploration of laughter. Here the phenomenology and theatrics of laughing override an emphasis on problem connotation.

The theme that starts a change-oriented encounter, what we call “act one” of a session, is identified by selecting a metaphor that best characterizes the beginning focus. Once a beginning has been formed and indicated, RFA then follows the course

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<sup>6</sup> A separate RFA could be done on the interpretive narration of a practitioner, that is, their post-hoc theoretical commentary or what they assume they thought during real time delivery. If linked to the actual transcription of what was spoken in a session, the two domains of discourse can be co-analyzed. This allows an examination of whether they are in synch with one another, out of synch, or have anything necessarily in common. In this way we find whether a practitioner’s theoretical interpretation is isomorphic to how they actually perform in a session. We have done this to cases published in clinical books or recorded on videotapes, and have found instances where the asserted theory is not necessary to explain what was accomplished in the casework. It is merely an interpretive glossing that enables a particular form of explanation to give the clinical work a more preferred type of meaning, political correctness, or ideological significance. The work of Michael White and David Epston is one example. The basic procedures of strategic therapy that first organized White’s work with children’s encopresis were later explained by interpretations that point to pathological cultural narratives. This resulted in subsequent clinical work that aimed to set up an interaction with clients that elicited commentary about dynamics of privilege and oppression, so as to validate that the formerly strategic therapy is now actually an example of narrative therapy’s preferred way of interpreting both client’s experiences and therapy itself.

of a session's performance and notes whether the contextual theme ever shifts. If it does change, is it able to maintain the shift? Does it revert back to the beginning theme, stay in a related theme, or continue moving forward? Whenever a session is able to move along a clearly differentiated beginning, middle, and end (a three-act play), we can say that it is well formed. This is when observers note that something has happened in a session, that it is moving, the performance has come to life, and change has been experienced.

Of course, both theatrical plays and transformative discourse may have more than three acts. The middle may involve more bridges and themes and the plot line hold more differences. However many themes comprise the middle, it is still a collective midpoint holding the fulcrum that determines whether things move backwards or project forward. In other words, a transition phase is typically needed to get from the beginning to the end.

We must again and again remind ourselves that neither a session nor life itself is a straight ahead lineal plot line. People go back and forth between frames, take side road exits, and most importantly, go in circles, or in other forms of loopy meanderings. We have previously demonstrated how the circularities of interaction underlie the progression of a plot line (Keeney & Keeney, 2012).<sup>7</sup> Getting a virtuous

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<sup>7</sup> The indication of a plot line or storyboard does not imply any emphasis on narrative. While any human interaction can be later interpreted as having narrative structure (as opposed to lived as narrative), it is a mistake in abstraction to reify a narrative as the contextual pattern that determines human experience. A narration is our story of what happened after the performance. The plot line itself is unknown in its creation; it arises out of interactivity, with no one knowing what might take place next, even when stereotyped responses are preferred. What clients and therapists seek liberation from is narrative, including the narrative of narrative. As Zen Buddhism dramatically puts it, "Open mouth, already a mistake!" In other

circle of interaction in motion is the first goal of transformation and change. Keeping it moving is the second goal. The final goal is leaving it alone to continue feeding itself in a positive and resourceful manner.

It cannot be said often enough that most phases of any session's progression do not march forward without a step or two backwards from time to time. What more accurately takes place is a circulation of one theme inside other themes, done in a way that enables earlier frames to be more integrated with subsequent frames. As a progression recycles back to the beginning, it reorganizes the former frames to become a part of the new frames. What was once a whole context is now a part of a more encompassing contextual whole. This circularity points to the recursive aspect of RFA.<sup>8</sup> A session moves forward by re-circulating contextual frames, with frames

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words, whatever story we have about our living is already removed from its being lived. The shift required points to the drama of interactive performance (rather than the narrative of interpreted meaning) – the here-and-now dynamic unfolding of never ending improvisation. Here narrative appears as a mirage, an illusion produced as an interactional byproduct. Similar to the Sanskrit notion of maya, narratives are the projections created by our dualistic dreaming, the very dynamic that binds us to suffering. Any emphasis upon narrative is therefore iatrogenic, that is, a fostering of dualistic mind, the pathology underlying all pathologies.

<sup>8</sup> We use the term “recursive” to indicate a complexity that is more than a back and forth binary oscillation, dialogue, or dialectic. Contextual frames act more like Chinese boxes where any box can be inside another or suddenly shift to holding what previously held it. Recursion points to a circularity that is always in motion, where the motion itself perpetuates further motion and circularity. Like the mythological Ouroboros, it continuously chases its own tail in order to devour it. As it re-enters its own circularity it generates more circularity, self-inclusion, and the paradoxes of autonomy where the more it changes (devours itself), the more it remains the same (is hungry for another meal). Change changes in order to not change (the ultimate change of change is not changing), which in turn, must change to keep the cycle that dances change and stability ongoing. With these circularities of recursion, we move past the simple lineal plot line. The latter – and the story line it implies - is an artifact, or perhaps an Eigen value (von Foerster, 2003) derived from underlying dynamics that may be partially glimpsed as back and forth motions,

recursively shifting to become a part of another more expansive – and less limiting – frame.

RFA enables as complex an analysis as the purpose at hand requests. As a means of clinical note keeping, the sketches typically should be simple. A practitioner benefits when an RFA keeps her on track – reminding her whether change is being fostered, ignored, forgotten, or impeded. A post hoc analysis can provide more detail for the practitioner, enabling a supervisor, consultant, or teacher (which can include the practitioner supervising her own work) to point to the actual performance of a session rather than get bogged down in interpreting. In so doing, change is encouraged. Specific moments can be highlighted, with attention focused on eliciting what other communications might have been offered that would have made a possible difference in the session.

RFA encourages practitioners to move conversations toward less impoverished contexts. It has little concern over the theoretical ideas a practitioner uses to interpret. Instead, it focuses on what is being done, expressed, communicated, and performed. It does so while discerning whether anything is moving at all, that is, generating the kind of difference that can precipitate, mobilize, and activate a virtuous circle of interaction. Again, we are not examining any hypothesis about what may be taking place inside a psyche, social system, or culture. RFA's attention is on the domain of live performance – a strict focus on what is taking place in the session and whether it is on the move.

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circular feedbacks, spirals, hyper-geometrics, or other more complex patterns of movement. What recursion underscores is that there is always the possibility for an unexpected change whenever change is present. And if change is not present, that situation will eventually change.

RFA enables us to present a score – whether simple or complex – of a session or whole case. In a glance, a practitioner or researcher can tell what happened or did not happen in the communicative performance. The level of magnification can be changed from whole frame progression to the more micro level of circular interactions and recursive interplay that enables the former to generate a plot line. With RFA, we have a more concretely relevant and empirically grounded relationship with a session.

We invite you to consider a method that keeps track of what is actually performed in a session, or of how you perform thinking about a session, as well as your performed relations with particular ideas, theories, ideologies, and models of practice. RFA helps a practitioner and researcher avoid falling into the trap of not knowingly going nowhere, even when a self-verifying narrative tempts you to interpret otherwise. Accept more accountability for how you interact with a client, including your post hoc thoughts about the latter, in order to foster a context that will more responsibly serve change.



## Chapter Two

### **Methodological Basics**

Recursive frame analysis is as good a methodology as the researcher or practitioner is able to effectively use it. The circularity of this assertion illustrates the recursive nature of RFA. In the hands of a finely developed observer with sharp distinctions of discernment, the method amplifies what the investigator already notices, doing so in a way that enables a generative relationship to emerge between the observer and her observing, or more generally, between the distinguisher and her distinguishing. Admittedly, this participatory involvement takes place in all methods, from statistical research designs to phenomenology and ethnomethodology. The observer is always seen in the observing, and the listener heard in the listening. While other methodologies vary to the extent to which they recognize, deny, or utilize this self-inclusion of the researcher, RFA highlights it, doing so to such an extent that it is the principal operating premise. In other words, RFA is a way of maximizing the recognition that the researcher is the instrument of research and that investigation of any phenomenon is always a study of how one acts in order to bring forth a special kind of interaction called “knowing.”

#### **Distinctions, Frames and Transitional Linkages**

At the first order of analysis, RFA handles three conceptual notions: distinction, frame, and transitional linkage. A distinction arises with every act of communication. Consider when a client is initially asked by a practitioner, “What problem shall we work on?” This sets forth the distinction of “problem” or “working on problems” in the conversation. If the client adds to this metaphor or theme with a

related distinction, then the distinction likely becomes a contextual frame that both gives meaning to and prescribes subsequent continuation of construing this form of distinguishing. More importantly, as this distinction re-enters its own domain, the reality of a “problem focused” interaction is made more substantive, that is, more “real.”

However, assume that the client surprisingly responds back, “I’m sick of talking about my problems. Perhaps you can be the first professional to tell me what is right about my life.” With this alternative distinction, the practitioner can accept it and go in its direction, perhaps countering with, “Thank God I don’t have to deal with problems! You are the first client that ever directly asked me to change my focus to what is right about your life. I’d have to say that your very proposal is the first thing that is right about you – you have enough good sense and wisdom to take us in the right direction.” Now the distinction of accentuating the client’s resources has become a contextual frame.

On the other hand, the practitioner could have responded with a challenge to keep things problem bound: “Why do you resist talking about your problem? Is this part of your problem?” This negates the client’s attempt to escape a problem-focused frame, and reels them back inside it. Sometimes therapists are taught to keep clients inside pathological or problem themed contexts because their model needs that framing to be able to conduct its operations. Stated differently, a problem-focused therapist needs a problem in order to perform problem solving. Perhaps a therapist, counselor, social worker, and psychiatrist need a patient – whether called counselee, client, participant, customer, or something else – in order

to perpetuate the pre-assumed roles. Our point is that clients and practitioners offer one another distinctions that can be accepted as either the content of another contextual frame, or that can themselves become a frame, or be reframed, ignored, partially or wholly utilized, or interacted with, in an infinitude of ways.

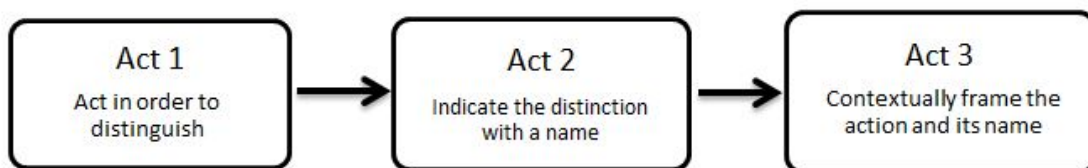
RFA recognizes that distinctions and frames are recursively intertwined: a distinction is a frame until otherwise framed, and a frame distinguishes (acts as a distinction) when framed that way. The extent to which a researcher can carefully notice how distinctions are being offered and used in conversation determines whether RFA will get off to a good start in an analysis. Developing the skill of distinguishing distinction, and how the latter frames and is framed by other distinctions, constitutes the first step of learning to effectively use RFA.

It is important to emphasize the recursive relationship between discerning a distinction and drawing a distinction. One distinguishes a distinction through the operation of distinguishing. You, the investigator, note which distinctions are to be noticed and given attention. Distinguishing the distinctions that matter requires distinctions that capably draw the line, mark a clear boundary, and unambiguously differentiate. As circular as all this discourse appears, it again strikes at the important dynamic that operates throughout the use of all aspects of RFA. Namely, the circular interaction of distinguisher and distinguished, as well as framer and framed is the *modus operandi*. Any distinction, whether drawn with stylus, uttered by sound, struck by touch, shown with image, among other choices, sets a distinction in motion. As George Spencer-Brown (1969) proposed, such action

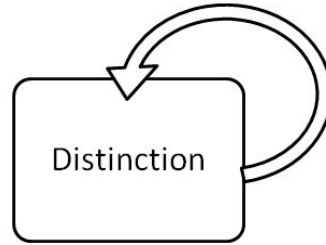
constructs a world of experience. Our realities derive from how we handle distinctions and contextual frames.

There is a seldom-noticed difference already implicit in the mention of the word “distinction.” Saying “distinction” hints that whatever act created the distinction is now named as a distinction; the action precedes its naming. At the same time, naming is an action of indication, a distinguishing of a distinction. We are always acting – drawing, etching, sketching, communicating, expressing, and enacting distinction and this action includes our acting on such action. It is tempting to forget a distinguisher’s action and believe that the named indication is primary. When this happens, we assume that names and maps are as close to reality as we can get, with no recall of the acts of creation that brought them forth. Interpreters claim that the world is only maps. Radical constructivists propose the opposite: everything is a territory of action, performed in interaction with other action. Meaning arises in interaction, and the meaning of meaning is found circulating in the re-entrant indications of distinction.

If we sketch the temporal progression of how distinguishing brings forth an experiential world, we find:



This sequential line, however, conceals the recursive circularity that underlies its progression. Here, distinction simply operates on itself:



The first recycled distinction indicates. “Indication” is the name of distinguishing distinction. As indication continues to similarly rename the distinction, bringing further examples of itself, we find that a contextual frame – akin to a mathematical set – is formed. Inside the frame are found multiple indications of the same class of distinction. With this in mind, we can re-sketch our RFA of distinguishing to highlight this movement:



Indication is a second order distinction – a distinction applied to itself – while a contextual frame is a particular class of indication, an indication of indication.<sup>9</sup>

Practitioners of the art of change work with distinctions, indications, and frames. These are the basic units of operation and analysis. Specifying behavior, thoughts, attitudes, feelings, interactions, patterns, or whatever, are simply other metaphors for the operations of distinction. For example, you first act to distinguish

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<sup>9</sup> Framing is not a third order operation, but another example of a second order distinction, this time cast as indicating indication.

an event, then indicate it as behavior, followed by further rounds of indication that build up contextual frames.<sup>10</sup>

For the purpose of using RFA, we recognize that every action construes a distinction and that subsequent action in relation to the distinction results in indication and contextual framing. Asking a client if they are ready to begin therapy, counseling, or consultation sets in motion distinctions that engender indication of a therapeutic context. However, the complexity of communication assures the possibility that any other distinction or indication may enter the scene, allowing shifts, changes, and transformations of other distinctions, indications, and contexts. For instance, a client may ask a therapist, “Before we begin, can you explain what therapy is?” In response to this, a therapist might decide to create distinctions and indications that help establish the definitional reality of therapy, that is, a contextual frame that will hold their discourse in a particularly defined way.

On the other hand, a therapist may use that opportunity to help throw the client outside the box of assumptions typically associated with clinical performance. Like a psychotherapist of the absurd, such a practitioner might quip, “There’s no such thing as therapy, really. All that exists are human beings trying to escape boredom.” Or, “Actually, I’m here to help you change. We don’t need to let therapy get in the way of that, do we?” In another example, “I am hoping that we can get straight to what truly matters rather than to have to go through all that therapy crap.” These latter remarks provide new distinctions that may construct a different

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<sup>10</sup> This circular use of distinction has been called a “dialectic of form and process” by Bateson (1979, 2002) and Keeney (1983), and demonstrated to be an indication of the recursive dynamic underlying reality production.

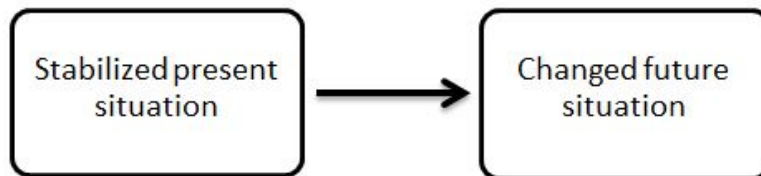
kind of contextual frame, one that may be more therapeutically potent than one filled with clichéd assumptions about therapy. Paradoxically, non-therapeutic frames may be more therapeutic during a performance of change. Or is it more reflexively complex than that? Perhaps it's better to say that there are resourceful advantages to having a therapy frame deconstructed and then re-indicated as non-therapy, doing so inside a "therapeutic" session.

In the beginning, we act in order to distinguish. Then we indicate our distinctions, doing so in repetitive ways that result in building a contextual frame. When the latter is built, we find ourselves standing inside a scene - an action scenario - which in the beginning is called act one. As we have spelled out before, change requires getting out of the presenting frame, for it is assumed to be an exemplar of what the client is trying to escape. To get from one contextual frame to another requires a transitional linkage. The "middle act" is a transitional linkage, a fulcrum between one side and another.

When we ask trainees to create a simple creative storyboard of an imaginary case, we often find something interesting. Typically, they spell out beginnings and endings with no clear middle phase. They might offer an account like, "A married couple argued all the time (beginning act), and then we told them to go home and blow up five balloons while dipping their little pinkies into a jar of honey" (final act). What is missing here is a middle act that enables us to believe that the assignment didn't just drop out of the wild blue yonder, but emerges from a logical line of development, a believable progression. A middle act for this case might reveal that the couple fights most often during the five weekdays (Monday through Friday),

with an emotional blow up taking place whenever either one of them feels like they are not getting any sweetness from the other. The metaphors in this discourse can subsequently be used to shape the question, “Would you rather blow up a balloon than blow up at each other, and do it with five balloons instead of five days a week?” If this transitional account isn’t convincing, then add some detail presumed to have been provided earlier in the session, perhaps describing how they took a hot air balloon ride during their honeymoon. They not only went high into the sky; they felt high about their marital union, something that may have had something to do with the champagne and honey crackers that were served midair.

The art of change rests largely on the ability to construct transitional linkages or middle acts between one contextual frame and another. One way of addressing this is to back up and imagine the following progression as the two-act structural form of change-oriented sessions:



However specified, clients ask to move from the present impoverished state of affairs to a more resourceful scenario in the future. The former is stabilized (not changing) whereas the latter embodies the desired change. To get from one phase to another requires a middle bridge that is connected to both. Another way of stating this is that the middle must offer a double message, an indication that it both holds stability of the present and the desired future change. One way of achieving this expression is to utilize the metaphors, distinctions, and indications of both

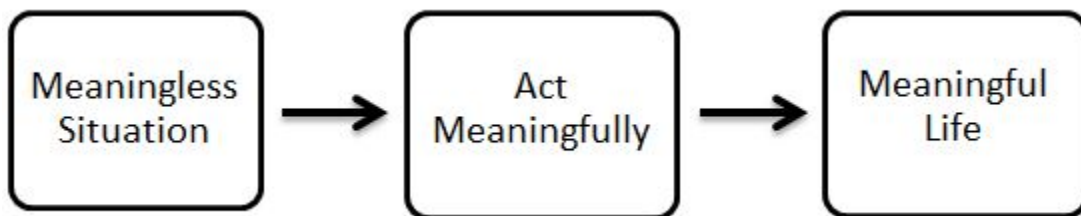


contextual frames. It's as if the middle act is communicating, "Here's a way to both change and not change." It's not neutral ground; it holds a choice that can appear logical and illogical, as well as consistent and contradictory. The middle phase may be simply a fork in the road, a fascinating riddle, a paradox, or a double bind.

In the example above, a middle act can spell out how the couple needs more rides in a hot air balloon, while remembering that the same fire that keeps the balloon airborne can also burn them. In addition, they can be reminded that the sweetness that comes from honey involved a bee that can also sting if you are careless. "Fire" is split into having a link to a negative and positive consequence, as is a "bee" that delivers both a sting and sugar. These splits enable a metaphorical articulation of a middle frame that hangs between the negativity (getting stung and burned) of the first act and the positivity (getting honey and high in the sky) of the desired final act.

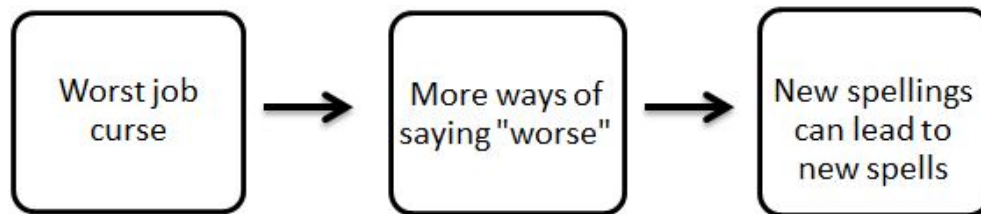
As an instrument of assessment, RFA discerns the relevant presence and absence of distinctions, frames, and transitional linkages that construct a performance of change. If there are no transitions, then there has been no discernable change. In such a case, all that RFA can outline is a sketch that shows no progression of thematic scenes. It can also detail how the distinctions produced were handled in order to maintain presence in a singular frame, or how discourse was not able to advance in any significant way. However, when noticeable change does take place it can be clearly indicated by how the three (or more) act plot advances.

All communicative performances that are change-oriented host distinctions and frames. The question is whether the latter recursively interact in ways that enable frames to move away from impoverished experience to those that are more meaningful and resourceful. The World War II Jewish psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl (1985) discovered that a way to maintain morale and survive a concentration camp was to find any way of acting that produces meaning. He later developed a psychotherapy that aimed at helping people construct meaning for their lives. It is important to recognize that this emphasis on “meaning” is not necessarily a suggestion that practitioners should help clients find new interpretations or narratives for their lives. At its best, it is a call for action that creates meaning. One must act in order to live a meaningful life, rather than interpret in order to glimpse a momentary meaning. Mapping this, we find:



Even if a situation is impoverished, horrific, impossible, or hell itself, act in order to invent meaning. The worst job in the world that feels like a curse can become an experiment in mastering how 25 languages have a word for “worst” and while doing that, acquiring 25 ways of saying “best.” Start with three languages and then advance toward a larger lexicon. In so doing, movement is initiated inside a stuck situation. Whereas the beginning act of an impoverished job only had one word for “worst” and one word for “best,” the new act has many words for both.

Those differences might lead to other indications and frames that lead to a middle act called “lost in translation.” There one is likely to find some lost treasure that helps find new possibilities for making meaning. Then one might be over the worst, that is, *hors d’affaire*. The latter may not be the worst way of articulating the worst, *das schlimmste*, suggesting that how things are spelled can induce another kind of spell.



RFA enables practitioners and researchers to be on the constant lookout for opportunities where the handling of distinctions can be used to foster change. This not only applies to conducting a session, but in analyzing a session. A researcher needs to enter the mind of the practitioner, re-enacting the discourse as it is studied, and imagining other ways the conversation might have turned. This entry into its movement, and being moved by it, helps a researcher to be more cognizant of the relevant shifts and the rhetorical means that were used to achieve change.

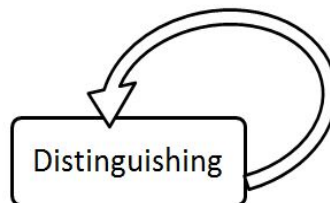
Equipped with a well-honed ability to handle distinctions, frames, and transitional linkages, a researcher can trace how a change-oriented reality was constructed. A practitioner can use these same tools to help build a transformative context that alters a client’s life. Finally, when applied to both the practitioner and researcher, they can converge as a Janus-faced performer capable of looking in both directions. In real time, such an agent of change is able to help change others by allowing others to change how the agent performs. After the performance, another

interaction can take place as the researcher brings the session back to life and learns new ways for practitioners to be more ready to serve change in future sessions.

### **Plot Lines and Recursion**

As a qualitative research methodology, RFA requires that one approach the analysis of a discourse with the initial purpose of identifying its most important distinctions, frames, and transitional linkages.<sup>11</sup> When these are identified, a session's plot line can be outlined, either simply as in a three-act play, or more complexly in ways that demonstrate underlying nonlinear dynamics.

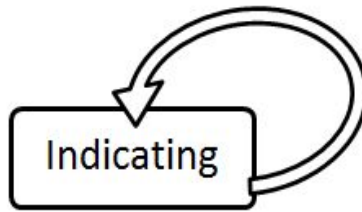
As we have argued, plot lines give an indication of whether there has been significant movement in a session, while at the same time they conceal the more circularly organized processes that bring it forth. Recall that the recursive re-entry of distinctions was drawn as:



The above also can be depicted as the re-entry of indications rather than as a proliferation of differentiated (unrelated) distinctions, indicated as follows:

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<sup>11</sup> In earlier forms of RFA, "frames" and "galleries" were used to indicate the progression of thematic action scenes. Galleries were seen as a class or collection of frames. For reasons of parsimony, and to indicate the more recursive nature of re-entrant distinguishing, the notion of gallery was eliminated in favor of frames that identify redundant indications of a distinction.



This is where we find that a sufficiently redundant re-entry of a similar class of indication creates a contextual frame. Inside this frame, all action is taken as re-indication that maintains presence inside the continuously named action scene.

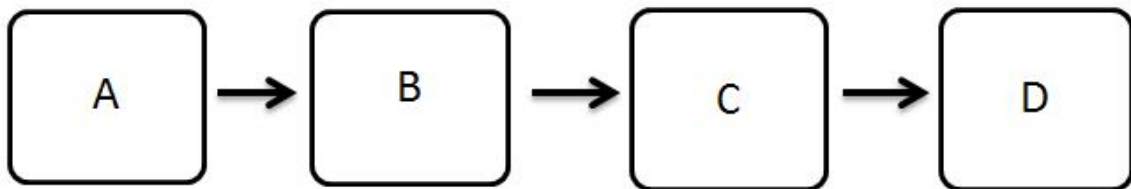
For instance, say a session begins with a client saying a string of apparently unrelated statements like, “Let’s talk about my mother’s failure to meet my expectations. Never mind, I’d rather talk about the great date I had last night. Come to think about it, can we just take it easy and discuss my new exercise program?” In this situation, one distinction after another is expressed, without any single one of them indicated, underscored, or emphasized. A practitioner could join in expanding the range of distinctions: “Shall we play a game of checkers? Or would you rather listen to some music? My intuition is that you want to talk about a dream.” Again, all that is taking place is the generation of a wide array of distinctions, none yet indicated or re-cycled, and no beginning frame marked (unless you want to call it, “casting a wide array of distinctions”).

Either client or practitioner can at any time start indicating any distinction or aggregates of them. “What would your mother think is best for you to discuss tonight?” “Did you think about telling your mom about your new date before or after you started the new exercises?” “What music would enable you to dream more about what we could discuss, whether it’s your mom, your new girlfriend, or the

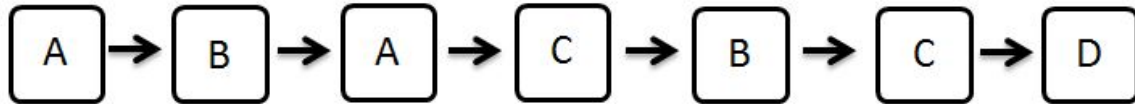
exercise of examining how much all this is just a game for you?” Once client and practitioner join in a similar exchange of indications, a contextual frame begins to emerge. In this case, perhaps “avoiding talking about mom,” “mom is like a game of checkers,” “how a dream mom would act,” or “listening to mom’s intuitions” would emerge.

As you distinguish how distinguishing and indication emerge, proliferate, recycle, phase out, re-emerge, get entrenched, or transform, give no theoretical analysis as to *why* this is taking place. Instead, remain in the descriptive domain, marking how distinctions give rise to indications that, in turn, become contextual frames. Do so to discern whether the frames themselves are linked through transitions that enable a movement from impoverished to more resourceful experiential themes.

Consider a lineal plot line that you identify as four contextual frames moving in a temporal sequence, connoted as:



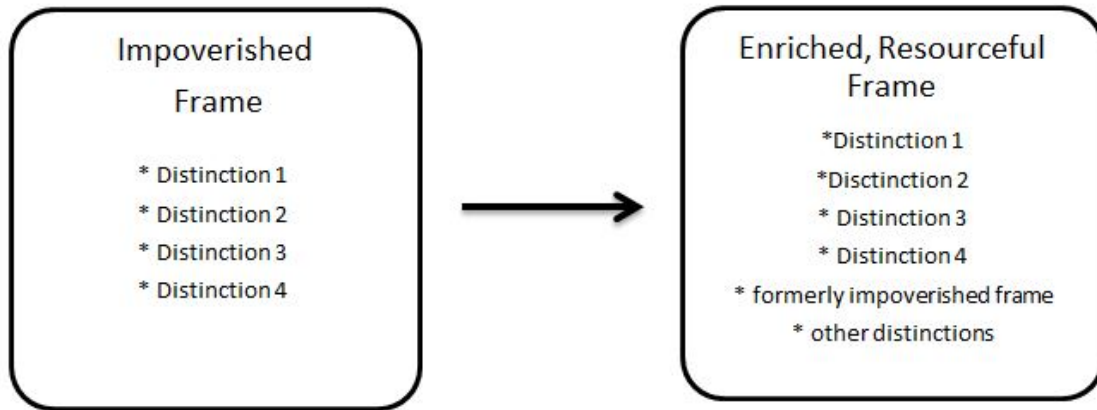
With a more detailed micro-level of analysis, you are able to discern how this plot line actually involves other forms of movement. A may take a step toward B, only to come back to A for a while, and then shoot off to C. This, in turn, is followed by a reentry into B, then back to C, with a final leap to D. Drawn as a sequence in time, we find:



What this lineal representation misses is the way a return backwards is actually a shift between a frame becoming a distinction and vice versa, that is, reversals of frame and distinction. When B returns to A, there is more than B returning, for now it is the whole sequence [A ---> B] that returns to A. Similarly, when A jumps to C, it is the whole of [(A ---> B) ---> A] ---> C. With each shift, a nesting of frames takes place, where parts and whole alter what is holding the other.

This is also true of the simplest 3-act plot line. After Act 1 moves to Act 2, it is important to recognize that it is not just Act 2 that then moves to Act 3. Rather, the whole progression of [Act 1 ---> Act 2] moves to Act 3. Act 3, in other words, holds all 3 acts. They are embedded inside it. Suffice it to say that the movement of change-oriented conversation is not like a booster rocket where each stage drops away, until you are left with a final stage. Instead, all acts, themes, and stages remain as things develop through the extension of distinction, indication, and framing of part-whole relations. Here change involves the construction of a frame that holds previous distinctions, while the initial frame becomes diminished to a less contextually present class of indication.

In the beginning of a session, we might find that all presenting distinctions re-indicate construction, maintenance, and entrenchment inside an impoverished action theme. At the end, the impoverished frame transforms into a distinction that is now inside the more enriched, resourceful frame. Here's a sketch:



Note that the same distinctions in the beginning frame are reframed in the final enriched frame; the way they are indicated and framed are what change. More importantly, the entire former beginning frame is now shrunk to being a distinction that is resourceful as well, along with other new distinctions that were generated along this trajectory.

More simply rendered, the art of change in its fullest form, is a deconstruction of the frames of suffering and impoverishment, as well as the problem, difficulty, and challenge frames that go along with them. In the beginning, suffering is the contextual frame, but the process of change transforms suffering into being a resource, gift, teaching, wisdom, liberation, joy, and the like:



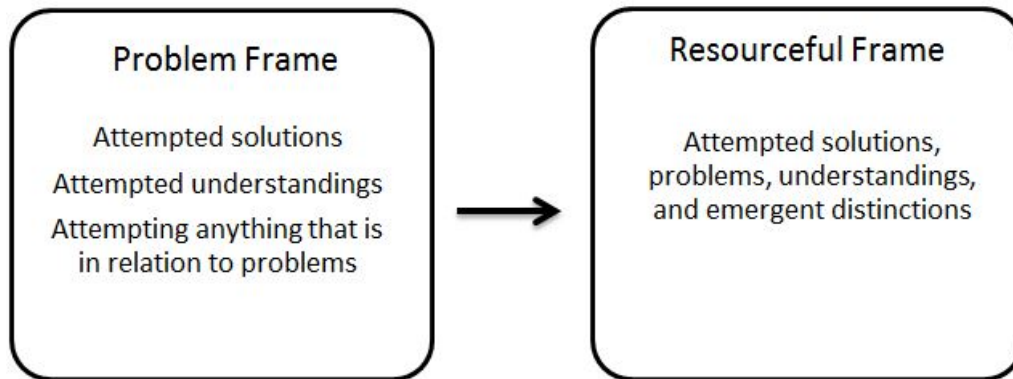
In the context of suffering, all distinctions feed suffering, even moments of joy. If you feel happy, it immediately brings suffering because you might start worrying that it won't last or that you will feel worse when the joy dissipates. Context, rather than distinction or indication, constructs the quality of life. On the other side, standing



inside the realm of joy, however philosophically or practically defined, reverses the indication of suffering. Here suffering has been unraveled, its indications deconstructed, returning it to a distinction that can serve joyful and meaningful living.

In the constructing and deconstructing of indications, contextual frames rise and fall, only to resurrect, reappear, and morph again. A masterful practitioner has constructive and deconstructive know-how, doing so through the shifting of frames, indications, and distinctions. A masterful researcher discerns the above with an eye and ear for the details that reveal circularities that move things in any particular direction. A master of either this kind of practice or research is likely to be master of both, for it is not possible to know without knowing how to act, as action know-how requires being able to effectively draw and swing the sword of distinction. The difference that makes a difference is the ability to cast and re-enter distinctions upon and within themselves in any direction, to build up layers of indication and deepened presence in a contextual frame, or to remove those layers, enabling the frame to collapse or dissolve.

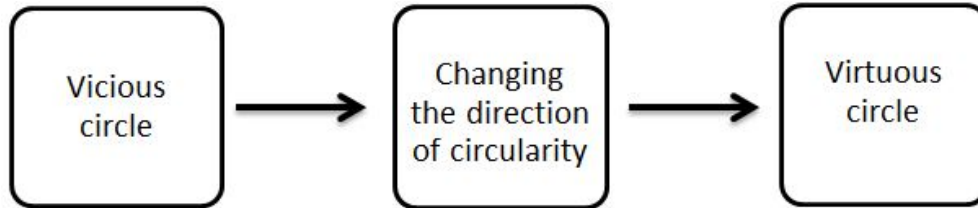
Stated in a different way, clients may be said to come with problems where attempted solutions feed the problem contextual frame. The shift desired is to deconstruct the problem frame and build a solution frame. Inside the latter frame, the previous problem can become one of the solutions. Technically speaking, the latter is not actually a solution frame. It is a resourceful frame where both previous forms of distinction – problem and solution – are now resourceful.



When one is stuck inside a problem or pathological contextual frame, every distinction is caught in a vicious circle. No matter what the distinction, this frame indicates it as problematic, setting up a no exit situation. On the other side, once you are well established inside a resourceful contextual frame, all distinctions are circulated inside a virtuous circle. Even suffering and problems are grist for life's transforming performance.

Spiritual wisdom traditions teach that we can contextualize our life inside the sacred, whether rhapsodically indicated as the heart of the divine, the grace of God, or comedic play of the gods. If presence inside this frame is maintained, all distinctions that arise will arguably deepen the meaning and enhance possibilities for one's life. A life of problem-solving, achieving success, and the like, however, is an easy setup for vicious cycles that become self-defeating whenever one repetitively indicates a loss, failure, problem, or pathology. Whereas the latter distinctions are transformed when inside the holiness of a greater power, they create hell when allowed to become frames that hold the whole of life rather than mere distinctions.

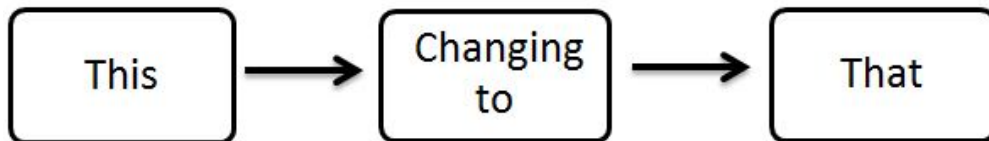
However we indicate the beginnings we want to transform and the endings through which we desire to prosper, know that the re-entry of indications in either is self-verifying. The choice that matters is the context or frame in which you place yourself. That is where free will is best exercised. After that, the contextual theme prevails, feeding on all distinctions to self-verify its theme and keep its circle turning. We cannot avoid being inside a circularity, and can therefore only choose which circles we will feed. In effect, change is the art of shifting vicious circles to virtuous circles. It can be mapped as:



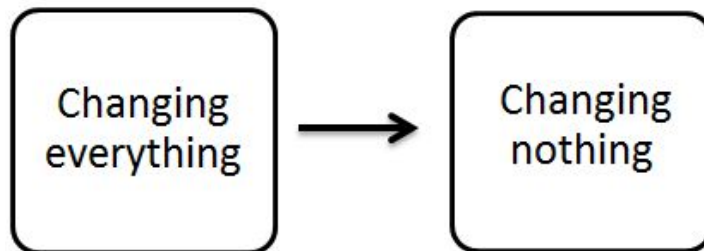
It is, however, more accurately a singular circularity that spins one way or another, depending on whatever indicates its contextual framing

The cybernetics of circularity is embodied in the re-entrant forms of distinction, indication, and framing. Similarly, transitional linkages are whole frame re-entries, where the frame reverses, shifting its part-whole relation. All of this is to say that there are no frozen plot lines, static distinctions, stand-alone indications, or absolute frames. There are only circularities that feed upon circular interaction to maintain identity and organization. These circles produce the processes that produce them, as they embody the processes that produce their identity. Actually, there are no circles at all, only dynamic re-entry that is, ever circulating change: change feeding on itself.

In the knowing (researching) of change, we must construct and deconstruct the distinctions and indications that frame its ever-shifting re-presentation as line and/or circle. In the movement from the circularity of viciousness to one of virtuosity, we find the collapse of their dualistic either/or. What was once a problem or suffering is now reason for thanksgiving and celebration. Problems and solutions dance inside the greater frames that care not to distinguish. Perhaps this is to say that change itself must change, starting with:



And moving to:



Where everything is inside nothing:



Finally, what we distinguish, erase, construct, and deconstruct, is always nothing more and nothing less than we ourselves who are acting in order to know. Ultimately, we are researching in order to search for a way of being that escapes the bondage of vicious distinguishing. If distinction creates illusion and suffering, then

we are researching to search for the absence of distinguishing, the ground of being out of which life performs without any distinction between actor and performance. There we have nothing to say, and in that frame we are free to say anything at all.

### **Domains of Analysis**

RFA is most attentive to the literal discourse that a change-oriented conversation actually performs. Operationally this requires a transcription of the recorded words spoken by all participants in a live session. While we acknowledge that nonverbal expression is also part of the communicational performance, its indication is mediated or conveyed by discourse. Whatever is experienced through the senses can generate another order of description that, in turn, can be transcribed as a secondary account parallel to what was spoken during the performance. Here notes of observation regarding visual, audio, kinesthetic, and even olfactory/taste perceptions can be logged. Again, though the latter are a non-linguistic domain of communication, their *indication* in an analysis takes place with descriptive discourse.

In addition to these two orders of discourse we find the interpreting and narrating of an observer that is not spoken in a real time session. This is where researchers construct hypothetical remarks, abstract generalizations, theoretical commentary, reflective speculation, intuitive assessment, philosophical understanding, and the like. If the “internalized” reflections of a researcher’s thinking are verbally articulated as they take place, another order of discourse is created. This actually can be physically accomplished by having a researcher speak and record his thoughts out loud as he observes a live or recorded session.

In summary, at the simplest level we find three orders of discourse operating in the research domain (as well as practice): live discourse of a session's performance, descriptive discourse that reports the observation of non-verbal expression, and discourse of internalized and/or post hoc narration and interpretation. Note that the latter domain can apply to the conversational performers of a session as well as to the investigator examining a recording of it. It is possible to imagine that for the purposes of a research study, a sidebar commentary could be recorded while each participant whispered their observations and interpretations into a separate microphone as the conversation took place. While this would be clumsy and itself enter into and influence the performance, it suggests a way of approaching the different lines of discourse that arise when multi-tracked conversational domains are studied.

RFA requires that a researcher have the skill to demarcate relevant observational descriptions that arise in association with the actual performed discourse of a performance. Obviously, describing every noticed observation would create so much detail that it would hinder seeing the more important distinctions, indications, and frames that non-verbal punctuations contribute. One must be on alert for the nonverbal moments that make a difference in a performance. If a client suddenly leans over before offering a resourceful metaphor that shifts the session, it should be noted. Repeated observation of a filmed session enables the more important nonverbal markers to be more readily identified.

Many researchers, as well as participants in any conversation, easily roam from one domain of discourse to another. After a conversational event, analytical

commentary can drift into becoming theoretical and primarily serve the building of an interpretation, rather than restrict itself to outlining how the conversation is structuring itself in its own performance. Unless one is trying to note the relationship of relevant theoretical premises (i.e., those that help illumine pattern) to a specific performance, RFA restrains the researcher from introducing the extraneous commentary of an outside commentator. Researchers need to ask what purpose is served by admitting diverse domains of discourse into an analysis. Does an extraneous discourse of the interpretive kind illumine the performance by giving clearer discernment of its most basic forms? Or does it have little relationship to the details of the specific performance, and is instead more like a free-floating diatribe in which any performance would have worked equally well as the object of an already-established interpretation? If a theory claims a universal generalization for all situations and performers, then there is no need to examine a particular performance. Such a theory explains even before any action takes place<sup>12</sup>. RFA

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<sup>12</sup> For example, a therapist may ascribe to the theory that heterosexual couples' relationships are all in some way negatively shaped by a culture of patriarchy and its "socially constructed" gender roles that subjugate women and elevate men. He may then use his theory to explain and interpret his clients' experiences (both in a session and in a post-hoc analysis), even when such metaphors and dynamics do not clearly arise in the actions or communications that take place in a session. Here the therapist imposes his pre-formed interpretations on clients' lives, choosing on his own – independent of what arose in the session – to distinguish, indicate, and frame what is most important and prominent in his clients' experience. In this case, the therapist reduces his clients to their group membership (sex, gender, and relationship status), and then defines the problem as "patriarchal culture." He then sets about helping the couple adopt his preferred interpretation, free of what he calls "patriarchal cultural narratives." This kind of therapy is no different than the kind from which it thinks it has liberated the field, where therapists imposed what might now be regarded as "old-fashioned" patriarchal family values. In both cases, the therapy is organized by the therapist's interpretation, applied to all clinical situations even before the therapy has taken place.

prefers an analysis that enables us to better discern the distinctions, indications, frames, re-entrant forms, and linkages of transformation that constitute what actually happened.

In the explication of a RFA, we recommend that interspersed comments that indicate descriptions of nonverbal communication be entered in italics, while a different color ink or size of font be used to distinguish discourses of performance and interpretation. For instance, consider this analysis of an excerpt from a therapeutic session:

Therapist: What animal would you least want to be like?

Interpretive comment: The therapist is introducing a distinction (“other animal”) that may enable a client to select a metaphor that helps her relate differently to parts of her experience, performance, or identity.

Client: A woodpecker. (*Client bobs her head in back and forth motion of a woodpecker*).

Interpretive comment: The client’s enactment of a woodpecker suggests the possibility that she identifies with characteristics of the bird’s behavior.

Therapist: If a woodpecker sat here right now and asked you to give it something that is a part of who you are, what would that be?

Client: I’d ask it to take away how I sometimes talk to others. I can peck away at people like a woodpecker and I don’t like it. (*Again, the client bobs her head, this time making a sharp, staccato, pecking sound.*)

Interpretive comment: Though the therapist did not indicate whether the initial request for giving the woodpecker a quality of the client was either problematic or resourceful, the client chooses the



former. Her enactment again brings her an alternative metaphorical way of talking about this part of herself, doing so in a way that opens other possibilities of interaction to emerge.

Our example demonstrates a presentation of three domains of discourse – the actually performed expression in the room that is indicated by the spoken words in larger font, italicized descriptions of noteworthy nonverbal communication, and interpretive discourse that is set in smaller sized font. We chose to interpret inside the previously developed perspective of how distinctions and frames organize communication, but other interpretive metaphors might have been used. What is important is that the discourse of interpretation is kept separate from the actual performance. In addition, the form of interpretation should serve bringing us closer to the data rather than becoming further disconnected from it. It should enable us to look more closely as to how distinctions, re-indications, frames, and transitional linkages structure a change-oriented conversation.

When we examine these three domains of discourse and discuss their relations, we are able to construe another discussion line. Here we can discuss how a particular theoretical orientation, or an epistemology concerning the construction of knowing, orients what distinctions we notice, including those in the nonverbal domain, the relevant frame shifts, and the form of interpretations that are introduced. At this level of analysis, now involving a fourth domain of discourse – an “analysis of our analysis” – we can transcribe its “commentary on our commentary” and show how it also handles the distinction(s) between the discourse being analyzed and the analysis itself. In this same way, more and more discourses can be recursively generated, each arising out of a re-entry into the previous one. At a

point, we can expect such an analysis to level out, appearing to recycle more of the same kind of commentary, indicating that we have hit a limit on the discourses that are relevant to the analysis. In other words, we eventually arrive at a recycled discussion where no further distinctions appear to matter or make a difference.

For example, take this sample of discourse, a continuation of our previous excerpt from an actual session:

Practitioner: Are you a red-crested woodpecker?

Client: Yes. See, my hair is red (*she points to her hair*) and I'm told I come from a line of royalty.

Practitioner: Do you know your family crest or is it lost?

Client: I saw it once, but I'm not sure what happened to it.

Practitioner: Perhaps it's time for you to update it and make sure it has a red-crested woodpecker on it.

Interpretive comment: Using the metaphor of a woodpecker enables the conversation to shift from being a way to complain about the way she sometimes talks to others and instead creates another metaphor, that of "red-crested woodpecker". This latter metaphor both associates her more with a woodpecker, but enables the theme to change from problematic to resourceful experience, in this case, someone who "comes from a line of royalty."

Interpretation of interpretive comment: while the metaphor of woodpecker is a way of indicating what could easily become an irritating framing of herself, the re-indication of red-crested woodpecker is a step toward delivering a desirable frame. Continuing this order of re-entrant indication – feeding the interaction more of the same order of indication – helps establish such a resourceful frame.

Interpretation of interpretation of initial interpretation: recycling indications of the same order establishes frames within which previous indications, even those that are different, now contribute to stabilized presence in the established contextual frame.

In this example, we have three orders of interpretive comments, each more abstract than the other, but all related and derivative of one another.<sup>13</sup> After the last interpretation in green, we hit the limit of what can be explained inside this logical line of explanation. Anything more said at this point would essentially be a recycling of the idea that a frame has been established and all distinctions within it serve maintaining presence of that frame.

If, however, we start espousing explanations that are removed from either the originally performed discourse or the RFA method that helps unpack distinctions, indications, frames, and linkages of change, then we are talking “out of context,” that is, generating a discourse that is possibly unrelated to the performed discourse – both in the live session and any subsequent attempt to present its construction. For instance, consider these extraneous interpretations:

“The client is having fun playing with the therapist.”

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<sup>13</sup> In our example, the interpretations are all related and belong to the same orientation, that is, a specification of the constructivist action creating a conversation. Typically interpretations are inconsistent and jump across different domains without any necessary relation. For instance, Chick Corea, the great jazz pianist, was once asked by a reporter to comment on why a particular concert had been so inventive and alive. Corea first answered with technical comments regarding chord changes and tempo alterations. The reporter asked again, “But why did it all come together tonight?” This time Corea changed his domain of interpretation and discussed how happy he felt with his life. Persisting, the reporter pressed him for a deeper explanation, which resulted in Corea giving a talk on his beliefs in Scientology. Similarly, therapists will often interpret in ways that are logically inconsistent and jump across unrelated ways of interpreting, expounding stereotypes, platitudes, ideologies, as well as comments on their emotional states.

“The metaphor of ‘woodpecker’ has sexual implications such that the client is referring to her challenges in sexual activity.”

“The red-crested indication of royalty suggests she is either aloof or has difficulty owning her authoritative position in life.”

All these comments are invented by the researcher, and must be indicated as separate from the actually performed discourse. On the other hand, if this kind of discourse arose in the thinking of the practitioner (or client), then it can be useful to explore its association with the lines actually uttered. Unless a researcher has access to the discourse of the participant’s thinking, such commentary has to remain hypothetical and regarded as more likely distracting than illustrative.

In summary, a researcher must decide what levels of discourse and analysis will be attempted. Then the different discourses must be kept separate, or at least distinguished, as they are examined, contrasted, and related. RFA allows us to keep track of the discourses that arise as we make distinctions in real time performance, as well as the post-performances that interact with the former. Finally, it enables us to see how our re-indications self-verify and thicken the descriptions and interpretations they construe. RFA enables us to retrace how a conversational episode was constructed, deconstructed, and re-constructed, and when it leaps into another order of conversation concerned with a more distanced and abstract form of hermeneutics. When an interpretation is too far removed from showing how it organized, further exemplified, or convincingly re-enacted the performance it claims to explain, we can begin asking whether a *non-embodied analysis* took place. Such a

discourse may only “cover up” or obscure another discourse – the one supposedly being analyzed – but have no obvious relation to it.

RFA insists upon analyses that show clear links between discourses that claim to be about another discourse, requiring that they at least be isomorphs of one another. In other words, the distinctions used in an analysis should seek to be both recognizable and expansive (rather than irrelevantly redundant) re-entries of the indications previously made. One must find the analysis in the performance as much as the performance in the analysis, but in this recycling a greater illumination of the dynamics and forms that create and hold it are noticed. As the x-ray of a bone must line up with the patient’s anatomy, an RFA sketch or score must match the conversation it maps. Unless theoretical interpretations line up, match, or correspond in clearly identifiable ways, they are better off dismissed as extraneous distractions.

RFA is a corrective for hermeneutic methods that fail to demonstrate correspondences between their explanations and actual discourses, metaphors, and frames that are performed in specific situations. As a pragmatic tool for practice, it helps a practitioner discern, respect, and utilize what clients bring to the performance stage, rather than frame them before they have spoken a single word or walked into the room. For research, ideological propaganda is disarmed, or at least identified as an outside discourse, in favor of seeing how descriptive data enables us to keep our analyses aimed at what we are specifically studying. Stated differently, RFA fosters an emphasis on the uniqueness of every conversational situation and highlights what is being performed. It does so while noticing how

other domains of discourse either contribute to or distract from discerning our relations with the conversations of which we are a part, as well as the interactions that aim to embody and set in motion the changes clients and practitioners seek.

### **RFA Procedural Guidelines**

In the chapters that follow we demonstrate several sessions that are analyzed by RFA. The best way to learn how to use RFA is to examine how it has been actually applied to change-oriented sessions. Each of the following sessions was videotaped, transcribed, and subjected to RFA as a qualitative method whose primary analytical purpose was to expose the important patterns that construct and organize its transformative movement. After you read these analyses, return to this chapter and re-read it. As you go back and forth, studying case examples that have been analyzed and the discourse concerned with the basic methodological premises of RFA, you will begin to have a better sense of how to apply it to both practice and research.

Always be mindful that RFA is not only intended to reveal the recursive organization of transformative communication; it is designed to help bring it forth. Act in order to distinguish the patterns that call forth change. Include yourself in this change in order to be moved to subsequently act differently. Do so time and time again while encouraging the effective utilization of change to become teacher, student, agent, recipient, and contextual host of transformation. RFA invites you to morph back and forth between being practitioner and researcher, doing so in order to help each participatory perspective – analytical discourse and evocative enactment – be more recursively intertwined in a resourceful way.

For each of the following RFA analyses we will demonstrate different ways of indicating the distinctions, frames, and transitions that make up a conversation. In the analyses that follow, we use bold font, italics, plain font, and brackets to distinguish between different orders of analysis. We placed brackets, for example, around commentary that is one step removed from the tracking of distinctions, frames, and transitions presented in the data. As we add commentary, our aim is to both differentiate diverse domains of discourse and demonstrate how they interact in order to lead us to clearer empirical encounters with what and how we experience change-oriented conversation.

We will move along different magnitudes of analysis beginning with a large-scale, macro view that enables us to keep an eye on big frame shifting, the development of a three-act structure. We will also zoom into the finer distinctions, frames, and movements that comprise a more microscopic examination of the dynamics that underlie larger scale frame progression. As we go back and forth between these different levels of analysis, we will note how emergent patterns of a change-oriented conversation appear to have their own organizational mind, a systemic process of interaction that is more than the sum of the minds of all individuals in the conversational scene.

This larger scale “mind of change” arises from the movement of improvisational interaction. Here each client and practitioner does more than act on one another. Each participant is moved, organized, and led by something larger than one’s previously acquired know-how and performance repertoire. This tacit orchestrating, like a flow experience, emerges in the movement of change itself. The

same is true for all performing arts from music to sculpture and dance – the dynamics of creative transformation bring forth the art, as the artist serves the process rather than the other way around, doing so naturally and spontaneously.

When this takes place effortlessly, a performance feels most alive. This is as true for the performance of research as it for the studied practice. The practice of analysis is no different than the live performance it studies, for as it strives to discern and track change, it is also performing change. RFA asks the researcher to interact creatively with the discourse being examined, inspiring action that creates distinction. This mapping is more than tracing; it is dancing with a past line of action in a way that brings present life to both indicated map and distinguished territory, each bringing forth generative frames for the other.

Discerning life in a change-oriented session requires a researcher whose research performance springs to life. We must re-enter the search for change that client and practitioner first traversed. In this re-search, we may find our understanding, and our way of participating in its construction, changing as well.

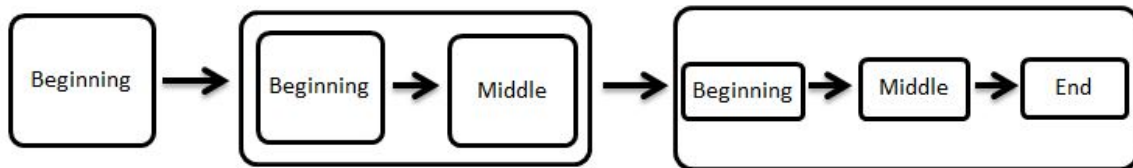
### **The RFA Score**

There are as many ways of creating an RFA score as the researcher can invent ways of indication. The simplest depiction of a linear progression through beginning, middle, and end acts can be drawn as three boxes linked by arrows of transition, as shown earlier:





Or these three acts can be embedded as:



When applied to simple mappings of change-oriented conversations, we recommend starting with a simple storyboard sketch that enables a plot line to be identified. First notate a three-act structure, and then open it up to show other acts in between each act. For instance, it may be useful to conceptualize the transition from beginning to middle act as requiring another three-act form



To get from Act 1 to Act 2 requires a transition between the two. The same is true for moving from the middle to the end. Any transitional linkage serves as a middle act from one frame to another frame, a fulcrum that enables discourse to tilt toward either side.

We now present several previously created RFA scores. They give a brief glimpse of how scores may look. The first RFA is of a classic family therapy case that Jay Haley supervised involving a young boy whose chronic masturbation was

publicly out of hand (see Keeney & Ross, 1985). The women in the family brought the boy to the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic and reported that his masturbation habit was so severe that he would sometimes wear holes in the crotch of his pants, and at one time he was hospitalized for blood in his urine. In addition, he masturbated in public, at school, or at home in the living room in front of his sisters. Frames describing previous solution attempts included previous therapeutic work based on a reward and punishment strategy, Dexedrine, and private tutoring.

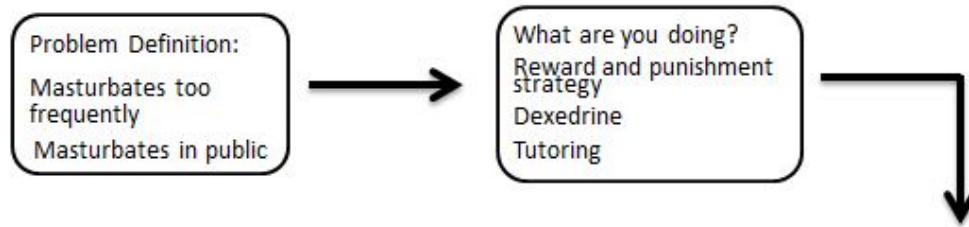
The first major therapeutic move came when the therapist defined masturbation as a “private matter” for men. This transitional distinction shifted conversation from the presenting contextual frame in which women (the boy’s mother and sisters) had attempted to handle problematic masturbation, to the transitional frame, “Men handling problematic masturbation.” Within this latter frame, the therapist asked the mother permission for him, as a man, to assume leadership in handling the problem. This shift, along with a challenge to the mother as to whether she could really handle the change if it took place, enabled the therapist to move to an assignment. In the first assignment, the boy was instructed to write down how many times he masturbated during each day of the week.

The subsequent session began with a review of the boy’s masturbation habits during the previous week. When the therapist asked on which day it felt best, the boy said it was Sunday. The therapist explained that he asked this question because, “It is important that you enjoy it all the time.” This provided a transitional distinction to move to the final contextual frame, “Handling pleasurable masturbation.”

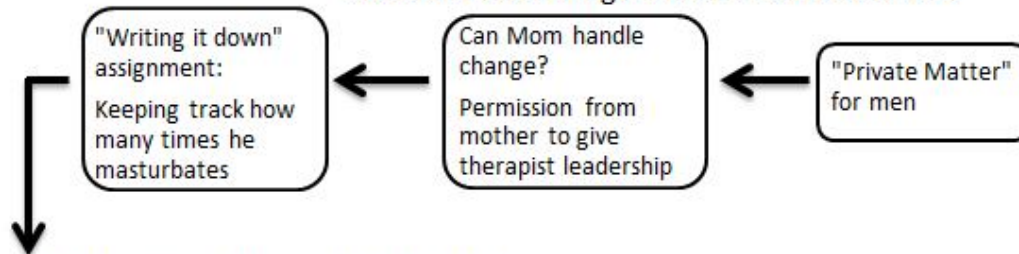
Within this final act, interventions were designed that prescribed a schedule for the boy to follow centered on this theme of handling pleasure. At first, the boy was told to masturbate only on Sunday and to do it more often than usual on that day, because it is more pleasurable then. In the following session, the boy reported that he didn't do the assignment, although he had his sister wake him up earlier on Sunday so he could get the job done.

Although the boy did not carry out the first assignment, the important point was that it helped establish and maintain the contextual frame that Sunday's masturbation is pleasurable. This resourceful context enabled the therapist to assign a second task: masturbating on other days (days which aren't as pleasurable) means that the boy *must* masturbate more often on Sunday. The therapist places the boy in a paradox: If he did what the therapist assigned, he would be free to reward himself on Sunday. If he disobeyed, he had to pay the consequence of performing pleasurable masturbation on Sunday. Either way, the boy was kept inside the context of "handling pleasurable masturbation." The RFA score for the case follows:

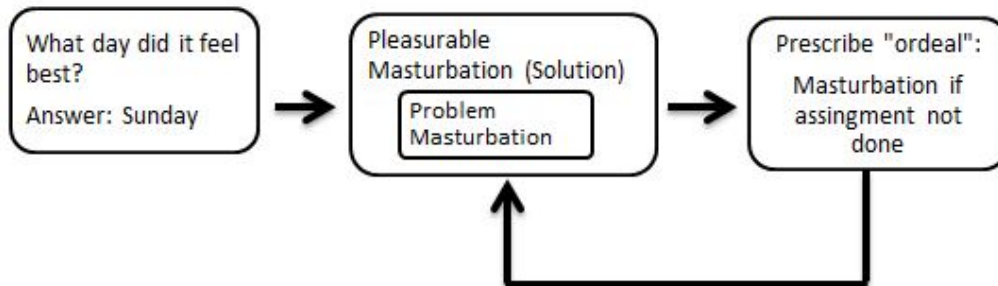
### Act 1: Women Handling Problematic Masturbation



### Act 2: Men Handling Problematic Masturbation



### Act 3: Handling Pleasurable Masturbation



#### Round 1:

Masturbation on days other than Sunday results in Sunday's masturbation as punishment (i.e., more masturbation on Sunday)

Not masturbation on days other than Sunday results in Sunday's masturbation as reward

The next RFA score presents a more detailed case, showing a number of transitional linkages that eventually lead to the final resourceful act. This is a score of a single session with a family conducted by Luigi Boscolo and Gianfranco Cecchin (see Keeney & Ross, 1985). A mother and father brought their daughter, Mary, for treatment. The presenting frame distinguished a “sick child” with epileptic seizures, hallucinations, temper fits, an inability to leave home, and failure to attend therapy.

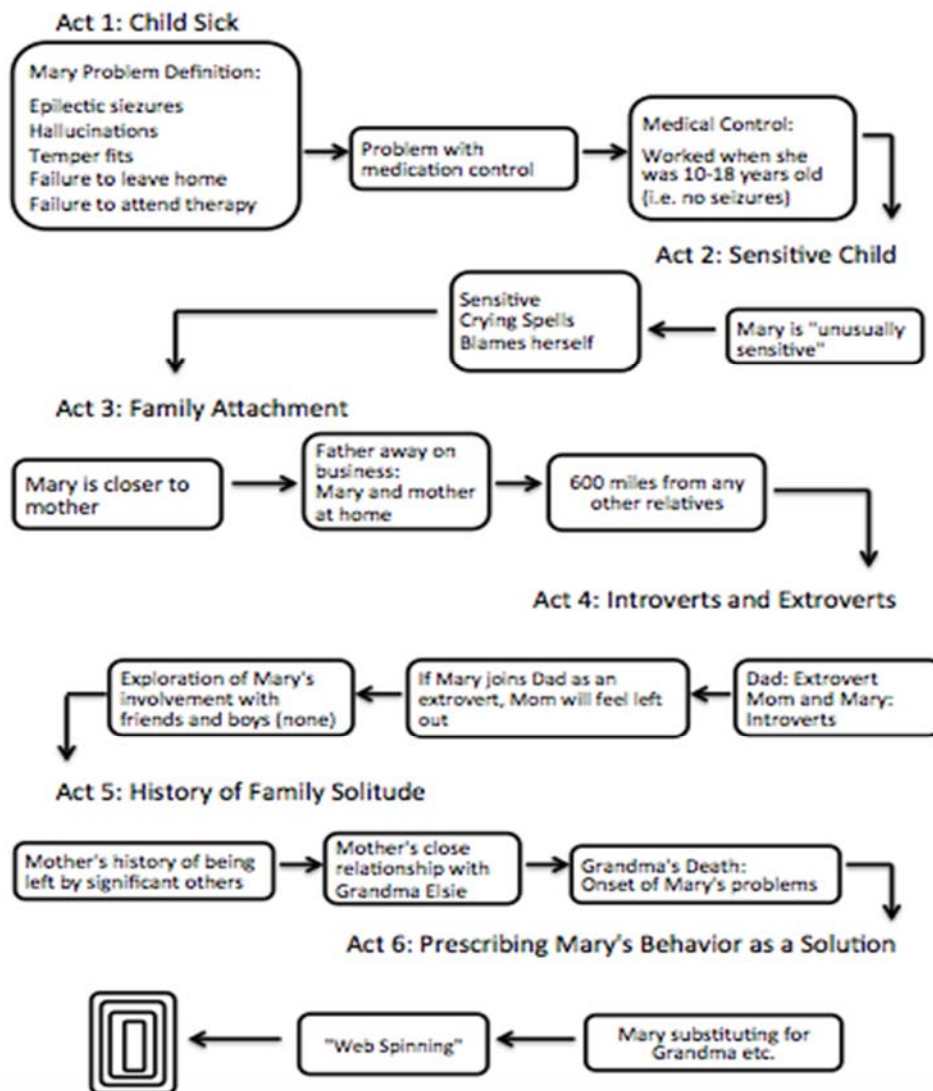
The parents defined their situation as one of medication control, since medicine had always worked in the past from the time Mary was 10-years-old until now at age 18.

Mother provided a transitional distinction when she mentioned that her daughter was “unusually emotional.” Subsequent discourse established the next contextual frame that focused on a “sensitive child.” Here Mary was described as having frequent crying spells and blaming herself for her problems. This opened another transition when the therapist asked about her attachments to others. Inside this frame, the family discussed how Mary was closer to her mother and how father was away on frequent business trips. It was also disclosed that the family lived 600 miles away from any other relative.

When Mother described herself as “introverted,” the therapist utilized this to transition to a frame that discussed “introverts and extroverts.” Here Mary and Mother were named as introverts. Mary lacked any involvement with people in her own age group. Mary also said that she wished she were an extrovert like her father. The therapist commented that if Mary joined her father as an extrovert, it might make Mother feel left out.

“Being left out” led to the contextual theme of a “history of family solitude.” Here, Mother presented other frames describing her history of being left by significant others. She mentioned the close relationship she enjoyed with her mother-in-law, Grandma Elsie, who had passed away. Mother stated, “I was most attached to my mother-in-law, and I suppose that has a lot to do with Mary because Mary was her only girl grandchild.” The onset of Mary’s symptomatic behavior was several years after Grandma Elsie’s death.

With this discourse, therapy moved to the final therapeutic contextual frame, “prescribing Mary’s behavior as a family solution.” The therapists emphasized distinctions that describe Mary as the person most able to replace the emptiness her parents felt when Grandma Elsie died. She was instructed to continue helping her parents avoid loneliness by providing more opportunities for them to parent her around the clock. Furthermore, the family was told to keep things as they were until Mary’s parents could find another way of handling the family’s solitude. The family resolved their situation in a few more sessions. The RFA of the session follows:



If you read an account of the above cases from the original source cited and follow the RFA score as you do so, you will be able to see more clearly how each session is constructed in terms of distinctions and frames. Be sure to note how an RFA progression of frames always includes an embedding of previous frames. You can also use the RFA scores as storyboards and proceed to invent additional details for a case story that holds the themes and transitions that are indicated. It might be interesting to do this first and then examine the actual case transcription later.

In summary, RFA presents its basic unit of analysis as *distinction*, after which a distinction may re-distinguish itself in order to *indicate*. As redundant re-indication builds a *frame*, we are able to discuss whether frames remain static and stuck or whether they shift into other frames through *transitional linkages*. The performance of everyday life includes all the diverse forms communication may express, including nonverbal and verbal action. Whatever domain of action is performed, its description takes place with a corresponding discourse. With an RFA score, the anatomy of a conversation is revealed. As RFA prescribes the enactment of a change-oriented performance, it is a recipe for constructing a transformative reality. When it unpacks either a score or performance, it deconstructs interpretive maps and opens new possibilities for charting how both performance and analysis could be re-constructed differently.

RFA is theoretically related to Erving Goffman (1974) and Gregory Bateson's (1972, 2002) conceptualization of frame. From this Bateson-Goffman frame orientation to communication, RFA practitioners recognize that speakers provide each other with frames or "contextualization cues" which help conversation

participants recognize how to act with one another, including the acts of indication that generate meaning. For recursive frame analysis, there is not an independent, hierarchical context causing that which it contextualizes to have meaning. Rather, meaning (and its absence) is produced inside the performed recursive interaction of contextual frame and that which is communicated inside it. RFA is the study of ever shifting conversational frameworks which allows researchers to focus on how “people’s communicative acts provide a context or frame for other communicative acts” (Keeney, 1991, p. 56).

To study this recursive structure and dynamic of communication, RFA may draw upon one or a combination of various indicational systems: Keeney’s frameworks of openings, connections, and disconnections (Keeney, 1991); speech acts (Chenail, 1991; Rambo, Heath, & Chenail, 1993); or profession-specific acts (Chenail & Fortugno, 1995; Keeney, 1991; Rambo et al., 1993; Rudes, Shilts, & Berg, 1997).

In the Keeney (1991) frame-works system, analysts note how performers “work the frames” in a conversation to produce particular actions and meanings, aiming to achieve certain goals and objectives via their conversational performance. As RFA investigators configure the talk into frames, they also note how change-oriented participants accompany and move with the flow of conversation in certain directions, impede the exploration of certain less resourceful topics, or suggest new distinctions and indications to previously established frames. Examples of these ways of working the frames include “opening a frame” (i.e., shifting the talk from one frame to another; Keeney, 1991, p. 66), “splitting a frame” (i.e., taking an existing frame and dividing its conjoint meaning into separate parts; Keeney, 1991,



p. 72), and “connecting frames” (i.e., bringing together previously separated frames; Keeney, 1991, p. 73).

Besides articulating these speaker actions in frame-work terminology, RFA researchers may also rely on distinctions developed in the discursive approach known as speech acts – the ways in which speakers use their words to accomplish certain actions in conversation (Chenail, 1991; Schiffrin, 1994). These speech acts can take the form of “assertives” (i.e., asserting the veracity of what is said); “directives” (i.e., directing someone to do something); “commissives” (i.e., committing the speaker to some future action); “expressives” (i.e., expressing the speaker’s feelings or thoughts); and “declaratives” (i.e., declaring some type of change in the world; [Cruse, 2006, pp. 168-169]). By incorporating a speech act perspective in RFA, researchers are able to characterize the conversational cues speakers use and take note how these various discursive acts help to shape the configuration of frame movement. In previous studies (e.g., Chenail, 1991; Rambo et al., 1993), speech acts such as accounts (i.e., explanations for one’s actions), disclaimers (i.e., explanations for one’s action to be committed a future time), hedging (i.e., noncommittal, ambiguous, or cautious wordings), and opening up closings (i.e., an apparent opening up of a new line of conversation that also closes down another line of talk, as in the use of “Yes, but...”), have all been used to illuminate the ways speakers offer new frames by sharing an account, mark the “rim of a frame” (Keeney, 1991, pp. 64-65) by hedging on the truthfulness of an account, and open up one frame while closing down another one.

Another type of indication that has been employed by recursive frame analysis is profession-specific acts (Chenail & Fortugno, 1995; Keeney, 1991; Rambo et al., 1993; Rudes et al., 1997). Profession-specific acts would be those specialized speech acts used by speakers in the course of conducting their work as teachers, attorneys, therapists, nurses, and physicians. For instance, marriage and family therapists attempt to “join” with their clients, “reframe” problems as solutions, and positively “connote” actions of their clients (Rambo et al., 1993). By indicating these profession-specific speech acts, RFA researchers are able to make note of the particular ways these professionals offer contextual clues to produce interesting configurations of frames and their transitional changes. Note, however, that these “speech-acts,” when indicated as such, are themselves interpretations of performed actions inside the discourse being analyzed. As previously discussed, RFA can help reveal the degree to which various professions’ common ways of interpreting their actions (e.g., “joining”) are actually useful in revealing what actually took place in the discourse being analyzed, or whether or not that interpretation is disembodied from or extraneous to what actually took place.

RFA invites the researcher to invent whatever distinctions and frames can help discern pattern in change-oriented conversation. As will be seen in the case studies that follow, RFA is as much a “research on research” as it is a means of critically examining presenting data. In the hands of a capable researcher, it enables a research study to transform itself as it searches for the distinctions, frames, and contextual shifts that matter. At the same time, it generates and hosts more possibilities for change when held in the hands of a changing practitioner. RFA both

describes and prescribes change and in so doing, it recursively crosses and re-enters the borders that distinguish map and territory.

## Chapter Three

### **Analysis of a Session: “Magmore”**

This session involved Brad Keeney’s work with Andy, a 16-year-old boy from Louisiana with his grandmother and a “mildly intellectually disabled” mother. A year before, he had threatened to kill his mom with a steak knife because she refused to play with him. Andy told the sheriff’s deputy that he had problems and wanted to get some help. He had been in and out of hospitals and institutions since he was seven. Andy had a history of torturing, mutilating, and sometimes being sexually inappropriate with several different types of animals including cats, dogs, frogs, birds, and lizards, which he would also roast and eat. Finally, he saw ghosts when he was admitted to a hospital. This information had been given to Brad by Andy’s therapist prior to the case, and he had been shown a collection of files on Andy two feet high, which he did not read. It was clear from the long record and the brief description given to Brad that many mental health professionals had regarded Andy as a kind of Hannibal Lecter in the making. At the very least, they had contextually framed Andy as a “seriously disturbed” client.

As Brad walked to his clinical office where Andy and his family were waiting with their therapist, he noticed what appeared to be a baseball on the ground. When he picked it up, he was surprised to find it was actually a soft rubber ball. He immediately thought that it possibly provided an interesting metaphor with which to begin the session: perhaps this adolescent appeared to be a hardened trouble maker, but was actually a soft human being. Brad entered the room with two contextual frames about Andy. The first one had been offered by the mental health

profession, where Andy was depicted as on his way to becoming a hardened deviant. The other frame was inspired by the metaphor of the ball that appeared hard on the surface, but was actually soft. Brad carried the ball with him as he entered the room.

**Brad Keeney (BK): How y'all doin'?**

This question presupposes no particular contextual frame. It simply was intended as a greeting and a nonjudgmental means of entering the system. (Note that this session took place in the Deep South of the United States, where "y'all" is everyday speak.)

**Therapist (T): Good.**

**BK: (to therapist) Is this your ball?**

Brad acts in order to set up the distinction of the ball being a metaphor for Andy.

**T: Yeah, I think I had it on my desk.**

**BK: Did you lose it?**

**T: I did...**

**BK: ...It was just sitting outside.**

**T: Well I guess it's yours now.**

**BK: It looks hard doesn't it?**

**T: Yeah it does.**

**BK: It looks hard.**

**T: But when you touch it, it's soft.**

**BK: (looking at Andy) Do you think it looks hard? But feel it: it's real soft. See?**

*(BK throws ball to Andy)*

**Andy: Yeah.** (*Andy squeezes the ball and then throws it back to BK*)

**BK: Wow. So is that the way you are? Do you look hard, but you're really soft?**

Brad simply utilized what he picked up on the ground before entering the session. His first impression of Andy was that he looked a lot softer than the “hard” descriptions other professionals had made about him. This contextual frame has now been created for the conversation, which we could specify as “looks hard, but is really soft”. With this frame, all previous clinical reports about Andy may now be regarded as indications of how he appears to the outside world, but may miss what is the hidden truth about his life.

**A: Yeah.**

**BK:** (*laughs*) **Tell me why are you here? Why are you guys here?** (*Grandmother laughs*) **What's the reason?**

Had this been asked before the previous frame had been established, it may have only elicited a report that perpetuated a focus on Andy's problematic appearances. However, with the “looks hard, but is really soft” distinction, whatever the family says can be held within a frame that provides more ambiguity, allowing for the possibility of looking at different (“soft”) aspects of Andy.

**Grandmother: To meet you for one thing, and to talk, chat for a little while.**

**Mother: Yeah.**

**BK: What kind of creative expression led all this to take place today? What happened? Did he burn a building down or did he ...?**

Brad avoids saying “problem” due to the hardened way this type of description has been repeatedly applied to Andy's life, and shifts to the metaphor of

“creative expression.” He could have used other metaphors like “surprise,” “trick,” or “unexpected performance.” For example, “What kind of surprise did you cook up that has everyone talking?” “Did you go trick or treating when it wasn’t Halloween?” “What unexpected dramatic role did you perform that has your Mom and Grandma confused?” This type of question helps maintain presence inside the frame that outward appearances may mask what is more essential or true about a situation. In addition, asking about whether Andy tried to burn down a building was a way of talking about the extreme nature of his behavior while avoiding an entry into the already hardened frame of “Andy the mutilator.” The latter contextual frame is what the therapy is trying to dissolve or release.

[Note: A practitioner of RFA is by definition a systemically or contextually oriented practitioner, knowing that the focus of change is on shifting contexts, moving from impoverished frames to more resourceful ones. The family is already stuck in the frame of “Andy the mutilator” or its variant forms that might include, “Andy the next Hannibal Lecter” or “Andy the psycho.” An RFA orientation, concerned with movement of contextual frames, does not want the conversation to slip back into or further indicate this impoverished psychiatric frame, as this would serve keeping the family (and the session) stuck inside it. Instead, it wants to utilize the movement that has already taken place with the “hard, but soft” metaphor.]

**G: He tried** *(laughs)*.

**M: No, I did.**

**A: No, I did.**

Both Andy and his mom try to take credit for having burned down a building, which in itself suggests that the context has expanded to include mother and Andy as opposed to an exclusive focus on Andy. In other words, the conversation is taking place inside a contextual frame that involves other family members. This movement helps minimize individual psychological discourse and instead examines the participation of others in a social performance.

**BK: Hold it, hold it...**

**M: I did.**

**A: She accidentally...**

**M: . . . I accidentally left the grease on the floor and I forgot to turn it off and then smoke went all over the house.**

**BK: So mom tried to burn down a building.**

Brad unexpectedly finds that a reference to “burning down a building” actually applies to the mother. Again, this fact will be utilized to broaden the contextual frame to include other family members, in contrast to the way other mental health professionals limited their attention to the psychopathology of an adolescent.

**M: Yeah, yeah.**

**T: ...the house**

**M: ...that’s me, that’s me.**

**BK: So mom’s on fire, mom’s a fire setter.**



Brad's playful comment suggesting that "mom's on fire" interrupts any pathologizing of her behavior, and implicitly suggests that something more resourceful underlies what she did.

**M: Yeah ... Not really.**

This comment is isomorphic to the distinction of "looks hard, but is really soft."

**BK: ...Grandma, what do you do to make the family interesting? Do you flood the house?**

*(family laughs)*

Brad reaches out to grandmother, trying to get a description of how she may be included with the other family members with respect to their interesting performances. At this time the conversation has moved from the hard-soft distinction to an exploration of the family's "creative expression," re-indicated as what is done to "make the family interesting." All this has been established in the first few minutes, without feeding any hardened pathological frames. Rather than physically or rhetorically bring in the two feet high stack of clinical records, Brad brought in a ball that accidentally rolled in front of the door. The latter was simply a utilization of what was present at the onset, without dragging in any parts of the family's history that had already become too concretized inside impoverished frames. The latter serve keeping the family from recognizing and participating in alternative ways of relating to both Andy's behavior and their family life.

**T: A hurricane will do that, huh?**

**G: Yeah.**

**BK: What makes you interesting? What makes people think, “Yup, you belong to this family?” . . . I should say, that these people belong to you?**

Again, we have quickly moved to including all family members in the definition of the situation. Here so-called “problems” are placed inside the frame of that which “makes the family interesting,” a softer, more pliable frame that that avoids pathologizing the family.

**G: Well, I can’t say that I gripe all the time, but sometimes I do.**

**T: Yeah.**

**G: I take Paxil and they say when I don’t take my Paxil...**

**M: ...Oh yeah when she don’t take her Paxil - oh my God...**

**G: ...I’m grouchy (*laughs*).**

**M: Yup, you can’t be around her.**

**BK: (*looking at grandmother*) So you gripe all the time.**

**G: Not really.**

Again, with the comment “not really,” it suggests that on the surface is seen a problem, but underneath there is something different. Notice how Grandma said, “I’m grouchy” while laughing.

**BK: (*to mother*) Sometimes you set fires, but not really. (*to Andy*) And what do they say about you that’s “not really?”**

Brad had observed that both mother and grandmother follow their comments about what could be taken as a problem, with the phrase, “not really.” This gave him a useful distinction with which to address Andy. Namely, he is a member of a family where people are “not really” what they seem. Again, this is

isomorphic to the distinction originally brought in by the ball that “looks hard but is really soft.”

**Andy: Oh I just aggravate people.**

**M: Yeah, he just aggravates his mama.**

**BK: But not really.**

**Andy: No, not really. I just play a lot.**

Andy moves from “aggravation” to “play,” distancing himself further from any pathological frame. Before he walked into the office, his family and other mental health providers saw him as pathologically disturbed, but now he is proposing that he is actually “just” aggravating and playing. While a therapist addicted to pathologizing may use anything said to maintain presence inside a pathological frame (they can’t stop reframing any possible alternative frame as further self-verification of pathology), a practitioner more attuned to contextuality will utilize how change is more possible inside a “play” frame than a “sickness” or “psychopathology” frame.

**BK: *(to therapist)* So, these people do things, but not really. You know what that tells me? That tells that whatever he got in trouble for, he’s just pretending.**

The “not really” modifier enables us to split the problem frames that the family has lived with – dividing them between the distinction of appearance (“not real”) and what is not seen (“real”). Each family member speaks this way. Brad is speaking their language, but is cognizant of how it provides a possible way out of further feeding vicious cycles of problem framing. If their surface problems are not

what they seem (like the ball on the floor), then an exploration can commence to see where other alternative meanings might lead.

**M: Yeah, he...**

**BK: That right?**

**G: Well actually he (*laughs*)...**

**M: He wrote on a wall.**

**G: ...let me see, how am I gonna say this...**

**Andy: ...I spray painted a wall.**

**M: Yeah there ya go.**

**G: He spray painted...**

**BK: ...you spray painted a wall?**

**Andy: Yeah.**

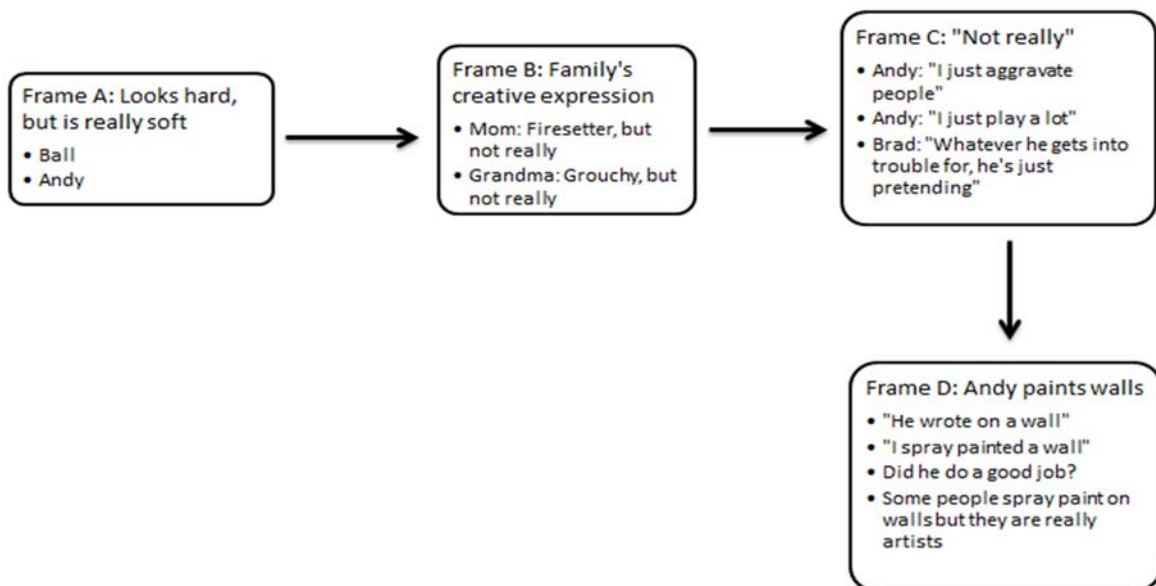
**M: His door.**

**BK: Hold it. Hold it. Did he do a good job?**

Brad is looking for what is resourceful, useful, creative, or transformative within any performance, expression, or account. Since the “looks hard, but is really soft” and “looks like a problem, but is not really one” frames have already been set in the session, Brad is able to assume that any indication of a problem may hide another side which is resourceful. Hence, the resourceful side of any surface complaint will be explored. The mention of Andy having spray painted on a wall (assumed to be bad) will focus on his ability to draw/paint (something good). At this time we can analyze the movement of frames that emerge in the first act of this session. The first distinction, “looks hard, but is really soft” sets up the first

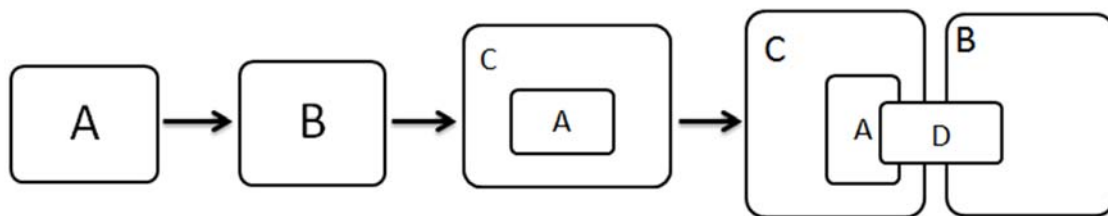
contextual frame for the conversation. A transition is provided by asking about what “creative expression” makes the family interesting. Inside this next frame, we find that mom appears to be a fire setter, but “not really.” Grandma appears grouchy, but “not really.” Lumping together these same qualifying responses enables us to enter the frame of “not really,” which is actually a variant of the first frame, where things are not really as they appear. Here Andy specifies that his form of “not really” is actually aggravation, a kind of play for him. Brad is then able to introduce the reframe that had been implied with the first distinction in therapy. Namely, that Andy is pretending (or playing) when others see him as performing crazy kinds of behavior. When Mom says that Andy wrote on (spray painted) a wall, this is spoken after suggesting that each family member’s example of dramatic conduct is creative expression, a means of making the family interesting. In terms of RFA, we start with this beginning sketch that indicates the temporal progression of frames (Figure 1):

Figure 1:



What is more important than the above plot line is how each emergent frame is able to frame or be framed by other frames. As Figure 2 shows, at first, frame A (“looks hard, but is really soft”) leads to Frame B (“family’s creative expression”), a separate, non-embedded frame that sits next to A. However, as the mother and grandma add the phrase “not really” to describe their dramatic behavior, it sets up movement to frame C, “not really.” This latter frame can be regarded as holding the original frame A, for “not really” is a more general way of indicating that things are not always as they appear. The progression of frame B to C did not complete the list of how each family member exhibited creative expression inside of B. After C is established, Grandma provides an example of what Andy has done that got him in to trouble – spray painting a wall. This behavior is established as frame D, as this theme is explored. Since frame D is itself both an example of “not really” and the “family’s creative expression”, it sits inside both those frames. Whereas in the beginning, frames A and B are side by side and not yet embedded, frame D (outlined in red as displayed in Figure 2) now provides an opening for their entry into one another.

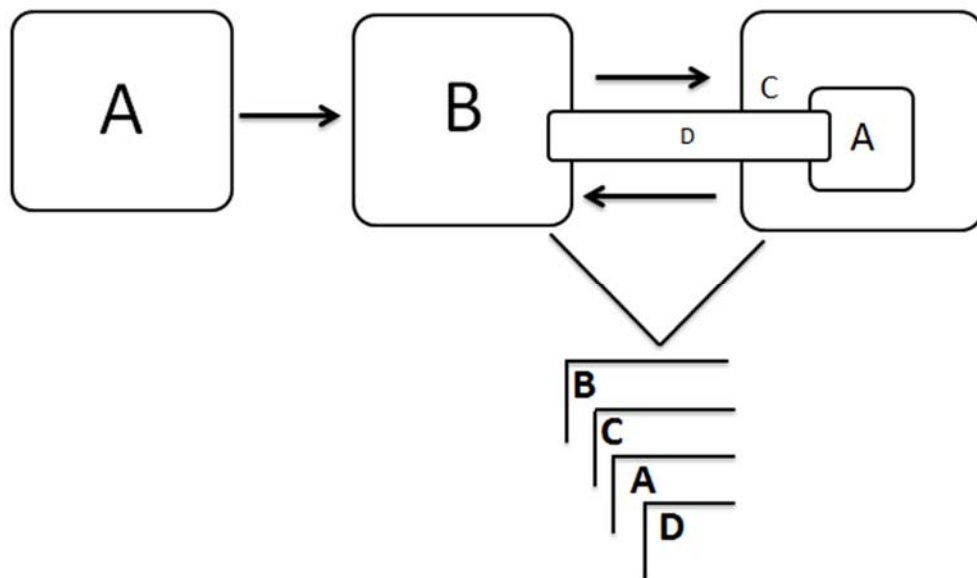
Figure 2:



[When creating an RFA, the researcher needs to approach every utterance as a distinction that only becomes a frame if more indications of the distinction

subsequently emerge. As frames are identified, the thing to note is whether a frame is embedded inside another frame, holds another frame, or is distinct, that is, sits side by side another frame. If a researcher finds that it is ambiguous whether a frame is separate or embedded, then this is most likely a case where it intersects other frames, but is not yet fully inside them. Transitional linkages typically are built by first creating a distinct frame, then finding an intersecting frame which serves as a bridge. The latter enables movement of discourse from the frames it links, and in so doing they may become embedded, as Figure 3 demonstrates]:

Figure 3:



Note that in Figure 3 we chose to depict frame B “family’s creative expression” as the frame that holds other embedded frames. This is because we regard it as the most resourceful encompassing frame, and the session is now inside an exploration of Andy’s spray painting a wall as an example of “creative expression.” However as Figure 3 also shows, the movement between these linked

frames means they can be embedded in any way, one shifting to hold the other as the discourse moves.

**G: No, he wrote his name on the side of the building.**

**BK: Yeah, but was it a good job? Did he not do it in a nice way?**

**G: Yeah...**

**BK: Can you paint well with a spray can?**

**Andy: (nods)**

**BK: Really?**

**M: He put something on his door. What did he put?**

**G: His initials.**

**M: His initials.**

**BK: Does it look nice?**

**M: No!**

**Andy: That's what they think.**

Andy implies that he accepts his work is creative expression.

**BK: Would your friends think it looks nice?**

**Andy: Oh, they haven't seen it.**

**BK: You know what I'm saying? Some people spray paint, but they're really artists.**

Introduction of the term "artist" provides a metaphor for Andy's creative expression.

**M: In case your friend did see it . . .**

**BK: Ok, so you spray paint walls.**



**Andy: Yeah.**

**M: He does.**

**BK: Maybe he just wants to take an art class.**

**M: Yeah, he does.**

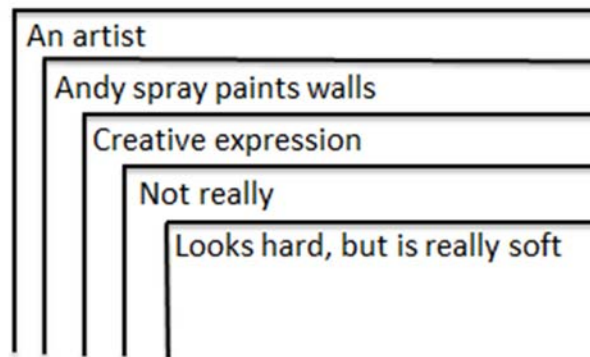
“Drawing” and “spray painting on a wall” (or door) have not been allowed to indicate a “bad boy.” Because of the previously established frames in the session – things aren’t as they appear, that is, it may be creative expression rather than problem behavior – Brad is set to suggest that Andy possibly needs to be more involved in art. The latter enables movement toward creative transformation – we are now interacting with an aspiring artist rather than further feeding and hardening the frame that distinguishes Andy as “bad.”

**Andy: I’m a good drawer.**

**T: He is.**

The session has built a sequence of frames, each available to reside inside the other, beginning with things that aren’t as they appear (“looks hard, but is really soft”), which leads to realizing that Mother, Grandma, or Andy are “not really” troublemakers. Instead they have creative ways of expressing an interesting family. Andy’s painting walls now does not have to provide evidence of bad behavior, but indication of creative expression, that is, the work of an artist. Andy agrees as he proclaims he is a “good drawer.” In terms of embedded frames, we can sketch them as follows:

Figure 4:



**Andy:** I draw creatures.

**M:** He does.

**BK:** Interesting. You notice he said the word “creatures.” Most kids would say “animals.”

**T:** Hmm.

**BK:** Or maybe you mean creatures, but something that’s not an animal?

**Andy:** Yeah.

**BK:** Like what?

**Andy:** Monsters.

**BK:** Monsters? Wow, like what kind?

**Andy:** Aliens . . . like they evolve into a monster and stuff.

**BK:** Now this is a serious question. Do you do the best you possibly can do to draw the scariest monster, as opposed to just a monster?

This question suggests and highlights more concern with his doing the best he possibly can with his art rather than where or what he draws. It also renders “the

scariest monster” as something resourceful when brought forth through creative expression to the best of one’s ability.

**M: He can do that...**

**BK: No, I want to hear it from him.**

**Andy: Not really, but I try my best sometimes.**

**BK: To make it scary?**

**Andy: Yeah.**

**BK: But, did you notice what you said after you said it? “Not really.” That’s the most interesting thing I’ve learned about this family. Anything they say that’s about a behavior that others would think is a problem, they always say, “not really.” This tells me that they’re actually experimenting with various forms of creative expression. In other words, it appears [that mother is] setting the house on fire, but not really. It appears that [grandmother is] complaining and that she’s whining, but not really. It appears that Andy is expressing scary things to people, but not really. Does that capture you all?**

The session continues building up the previously established frames. Since Andy has been redefined as someone who wants to pursue art, we are establishing a more resourceful way of specifying the implication of their theme of “not really” when it is applied to Andy’s expression. What people think they see on the surface of Andy’s scary behavior is not really what it seems. It may reflect something related to his inner desire to bring forth artistic or creative expression. The aesthetic creation of monsters is art, not necessarily evidence of psychopathology.

**G, M, Andy: (enthusiastic agreement)**

**BK: There you go.**

**M: And he scares me when I'm coming out of the bathroom.**

**BK: See, the problem is the world thinks it's for real. It's really not real...**

At this moment, the problem is distinguished as residing in the way the world perceives Andy, rather than referring to Andy's mental health and social role of being a patient. Others are only seeing the surface appearance, which is not really representative of what is taking place. This sets forth a distinction that can later be turned into a frame.

**M: ...not real**

**G: Not real...**

**BK: ... that's probably what's happened with your boy. People are seeing something that they think, "Oh this is real; his monsters are real." Maybe you draw so well that people are scared that you'll actually make a real monster.**

**Andy: I'm thinking about it.**

**BK: Really?**

**Andy: ...creatures and stuff. That'd be kind of cool, though, like a new species.**

**BK: Wow! Now that's what I call ambition! Most kids want to be a musician or be a professional sports player. He wants to create a new species** *(BK shakes*

*hands with Andy)!*

*(everyone laughs)*

Brad uses this moment to highlight Andy's creativity – praising his ability to think about what other kids don't imagine. This line of inquiry fits the contextual frame of a young person aspiring to be an artist.

**T: That's pretty impressive.**

**BK: That's awesome! That takes balls.** (*Everyone laughs as Brad throws Andy the ball again.*) **That's unbelievable . . . that's just unbelievable! You know I would have been so proud if my son would have come to me and said, "You know dad, I think my goal is to create a new species."**

The session began with the distinction characterized by a ball that appeared hard, but was really soft. At that time, Brad had thrown the ball to Andy and asked if he was like the ball. Now the ball is tossed again, with the comment that it takes balls to invent a new species. This enactment recursively brings the metaphorical ball back into the session. A resourceful frame for the session was lying on the floor before a single word had been spoken. Now it's emphasized that Andy is like that ball and so is his art.

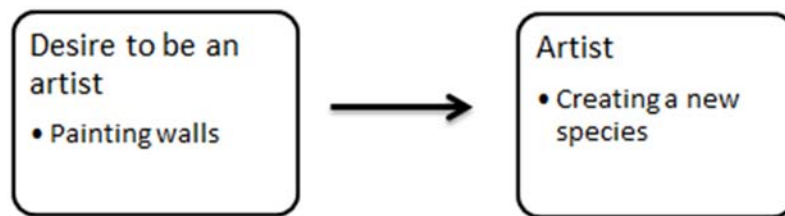
[It may be tempting to speculate that his way of performing dramas of "aggravation" arose from an intention to play, as does any game that tosses a ball. This kind of interpretation arises because we are inside a frame that promotes looking at creative play rather than pathology. In other words, it is the contextual frame that orchestrates both the performance of the session as well as post hoc interpretation.]

**T: That would be pretty cool huh?**

**BK: That would be amazing. . . What would the new species do that human beings are not able to do? Or before we get there, what would be something it would say to people that human beings don't say to people?**

The new creature, or different species, has become a metaphor enabling us to talk about how to make different, unique, creative expression in the world, which implicitly includes Andy's exploration of various modes of expression. We have moved away from a reframing of Andy's painting walls to discussing a specific work of art. This shift not only firmly establishes our presence inside the contextual frame of making art, but moves us further away from pathological connotation. This can be represented as follows:

Figure 5:



Whereas the first frame indicates how painting walls implies a desire to become an artist (a particular case of appearances not really being what they seem), the second frame accepts Andy as an artist and entertains conversation about a particular project. Whereas the first framing is a reframing of what others see as pathology, the latter framing leaves behind any trace of a problem connotation. It is entirely devoid of problem talk and only attends to the creative considerations of an artist. The ambiguity between appearance and reality are now utilized as an artist's creative resource as opposed to being the basis of a mistaken identity.

**Andy: I don't know. I haven't thought about that yet. Like do more. Like they got powers and stuff. Like they can fly . . . walk and speak . . . talk to creatures.**

**G: Like that haunted show the other night?**

**Andy: I like scary stuff. . . .**

**BK: So [it can] walk, talk, fly...**

**G: He attacks and does whatever.**

**M: And he watches this movie with bats on it.**

**BK: OK, you're just beginning to think about what it would be if you could create it.**

**Andy: What it would be?**

**BK: ...and what it would express. I mean you're saying it could fly and it could talk and walk. The only thing that's really interesting and different there is that it would fly, unless it talked and said things that human beings don't say.**

**Andy: Speaking a new language.**

**BK: There we go.**

**T: Hmm.**

**BK: Exactly. Would it be a language people hear? Or would it be a language where you just put thoughts in people's mind?**

**Andy: Put thoughts in people's minds.**

This new metaphor provides a way of addressing what Andy's communications have already done to his world – putting thoughts into people's minds. These thoughts, of course, may “not really” be what they seem.

**BK: Would it be thoughts that startle them as opposed to thoughts they're familiar with?**

**Andy: Startle them.**

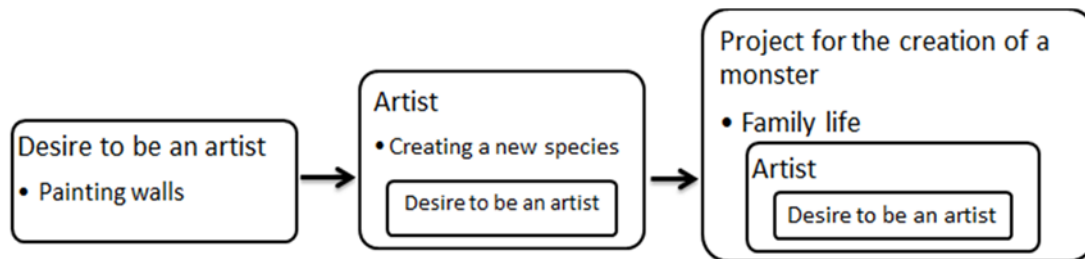
**BK: Would it be thoughts that you would say they think are real, but you would say not real?**

**Andy: Not really. Yeah, sort of. Yeah.**

**BK: Okay, so in other words, your family is teaching you how to create the perfect monster.**

Since mother and Grandma originally qualified their statements concerning some of their appearances as a fire setter and grouchy person, using the phrase “not really,” Brad ties this to the ability of Andy’s monster to be able to make people think that things are real, but are really not real. This coupling enables Andy’s family to be brought inside his art project. The dramas at home are teaching him how to have ideas for his artistic creation. In effect, we have moved across these frames:

Figure 6:



In this nesting of frames, Andy is able to include his family life, with all its contradictions and challenges, as contributing to his art project. Their ability to perform appearances that are not really what they appear to be is a source of creative inspiration for creating a creature that does the same to the public. Though not shown in Figure 6 for the sake of simplicity, “family life” is now a frame inside which both the “family’s creative expression” and “not really” frames are embedded.

**Andy: They don’t want me to, but I...**



**BK: Do you hear what I'm saying, because his monster is going to create fires, but not really. It's going to get everybody to complain, but not really. Cause look at grandma-she's smiling. And she's enjoying this whole family. This family is entertaining, isn't it? Would you say this is an entertaining family? In other words, you don't get bored in this family.**

The "not really" family, in other words, can inspire an aspiring artist to consider things to put in people's minds that are not really what they appear to be. Not only does it serve the development of creativity, it makes home life entertaining and not boring. Besides contributing to maintaining contextual presence in this project, Brad is utilizing earlier remarks about how the family regards itself as interesting. Throughout the session, all family members have smiled and laughed quite often, suggesting that all their drama was, at least on one level, amusing and entertaining to them. One could propose that this achievement of entertainment over boring experience is itself another surrounding frame:

**Andy: Oh no.**

**M, G:** *(Laugh)*

**Andy: Not really.**

**BK: Do you know the most complimentary thing that an adolescent, a young man, could say about his family is that, "My family is not boring."**

**T: Wow.**

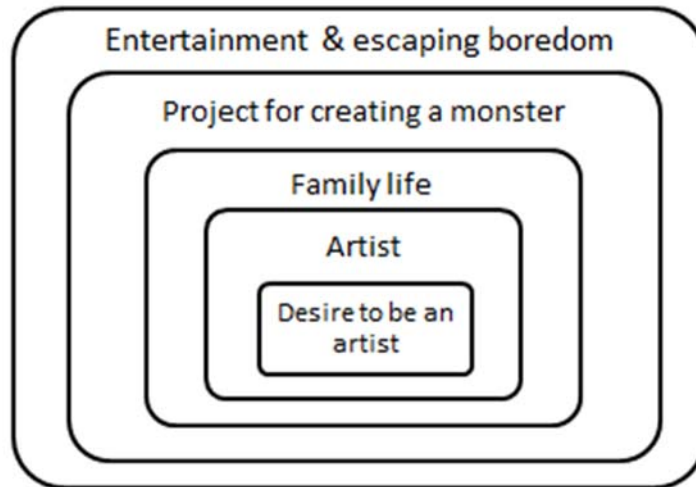
**BK: Because everyone thinks, at his age, that their family and family life – and that includes him – is boring.**

**T: That's true.**

**BK: This is a miracle! You may be the only family that isn't bored in this state.**

**I don't know. Most families are...**

Figure 7:



In the beginning the family came after years of feeling defeated with a son whose clinical record kept growing higher. In a single session an alternative contextual foundation has been built that enables them to celebrate their unique and even miraculous ability to not be boring.

**M: Bored.**

**BK: They're bored. But you have a family in which, my heavens, your son wants to create a new species. Something that doesn't even have to say a word [because it can] put thoughts into [people's] minds...**

**M: Oh God, please...**

**BK: ...about things that startle them that really aren't what they seem to be.**

**Very interesting, very interesting.**

**M: It is.**

**BK: ...Let's say you created this creature and did these things. What would be its name?**

**Andy: Kind of scary. Something scary**

**BK: What was that?**

**T: Something scary**

**BK: Something scary? So we call it SS: "Something Scary"?**

**Andy: No, I think um... (puts hands on head)**

**BK: He's creating right now.**

Andy's nonverbal communication as he bent over with his hands pressed against his head was distinguished as a moment of creative activity. This enactment re-indicated that the context Andy and the family are now in involves an emphasis upon artistic creation. Accordingly, it was more the name of the context Andy is now in rather than an evaluation of his mental capacities.

**Andy: Magmore.**

**BK: Magmore. Magmore or Madmore?**

**Andy: Magmore.**

**BK: That's a very interesting name. I never heard of a Magmore.**

**M: No, me either**

**T: Sounds pretty intense.**

**BK: It does. Mag is sort of like it's a magnet so I think people are going to be attracted it.**

**T: Drawn to it.**

**BK: Drawn to it.**

**T: Yeah.**

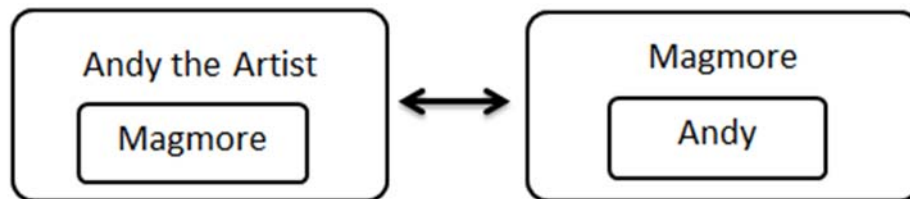
**BK: Does that make sense?** (*Andy nods his head indicating “yes”*) **And the more they try to stop thinking about it, the more they think about it.**

**Andy: Yeah . . . it hypnotizes you.**

**BK: It hypnotizes. You know what? I’ve got a feeling that you hypnotize a lot of people** (*everyone laughs*). **And they do all kinds of things that they think are real that you know are not real.**

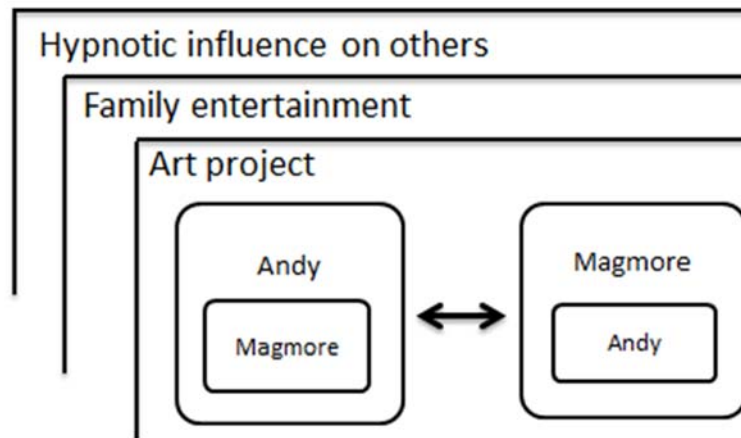
The name of his monster, Magmore, suggests a magnetic, hypnotic effect on people that leads others to assume more about a situation than meets its truth. In other words, Magmore embodies the same influence Andy has on the world. We will make this connection more obvious so that any talk about Magmore is also talk about Andy. We are beginning to create an oscillation between two framings, one where Andy the artist is creating Magmore, and the other where Magmore is a metaphorical way of talking about Andy:

Figure 8:



As these two forms of embedded frames shift back and forth, they secure presence in a nesting of frames that does not include any exit to a pathological frame. As Figure 9 demonstrates, the dance between Andy and Magmore is an art project that provides family entertainment and has a hypnotic influence on others.

Figure 9:



**M:** Oh yeah. He can.

**BK:** So you're a master hypnotist in some ways.

**G:** A what?

**BK:** He's a hypnotist. He hypnotizes, makes people think things that they think are real, but they're not real.

**M:** But they're not real.

**G:** Oh, okay.

**BK:** Like I bet he could convince someone that he actually is trying to make a monster and they would probably send reporters to the house to sneak in...

**M:** *(nodding her head)* And try to check it out.

**BK:** *(nodding)* ...and take photographs and check it out. He could probably convince them of that.

**M:** I think he can too.

Even the imagined creation of Magmore is seen as having a likely hypnotic effect on people in Andy's world. Some might actually believe he is really trying to make this monster. That's how hypnotic Andy's influence is on others. He can stir

their imagination to believe it is real. Again, we are shifting the nesting of frames between Andy and Magmore.

**BK:** *(looking directly at Andy)* **Is that right?** *(Andy nods in agreement).* **See! Very interesting. Maybe you'll grow up to be a Hollywood film-maker** *(Andy laughs).*  
**That's the kind of mind...**

**Andy:** **I've been thinking about making comic books.**

**BK:** **Comic books? There you go: drawing and this kind of creative thinking. Have you made a comic book before?**

Andy points to another contextual frame where his specific form of creative expression involves making comic books. Brad will elicit further discussion that fits this new distinction to provide enough indications to firmly establish it as a frame.

[The latter is a very important task, for a distinction cannot function as a frame until it holds enough distinctions that indicate it is holding rather than being held. Otherwise, it remains a distinction inside another frame. In effect, RFA attends to how distinctions either remain distinctions or re-indicate themselves sufficiently enough to become frames or holders of distinctions of the same type. The first time a distinction is offered by a conversant, it holds the possibility of becoming a frame. If the conversation brings forth more distinctions that fit inside the previous distinction, it expands to become a frame. This includes the most trivial of distinctions that may at first appear irrelevant to the ongoing plot line. For example, consider if a client asks, "What time is it?" If the therapist responds that it is 10:36 am and moves back to the conversation, the distinction remains an extraneous distinction. However, if the therapist or client continues re-indicating distinctions

about time, a frame can be established. For example, "Is it time for you to change?" "When is the last time you had to ask a question in order to move forward with your life?" "Can you imagine if a grandfather's clock was in my office and it spoke immediately after you asked me for the time and said, 'You don't have to remain stuck in the mourning of your ancestors for it will soon be afternoon.'" Here the distinction has inspired other indications that collectively build a frame.]

**Andy: One time when I was little.**

**BK: Really? How many years ago?**

**Andy: When I was in the sixth grade.**

**BK: Where is it? Do you still have it?** (*Andy shakes his head indicating "no"*) **What happened to it?**

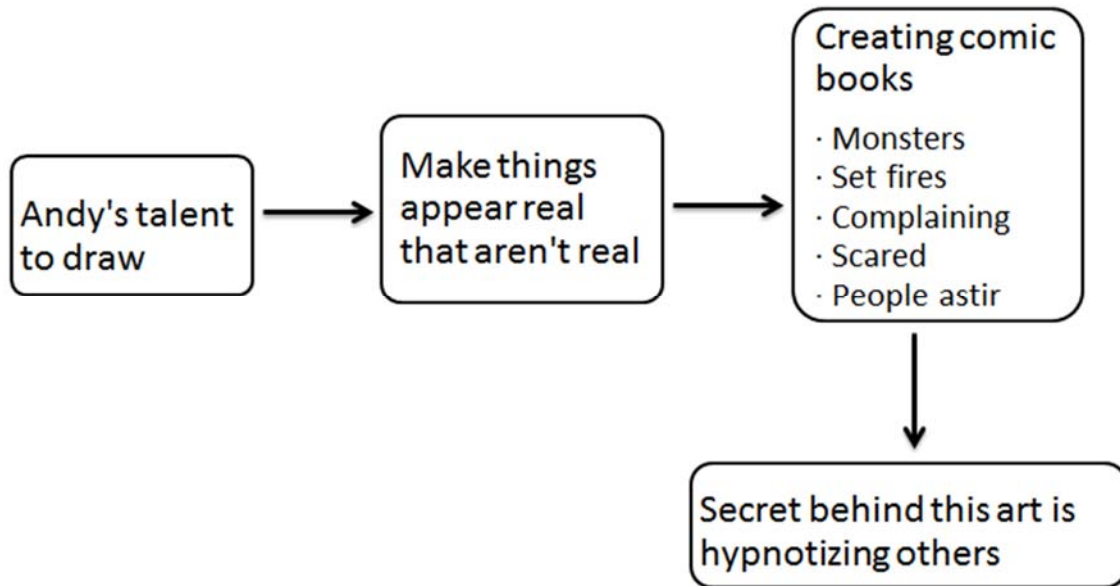
**Andy: I gave it to somebody, a little kid.**

**BK: My heavens! I think this case is done** (*BK is looking at therapist while Andy lifts his head to look at BK*). **He knows precisely what he is to do with his life. It's just been on hold. Once upon a time he had a skill that he knew - he recognized he could draw. He knew how to use his imagination. He knew how to make things appear real** (*looking at Mother*) **that aren't real. That's a comic book. He knew how those things that were real and not real sometimes involved monsters. That's a comic book. He knew that those monsters could set fires but they weren't really fires. He knew that all the people and characters in there would be all astir and all complaining and all scared and all thinking this is gonna happen and they should be worried, but it wasn't real. And he knew how to create a name for the character that nobody had**

**ever heard before because the secret, the art, of comic book making is hypnotizing others and drawing them into a [fantasized] real world...**

Brad has taken the frames of the session and introduced the following plot line:

Figure 10:



If we were to show the above plot line as embedded frames, we could show that Brad has now placed all the facts, descriptions, and metaphors that arose in the session as being inside and substantiating the resourceful contextual frame: creating comic books. The latter distinction, initially introduced by Andy as “I’ve been thinking about making comic books,” was re-indicated by Brad as a frame that holds Andy’s mission in life – “My heavens! I think this case is done. He knows precisely what he is to do with his life” – followed by a description that places all past actions inside the frame of entering the world of comic books. In comics, there are more choices for Andy. Here anything can happen and not happen, without having to get



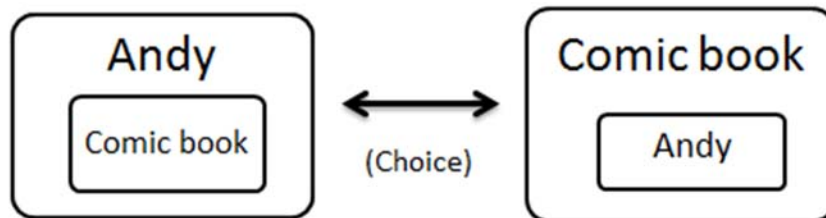
into trouble with the outside authorities. Here his creativity and imagination can flourish more, but be held safely within the protective confines of art.

**M: A real....**

**BK: ...that's not real. And so it stopped. So he probably tried to make his life a comic book** (*everyone laughs*).

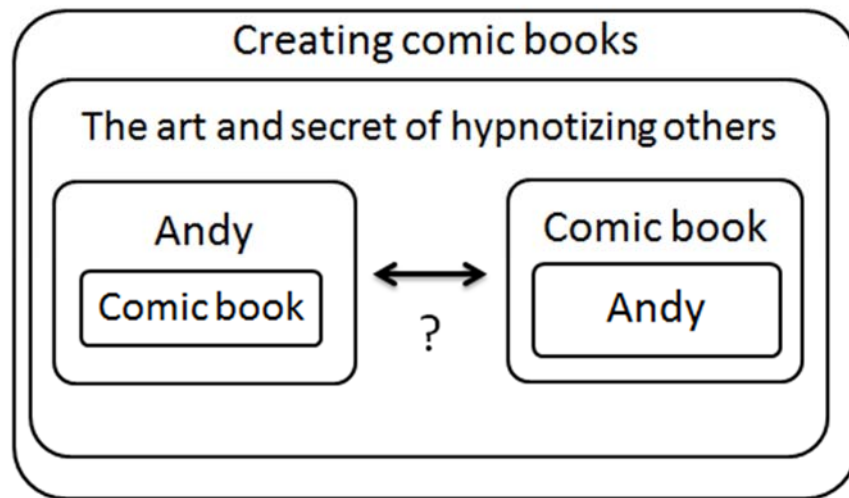
This is the transformative moment. All the circumstances of his life have brought him to this fork in the road. He can continue being a tragic comic or initiate becoming a successful creator, an artist who creates comic books. All forthcoming conversation will be brought forth by this choice – to be an artist or not to be an artist, to become a creator of comic books or to be a comic book. In other words, his life is a matter of choosing which nesting of frames he will enter:

Figure 11:



What is important about this contextualization of choice is that there is no pathologizing, no exit that enables a return to how others have previously framed Andy as being bad, mad, disturbed, sick, etc. Both choices are inside a larger frame of creating comic books, which involves the art and the secret of hypnotizing others:

Figure 12:



**T: ...will do it. Yeah.**

**BK: He's been acting like a comic book character. I don't know the details of your life, but I'm going to guess that you have been acting like a comic book character carrying on and doing things that a comic book character would do. Is that true?**

Without ever mentioning all the things Andy has done in the past that got him into trouble, Brad is able to set forth an alternative context that provides new meaning. He has been acting as a comic book character, a more resourceful framing than indications of mental illness.

**Andy: Hmm. Yeah it gives me some ideas.**

**BK: Yeah. So you just need to pick up...Which hand do you use to draw? Are you right handed?**

**M: Yeah, he's right handed. I'm left handed.**

**BK: Your mind has been waiting for your hand to start. When you make a comic book do you use pencils? What do you use? Is it a pencil?**

**Andy: A pencil.**

**BK: Do you have a special pencil to make a comic book?**

**Andy: Mostly any pencil I can write with.**

**BK: *(to mother and grandma)* I'm going to ask the two of you [to do] perhaps the most important thing anyone will ask you to do with this young man. And that is: immediately after this session, go get him a special set of pencils and paper, so he can get on with his life and become a great creator of comic books.**

This is a direct invitation to change. Brad underscores it as the most important request they will ever hear. The whole family is invited to re-contextualize Andy's life as that of a creative comic book artist.

**M: Hmmm. Okay.**

**BK: Will you do that?**

**M: Yeah. Uhhmm.**

**BK: Because this is a hand that's waiting for a talent to express itself. When he was born...**

**G: I did that three or four years ago but I guess he wasn't ready.**

**BK: Really?**

**G: Yeah.**

**BK: Maybe not, but you see...**

**M: See now he's ready.**

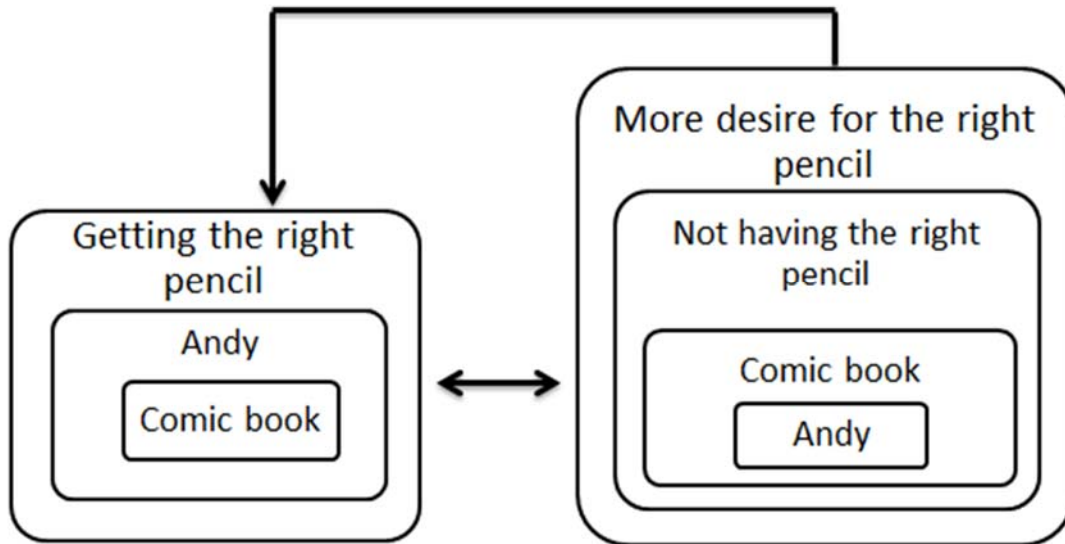
Mother's and Grandma's remarks demonstrate that they are already inside this contextual frame.

**BK: ...our creative minds do all kinds of creative things. When he has a hand that's wanting to express this beautiful imagination, this hypnotic way of influencing people, and it's not used, if it doesn't have the right pencil – what happens is he's going to turn into the very thing his hand wants to express. I guess the decision for this family is whether he'll be a comic book or whether he'll create comic books. I advise you to make, create comic books because that will give you a rich, interesting, maybe even lucrative life. The other [choice] will just make your hand want to have a pencil more than it already does.**

Again, a context for transformation is set in front of them. In this session, Andy has become an artist. The family is being asked to continue living inside this resourceful contextual home. Here Andy creates comic books. Otherwise, he becomes a comic book. Both are potentially hypnotic, wild, influential, startling, disturbing, and beyond imagination. An artist gets paid for being wild and crazy, whereas the other gets you into trouble. His situation has now become: if his hand expresses his talent, he will become an artist. If his hand is held back, he may “turn into the very thing his hand wants to express.” Notice that Brad recasts the latter choice as a disguised alternative: “The [other] choice will just make your hand want to have a pencil more than it already does.” In this latter resourceful framing, he can choose to be an artist or choose to desire being an artist more than he does now,

which paradoxically moves him closer to becoming an artist. In terms of RFA, we have:

Figure 13:



**M:** Make him do it his self *(laughs)*.

**BK:** See in a comic book you can say anything. You can do anything.

**M:** Yeah, really.

**BK:** You can set fires. You can go to the back yard and look at a dog and just take your pencil and say "I change you into metal." You can see a deer walk by and take you pencil and go, "I change you into a five headed octopus with a sparrow's wing and the sound of a bumble bee when you fly near people."

**M:** Don't tell him. He might do it! *(laughs)*

**BK:** Because a pencil can do it. His hand can do it.

The original frame of "not really" has become re-indicated as a comic book. With a comic book, the created art becomes the "not really". Without this form, the family entertains itself with a performance of that which it is not really meaning to

be identified with. Setting a fire, but not really being a fire setter; complaining, but not really being grouchy; and acting like a Magmore, but not really being a Magmore.

[Like a species without language, a creature must first act that which it later must indicate it is not indicating. For example, a wolf nips another wolf, but then does not get into a fight in order to indicate that it was play rather than a serious attack. This family performs an expression that appears to be problematic, but then indicates that it is not really problematic.]

**G: *(to M)* His hand can draw that.**

**M: I know. I'm ah, I'm telling him not to give him ideas.**

**G: Well yeah.**

**M: Not doing that to the dog.**

**G: Put some ideas in his head.**

**BK: But you know, you know.**

**M: No, no *(laughs)*.**

**G: But he can draw it on a piece of paper. That's what he's talking about.**

**M: Oh.**

**BK: Is that weird. . . a creative man like this, [with creativity] in his hand needs to draw these things. His imagination needs to be drawn. When that doesn't happen, then you do all kinds of crazy things like try to really make a dog...**

**G & M: Oh yeah.**

**G: He's always had an avid imagination. I mean even when he was little.**

**BK: I'm going to give you a professional...I'm going to name what's happened. This is professional talk: His hand is constipated. His drawing hand is constipated. It has to be set free. The creativity that is in him has to come out. He has to draw. He has to make comic books. You can't tell him, "Don't do comic books." In fact, you can't tell him...**

Brad gives them an absurd diagnosis, calling it professional talk: "His hand is constipated." The session is now focusing on releasing his hand to draw comics as an alternative to being a comic book character. This new diagnosis is simply another indication about needing the right pencil.

**G: No, I haven't.**

**BK: Don't tell him not to make comic books that aren't too scary. He should make the scariest comic books he wants to do. He should not only have them be scary, but they should be a little crazy. . . he can have a story where the thing that scares people the most ends up being the nicest person.**

Here scary is not what it appears, but may indicate a crazy way of masking a nice person. This may apply to both the comic character and its creator. Rather than fight Andy's ability to produce crazy ideas and scare others, these are utilized as talents when they serve the making of comics.

**M: Yeah and something about knives and he could do something about knives...**

The scary thing he previously did to his mother was claim he would kill her with a knife. Now she, while fully inside this alternative context, encourages him to make a comic book about knives.

**BK: I'm talking about the comics. I'm just talking about the comics.**

**G: Yeah.**

**BK: That's right. I think comic books [often] get boring because they show the scary people to be the bad guys. The scary people should sometimes be shown to be those who are the smartest - [those] who see the world and know that they have to appear not as they really are in order to help move life in a way nobody expected. That was a . . . mouthful. But I think you understand what I'm saying don't you?**

Brad is suggesting that there are many other ways of working with monsters, including the surprise that they may be the real good guys. This is a way of talking about Andy's own behavior through discussing how he can choose to invent his fictional characters. For example, a creature may be so smart that it performs deeds in the world with more complexity, including appearing bad while working toward something good. In addition, since it has already been established that this family has found creative ways to escape boredom, surely Andy's comic characters want to be more than what they predictably appear to be as part of a cliché plot line. Again, he can use his family life as a source in developing comic book characters and story lines, including how they distinguish appearance and reality, artistic creation and personal identity.

**Andy: Ummm.**

**BK: Excellent. I knew you did. I knew that you were born with a special mission, with a special talent. And your mission is to use that special talent. I'm gonna just take a brief recess, and get some water for myself. I'd like for**



**you [the therapist] to talk to them and for him to share what kind of pencils he wants . . . what kind of paper? Maybe they should have a certain space in his room just for the...Maybe they should put a sign over his bedroom door saying “professional cartoonist.”**

The family and therapist are left to more deeply settle into their new contextual home, that is, build up more distinctions that re-indicate that they are now in this new contextual frame. They are to discuss the tools he needs for building a new life, including re-arranging his room.

**T: Cool!**

**BK: This all needs to come in their life in a big way.**

**T: Yeah!**

**BK: You all talk about it. I’ll be right back. Okay?**

**T: Cool!**

**BK: It’s awesome man. *(Patting Andy on the back, BK exits).***

**T: Awesome! So, what do you think about that?**

**G: *(laughs)* Amazing to me!**

**M: Amazing to me too. . .**

**Andy: I should have brought...I got my binder in my book bag. I can show you the rest of my pictures.**

*(The therapist and family discuss the kind of art materials he wants. He specifies big pieces of paper on a pad and notes that his studio should be located in his bedroom near his desk and window. Grandma recommends a setup where he “can look*

*out the window and think and concentrate.” They put together a plan to go both to a hobby center and Walmart.*

*When Brad comes back to his office, he is thinking of a heavy metal hand that he has on one of his shelves. He frequents antique stores and flea markets to find unusual items that he gives to clients when the moment seems right. His office is filled with these unusual items. Brad enters with the decision to give him the metal hand.)*

**BK:** *(BK reaches on the shelf for the metal hand)* **For years I’ve had a hand not understanding why I had a hand. I know that you had noticed that it’s a right hand. I think maybe this hand’s been waiting for you and that I should give you this hand. Now when I give you this hand, your hand is going to be free to express itself fully through the art that’s your talent.**

With these words Brad prepares to give Andy the metal hand in a ritualistic way, concretely marking the moment when his hand is declared free to express his inborn gift and destined mission.

**Andy:** **Yeah.**

**BK:** **Okay?** *(BK offers Andy the hand)*

**Andy:** **Thank you.**

**BK:** **You bet.**

**T:** **Is it pretty heavy?** *(Mother is quietly chatting with Grandmother)*

**Andy:** **Yeah** *(smile on face).*

**BK:** **It’s heavy.**

**T:** **It’s awesome.**

**Andy:** **It’s steel ain’t it?**

**BK: Is it?**

**Andy: Yeah. It's steel.**

**G: Do you know what I was sitting here thinking about? The year before last we went to church one night to a special meeting. The man that did this talking that night was a . . . preacher, but he'd had a stroke and a lot of things that he says is not clear. But he got up there and . . . he had comic books drawn.**

**BK: Really?**

**G: ...that just hit it right on the nail . . . I don't know who made the comic books, where he got it from or anything about it . . . was sort of like these people dressed up and they would go out to some part of the outside in the woods in the, like in the country like in the woods like - it was like ceremony that they would do, but then it started getting into the school, and they had to put a stop to it.**

**BK: Do you know what's interesting to me about what you said? (*Grandmother and BK lean toward each other*) You found yourself listening to a preacher who for some reason brought up comic books. That's almost if it's, I don't want to be too ambitious with my thinking. . .**

**G: Yeah.**

**BK: But it's almost as if already you were given a sign that comic books have something to do with the path of his future.**

Brad utilizes what grandmother presents as further validation of their new contextual home, rather than chase another direction that might bring forth a non-resourceful frame.

**G: Well you know.**

**BK: *(looking at therapist)* That's extraordinary, you know?**

**G: It was really amazing to me because I took the comic book home and I read it.**

**BK: Yes.**

**G: And then it came up into the schools. And it was happening at school what they were doing and what they were saying and all this other...**

It would likely be a therapeutic mistake to explore whatever Grandma is talking about, perhaps a minister who thinks that certain comic books are related to some ritualistic activity in the schools. All that matters is underscoring the re-indication of comic books and allowing it to maintain presence inside its frame, rather than establish an alternative frame that potentially gives comic books a non-resourceful connotation.

**BK: *(looking at Andy)* Now this is important. I want to say this to your talent. I want to speak to your talent: When you make a comic book, that becomes your whole world. Every comic book you make can be anything that your talent wants to express. That means you can create many worlds *(Andy nods in agreement)*. You can sometimes base your world on things that happen in your family. I mean you might just turn to your family and see it as an inspiration for the kind of world you can create in that comic book world. So, if mom almost burns the house down it gives you an idea for a comic.**

By speaking to his "talent," Brad is able to underscore, in a different way, a recognition of his gift. Addressing the talent and calling it out by name validates it.

Furthermore, saying, “When you make a comic book, that becomes your whole world” is another re-indication of the new resourceful frame, where all of Andy’s behavior and experiences are held inside the frame of being an artist who makes comic books. Brad also suggests, consistent with what has been established earlier in the session, that his family is a source of inspiration (even when it’s an annoyance). Whatever happens at home can be utilized to bring forth new creative expression in a comic book.

**BK: If Grandma talks about a preacher who talks about a comic book it might give you an idea. In a way, everything that happens in your life (*Grandma interrupts*)...**

**G: Hey, I have another idea!**

**BK: Yes?**

**G: When he was small we have a pond out kind back...**

**T: Behind your house, yeah.**

**G: And when Pa Pa passed away . . . he would take knives out and bury them and we didn’t know where he buried them. We don’t know what he did with them. But now it’s all cleared off land now. So, they may be there, you know, and they may not be. But, anyway, he would ah...**

**BK: Who’s he? Who buried them? (*Andy puts up hand*)**

**G: (*Grandma points to Andy*) He did.**

**BK: Okay.**

**G: And he would walk out around in the woods at that time and he would go around this pond and stare around. He would go further if I didn't go follow him. Maybe he could draw something like that.**

**BK: He can use anything...**

What's important is that Grandma is framing what she offers as an idea for what he could draw, rather than posing an alternative meaning for his life.

[RFA is not organized by the hegemony of any kind of therapeutic interpretation, but by building contextual frames that promote resourceful ways of participating. Too many therapists, intrigued by where Grandma's distinctions might lead, might roam outside the already established resourceful frame and get lost building interpretive frames that too easily slip back into a pathological way of making sense of Andy's conduct.]

**G: A little boy going out in the woods...**

**BK: That's a wonderful idea. Anything that inspires him.**

**T: Yeah, Yeah.**

**BK: You know and sometimes you think thoughts that don't make any sense. You know what happens if you're...**

**G: Well, ah, that...**

**BK: One sec. Just let me finish this. Because I want to fully address what you just offered. A creative human being thinks things other people don't think.**

**G: Mm hm.**

**BK: What's important is they take that creative inspiration and express it in the art that God gave them to use. If he doesn't use his right hand, the hand**

**that's been stuck - but now he is - what happens? It just comes out in weird ways. Now we want those things to come out not only in weird ways, but even weirder ways than anybody ever imagined. Because he's free to do it in his own world which is the world of the comic book. (looking at Andy) Do you understand what I'm saying? (Andy nods.)**

Re-indicating the frames we have established helps maintain presence in the resourceful handling of discourse. Specifically, Andy's previous behavior that was framed as pathology, including "thinking things other people don't think" and being "weird," are re-indicated as being inside the frame of a "creative human being" who makes comic books.

**G: Well I think I've told you that about him going out in the woods (BK nods). I think he was looking for someone (Grandma mouths "Pa Pa" without saying it out loud).**

Grandma is telling us that his grandfather's death was an important marker in Andy's life. It would not be surprising if it marked the onset of the acting out behavior that caught the attention of others. It is also interesting to speculate, after the fact, over the connection between a preacher's comic books that describe weird rituals in the woods and Andy's walking around the pond and burying knives after his grandfather's death. As fascinating as this is, a therapist must avoid being carelessly tempted to explore it. This would most likely unravel the progression that has been made and return the session to a "problem" oriented theme. In this session, Brad looks for how to utilize Pa Pa's presence in the present resourceful frame.

**BK: When you have somebody like that, that you love so deeply you never get over it. You never get over...**

**G: I think that's what, I think that's what he was doing.**

**BK: You never stop missing them. You sometimes have dreams where you even cry because you see them, because you feel them close to you in your dreams. Do you all ever have a dream like that?**

**M: I had one ...**

**BK: *(looking directly at Andy)* Do you ever have a dream like that where you...**

*(Andy starts weeping)*

**M: I have a dream...**

**BK: ...where you see them and feel them and then you just start crying because you feel alone.**

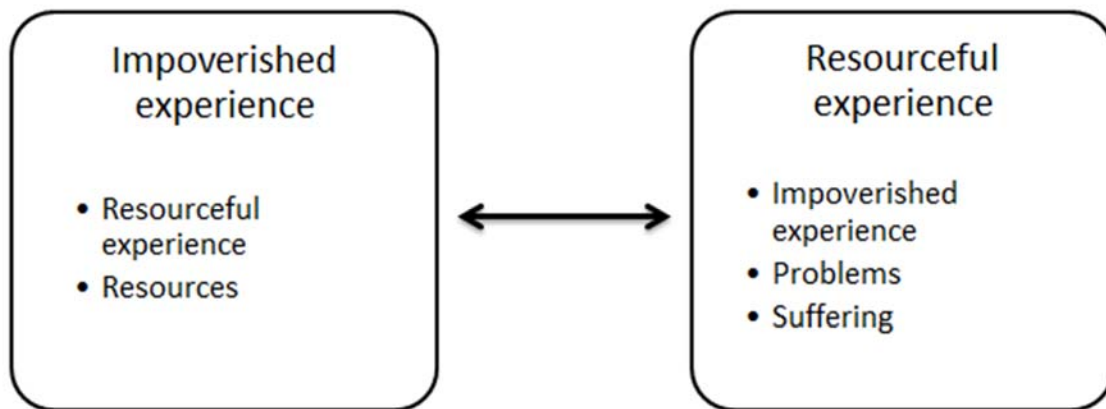
**M: I had a dream...**

**BK: Just a second *(to mother)* - because I understand that because I had a grandfather like that. You know what? I still have dreams like that of both my grandpa and of my grandma. When I see them, sometimes I'll just see them sitting in a chair . . . it's very interesting because once I had a dream where he actually buried a key in the ground and I dug it up and it was the key to his house where I used to go see him . . . It just means that somebody loved us deeply. We know that it's a special love because it will touch us that way when we miss them and they'll come, bring back the memory of their love in the dreams. I . . . know that there was a great love between you...**



Andy's experiences that are connected to his grandfather – dreaming him with tears and burying objects in the ground – are associated with Brad's own experiences. They are resourcefully regarded as confirmations of love for grandfathers, and are not pursued in order to construct interpretations that might distract from the forward movement of the conversation. Once a resourceful context has been established in a conversation, conversants typically introduce and re-introduce distinctions that have been important in holding up their previous more pathologically-oriented frame. It is important that these distinctions be held inside the resourceful frame rather than allow them to grow into frames themselves. RFA basically regards the therapeutic situation as movement between these nested frames:

Figure 14:



The important change for therapy is changing it from a focus on impoverished experience, which includes any discussion of attempted solutions, available resources, and inspirations (all done within the frame of impoverishment) to a focus on resourceful experience. The latter can host discussion on how problems, suffering, and impoverished experience can become resources for living.

Stated differently, in a resourceful contextual frame, any particular problem is only a distinction that is not given enough attention to allow re-indication to make it spring to life as anything larger than a distinction. Here problems are not allowed to grow into contextual frames. The same holds true for solutions – they are tempered as distinctions, rather than allowed to contextually organize therapeutic discourse. Standing inside a problem-focused (or its implied complement: solution-focused) contextual frame limits talk about resources so they remain distinctions, thus not allowing them to grow into frames that can re-contextualize a client’s life. The art of change is most simply defined as the art of changing contextual frames, starving impoverished distinctions and feeding resourceful ones (see Keeney & Keeney, 2013).

**G & M: Mm hm.**

**BK: ...and that when he uses his hands to express the gift that God gave him to use, grandpa would be very happy. That grandpa would be, dare I say, smiling and dancing now. Do you know what I mean? (Grandmother nods) You know what? My guess is that he just didn’t come into the world with this creative gift from nowhere. This family is a creative family (quiet laughter). That is, on the one hand...**

Here we have brought grandfather into the newly built contextual home where he can be imagined to be happy about Andy following his destiny to express his creative gift. This is how we use his introduction into the conversation as a distinction that resides inside the already established resourceful frame.

**T: He’s never bored (laughter)**

**BK: ...on the one hand there is one thing after another, but not real.**

**G: Never what?**

**T: Never bored** *(smiling while looking at Grandmother)*

**G: Oh...**

**BK: I bet there's some interesting stories about Pa Pa's life that would make an interesting cartoon.**

This is a reminder that anything about the family's history is to be framed as a source for inspiring Andy's art.

**G: I wished I could remember what he [Pa Pa] always talked about, joked about, ah, who were they** *(looking at Mother)?*

**M: I don't know.**

**G: You don't. Oh my mind just went blank. "Little Moron!" He used to talk about Little Moron. He joked about Little Moron.**

**BK: Interesting.**

**G: He would tell that and he could get into a bunch of people and he would be the center of attention.**

**BK: Isn't that weird? Because the first part of the word "moron" is "more," which is the last part of the name of the monster Andy wanted to create which was Magmore.**

This is another way of bringing Pa Pa into the home of an aspiring young artist that is localized as an additional re-indication of the established resourceful frame. What is implied, but not made explicit, is that Andy's love for his grandfather can inspire him to create, something that would make grandfather proud and happy.

The very name of Magmore holds a part of Pa Pa's imaginary joke character's name, Little Moron. We now have the possibility of "more" meaning for Magmore.

**T: Magmore.**

**BK: That's really interesting isn't it?**

**G: Oh** *(looking at BK)*, **how did you...?**

*(laughter)*

**BK: Isn't that a weird thought?**

**G: Yes!**

**BK: Whoa. That's how creative he is. He doesn't even know how creative he is!**

**T: Wow!** *(looking at Andy)*

**BK:** *(motioning toward Andy while looking at Grandma & Mother)* **He made a connection with his grandfather even in the name of what he was going to create as the character for the comic.**

**G: Oh, okay.**

**T: Wow!**

**BK: Wow.**

**G:** *(looking at Andy)* **More, what did you say?**

**Andy & BK: Magmore.**

**G: Magmore. Moron. Magmore. Okay!**

**BK: So you got the "more". Half the word is there.**

**M: Yeah it is.**

**BK: Mm hm.**

**G: I wished I could remember some of those things that he used to tell.**

**BK: I think *(pause)* when he receives - because he's already received the blessing that his hand is now free to express the gift he has - when he receives the pencils and the paper, sets the room up, and steps into his new life of becoming someone who's here to express his talent, I think you're going to be surprised by the things you remember about Pa Pa *(looking at Grandmother, then turns to Mother)*. And I think you're going to be surprised by the way in which there's a lot more creativity in all of you that will start to surprise you as you see his creativity flow. And boy when it comes on . . . get ready, cause . . . you better have enough paper. Cause he just might be going to town. You know, it's up to him how much he wants it to flow.**

Everything that is presented in the session is utilized to further elaborate and substantiate the reality of a family that nurtures an artist who creates comic books.

**G: How did somebody like you two people to come into our lives? I mean, I don't... *(laughs)*.**

**BK: I was going to ask you...**

**G: It's fascinating.**

**BK: How can fascinating creative people like you come into our lives? Because it's such an inspiration...**

**G: I mean...**

**BK: ...to see how. . . Are you all religious?**

**G: Yes.**

**M: Yes.**

**BK: And would you say...**

**G: No. He's not.**

**M: He's not.**

**BK: But you...**

**G: I don't know why he's not, but...**

**BK: *(looking at Andy)* But you . . . recognize that there's mysteries in the world, yes? We can say that there's mystery.**

**Andy: *(looks up and nods)* Yeah.**

**BK: It's a mystery that all of these fascinating things take place *(therapist nods)*...**

**G: He doesn't...**

**BK: in ways...**

**G: ...he doesn't prefer to go to church. Why? I don't know.**

**BK: Well . . . in his comic book he is free to invent a church nobody's ever heard of. Wouldn't that be interesting? *(Andy nods)* Yeah. The Church of Magmore *(everyone laughs; Andy is rolling his head and laughing; BK then stands and shakes hands with Mother, then Grandmother, and then Andy's hand)*. Well I think you all are going to have one of the most fascinating stories to share with the world. Maybe someday it will be a Hollywood movie. No, some day it will be a cartoon [comic book] in everyone's home.**

Again Brad re-indicates this new distinction – Andy's relationship to church – as an aspect of his family life that can inspire his comic books. One might guess that one of the biggest disagreements in the household concerns God and going to church. Andy's delight and explosion of laughter about the thought of creating a

Church of Magmore shows how free he really can be when he creates a comic book world.

**T: Yeah!**

**BK: That would be something, wouldn't it? You never know. Cartoons become movies, movies become cartoons, and lives become cartoons, and lives become movies, and movies become lives. What a movie you've been living. Now it's time to make it free to express everything that touches you most deeply including the feelings of Pa Pa . . . you know, Pa Pa's in the family.**

[Their life has been unreal ("not really") like a comic book, a cartoon, or a movie. In these fantasy worlds, anything is possible including the choice to be free to express the feelings for the loved ones you miss the most. To an imaginative boy, the death of a close grandfather could easily feel as if life murdered a dear relation. Burying knives underneath the ground is a creative way of burying the instruments of death. Walking around the perimeter of a pond is imaginative, and perhaps mythological. The circle of life – the water that holds and births and nourishes life – is surrounded by the possibility of death which lies buried underneath the ground, waiting to bring others down under with it. As interesting as this fantasizing may be, Brad did not bring it into the conversation because what is most important is that we bring forth ways in which the presence of Pa Pa's absence can be a resource for the young aspiring artist.]

**M: Yeah.**

**BK: ...cause you still feel your love for him.**

**M: Yeah.**

**BK: He still shows up in dreams. Pa Pa's still there.**

**M: I had a cousin got killed in a car wreck...**

**G: There's a humming bird comes by my house.**

**BK: Really?**

**G: Every once in a while.**

**BK: *(looking at Andy)* There you go . . . Magmore's humming bird . . . what could you do to a humming bird in a comic book world that would just make people think real but, not real. . . that would be so interesting and hypnotic?**

**Something for you to think about, you know? Maybe that would be a comic book . . . maybe for Christmas you'd make a comic book for each person in the family. Grandmother gets a humming bird...**

Again, utilizing everything for the artist's imagination and creative expression.

**M: And I'd get one with the house on fire.**

**Andy: And another thing...**

**BK: What was...**

**M: I'd get one with someone setting the house on fire.**

**BK: Yeah, she gets one...**

**Andy: I'm thinking about, I'm thinking, like, with the drawings and stuff making a video game too.**

**BK: Wow! Awesome. There's so many, you know...**

**T: So many ideas.**



**BK: When you take all the energy that you've been wasting on nonsense and creatively apply it to the world, it can make a surprise you're not going to believe.**

The comic book-like behavior that originally got Andy in trouble is now regarded as "nonsense," a waste of creativity and energy that brings less surprise than what would be produced by being an artist.

**M: It'll probably...**

**BK: And your life is going to be so** *(leans toward Andy)* **weird** *(Andy looks up and smiles).*

**M: It'll surprise everybody.**

**BK: And surprise everyone.**

**T: Yes, that's true.**

**BK: Your ability to hypnotize everyone will multiply ten times. And your ability to disturb people in ways that make you smile will multiply ten times. But you know what? You'll get away with it; and secondly, some day you might make a fortune doing it. But one thing's for sure: this whole family is already very rich - rich with the unique creativity that you've all brought together** *(Mother laughs),* **and come to us and shared, and that's just a blessing for us. I think you need, as quickly as you can, without breaking the speed limit, to go start the next chapter of this gifted young man's life. Okay? Turn his room into the studio of a professional cartoonist.**

The same skills that got him into trouble are now harnessed to bring forth positive outcomes. They are set up to be used to construct and continuously re-indicate a contextual frame concerned with art and comic book creativity.

**M: I didn't think about that until you said something.**

**BK: Okay? So you all should get on with it. Now you have three hands and there's the beginning part [the steel hand] for Magmore.**

**T: Magmore.**

**M: I never heard of...**

**BK: Maybe Magmore will be a monster who secretly, when nobody's looking, draws cartoons with a steel hand.**

Underscoring that Magmore has a steel hand for drawing is a way of talking about Andy.

**T: Woa.**

**M: I never go in his room when he's drawing.**

**T: I'm eager to see what Magmore looks like.**

**M: I do too.**

**BK: Awesome. Okay, that's it! That's it.**

**T: Great!**

**BK: Go make some history.**

**T: Awesome.**

*(Everyone stands)*

**BK: Let me shake your hands. Really nice to meet you. All right, let me shake that metal hand too.**

**T:** *(laughing)* **Very good. Very nice.**

**BK:** **Great!** *(laughs)* **Fabulous.**

**Andy:** *(to T)* **There's your ball.**

**T:** **Oh, thank you.**

**BK:** **Yeah, he doesn't need it; he's got a steel hand.**

**T:** **He doesn't need this.** *(BK laughs.)* **It looks hard but it's soft, really** *(therapist opens door).* **All right, there you go.**

We end where we began, but with a difference. In the beginning this communication was a simple distinction, but then it moved to becoming a bridging transitional frame. Finally it became a metaphor for the kind of play that shifting frames can nurture.

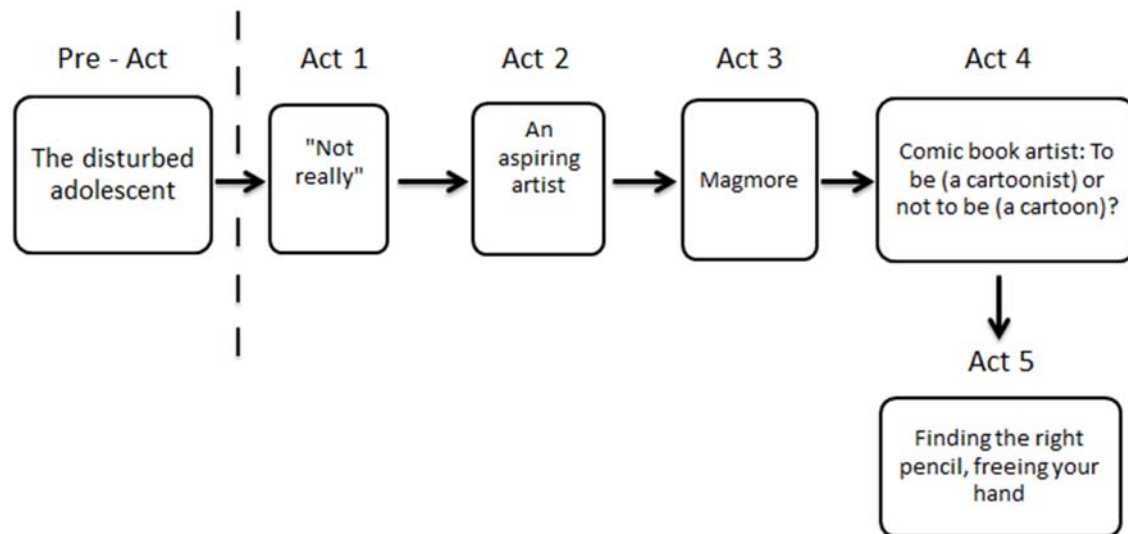
**BK:** **Thank you all. Take care.**

A simple RFA of this session can be reduced to five acts:

"Not Really" ----> An Aspiring Artist ----> Magmore ----> Comic Book Artist: To Be (a Cartoonist) or Not to Be (a Cartoon)? ----> Freeing Your Hand

It should be noted that there was a contextual frame enacted prior to the session that was never brought into the conversation. Namely, Brad had been told that Andy had been through numerous treatments for all kinds of crazy conduct. Therefore we could call this a "Pre-Act", named something like, "The disturbed adolescent." Our RFA sketch more accurately would therefore portray this sequence:

Figure 15:



The transitional bridge between the pre-act and Act 1 was serendipitously provided by the ball on the floor. The establishment of the “not really frame” was made possible by the “looks hard, but is really soft” frame precipitated by comparing Andy to the contradictory appearance of the ball. This distinction of opposites – hard versus soft – becomes “not really versus really” where presumed problematic conduct by all family members is not what it appears to be. Even prior to establishing the “not really” frame, there was no need for the therapist to use the actual clinical names or interpretations offered by others, for they were most likely misperceptions. Hence, the first inquiry about behavior outside the norm was voiced with the metaphor of “creative expression” that “makes the family interesting.”

As we saw in Figure 2, the “not really” frame holds the “looks hard, but is really soft” frame as a subset. When information was set forth about each family member’s creative contribution to making the family interesting, the family chose to

mention Andy's having painted a wall. At this time, that behavior could be framed as both a "not really" what it appears to be, and as "creative expression." This double framing of his conduct sidesteps all pathological frames and the association of the two frames implies "not really pathology, but really creative expression." This movement of frames sets the stage for the therapist to spell out that his previously mis-framed conduct is now more accurately understood as an expression of Andy's desire to be an artist.

Figure 4 shows how the session had, in effect, nested 5 frames inside one another, with the outer frame emphasizing Andy as an aspiring artist. Inside this context, conversation continued to arise (and re-indicate) that led to Andy's specific desire to fantasize the creation of a new species, a creature that appears monstrous, but really isn't. Here therapeutic conversation enables Andy to talk about all the things he has done that got him in trouble, without those distinctions feeding the self-verification of a pathological frame. Rather, they are the brainstorming of a creative artist reflecting on an inventive project. Figure 5 shows this very progression, moving from the indication of Andy's painting walls to be a sign of an aspiring artist to an actual artist discussing a specific work of creation.

As this conversation continued, all distinctions that arose were shown to fit inside the frame that holds them, that is, their relevance to contributing to Andy's art work. Even the mention of family life episodes is regarded as resourceful material for his work. With this extension of the discussion, the frame of artist becomes itself embedded inside the larger frame of the specific project for the creation of a monster (see Figure 6). In other words, RFA shows how the recycling

of indications not only maintains presence in a particular theme (art), but also generates a more differentiated layering of a contextual theme. In this case, the contextual frames move from a desire to be an artist to actually acting as an artist, and then to a specific artistic project. Each frame is a more finely tuned layering of the other. When Andy is an artist, he is more likely to create than if he simply has an aspiration to become an artist. When he is involved in an actual art project, the identity of being an artist is moot.

As Figure 7 shows, all of these embedded frames can be further indicated as addressing the existential purpose of escaping boredom. This indication is less about serving interpretation of Andy's situation than it is another round of framing that contributes to the contextual layering. In other words, with each spinning of the contextual weave, the resourceful frames are made more real through recursive indications that bring additional referential correspondences to each embedded frame.

As sufficient complexity is built in the layering and embedding of frames, more frame oscillation and shifting is possible, enabling transitional movement to get mobilized. For example, Figure 8 shows the choice between Andy the artist who creates Magmore versus Magmore being a metaphor for Andy. As this became a back and forth oscillation between frames, it planted the seed for what would become a therapeutic fulcrum for transformation in the case. If Andy chose to be an artist, his life would more likely be resourceful and rewarding. If not, then he would be regarded as choosing to act like a comic book character, Magmore, the interesting monster. Note that this is already a more resourceful position than being trapped

inside a pathological frame that typically recommends long term psychiatric hospitalization, medication, and social stigmatization. If he is acting like a comic book character of his own design, he is more free to make choices that allow the character to be more interesting and creative. In addition, later in the session Brad goes further and frames the choice of being a comic book figure as an indication that Andy has even more desire to free his hand to create art (see Figure 13). With this structure, Andy is in a therapeutic double bind: he either chooses to be an artist or chooses to have more desire to be an artist.

The oscillation between Andy the artist and Andy as Magmore enables talk about Magmore to be simultaneously about Andy. This helps establish the next layer of contextual frame, “hypnotic influence on others” (see Figure 9). What is useful about this frame is that it specifies what Andy and Magmore have in common – an ability to put thoughts in other people’s minds. Again, RFA recognizes, maps, and utilizes the ways embedded frames may shift position and hop across levels. These embedded frames are not hierarchically arranged in any fixed way so that the frame at the bottom is always framed by subsequent frames. Instead, they are like Chinese boxes where any frame can frame any arrangement of other frames.

This ability to shape-shift between being that which frames and that which is framed is brought about by the recursive nature of re-entrant indication.

Graphically depicted, a frame may deflate itself and become a part of another more encompassing whole, or it may expand to hold other frames as parts of its extended reach. As more and more frames are embedded, there is more opportunity for them to re-sort their part-whole relations. In this session, Brad presents a plot line that

rearranges the temporal ordering of frames as they arose in the session. Beginning with Andy's talent to draw, this leads to his ability to make things appear real that aren't real, the basis for creating a comic monster that holds the details of his family drama. Finally, making this creative production effective and successful as a comic book involves using a secret – that this art requires the ability to hypnotize others (see Figure 10).

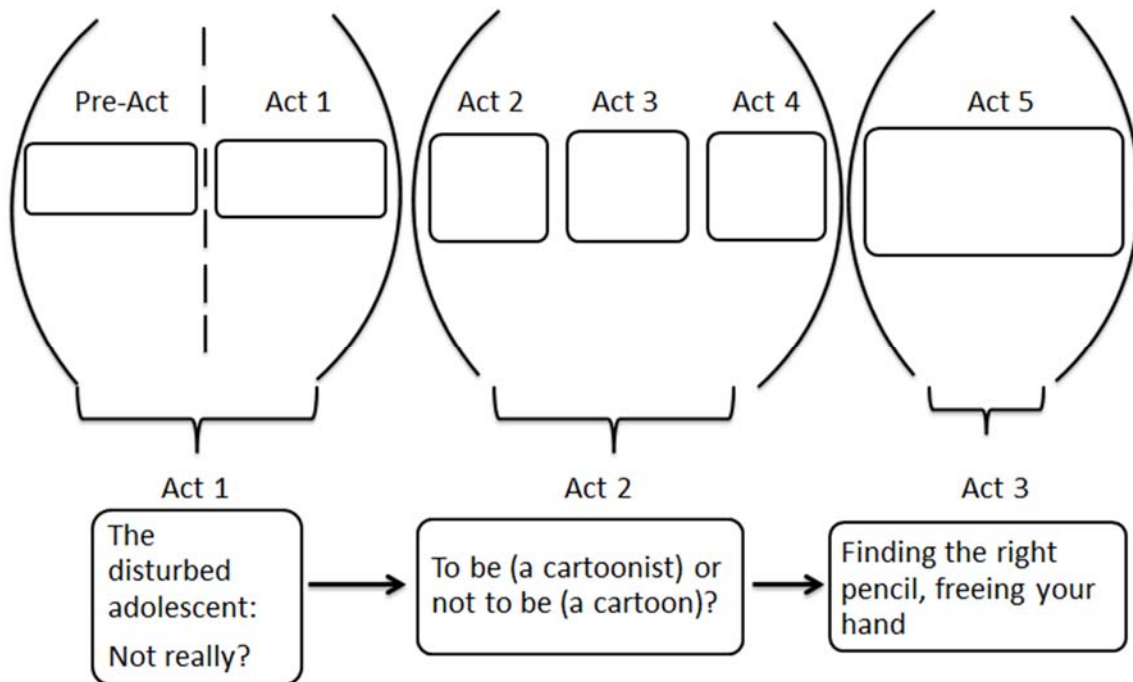
When the session recycles the previous choice between Andy being the creator of Magmore versus being Magmore, the metaphor shifts to the choice of Andy being a creator of comic books or a comic book character (see Figure 11). Though this is a recursion of the previous distinction, it is now articulated inside a context of multiple frames including the idea that the art and secret of comic books is hypnotizing others (see Figure 12). At this time the therapeutic fulcrum is firmly established and ready to tilt forward. This is accomplished by diagnosing Andy as having a constipated hand that is waiting for the right pencil. This framing actually takes away the choice of whether he is desiring to be an artist (the meaning of remaining a comic book character) versus being an artist. Instead, the situation becomes distinguished by whether he gets the right pencil or desires the right pencil, which is not a choice, but a matter of whether he has the right pencil that can free his hand to express the creativity he desires. As Figure 13 indicates, the therapeutic bind is more fully expressed, for now acting like a monster in a comic book only indicates that his hand is desiring the right pencil. If he has the right pencil, he is drawing monsters, whereas if he is acting like one, he is expressing an even greater desire to have a pencil and draw. In effect, all his communication is an



expression of his desire to create, be an artist, and invent hypnotizing characters. Without a pencil in hand, he is caught in the situation of performing an analogic message about his desire through enacting the thing he would otherwise draw.

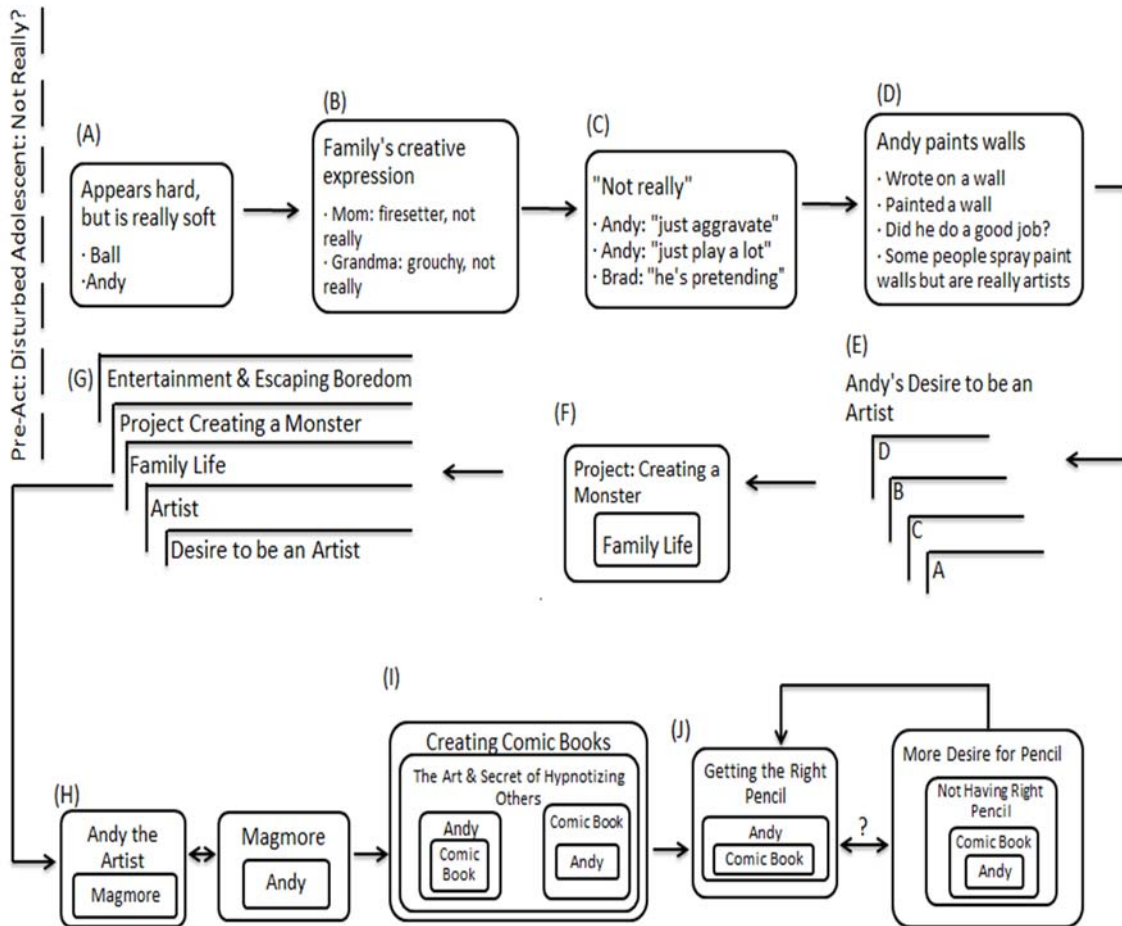
If we reduce the session to a three-act structure, we can look at the progression of five acts (including the pre-act) in Figure 15 and collapse it to three acts, as follows:

Figure 16:



A more fully developed RFA that holds the distinctions outlined in this analysis appears below:

Figure 17:



We followed up for several months and found that Andy was successfully doing his school work and the family reported that things were moving along nicely at home. His bedroom became a studio, a place where his imagination was able to express itself with a hand free to create imaginary worlds. Three months later, Andy initiated getting a job on his own and volunteered for public service to clean graffiti off of public walls.

He has continued drawing and doing well in school. As a final follow up, Brad and his colleague went to his home during the Christmas holiday and Andy was proud to show us his grades. He had made all A's. We celebrated how his story can provide inspiration to other adolescents whose natural gifts are not always seen or understood by others. He invited us to see his studio. We took a glance at the spot where he created his cartoon figures. There he gave Brad his first drawing of Magmore as a gift.

## Chapter Four

### **Analysis of a Session: Selling a Cancer**

In the RFA that follows, the analysis we place in brackets includes the thinking of the therapist as he was performing the case, demonstrating its relation to the actually performed distinctions, indications, frames, and transitional linkages. This particular kind of post-hoc analysis is of course only possible when the RFA is being authored or co-authored by the therapist who conducted it. Though not necessary in order to map the movement of a session, its inclusion is valuable because it shows how the theoretical discourse of the therapist's stream of thinking, while separate from the spoken words in the session, is isomorphic to the performed discourse. This is due to Bradford Keeney's long term familiarity and expertise with RFA. As a constructivist epistemology for creating conversation and recursively constructing discourses of knowing about the latter, RFA helps analytical thinking be more in synch with the organization of real time conversation.

Brad was conducting a demonstration session for an audience of mental health workers in Canada when Mary, a middle-aged woman from the audience interrupted his session. She shouted out,

**Mary: Stop! Please stop. I need to talk. I cannot wait any longer. I am sick with cancer and need to work with you now.**

Her request was both sincere and desperate. Brad started talking to her as she sat in the audience.

**Brad Keeney: I need to ask whether you live in an apartment or a house.**

The woman's presenting distinction about her having cancer (spoken from

the audience) is not re-indicated. Instead, a question is posed about her “life”, asking about where she *lives* (resides).

[Perhaps the choice of words implies a question of whether her life resides in a partial way (in an *a-part-ment*) or in a *whole* way (house). This kind of interpretation, while fascinating, is not critical to unpacking the beginning structure of the conversation.]

**M: I have a house.**

**BK: Does it have one floor or two floors?**

This question intends to evoke another possible distinction, with no preconceived importance given to any response she might make. Whatever she says will be utilized.

**M: Two floors.**

**BK: I’m speaking to your unconscious. What floor does that part that you worry about live on?**

Brad was aware that Mary is a Jungian therapist, and that using the word “unconscious” might be a meaningful metaphor for her. A house with two floors enables the presumed deeper and more holistic (analogical) nature of her being to be distinguished and engaged. But rather than ask where the unconscious metaphorically resides, Brad moves to exploring the location of “the part that [she worries] about,” an implicit metaphor for Mary’s cancer. “Cancer” is the name of a very specific, already established frame in Mary’s life. Referring to it instead as “that part that she worries about” places a discussion of her cancer in a context that holds more ambiguity and room for exploration.

**M: It lives in the basement.**

**BK: The basement. Which corner? Or is it a corner? Or is it in the middle? Is it in a box? Is it wrapped up? Has it been forgotten?**

This is another invitation to draw more distinctions about “the part of her that she worries about.” Providing multiple examples of how she might respond opens more possibilities for distinguishing, including whether this part of her is on the periphery versus in the core, fully visible or hidden under wraps, or even forgotten.

**M: It’s funny. I see two places. I see the bedroom, and I see the basement. In the basement I see it over in a corner where the laundry area is.**

[While acknowledging that this response is fertile with metaphors that can inspire multiple interpretations, we shall not give the latter any importance for they are not present in the actual conversation. However, we can note in a post hoc commentary that the association of the bedroom with the basement laundry may be hinted at with a metaphor concerning “changing sheets” or “dirty bedroom linen.” At the time, Brad did not know that the woman had rectal cancer.]

**BK: Is it wrapped in an old newspaper?**

[Perhaps this question is also another way of asking whether her worrying is “old news.” Certainly her worrying is old news, for she has been repeatedly thinking about it and discussing it often, as would anyone in her situation.]

**M: Well, as soon as you say that, I see that.**

With respect to an RFA of what is actually expressed, another distinction has been set in place and re-indicated – that this “part that she worries about” is

wrapped in an old newspaper.

[Some therapists reading this transcription or watching the session may assume that Mary is in trance, simply following along in interactional synch with Brad, or that Brad is intuitively coupled with her. These, however, are all a narrator's interpretation, not discourse arising in the session.]

**BK: Is it a classified ad?**

Mary's initial request for help indicated that she wants change.

[The want ads are also where requests are posted.]

**M: Well, it could be. I'll go with that. I see the print. It's black print.**

**BK: What might it say? What might one word be in that print?**

**M: The . . . the space of time.**

We have been talking about the metaphorical spaces of her life (apartment versus home, how many floors, basement or bedroom, etc.) in the context of her concern for how much time she has left, which Mary introduced with her first statement: "...I cannot wait any longer. I am sick with cancer and need to work with you now."

**BK: Perhaps you are looking at a classified ad. (*Audience laughter.*) At least you've seen it as such. For a moment, this thing is wrapped in old print with words giving it a particular meaning. Maybe you should think of putting it in another room.**

This is a request for enacting change, performing action that is more than reading the want ads. Mary is implicitly asked to have a different relationship to cancer ("the part that she worries about"), interacting with it in new ways other

than asking for help with its cure.

**M: It's kind of horrible. I don't really like it. It's kind of like a hard turd or something.**

**BK: Yeah? Well maybe you should give it a makeover. (*They both start laughing.*) What I was thinking of when you first spoke is that somehow it's good for you to move your furniture around in your house. When was the last time you changed your furniture, I mean, moved your furniture?**

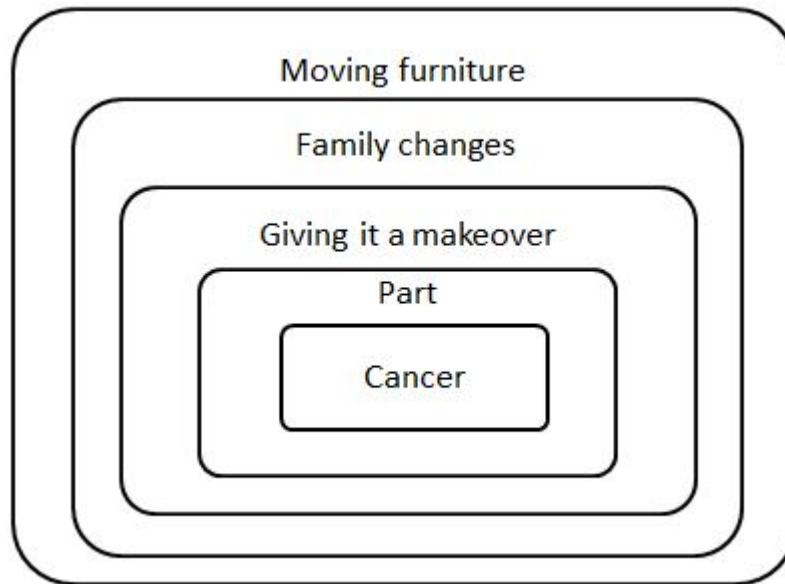
Two more requests for change: give it a makeover and move your furniture around. A "makeover" can be taken as another metaphor for a contextual frame. Mary is being asked to re-contextualize, that is, make another frame for presenting both her cancer and her relationship with it.

**M: Well, just a week ago, I brought a piano in. My father died recently, and my parent's home has just been sold, so there's been a lot of furniture moving. I have been selling and letting some things go. There's a whole family structure that's now gone. I brought the piano in. I was going to sell it, but I brought it to my home, and there're only certain ways the furniture will fit because it's a small house.**

Moving furniture is an appropriate metaphor for the changes already taking place in her family life. Moving the things in her house is isomorphic to moving frames around, including how she arranges her own relations with her body part of concern. The following nested distinctions are being established:



Figure 18:



Note that Mary's initial mention of the term "cancer" was immediately framed as "the part that she worries about" or simply "it" at this point in the discourse. It is now implied that they are discussing her cancer, but doing so with shifting terms that are more ambiguous and allow more room for other possibilities of interaction and change.

*At this point, Brad felt it was time to bring Mary to the stage. Prior to this they had been talking back and forth across the audience. Brad asks her,*

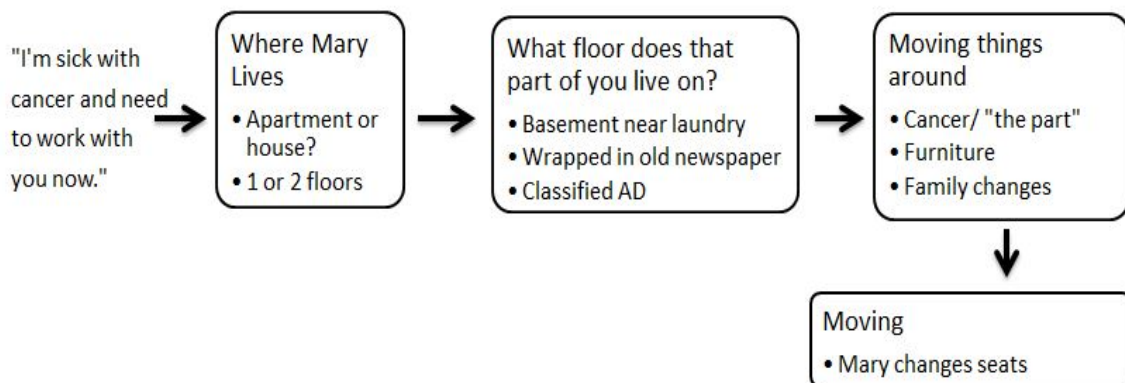
**B: "Would you mind sitting up here?"**

*After Mary came up and sat down, Brad turned away from her and gazed at the place where she had been sitting the moment before. He pointed there and started a talk that brought what they just said to the present moment.*

Figure 19 shows a beginning depiction of a plot line of the session, where Mary's initial request to work with Brad led to a conversation about her life's

location, in terms of residing in an apartment or house, and whether it has one or two floors. This became further differentiated to identify the metaphorical location of the part of her that she worries about, leading to the basement corner where it was imagined to be wrapped in the classified ads of an old newspaper. The latter set of distinctions, especially the classified ads metaphor, set in motion the first step toward addressing change, specified as moving things around. After requesting that she move both her worrisome part and her furniture around, Mary indicates that she is actually moving some furniture, for a recent family change precipitated by her father's death brought new furniture into her small house. Inside this frame of moving, Mary is asked to actually move herself from the audience to the stage.

Figure 19:

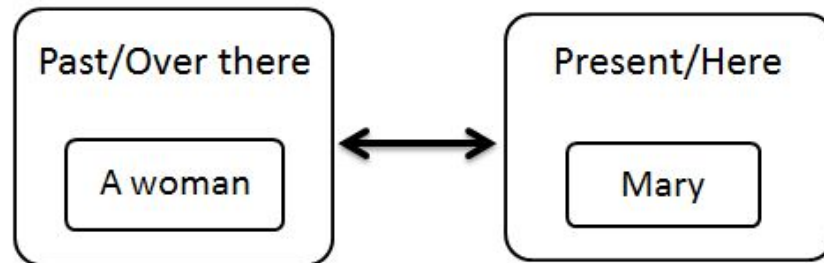


**BK: You know the last time I was here, there was a woman sitting over there who reminded me of you. She had a similar complaint.**

Now that Mary has changed places, Brad further indicates this difference by suggesting that Mary (now sitting on the stage) is no longer the woman who was sitting in the audience just a moment ago. There are now two places, two times (past and present), and two different people. This implicitly suggests that a change in

space can bring a change of person. Thus two contextual frames are set in place:

Figure 20:



Now Brad can talk about a woman who was sitting “over there”, though all communication about her is of course also communication about Mary. Mary is both Mary on the stage and the woman in the audience.

**M: Hmm.**

**BK: She was worried about her life, about something that had come into her life, into her body, and didn't know how to relate to it and was confused about the choices. She didn't know whether to see it as a disease that threatened her life or to see it differently. Many people made suggestions, and she was frustrated about how to sort through all of that. As best as I can remember, I asked her where she lived. Did she live in an apartment, or did she live in a house?**

An important distinction is introduced with the comment that implies Mary has choices about how she sees or relates to her cancer, rather than only regarding it as a threatening “disease.” Again the word “cancer” is not spoken; only a vague reference to “something” that came into her life and body is mentioned with a subsequent question about how to relate to it.

[Whether originally specified as disease, challenge, problem, or suffering,

clients have more choice when we deconstruct those hardened names and speak more softly and vaguely about “something,” or “a visitor,” “house guest,” or an “unexpected arrival.” Rather than solely fight or mobilize a campaign of eradication, more possibilities for action emerge when frames expand, allowing room for an exploration of other ways of relating to it. Said differently, rather than trying to cope with or cure cancer, we can invent more ways of interacting with something we don’t understand. There are more choices than fear, worry, and combative relationship. We can be more experimental and consider tinkering, exploring, re-locating, re-naming, and even playing with it.

For example, many guided imagery exercises used with cancer patients involve fantasizing a miniature swat team or a Navy SEALs special force operation to enter one’s body and combat the enemy disease. The risk of such a strategy is that it perpetuates a fierce dualism, suggesting a disembodied mind use a kind of willpower to assist in the attack on other troubled parts of the body. While this may be argued to be effective, such a symmetrical engagement can escalate and contribute to problem maintenance, as it does in alcohol addiction where the more one tries to use willpower to conquer the desire to drink, the more the stage is set for a cycle of temptation and risk of relapse (see Bateson’s essay on the cybernetics of alcoholism in Bateson, 1972). While not suggesting that having cancer is the same as being an alcoholic, the point is that going to battle against any part of our experience creates a contextual frame of combat, where conquering or disposing of “the other” paradoxically requires “the other” to show that there is reason for the combat to exist.]

**M: Right.**

**BK: She said, “A house.” I replied, “Was it one story or two stories?” She answered, “Two stories.” And I said, “Where in that house did that surprise guest reside?” She then said, “I think in the basement.” For some reason I asked, “Is it wrapped in old newspaper?” She answered, “Since you asked, I can see that.” And then I asked her, “Is it classified, a classified ad?” Members of the audience laughed when I said that. I wasn’t sure why they laughed. I was confused by their laughter because I was exposing classified information.**

*(Audience laughter.)* **So I thought to myself, I wonder what she would see, because she was so focused and serious about this matter. I was sure she would take the next step and put a little effort into trying to bring her inner focus to help her see what was written on the newspaper. She saw the single word “the.”**

**M: Oh my God!**

Mary realizes the discussion is about her previous conversation. The introduction of “classified information” re-indicates and highlights that what is being discussed is critically important.

**BK: Then she said there were some other words. They were either *the space of time* or *the time of space*. I thought to myself, well that covers it all: space and time, time and space. Add an *e* to the word *the*, and it becomes *thee*. Eternity.**

Playing with her distinction enables it to imply the biggest frame of all, eternity. [Brad’s comments suggest that Mary is metaphorically staring at the whole

life and death drama of her existence.]

**M: Yes.**

**BK: I remembered that the day before the woman had asked me, “Could we have a chance to talk the next day?”** *Mary had asked Brad to have a session the day before, though she had said nothing about her condition.*

**M: Which I did.**

Now, Mary is explicitly referring to the woman as being herself.

**BK: I was awakened in the middle of the night with the idea that I would speak to you later that day and that I should tell you that you should move your furniture around. Being a very different kind of person, I no longer have any curiosity as to why I would dream such a thought. I just know that I will say it to you and that it is the right thing to say.**

Brad shifts back to addressing Mary directly.

[It is not uncommon for some therapists and healers across diverse cultures to have dreams about their clients even before they see them in a session. The arrival of such a frame should be utilized, especially if it isn’t understood.]

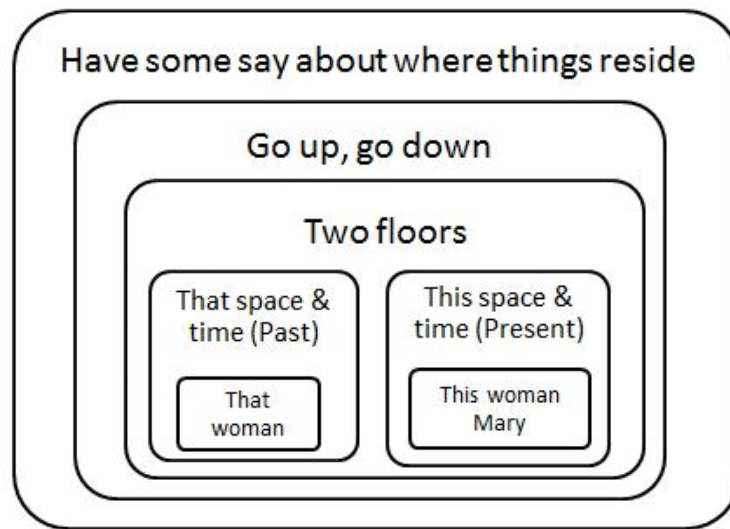
**M: Of course.**

**BK: I just remembered to remember that thought for that space and time. So at this time and in this space I think it might be interesting for you to know, like that woman** (*Brad looks to where she had been sitting*), **and this woman** (*Brad looks at Mary*), **there’s always at least two floors.** (*Mary nods her head in agreement.*) **Sometimes you can go up, and sometimes you can go down. But for all the things in your house, you do have some say about where they’re going**

**to reside.**

Brad's comments create two side-by-side frames indicating past and present inside a series of nested frames. These frames include there "always" being "at least two floors", and Mary having some say about where all the things in her house may reside:

Figure 21:

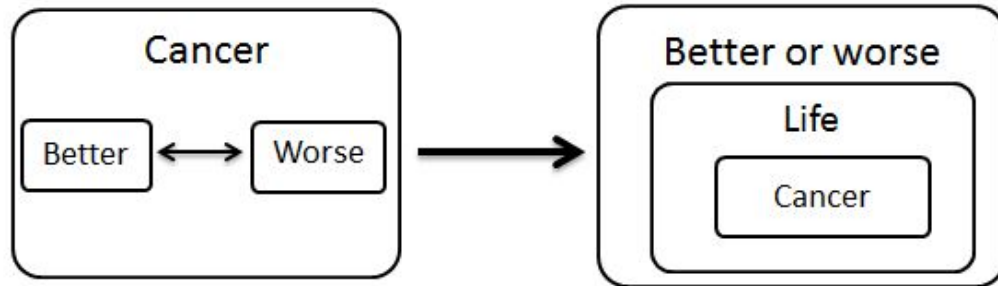


This layering of frames is organized by the theme that Mary has more choice in how she relates to her experiences ("has some say"), or is free to move things around in her space and time. This provides an invitation for changes previously kept outside the radar of her cancer-focused either/or frame. Here the possibility of things going up or down is framed inside her ability to make choices for change, especially locating where things reside, literally and metaphorically.

[We can also note more generally that disease, especially cancer, tends to lock people inside a binary opposition where they are experientially organized by whether their condition is getting better or worse. This orchestrates their everyday

life to be dominated by the contextual theme of cancer, where they oscillate between “my cancer is better” or “my cancer is worse”:

Figure 22:



On an existential level it is not cancer that is the problem, but being locked into a contextual frame that provides no escape from going back and forth between worrying about its presence or absence. This can lead to a life stuck in assessing worse versus better, a vicious cycle that is hard to escape. Now the dualism goes past cancer and spreads to being a constant assessment of the present life one is performing.]

**M: I do.**

Mary’s comment re-indicates the frame “having some say.”

**BK: You can give them different names. Sometimes you can worry about them.**

**Sometimes you can laugh about them. Sometimes you can even—**

**That’s it! Oh, I just got a little ripple of excitement. This is what I think you**

**must do: you should put a classified ad in the newspaper seeing if anybody**

**would like to buy this part of you. (Mary immediately burst into laughter.) The ad**

**should say: “My cancer’s for sale.” As Mary gasped and laughed from her belly,**

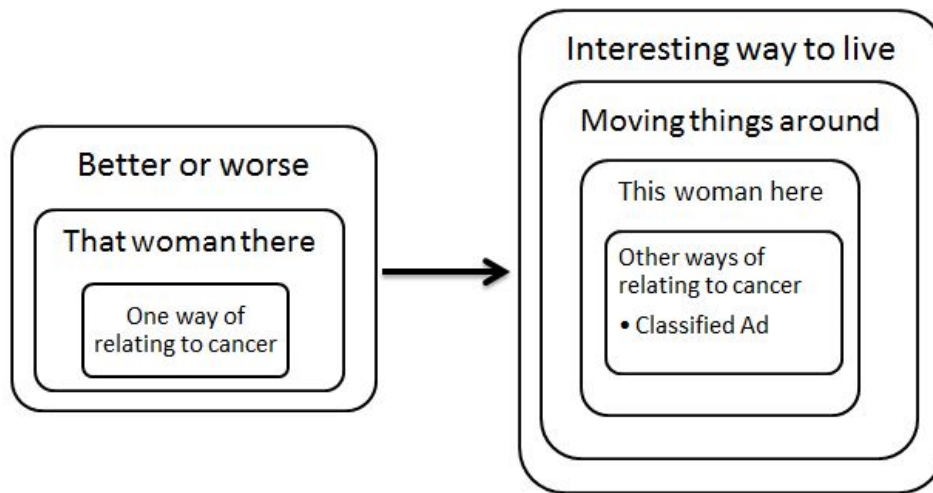
*Brad shouted out, “Whoa, isn’t that an interesting way to live!” Someone in the*



audience shouted out, **“Wonderful!”**

Different possibilities for ways Mary can relate to her situation are distinguished inside the frame that invites moving things around, including the spontaneous recommendation to sell her cancer (note this is the first time that “it” or “this part of her” is explicitly referred to as cancer). In effect, the woman who spoke in the audience was stuck inside the dualism of worrying about the condition of her disease – better versus worse. The woman on stage has moved inside the frame of moving things around. Here she can explore other ways of relating to her situation, and even find that it can become an interesting way to live:

Figure 23:



**BK: So you’ll have to decide.**

**M: I’ll have to decide.**

**BK: You’ll have to decide how big the ad will be.**

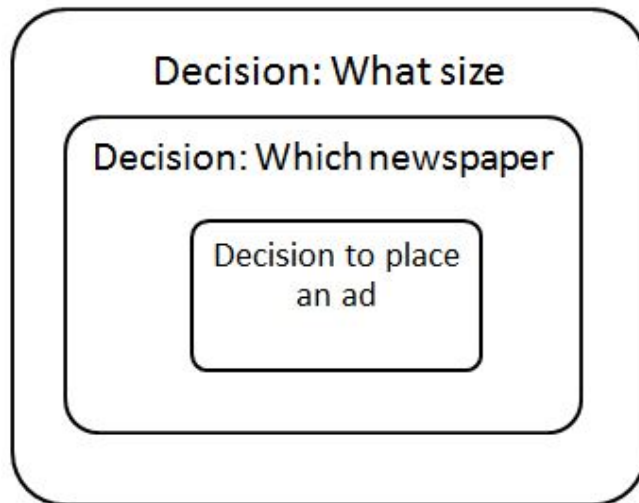
**M: And which newspaper it will go into.**

**BK: You just might consider a full-page ad.**

The decision is shifted to being about the size of the ad and the choice of

newspaper, not whether she will run an ad. In terms of RFA, the decision to place an ad is embedded inside other decisions, making it more likely that the ad will be accomplished, since the latter decisions already imply that the ad is in motion:

Figure 24:



**M: All right.**

**BK: It depends on how important it is for you to get on with this.**

**M: Right.**

**BK: But of course, you know, if you see a full-page ad, you can always reduce it to being a small full-page ad that will appear to be a smaller ad although it's actually a full-page ad in your mind because that's how it began. These are important choices, but only you can navigate through that. You can know whether it's going to be small or big. Whether you'll describe what you're offering as small or big, and of course, whether it's small or big depends on what floor it's on and how it's staged to the world . . . Will your ad say, "For sale: A part of me"?**

Although Brad is referring to the size of the ad, his communication is a

metaphorical way of talking about Mary relating to the size of her cancer. She is free to imagine that small is large and large is small in any cognitive domain, and in this frame-shifting her relationship to it is made more flexible and available for change and transformation.

[Whether this can influence the actual physical size of the cancer depends on the nature of mind-body interaction, and we can choose whether or not to believe that the way our mind thinks plays a part in what happens in our body. At the very least, tinkering with the way we relate to the size or magnitude of any suffering enables more choice and room for change in how we relate to our lives, and thus contributes to the quality of our everyday existential experience.]

*Someone in the audience provided another way of advertising: “Do you want a piece of me!” This brought a lot of laughter.*

**BK: Some might propose, “Cancer looking for another home.” . . . Is it going to be for free? Or are you giving it away?**

**M: No.**

**BK: Some ads say that a person has something and they are looking for somebody who’d like to take it.**

**M: That’s true. I just did that with my parents’ furniture.**

More and more choices for different ways of relating to her cancer are being invented, helping keep her in the more resourceful frame that has been established.

**BK: You could have a yard sale.**

**M: (Mary nearly fell out of her chair laughing, but then turned serious.) OK, I can see that, but somebody picking it up bothers me. If I make a newspaper ad and put**

**the cancer for sale along with some of the old knickknacks of my folks, someone will come around and ask, “Oh, what’s this? I’ll buy it.” I don’t want somebody taking that.**

**BK: Oh, so you prefer keeping it in your home.**

**M: No! But I don’t want somebody else taking it into their life.**

**BK: Then you’ll have to change it so it’s something that you will be happy to see them take . . . Why don’t you say it’s a pet cancer? Maybe you need to put it in a birdcage. What kind of cage would you choose? Would it be a cage for hamsters or a cage for . . .**

The session is now fully inside a resourceful context where any kind of choices can be made about relating to cancer, including changing it to something Mary feels happy about someone else taking into their life. The idea of a pet cancer leads to the idea of a cage, which sets forth another distinction that will be utilized.

[From the perspective of RFA, distinctions are simply inspiring more distinctions without the need for any purposeful steering by a theory that first sets forth its primary distinctions, and then asks everyone to enter the frames that are built. In a way, creativity is associated with free frame flow, less impeded by the restrictions and constrictions imposed by a theory, model, protocol, or template approach. The latter are a set of preferred distinctions and frames. Other possibilities for distinguishing, indicating, and framing are not permitted; otherwise the theoretically driven model might morph into something else. This begs the question as to whether schools or models of therapy primarily serve stabilizing their preferred ways of knowing rather than exercising the flexibility that the

process of change requires.]

**M: I saw a birdcage.**

**BK: What size?**

**M: I saw one of those old-fashioned birdcages.**

**BK: Yeah, that's what I saw. Victorian?**

**M: Yes.**

**BK: That's what I saw too. Interesting. We're in the same space and time, aren't we?**

**M: We're in the same space and time.**

By re-introducing the previous metaphors, "space and time," Brad highlights the fact that he and Mary are inside the same contextual frame.

**BK: Would it be—**

**M: It might be hard to give away!**

**BK: That's what I was thinking! Maybe you'll decide that this cancer should be your pet held in a cage that makes it beautiful. I don't know. Maybe you just need to move it around first. Put an ad in the paper saying you're thinking about giving it away and you'll entertain offers. Or maybe you should go halfway in between. Maybe you should rent your pet cancer. People could check it out for a couple of days.**

The suggestion to place her pet cancer inside a cage in order to make it beautiful is a way of communicating that it is the contextual frame that determines how it looks, is understood, and the choices of interaction available.

**M: No! None of that! I know about teetering around with it. I know about how**

**it can come and go. Yes. No. Yes. No. Here it's back. No, it's not. Oh, I'm healed. No, I'm not. Oh, I know about the vanishing and reappearing act.**

Speaking in the language of RFA, we could say that Mary is talking about the frustration of being caught in an either/or contextual frame, worrying about whether her health is improving or not. She is now essentially saying that she is ready to change and move into a contextual frame that inspires more choices of how to relate to her situation.

**BK: You know about being inside a cage.**

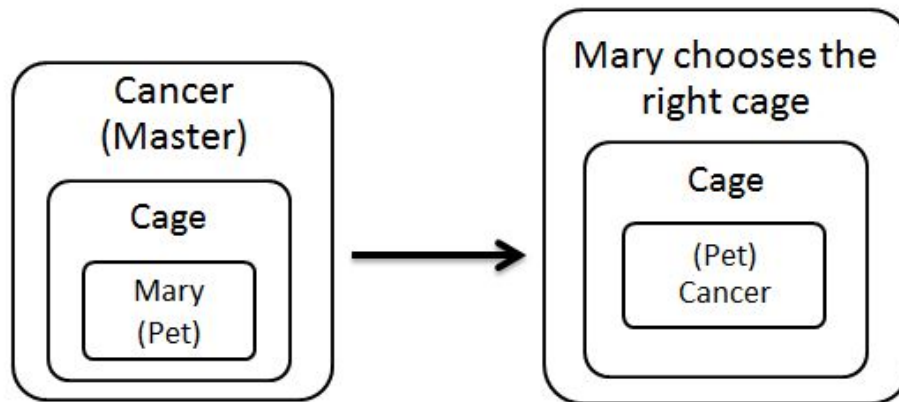
Brad re-indicates the cage as being the either/or frame inside which Mary is trapped.

**M: Absolutely! Absolutely! (*She starts to weep.*) I do, though it has brought me so many gifts. But I still can't get it out. I know the shadow of it. I know the shadow of how it has defined me. I know the shadow of how it has been my—**

**BK: I know the word. It has been your master. You've been the pet. It's time to turn that around. Go get a cage of the right size for the right space so you'll see who's the master.**

Brad's comments invite Mary to make a shift in frames, moving toward a more resourceful contextualization. In other words, she is asked to go from being framed (caged) by her cancer, to being the one who chooses the cage (frame) that holds her cancer:

Figure 25:



**M: I will do that.**

**BK: And put out an ad.**

**M: I will do both.**

**BK: Great!**

**M: I previously asked for a dream in case we would meet and talk about my situation. I had two dreams. Do we have time for me to speak about those dreams?**

**BK: Yes, it's always time—**

**M: And space.**

**BK: This is the space.**

**M: A number of months ago, I had a dream that I was in a room and there was a woman behind the desk. She had her magical objects in front of her. I couldn't see her face.**

**BK: This is what we've been talking about, you know.**

Mary is in a room where she is able to look at who she was in the audience (and how she was framed there) versus the choice to become someone who can

frame her situation differently. This, in turn, allows more space to present and rearrange all kinds of never before imagined choices of how to relate to what has come into her life, doing so within the transformative experience of shifting frames.

**M: Yes. And there were boxes like bento boxes on the desk. I then saw an image of myself, and I said, “That isn’t for me anymore, but this image is. I can pass over to another image of myself.”**

**BK: We’ve been talking about this today.**

Brad re-indicates the more resourceful contextual frame that has been established where Mary is free to shift to another framing of her life in which she has more choice about how to relate to her cancer. Mary’s dream where she passes over to another image of herself is similar to the way she passed over to another chair early on in the session, a change which was used to create a shift from one frame to another: “that woman there” who came with one way of relating to cancer, to “this woman here” who has many choices for how to relate to cancer. Frames, like boxes, are sitting in this conversational session, ready for her image to change as she steps into any different way of framing.

**M: Yes, exactly. In the next moment, a young woman from my high school who I haven’t thought of in a long time suddenly appeared. The woman behind the desk said, “Ah, she knows everything about benches, and she will find your bench for you. I’m going to make a ceremony for you. The tumor is over.” After that dream I had a lot of difficulty. My father died, and he had always been working with me. Furthermore, the tumor that had been contained for about three years has grown. It has grown over the last few months, which has been**



**upsetting in terms of what that might mean. I feel that the dream hasn't come to completion and there's something in me that is not able to complete—**

**BK: Well of course! It's because you're out to lunch.** (*They both laughed as Mary got the joke.*)

**M: Yes, you mean my bento box.** (*A bento box is a Japanese lunchbox filled with all kinds of savory surprises.*)

Though Brad teases her with a joke about the meaning of a bento box, it is accurate to say that she has been “out of frame” (out to lunch) with respect to considering more and different ways of framing and relating to her situation. The statement that “the tumor is over” can be indicated as a way of saying that it is time for her usual dualistic framing of its presence or absence to be over.

[Her reference to Japanese culture is interesting. Brad was mentored in the Samurai tradition of *seiki jutsu*, the art of the vital life force. It involves sitting on a special bench and performing spontaneous body movements. Her dream about a bench corresponds to this truth in his life. We could interpret the communication in her dream, “She will find your bench for you... the tumor is over”, as indicating it is time to move to the seiki bench, a metaphor for the location where change and transformation take place in the context of experimenting with movement as part of the art of the vital life force.]

**BK: Then maybe you need a bench. It would be a nice place for that Victorian cage which holds all your old-fashioned ideas.**

“Old-fashioned ideas” is a metaphor for all the previous ways Mary has framed and related to her cancer. This comment connects the new frame, the right

bench coming into her life, with the previously introduced resourceful frame of Mary choosing the right cage for her cancer.

**M: Oh! I love that!** *Mary literally rose from her chair, and her whole body trembled from head to toe.*

**BK:** *(Brad pointed to her body and shouted)* **Oh yes! That's exactly what you should do on your bench. That is it!** *Brad pointed to how she was shaking, and he demonstrably shook to add an emphasis to the importance of her ecstatic body expression.*

Both Brad's verbal encouragement of Mary's trembling and his physical performance of shaking brought the connection Brad saw between Mary's dream and seiki jutsu into the interaction. It should be noted here that this session took place in the context of a workshop in which the practice of seiki, including reference to a seiki bench, had been discussed. Thus Mary and the audience recognized the reference to a bench and the performance of ecstatic shaking as referring to the Japanese art of seiki jutsu, even though the words "seiki jutsu" were not spoken in the session.

**BK: Do this so you can move around all the furniture within you.**

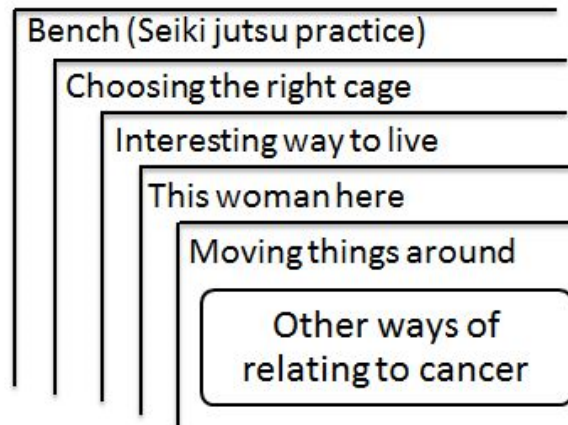
Brad recalls the previous resourceful frame of moving furniture/moving things around and places it inside the new, more encompassing contextual frame of seiki jutsu (ecstatic body movement and shaking).

*The audience shouts, "Yes! Yes!"*

Seiki jutsu involves moving the life force, seiki, throughout one's body, doing so for healing and well-being. When this takes place one experiences body

trembling, shaking, and automatic movements. Mary's dream and her trembling body communicated this wisdom. Brad enthusiastically praised these aspects of her report, including her reference to Japan with the mention of a bento box. In terms of RFA, the distinction of seiki jutsu (a healing practice for transformation) can now circumscribe her other distinctions, providing deeper meaning for her new contextual frame:

Figure 26:



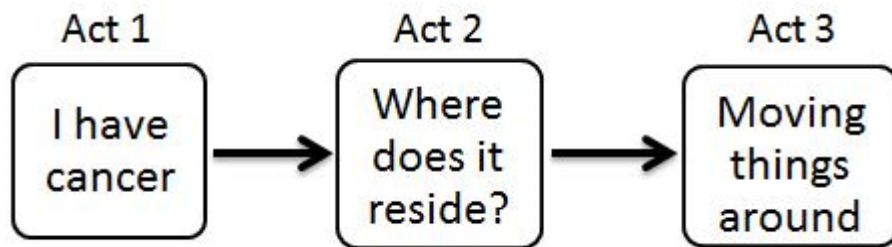
**BK: You know what to do. So go be it. In this time and space. For all space and all time, and any time and any space, first or second floor. Even in a basement. Inside and outside, do it for her. (Brad points to where Mary had been sitting in the audience.) She was like you in a time I remember not so long ago. Because that time is this time and all time.**

Metaphorically speaking, on one floor things appear, while on another floor they disappear. Each floor is a different place and time, a separate reality. We are free to move from floor to floor, shifting from one reality (or contextual frame) to another, doing so as we watch former things vanish while discovering other things come to life. On one floor, we're inside a cage. On another, we are free. In one space,

it's another time. In another time, it's a different space. Mary's ideas about her cancer were now free to move in any direction and be as small or as large as the chosen frame indicates.

A simple three-act RFA of the session shows a progression from being stuck in framing her life as being orchestrated by a battle with cancer, to a broad consideration of where her life resides, ending in her exploring diverse ways of moving things around (changing her frames and choices of relating), including how she interacts with cancer. The latter includes an ancient practice that asks her body to move spontaneously as a means of initiating healing.

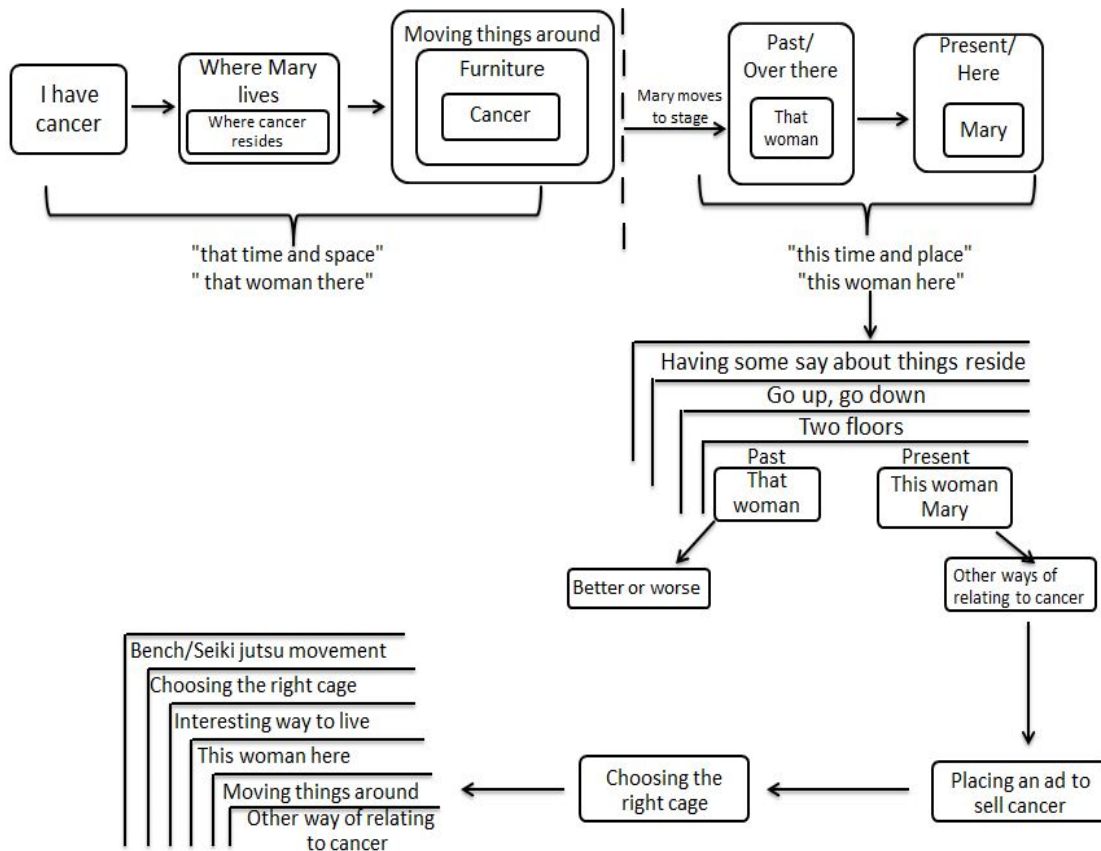
Figure 27:



If we look more closely, however, we see that there are two sessions: the one when Mary was in the audience and the other when she came to the stage. The latter was itself an enactment of change, for the previous discussion had set up a frame about the location of her life. As the subsequent frames shift back and forth between her past way of relating to cancer and her new residence within a frame that encourages more creative choices, she is seen to come more alive in the session. She becomes more animated; laughs and smiles frequently; speaks more loudly and confidently; and even her skin developed more color. Mary begins to lean forward and indicate forward movement with her gestures. In the end, her body is shaking

spontaneously as she celebrates a new found way to be inside frames that give her more choice of re-arranging the things that matter, as well as the discovery that moving things around is an interesting way to live (see Figure 28). Change is the experience of life's vitality, and even changing one's relationship with cancer is a way of bringing forth more life, with its gifts of surprise, play, and joy.

Figure 28:



Brad received a letter from Mary several months after our session. She wrote:

Hi Brad,

I wanted to give you an update. I posted an ad in the Toronto Star entitled, "Cancer for Sale—no longer have time or space." I found the perfect birdcage in a drive by sale on the way to a cottage. I also sent the cancer a "Dear John" letter. I actually mailed it. I think it was sad, but understood it was over. The furniture in my house is moved.

I went to the corner of my basement and found I had stored a painting there that I did not like because of an abstract shape in the corner of the painting. It was sitting where I said the cancer lived in my house. The painting is moved. Perhaps I will leave it somewhere fitting in the city.

The shift from fear to confidence around the cancer was dynamic from the time we worked together. Thank you.

I recently received a checkup from my surgeon. Although the tumor was still there, the horrific surgical side effects she had previously discussed with me as a 50-50 risk factor had changed to being negligible. She also let it slip out that I would live to be an old lady. This comment could not have been based in her reality of talking to a patient with recurring cancer, but it was mysteriously said anyway. I felt my life had shifted into a new dimension of reality.

My longing is to keep the shaking happening and to keep on going.

Shaking all over,  
Mary

Now we can see that when Mary's unconscious was asked where her cancer resided, she indicated a place in her basement where she had forgotten that she had previously stored a painting she did not like because it had an unpleasant abstract shape in its corner. As she performed the changes discussed in the session, her life brought forth more re-entries into her resourceful context, adding further layers of distinctions and frames, with their deepening of meaning and inspiration for more creative action. She found herself living creatively with cancer and that shifted the quality of her emotional life. She became more confident and exercised more imagination in her every day. In her own words, she felt her "life had shifted to another dimension of reality." She had shifted frames and that change is nothing

less than entry into another experiential reality.

Several months later she sent another letter:

Greetings Brad,

I met with a friend yesterday who I have not seen in years. She told me she had heard of someone who had placed an ad in the paper to sell her cancer.

Living in a new way. I will be in touch again.

Big love and delight to you,  
Mary

In the session Mary had reported a dream of seeing a friend she had not seen for a long time. In the dream the friend witnessed hearing words that pointed to a way of healing movement and transformation. Now in real life, Mary met a friend who reported that she had read about a woman who interacted in a way with her cancer that she had never heard of before. Her friend had actually become a witness for the changed woman Mary had become. Mary's changed contextual frame for living enabled distinctions to be held that fed her feeling more alive.

## Chapter Five

### **Analysis of a Session: Seeing a Ghost**

This session was conducted with a client named Carlos, a man in his late 50s, as a demonstration interview at an international therapy conference in Mexico<sup>14</sup>.

The transcription and RFA follow:

**Carlos: I came to see you because I have a problem related to stress. I get stressed very easily. I am a lawyer and have a law firm. I can do certain things to relax myself, but in a very short while I'm terribly stressed again. I tense up to the point that I feel my joints become numb. I especially feel my hands stiffen up and sometimes my feet as well. I'm worried because stress is affecting the quality of my life. I sleep tensed and use a plastic guard to avoid breaking my teeth. I'm worried because I am afraid it might develop into arteriosclerosis. During the weekends I try to go to a house on the outskirts of town to have a massage and take a hot bath. I have a doctor who provides me with relaxation therapy, but though I have improved quite a lot, I still have stress. I'm really worried. I have a lot of problems, but I manage my job successfully. It is my personal life that is affected by the stress. Again, I'm afraid that in the end I will get sick and will have to pay the price for this terrible stress I'm going through. I'm in AA, but I haven't had any alcohol and I haven't done drugs for the last five years. When I stopped drinking, my life changed. The alcohol in some way relaxed me and now that I don't have it, it has complicated my life.**

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<sup>14</sup> This session was originally published in *Circular Therapeutics* (Keeney & Keeney, 2012)



**Brad Keeney: Okay.**

**C: Lately, I went through two events that stressed me a lot, so I took a trip. I left for four or five days and then came back. Now I feel better.**

**BK: A few minutes ago, at the moment when you first sat down, a very strange question popped into my mind. When that question came into my mind, all I could do was think of it. I wondered whether I should ask this question, because it's probably a crazy question. But because it popped in my mind and would not leave, I know that I must ask it. It may be a question that's hiding another question. I don't know what the question means. The question that came to my mind, the one I wanted to ask you is this: Have you ever seen a ghost?**

Here Brad introduces a new distinction to the session that has no obvious relationship to what the client has spoken. Brad implicitly acknowledges this by the way he sets it up, saying that it may be a "crazy question" and that he doesn't know what it means. We sometimes call this kind of question or expression "an out of frame distractor" (Keeney & Keeney, 2013, p. 71). Introducing new distinctions that are outside the current fixed frame can open new avenues for exploration.

[The way the client looked when he sat down in a chair, even before he opened his mouth to utter a word, inspired Brad to ask this question. Since the human body is more like an orchestra of multiple communications – rather than a singular voice – a person's movement, skin color, posture, tonality, rhythms, choice of metaphor, and the like are all communicating a complex weave of expression.

Carlos, in some unspoken way, expressed that he has lived a life inside a contextual

frame that asks about the strange things he has experienced. This points to a more resourceful way of exploring future directions than the distinctions that arise inside the impoverished theme of stress. Note that improvisational interaction that is not organized by any therapy model or protocol is arguably more flexible to introduce uncommon distinctions that might bring unexpected experience to a session.]

**C: I think it's a good question. I remember when I was very young. During my childhood I saw strange things. I experienced strange things, but it was such a long time ago. I'm still a little bit confused about whether they really happened or not. I thought I saw a ghost. I have developed a kind of defense about those strong and strange experiences. I have erased them from my mind as if they had never happened. I realize there are some things that I have erased along the years. There is one more thing - when I'm sound asleep I feel like a different energy comes into me and won't let me wake up. That has happened to me on several occasions. When I'm very tired this happens to me, and I'm very sensitive to certain circumstances and certain people, and certain energies as well.**

**BK: I don't think your life has anything to do with stress, nothing to do with stress at all. This is not stress.**

Brad exits from the initial problem frame that Carlos is suffering from stress. When Carlos relates to the possibility that he saw a ghost, the re-indication of this distinction moves it toward becoming an alternative contextual frame.

[Saying his life is not about stress after the ghost frame has been presented is perhaps a way of communicating, "the more important and interesting context of

your life is about seeing strange things, including the possibility of having seen a ghost.”]

**C: What is it then?**

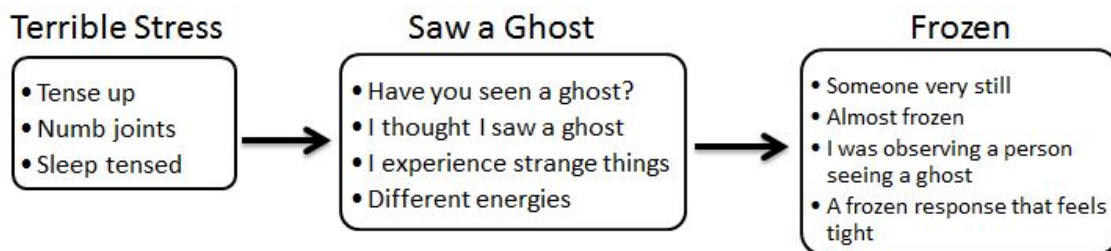
**BK: I think you are frozen.**

**C: Scared?**

**BK: I think that from the time when you saw whatever you think you saw or didn't see, you froze. When I first saw you sit down, I saw someone very still and almost frozen. As you described all the stress and the reactions you have to it, I felt like I was observing a person seeing a ghost. When someone sees a ghost, you get a frozen response that feels tight.**

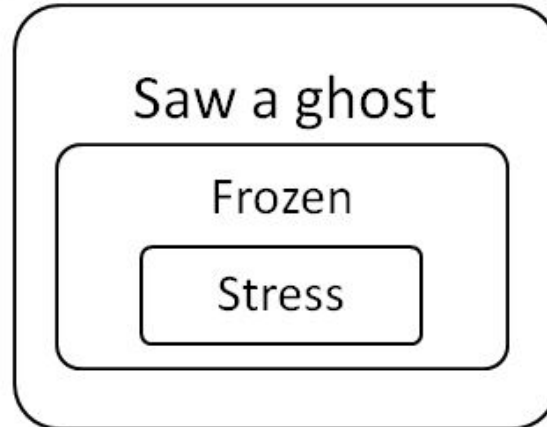
Upon hearing that Carlos does think he saw a ghost, and that he has had other kinds of “strange” or supernatural experiences, Brad re-frames Carlos’s initial complaints (being “tense” or tight) as indications of being frozen, the natural response of someone who has seen a ghost. We can map the plot of the session thus far as follows:

Figure 29:



As Brad brings Carlos’s initial complaints about stress, including his physical appearance and body language, inside the frame of someone who is frozen because they have seen a ghost, we can recognize the following embedded frames:

Figure 30:



While the progression of the session's plot line moved from stress to seeing a ghost, to being frozen, the three frames will become embedded in a different order: a man seeing a ghost becomes frozen, but may mistakenly appear to have stress.

**C: Yes, I understand. I feel that way.**

**BK: I would guess that you are a living puzzle that many doctors, experts, and therapists cannot understand because everything that should work with stress does not work with you. This is because it's not stress.**

Brad re-indicates that "stress" is no longer the frame that holds Carlos's experiences. Already we know from his initial reports that Carlos was stuck in a vicious cycle with regards to handling what he called "stress" – all attempts to ameliorate it resulted in little change. Almost any exit from this stuck problem frame may lead to a more resourceful direction, including the somewhat unusual suggestion that he is frozen as a result of having seen a ghost. The latter is non-pathological, indicated as a natural response to such an event. The above expression, "you are a living puzzle", is another resourceful way of re-indicating this frame and

distancing it further from a problem emphasis. He no longer is contextualized as battling the problem of stress, but as someone embodying a living puzzle, a situation that is more fascinating than troublesome.

**C: It's fear.**

**BK: I don't know. You're a man who saw a ghost. I don't know that anyone has told you how to live with that fact.**

This is another re-indication of the non-pathological frame now holding Carlos's situation. Rather than being a man plagued by stress that he cannot seem to escape, he is a man who saw a ghost who is possibly only confused because he has not learned how to live with this fact.

**C: No.**

**BK: Not everybody has seen a ghost or sees or experiences weird things. Do you have good intuition?**

Re-indicating his weird experiences as an example of "good intuition" both accentuates that he has the gift, skill, or talent of intuition, and emphasizes that it is a good thing to have. This comment helps feeds movement to continue advancing toward a resourceful direction.

**C: Intuition? Regarding what?**

**BK: Do you ever get a special feeling about the way things are going to be?**

**C: Yes. It happened to me many years ago. In 1993 I had a best friend who invited me to spend a weekend in Monterrey. He was gay and he had a boyfriend. While I was in his house I had a very strong dream where this boy came in and killed us both. I woke up very upset and I told my friend the**

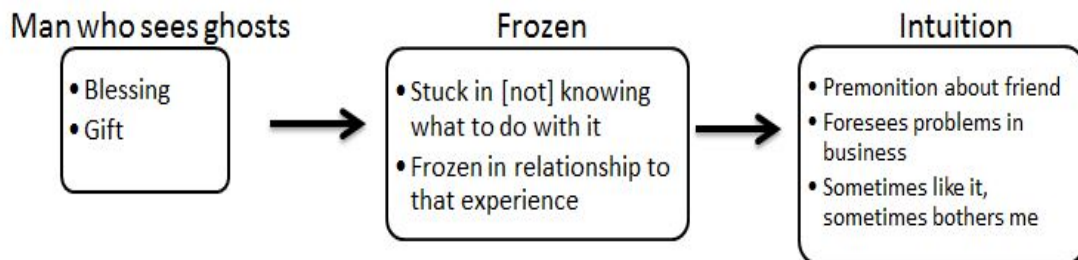
dream. I warned him to be careful with that boy because I didn't feel he was a safe person. He told me not to worry because he had him under control. He said that his boyfriend was very young and out of control, but there was no problem. Fifteen days later that boy killed my friend. He stabbed him 37 times and my friend's family asked me to claim the body. What I saw was terrible. It coincided with the previous dream and that had a big impact on me. This has happened to me on other occasions when the things I dream come true. However, this one was very unpleasant. I actually felt a little guilty because I think I should have insisted more on my friend taking me seriously. Yes, I have a special intuition. It also happens to me in business when I see problems coming. I wake up early in the morning and start having ideas and premonitions about what is going to happen. Sometimes I like it, but sometimes it bothers me.

BK: This has nothing to do with stress. Let's take the idea of stress and say, "Bye, bye. No stress." You are a man who sees ghosts and somehow this has been a blessing. But it's also been something that you have been stuck in knowing what to do with it. You are frozen in relationship to that kind of experience. It doesn't matter when you run away from things. All the things you try to do to deal with this situation don't matter, because this gift keeps visiting you - this ghost-like gift. Now I'm wondering about your intuition. If your intuition now talked to me, I would want you to not think, but only allow your intuition to communicate. I'm talking only to your intuition. I'm asking

**your intuition about when you were young and saw a ghost. Who does your intuition think was the ghost?**

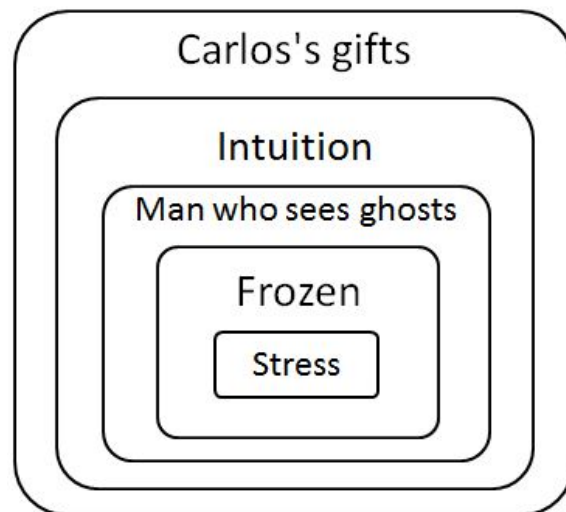
Upon hearing Carlos’s dramatic story about his intuition, Brad immediately responds by removing the frame “stress” entirely from the conversation. He avoids the trap of reacting to Carlos’s expressed fear and unease about his intuition, which would risk over-indicating an impoverished distinction, perhaps building it into a contextual frame. Instead, Brad summarizes the plot line of the discourse so far, beginning with the frame, “you are a man who sees ghosts,” further connoting this as a resource – a “blessing” and a “gift.” It is then re-stated that Carlos is stuck and frozen in his relationship to that experience, due to “not knowing what to do with it.” The latter is a non-pathological way of indicating Carlos’s uncertainty about how to relate with the mystery in his life (formerly distinguished as symptoms of stress). Brad then turns the focus of the conversation to further exploring Carlos’s intuition. He does not highlight or feed Carlos’s fear about his intuition, despite the tragic story that was recounted. Rather, after re-indicating the context of the conversation as a resourceful exploration of Carlos’s “gift” and “blessing”, Brad affirms the importance of his intuition by asking to speak to it directly. We can represent this plot line as follows:

Figure 31:



The addition of more embedded frames creates distance away from the original presenting frame, “stress,” and movement toward a resourceful context in which the entire discourse is about helping Carlos relate to his intuitive gifts. As more frames are brought to surround what was previously a frame, the latter diminishes into becoming a distinction. In this case, the initial presenting frame of stress has been deconstructed into a mere distinction that is now contextually framed by other layers of indication.

Figure 32:



[It might be tempting for a therapist to react to what was tragic and scary about Carlos’s story, but it is essential at this time in the plot line of the session to avoid giving any pathological connotation to Carlos’s experiences, particularly as he himself expresses uncertainty about whether he regards these as positive or negative. Both seeing ghosts and having premonitions are not universally accepted as “gifts” or even valid experiences; they can be easily framed in a non-resourceful way, including being indications that a client is insane, evil, or sick. Such reports by people throughout history have sometimes resulted in their being burned at the



stake or institutionalized, depending on whether the person was subject to the guidelines of a church authority or those of the DSM.

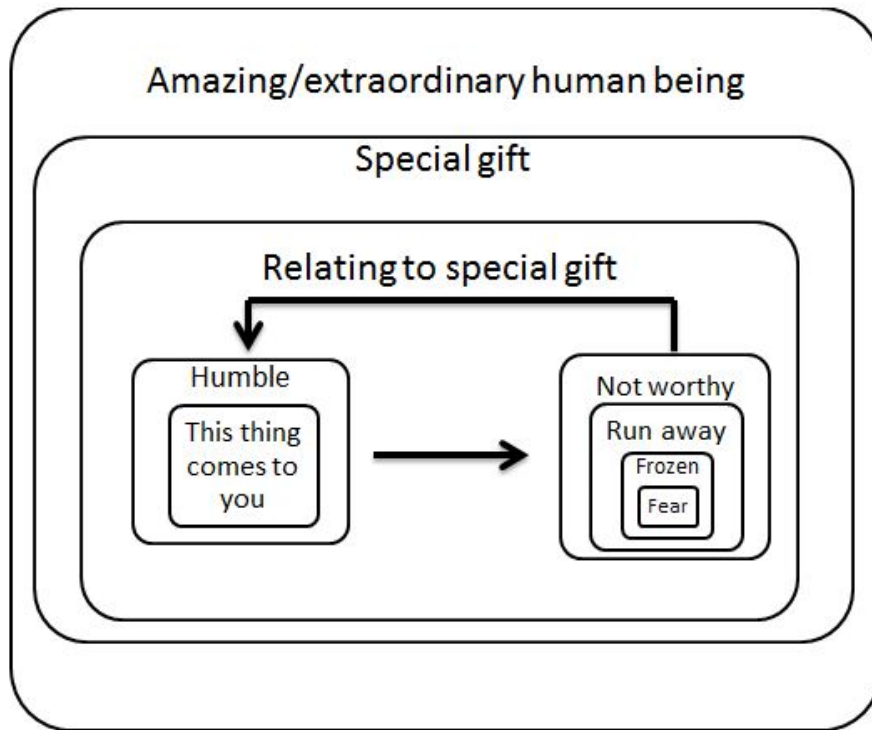
Brad, however, did not regard Carlos's reports as being unusual or as signs of pathology. Brad himself has a long history of personal experience with having visions and strong intuitions. Among shamans and healers, as well as the cultures in which they live, these experiences are regarded as resources and special gifts. Should someone feel fear or uncertainty about how to hold such an experience, elder shamans are there to help teach the person how to relate to it. Brad, regarded as a shaman by many indigenous elders throughout the world, recognizes that Carlos is in need of assistance and direction with how to relate to his gifts.]

**C: I don't know. It's a good question. When you asked that question, I felt something moving in my upper chest. There is a kind of emptiness there, but I don't know what is going on. I think that maybe it was not just one ghost that I experienced. Maybe there have been more, but I don't know. This is the thing: I'm afraid of contacting that part of myself. There's a terrible fear inside me and this is a part of that fear. After I stopped drinking and was part of the AA program, I complied with the 12-step program and I have been able to view my defects. I have realized that I can be very scared about some things and that fear paralyzes me. I have noticed this. Maybe I try to fly from that part of me. I run away from getting in touch with my intuition. Yes, it is a gift, but I am scared of it. I don't know how to manage it and in some way the unknown makes me scared.**

**BK: Your amazing life has this special gift and inner talent that you are afraid of using because you fear what you might experience. You fear experiencing a mysterious thing and this keeps you frozen. All the things you try to do, including drinking, are simply ways of running away from this thing you fear, and it has you frozen. When this thing comes to you, you feel it in your body. Your body then says, “No, I don’t want to feel it.” It then turns you into a frozen solid wall. All this makes so much sense. What an amazing, extraordinary being you are, to have this kind of gift and to be so humble and say, “It can’t possibly be me who has this gift. I am not worthy of this gift.” You then try to prove to yourself that you are not worthy of such a big good gift.**

This is a transitional fulcrum in the session as Brad builds a new contextual frame where Carlos is an amazing human being who is involved in a struggle about how to relate to his special gift – does he accept it or run away because he thinks he is not worthy. His fear, frozen response, and running away are all re-framed as an indication of humility. He subsequently aims to prove he is not worthy of such a gift. As Figure 33 shows, when Carlos runs away from his gift, it can now be regarded as a re-affirmation that he is a man with a special gift who is being humble about it.

Figure 33:



In this interaction of nested frames, when Carlos attempts to show that he is not worthy – through fear, flight, or frozen immobility – he proves that he is humble, that is, more worthy than formerly presumed.

**C: It's possible. I thought it was fear. I don't know.**

**BK: I'm having another weird thought in my mind. I see you hanging a flag in your bedroom. It's like the flag of a ship, but it hangs from your bedroom ceiling. Maybe it's solid color, perhaps it's red, or maybe it's another color. I see you putting a flag in your bedroom that enables you to say, "I'm going to sail wherever the wind takes me and not stand still anymore." I don't know why I'm telling you this. I'm just seeing this in my mind. It's a crazy thought. It's an interesting way to get your life moving. Put up a flag and declare you are going to be carried somewhere by the wind, instead of resisting.**

Brad prescribes a task to help Carlos become un-frozen, where hanging a flag in his bedroom expresses a decision to move closer to his gift. Furthermore, Brad reveals that this prescription was inspired by a “weird thought,” further affirming that acting on intuitions is a resource. This has become something that both Brad and Carlos share.

[We can postulate that moving with the wind rather than standing still is a metaphorical way of asking Carlos to change. The act of raising a flag is an enactment of a decision to change, allow his intuition to move him, rather than fight how it tries to inspire action. Arguably, the latter resistance is what tires and fatigues Carlos, what he has presumed was stress. Sailing with the winds of intuition releases the stress of resisting its movement.]

**C: In some way it's what I've been trying to do today. Even the AA program asks that I let myself go. There are some things which I cannot control, that are beyond me, and which I have to let the Higher Power be in charge. This is what I have tried to put into practice during the last couple of years and it has given me more peace. Sometimes, however, I feel afraid to know where this can lead.**

The AA idea of letting go and letting a Higher Power be in charge is a re-indication of moving with the wind [note that *spiritus*, Latin for breath or “to blow”, refers to wind], this time given a deeper meaning through spiritual discourse. While acknowledging that this is the right direction for his life, he now provides more specificity about his concern – where this can lead. As he examines his fear inside the more encompassing resourceful frame of “relating to a special gift,” he is able to

move away from being afraid of the gift and differentiate it from a fear of where the gift, intuition, wind, or Higher Power can lead him.

**BK: How many people know about this secret side of you?**

Brad is implicitly acknowledging the way Carlos talks about his gifts as something he has not yet fully embraced or accessed due to his fear about “where this can lead,” but softens it by calling it a “secret side” of him.

**C: Very few. My family knows something about it because they have been involved with this type of thing. We have many clairvoyants. From both sides of my family there are people who were and are involved with that part of magical thinking. My family believes in spiritualism, reincarnation, and traditional magic.**

**BK: Do they know as much about you that you shared with me today? Do they know what you told me? About your dream and about the experiences you’ve had since you were a child?**

**C: No, not all. They know some things, but they see it as something normal, as the family’s legacy. But none of us has had the desire to develop it or to get more involved.**

**BK: What I think, in spite of your being so quiet about the secret of your life, is that your whole life is about struggling how to handle this gift. Everything, from your efforts to handle stress to your drinking, are inseparable from struggling with how to handle your special gift. You make your life secret. You are so successful with this secret that you have become a ghost to the world. Nobody sees this important part of you. It’s invisible like a ghost. In some way,**

**you’ve become a ghost. And understandably so. Because I’m sure if your parents, and your family knew all about what went on with you, they would say that you must do more of this. They would see this as the family legacy, as your destiny. They would want you to change your life and follow this as a special calling.**

Utilizing how Carlos has kept his gift a secret from his family and the world, Brad builds the new frame that Carlos himself has become a ghost. The latter is resourcefully connoted as reflecting how “successful” he has been at keeping this “important part” of himself a secret. At this moment in the conversation an important turn or recursive transformation takes place. In the beginning, Carlos had been depicted as frozen as a result of facing a ghost. Now he is the ghost whose secret gift is an unseen presence for others. With this reversal, there is the implication that what is frozen is the way his interactions with others seldom utilize his gift. This is brought forth with the mention that Carlos’s family is very familiar with similar experiences and that they await his readiness to make more of himself visible. And in so doing, he could step into the possible calling of his destiny, fulfilling the family legacy. We can illustrate this progression of frames as follows:

Figure 34:



We include the “flag” frame in Figure 34, though it is sort of lying in wait inside the present flow of conversation. It was previously introduced as a way of inviting Carlos to become unfrozen, accept his gift, and move forward with his life. Figure 35 shows the current embedding of frames. Note that the flag frame is implicitly embedded inside “handling your special gift.” In summary, all former distinctions and indications are now inside the more resourceful context of a man whose destiny requires that he learn how to relate to his special gift:

Figure 35:



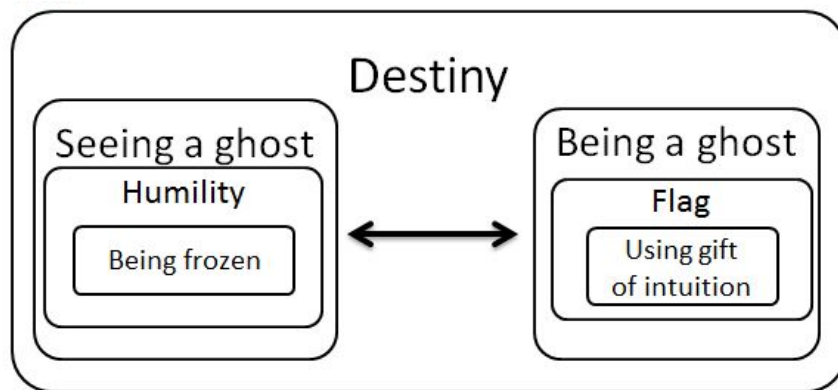
**C: Do you believe that this is part of my destiny? Should I get more involved and develop this gift?**

**BK: I don't think about these things. I prefer listening to my intuition because these magical things cannot be understood by the mind. I just sat down with you and heard a voice immediately tell me, "This man has seen a ghost." Then later my imagination saw you putting up a flag in your bedroom and heard you**

saying, “I’m ready to move on with my life.” Now I actually see and hear that you have become a ghost and I also remember that I’m speaking to a lawyer. That’s miraculous. Who would think that a lawyer has seen a ghost and is a ghost? That’s amazing. I think that there are more satisfying ways to deal with your secret, more enjoyable ways of handling your secret gift, than acting like you’ve just seen a ghost and clenching up into a tense frozen posture. You even dress like a ghost. You’re wearing all white. You really are a ghost. *(There is laughter. BK points to his necklace.)* **What is this?**

Brad continues to elaborate and develop the side-by-side frames of seeing a ghost versus being a ghost. Being a ghost requires elevating the importance of intuition when relating to mystery, whereas only seeing a ghost typically leads to being frozen and unable to move. Carlos is more and more depicted as a ghost, even dressed in white, setting up the prescription to hang the flag, a message to “move on with his life”. Hanging the flag is an alternative, more “enjoyable” and “satisfying” way of handling his unseen intuitive gift. This embedded interaction of frames can be illustrated as follows:

Figure 36:





When Carlos acts as if he has seen a ghost, his frozen state may be taken as a sign of humility, making him more ready to move forward and see himself as worthy of his destiny. The latter includes not only seeing ghosts, but seeing himself as a ghost with unseen gifts about the unseen. As a ghost, he may handle his gift differently, raise the flag, and feel free to move as his intuition directs.

Recall that Brad had pointed out the necklace Carlos was wearing, asking for its meaning. He responded:

**C: It's a Chinese symbol for love. This is the way you write love in Chinese.**

**BK: Maybe you saw a love ghost. That's what I wonder about. It seems to me like some love ghost came visiting you.**

Earlier in the session Brad had asked Carlos's intuition to identify the ghost that came to visit him when he was young, but the question was never answered. When the question was addressed again, it is suggested that a love ghost may have visited him. To the surprise of Carlos, Brad, and the audience, the sound system went off after that statement was uttered.

**C: The microphone is out...** (*The sound system had stopped working.*)

**BK: I think the ghost took away the microphone.**

Brad utilizes this distraction to indicate that there may be a ghost in their midst. In terms of RFA, another re-indication is made that further maintains presence inside a contextual frame that deals with ghosts.

**C: I thought the same.**

**BK: Perhaps they like to mess with electrical things. I said I think you...**

**C: You said I probably had seen a love ghost because it had touched this part of me (*pointing to his heart*), and that's why my chest feels funny when I think about these things. I thought that I probably have seen a love ghost. That was when the mic turned off.**

Earlier Carlos had reported feeling something move in his upper chest when he discussed the ghost. As it is noticed that the necklace's pendant about love rests over his chest, Carlos links these distinctions together so that the Chinese symbol for love is a sign about the chest feeling he gets whenever the ghost is considered. Namely, it is a re-indication, now a confirmation, that his mystery involves a love ghost.

**BK: Some people say there are no coincidences. (*laughter*) I'm going to propose that it's wise to assume that you saw a love ghost because of what just happened. Perhaps there's nothing more to say.**

Brad simply accepts the way Carlos is framing the associations between physical feelings on his chest, the Chinese symbol for love, and talk about a ghost.

**C: Yes, it was amazing.**

**BK: Maybe a love ghost has been after you.**

The most important frame in the beginning of the session, "seeing a ghost", formerly used to construct an even bigger frame that Carlos has a special gift and destiny, is brought back into the conversation but given the resourceful connotation of being associated with love, a love that may be chasing Carlos.

**C: Maybe.**

**BK: Would you consider hanging a flag in your bedroom? It can be a little flag or a big flag. It can be a piece of colored cloth.**

Brad brings the focus back to the prescription for action and asks for more distinctions that can strengthen it as a resourceful contextual frame.

**C: Many colors?**

**BK: It's your choice. What do you see? What do you feel? What does your gift tell you?**

Again Brad affirms Carlos's special gift, inviting it inside the present interaction.

**C: I see only one color and it is like wine. It is a red color, a burgundy. That is the color I see. I imagine the flag that way.**

**BK: That's the flag I see. We must know the same ghost.**

This comment re-emphasizes that Brad has been accepting and utilizing his own intuition throughout the session, a way of joining with and encouraging Carlos to accept and use his gift as well. Recall that when the microphone went out, Carlos expressed to Brad that he also assumed it was the ghost, and that he thought it was a love ghost that he saw. Both Brad and Carlos have stepped into a contextual frame where they communicate about a special gift that accesses intuition and mystery.

**C: I think so.**

**BK: Now the ghost flag can announce that you are going to get on board the love boat. (laughter)**

Brad weaves the current metaphors together to emphasize that hanging the flag brings Carlos closer to love.

**C: Let's hope so.**

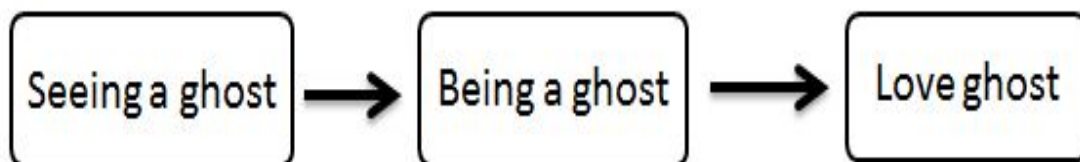
**BK: Yes. From time to time, it must be complicated to shut down all of your body because the love ghost loves you. . .**

**C: Yes, it's difficult.**

**BK: Because a love ghost comes with love, those ghosts you met as a boy weren't really scary. Their love was good. But now, all these years later, you have things a bit mixed up. Whenever you feel love coming, you feel like it's a ghost coming your way.**

The red flag and the love ghost have led us to the love boat, all metaphors that point to the way Carlos relates to love. While still inside the frame of handling his special gift and destiny, Carlos is invited to see that it is really love that has been chasing him. This context enables us to consider that perhaps he has feared where love can take him. Furthermore, the ghost over his chest is found inside his heart, what he earlier described as a felt "emptiness", a ghostlike presence of an absence. As Figure 37 outlines, Carlos was initially frozen when he saw a ghost, and that in turn led him to becoming a ghost to others, that is, keeping his intuitive gift hidden. Finally, he recognizes that the ghost he once saw and the ghost that he actually is concerns love. In other words, love is the ghost in his life.

Figure 37:



**C: Probably it is.**

**BK: Put up your flag – the flag that honors love.**

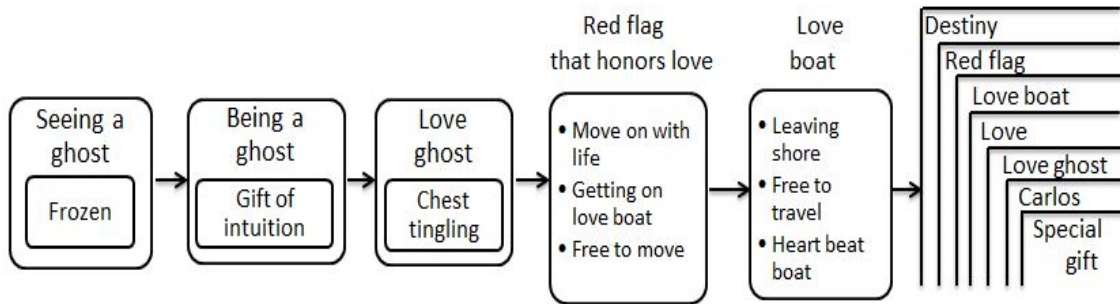
**C: I will put it up.**

**BK: Say to yourself, “I’m on board the love boat.” There’s no reason to be scared of a love ghost anymore, because you’ve also become a love ghost. When that ghost comes again, you should say, “Hello, nice to see another ghost.” I’m teasing you. No, I’m not. There’s a truth here. I think your life has been keeping you on the shore, waiting for the boat to leave. It’s interesting that you go away for a little bit and come back. It’s almost like a practice or dress rehearsal to get yourself ready to move to be free to travel. I don’t mean geographical travel. I mean the beating movement in your heart, the heartbeat boat that can take you to places, on journeys to the many ways that invisible love can be present. Yes, love is invisible. Love is a ghost. The capacity that you have for your body to experience life and love is huge and this is good.**

The invitation to hang a flag that honors love is presented to Carlos as a way of acknowledging an acceptance of both love and love ghosts into his life. Just as “ghost” was altered to being a “love ghost,” this same frame shift is applied to Carlos. He is transformed from being a frozen ghost to becoming a love ghost - a man who allows love to come into his heart and move his life forward. The flag is an invitation to get on the love boat, a metaphor for movement that “leaves the shore” and becomes free to go forward in matters of the heart. All his previous flights from stress are depicted as dress rehearsals for change and movement inspired by his

heart. He is now invited to travel by the movement of his beating heart, allowing love to guide his journey. The progression of frames can be depicted as follows:

Figure 38:



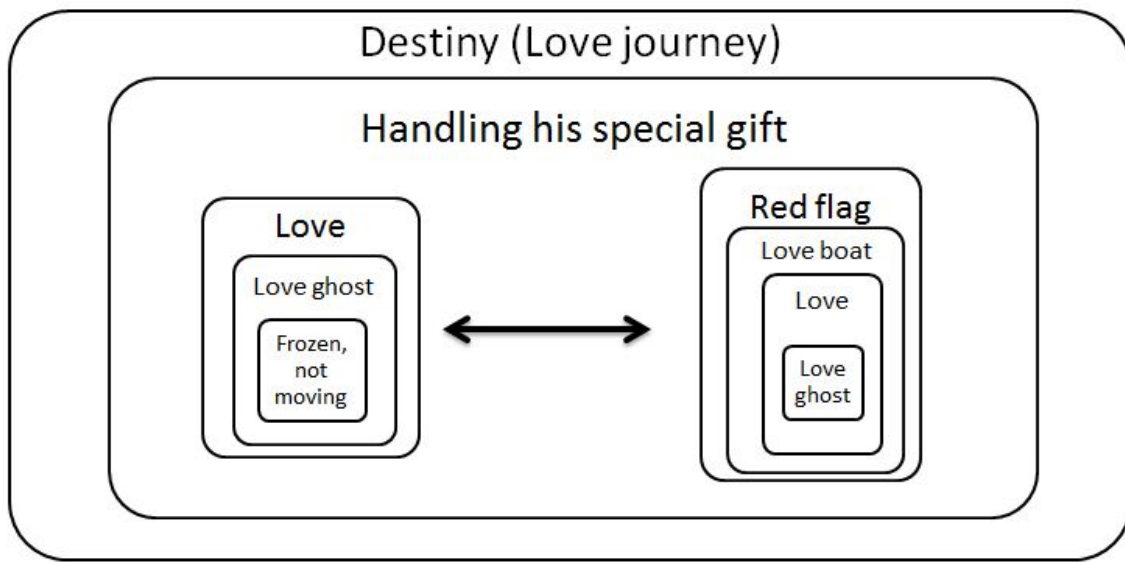
Note that the embedding of frames continues to invite Carlos to follow his destiny, offering him a transformative way of advancing his special gift. In the beginning, a non-pathological diagnosis was given, defining Carlos as a man who simply had not learned how to live with the facts of his life – that he is an intuitive man who sees ghosts. The frozen, startled response to seeing a ghost shifted to seeing himself as a ghost with an intuitive gift unseen by others, and then moved toward a love ghost encounter that made his chest tingle, followed by an invitation for him to raise the red flag that honors love and get on board the love boat.

Carlos is given a prescription for action that will help him handle the love that might suddenly appear at any time. Going past the either/or choice of accepting versus running away from experiences involving mysterious intuitions and sightings, Carlos is now invited to allow the wind, the Higher Power, and the mystery of love to move and direct him on an uncharted adventure.

Here there is no exit back to pathology and the distress of resisting what life offers to the heart. The session has sailed far away from the stuck problem frame of

“stress.” If Carlos hangs the flag, gets on the love boat, and moves toward his destiny, he accepts becoming a man who allows a mysterious journey to unfold. The frames shift and advance to place him in an even more resource-saturated domain:

Figure 39:



Here he is free to move back and forth between accepting love as the frame of his life or as raising his flag in order to announce a journey deeper into love. Both choices contribute to a virtuous circle that brings forth more distinctions, indications, and framings of the possibilities of being inside love.

**C: It's possible.**

**BK: Are you ready to get on the boat? You've waited long enough. Raise your flag.**

**C: Okay.**

**BK: It will be nice. Will you do this? Will you hang a flag, a burgundy flag in your room? You promise?**

**C: I promise.**

**BK: Are you sure?**

**C: I promise.**

**BK: Now I see your flag hanging. Every night before you go to bed, maybe you should say, “Bon voyage” before you go to sleep. You’re ready for life itself to move through your life and take you somewhere. You’re ready to meet the invisible magic, the ghost of love. Ghost, we ask that you come as a wind. Blow the ship’s sails. Tight body, go away. Sailing wind, take this man away on a journey to love. Do you know how to blow air?**

A new embedding is cast, with the ghost of love indicated as a wind that blows the sails of a love boat. This sets up a transformative moment when it can be announced that the wind of love is capable of releasing Carlos from being frozen inside a “tight body,” formerly experienced as stress and tension. With this release is found the beginning of a “journey to love.”

**C: Yes. (*laughing*)**

**BK: Blow a big puff like this. It’s good for you. From this day on, the minute you think you might see or feel a ghost or have a strange feeling, it’s good to know how to make a big wind.**

This prescription for blowing a puff of air associates a “love wind” with the “strange feelings” he gets on his chest, marked by the symbol of love on his pendant. It helps Carlos frame what is happening in his heart as an opportunity for movement rather than standing still with concern over where the wind might carry him.

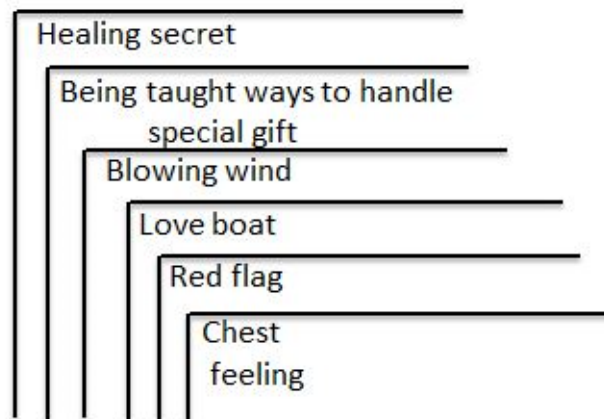
**C: Okay. I will do it.**



**BK: Bon voyage. If you try right now you will see what happens to your body when you blow a wind. Make the biggest breath you can and blow so hard that it makes you tremble. Try it and be surprised. Try it with me. (Carlos and BK each blow a big puff of air and tremble.) Feel that? Amazing, right? I will tell you a little secret that comes from Africa. It's what the healers from some of the old tribes know. If there is ever something out there that you are uncertain about and fear, there is no need to say any magic words. There is no need to do anything except blow with all your might.**

Brad directly addresses Carlos's fear, except now he offers a way of handling it that utilizes his special gift – a love ghost blowing love wind whenever his intuition and body feelings signal it is needed to bring forth movement and change. This is delivered inside a contextual frame where Carlos is being taught by a lineage of other healers. This nesting of frames can be illustrated as follows:

Figure 40:



**C: This is amazing. I felt something strong when you blew. I felt the energy when you blew. It was a lot of energy.**

**BK: It's because you feel things. We are both men ghosts. We are men who will never quite understand why the ghost of love comes to us, wanting to move us. It is a beautiful thing and a frightening thing. It is our gift and our curse. We are ghosts, but if you hoist your flag every night and say "Bon voyage," everything will be okay.**

Brad explicitly calls attention to how the relationship between he and Carlos goes past that of therapist and client, to that of two men ghosts sharing an intuitive gift that is sensitive to the ghosts of love. The session addresses how to relate to this gift so it steers life in a good way. While the gift can be both beautiful and frightening, it surpasses any delimiting emphasis on the pathologies of stress. This contextual shift began with the first question to Carlos about whether he had seen a ghost, followed by a request to directly speak to Carlos's intuition. In the subsequent course of the session, the interaction between therapist and client became a highlighted part of the contextual framing. It became a conversation between two men about ghosts and love, discussing how to live with intuitive ways of relating to the mysteries of life.

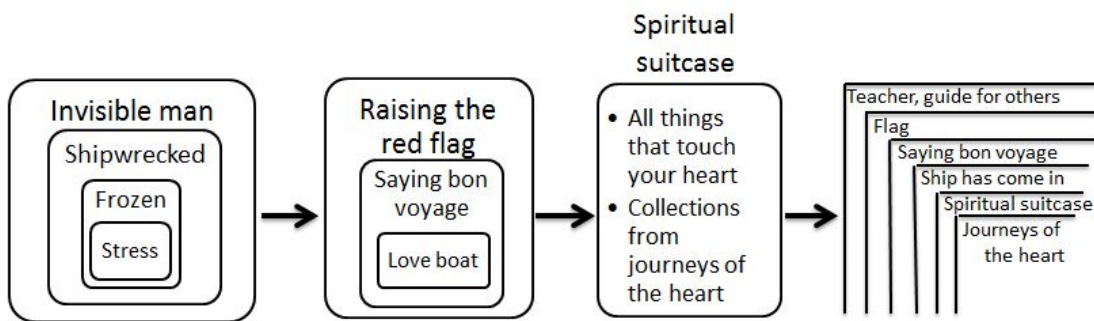
**C: Okay.**

**BK: I think that you came here today to teach all these therapists about some extraordinary things they would otherwise never know anything about. You are an invisible man carrying ghost love, and holding other teachings, yet to be known. You can provide guidance and help to others through law, and through relationships, and through all the many ways you can touch both the mind and heart. You are not stressed. You are shipwrecked. All you have to do is get a**

**little flag and know that your ship has come in. Always say, “Bon voyage.” I think it would be nice for you to purchase a little suitcase and call it a spiritual suitcase. This suitcase shall hold things that are close to your heart. If you’re at a store and you see a card that says a wonderful thing about love and it touches you, buy it and put it in your suitcase. Every time you collect something from one of your journeys of the heart, put it inside this spiritual suitcase. Please know that I feel your energy too. It’s good that you’ve come today.**

Brad suggests that Carlos has actually learned a lot during his lifetime about how to handle and relate to his intuitive gift and is ready to be a teacher and guide for others. All he needs to do is hang a flag, say “bon voyage”, and get on a ship that can carry his life toward love. His being frozen has been re-indicated as “shipwrecked”. All distinctions, indications, and frames are now about traveling through life with love. Another prescription for action that enacts this resourceful frame is offered with the spiritual suitcase. This progression of frames is illustrated below:

Figure 41:



**C: Thank you for seeing me.**

**BK: You can go everywhere your heart calls, doing so now with a new wind and a new flag and a readiness to go forward, welcoming all the surprising and extraordinary ways life is rich and complex. You have earned the right to get on board the ship. You have waited long enough. You paid all the dues. Though you've tried every way to run away from these things, they will continue coming to you. Now it will be a more interesting life because you will be on the boat, moving with the wind. Inside all the wind, carrying the wind, being the wind, being the heart, being the love, being the invisible presence of all the magic your family on both sides has waited for someone to carry into the world without fear, for the sake of the whole family's destiny and legacy. What an amazing chapter you've come to in your life. Bon voyage.**

**C: Thank you.**

Brad offers a final affirmation of Carlos's gifts and a further invitation for him to step more fully into his destiny. Carlos is assured that he is ready to act. He has transitioned from being a frozen ghost to a love ghost, a wind of love, and a man prepared to be inspired and moved by a tingling heart.

Given the special relationship between Brad and Carlos, Brad's final two poetic statements to Carlos sound like an ordination ceremony. Here "Bon Voyage" is less a goodbye than an encouraging welcome to a new and amazing chapter in Carlos's life. The session began with a man who complained about being plagued by a "terrible stress," a condition he had not been able to ameliorate despite trying various strategies. Upon discovering that Carlos had a special gift and was visited by

a mystery that was both beautiful and sometimes frightening, the session moved to teaching him how to step into his destiny – being a love ghost, a man on a journey into the mysteries of love.

We can collapse the progression of frames in this session to the following progression of five acts:

Figure 42:

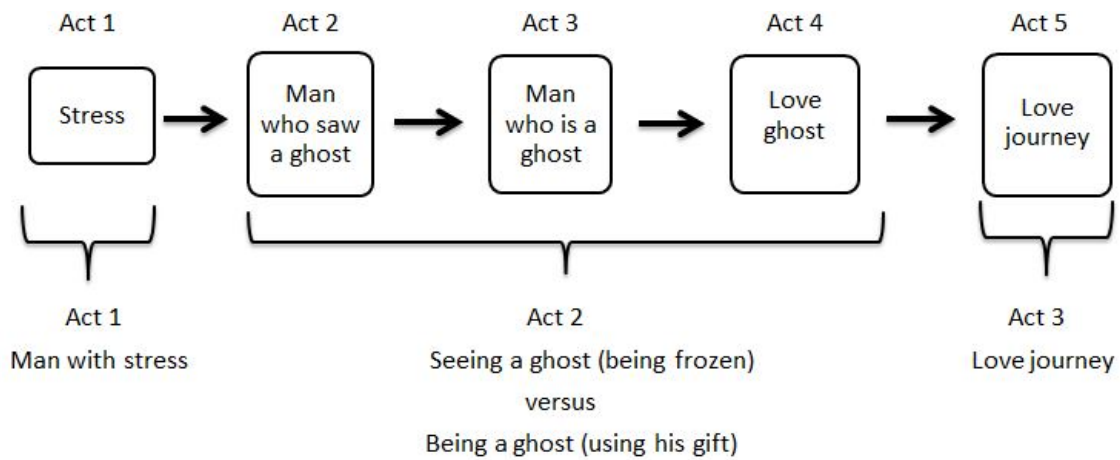
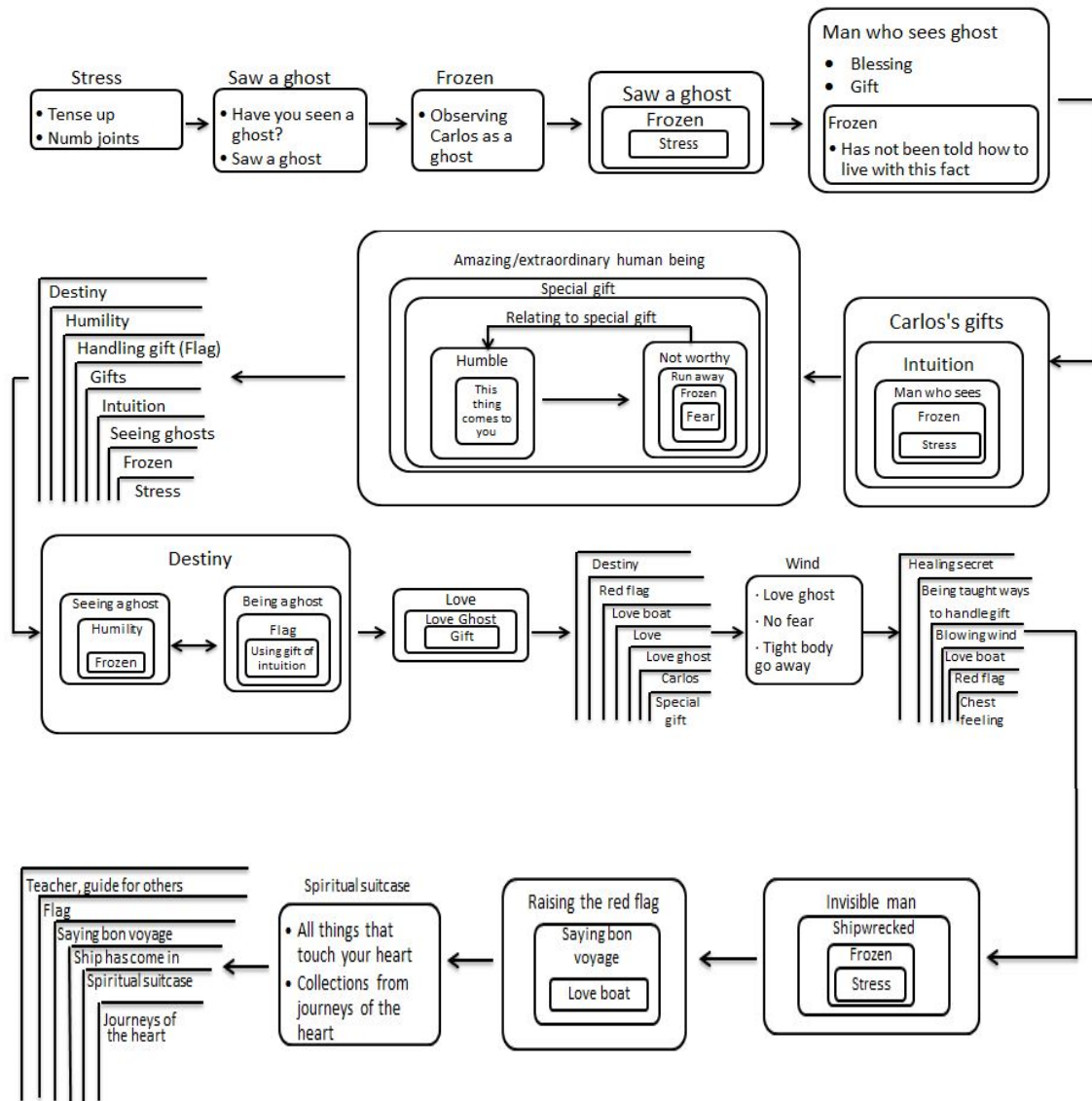


Figure 42 also shows that these five acts can be collapsed even further into the following three-act structure:

*Man with Stress -----> Seeing a Ghost (Being Frozen) or Becoming a Ghost (Using his Gift) -----> Going on a Love Journey*

Figure 43 offers a more detailed RFA map of the movement of frames in the session.

Figure 43:



As is true for all sessions, there is more involved than a simple plot line taking place. Here, a man feeling stress discovers he is frozen after seeing a ghost, only to be surprised again when he sees that he is the ghost and that the invisible presence that eludes him is love. Along this journey he faces his intuitive gifts, reclaims his family legacy and destiny, raises his burgundy flag, packs his suitcase, and is ready for the callings of his heart. On closer examination what we find are the

bringing forth of multiple distinctions, indications, and frames that continuously embed themselves in different arrangements. As presenting concerns are deconstructed from frames to distinctions inside other more resourceful frames, new possibilities and choices arise. At any moment a frame may recursively shift its relationship to another frame so that an observed ghost becomes the observer, and later becomes the elusive heartfelt stirrings of the fleeting presence of tingling sensations in the chest. Similarly, an unseen intuitive gift enables unseen things to be felt, as the raising of a flag lifts one's heart, inspires the packing of a suitcase filled with souvenirs from journeys of love, and brings forth the utterance of "bon voyage." In this constant turning and rearranging of frames and distinctions, metaphors rise and fall like the tides of the sea. These changing forms, in turn, move a conversation along, giving it a life of its own. Inside this flow of recursive frame shifting, our experience and performance are set free to change.

## Chapter Six

### **Further Considerations of Recursive Frame Analysis**

RFA was originally intended to help therapists emphasize the performance side of their presence inside the interactivity of therapy. When used during a case, it challenges a therapist to move past the presenting act, acting in any way that makes a difference for forward movement – or any kind of movement away from the vicious circles in which clients find themselves trapped. After a session, an RFA score enables therapists to look at the patterns that organized their conversation, rather than regress into a theoretical exposition that drifts away from what took place in the performed session.

The first publication that set forth RFA was published in Italian (Keeney, 1990). The following year, RFA made its appearance into the English publication (Keeney, 1991), *Improvisational Therapy: A Practical Guide for Creative Clinical Strategies*. It is important to highlight that Keeney chose to first contextualize RFA as a way of creating therapy, rather than as a research method, even though it is also the latter. This constructivist orientation moved him inside second order cybernetics where the therapy being studied or the data being analyzed is shaped by how one draws the distinctions that bring it forth. Of course cybernetically speaking, this is the case with any research method, but RFA makes explicit and utilizes the circular (recursive) relationship between researcher and data. Keeney contextualized his research method as a clinical method – not a school of therapy, but a tool for inventing therapies. Improvisation became the key metaphor, a way of moving away from the stasis of the modeled approach to therapy. In this



groundbreaking book, therapy was liberated from having to be allegiant to any particular model.

Unfortunately, few therapists recognized the postmodern liberation that was being announced. Instead, more and more models proliferated with little to no awareness of the critical distinction between narration and performance, interpretation and interactivity, semantics and politics. However, one of the founders of postmodern anthropology, Stephen Tyler, former endowed chair at Rice University, recognized the importance of Keeney's contribution. Declaring that the book was a "therapy of therapy" Tyler (S. Tyler & M. Tyler, 1991) noted its postmodern sentiment:

Improvise (in-pro-videre), the un-for-seen and unprovided-for is the negation of foresight, of planned-for, of doing provided for by knowing, and of the control of the past over the present and future. Doing, unguided by 'how -to,' and uniformed by 'knowing' – those other names for the past, the already seen – makes the opening for an art that is neither a craft nor a technology capable of being mastered. No mystagoguery of mastery encumbers the improvident being-now, and no history in-forms it. (p. x)

*Improvisational Therapy* included a chapter of invented therapies, showing how it was more generative to invent many therapies rather than spend a career caught inside one. This arguably was the first postmodern moment in therapy, an invitation to "cast off these armors of the ready" (S. Tyler & M. Tyler, 1991, p. xi), that is, the prescriptions of a therapeutic model. That which is now called "postmodern" therapy is actually modernist in that it assumes a single philosophical orientation and replicable form (Anderson, 1997). Truly postmodern therapy, in contrast, is inventive, playful, and fully on stage. A postmodern therapist interacts with the other without assumptions about what constitutes appropriate manners of

speech or action (e.g., therapist must always interact with the client as a “conversational partner” [p. 95]; always defer to the client as “expert,” and so on [p. 95]). As Tyler and Tyler (1991) described the improvisational nature of a postmodern therapy: “A therapist and client respond to one another without benefit of a script or even of a narrative” (p. xi). Therapists and clients “per-form without being in-formed” (p. xi).

On the other hand, the dominating models (the model dominates the course of therapy and restricts any improvisational drift) of so-called narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) and postmodern therapy (Anderson, 1997), among all the other modernist models (note: all “models” are inherently modernist), in-form therapists and clients in ways that negate the very goals they seek of liberation and freedom from imposed bias and ideology. As models of therapy that do not foster improvisation, they remain another example of the mind-control that characterizes any school of therapy, independent of its good intentions.

As Tyler and Tyler (1991) suggested, postmodern liberation “does not enable ‘doing’ by means of efficient repetition, but by a kind of inefficiency, a being-unready that prepares beforehand only by making ready to respond in tune, tempo, and theme”, again, “in order to per-form without being in-formed” (p. xi). When a therapist predictably follows clichéd ways of talking to and interacting with clients and constantly relies upon a reified technique such as “externalization,” “circular questioning,” or “the miracle question,” they are imposing a form that controls rather than liberates.

RFA was a call to transform therapy as a postmodern theatrical art, rooted to the circular interactivity of improvisation that includes story as part of the performance, not as a reified thing to fix. Contextualized as a tool that helps therapists improvise and invent therapies, it erases the line separating practice from research. RFA is a *creative tool* that brings research and practice together as one cooperative activity: improvisational invention, the creation of performance that utilizes the unfolding movement of whatever happens between therapist and client.

As suggested before, RFA brings a kind of sheet music to therapy. It enables us to replay in our minds what was performed, showing the movements that got us from the beginning to the end of a session. It enables us to quickly see when a session is going nowhere and when it has moved somewhere. Without a tool like RFA, therapists too easily drown in discourse where it is all but impossible to separate signal from noise. Again, this fosters the never-ending game of theoretical commentary that tries to convince client and colleagues that something actually took place when, too often, it most likely didn't. Without improvisational freedom, therapy serves models rather than clients or therapists. Sessions are exploited to prove the model's veracity, whether it is claims to be systemic or narrative, strategic, communicational, psychoanalytic, or whatever.

### *Recursion*

RFA presents an exit for therapists, showing them the way outside of models. It invites improvised invention and authentic cooperation where therapists collaborate with the circular interactivity moving improvisation, rather than their theory or model. Not only is practice revolutionized by RFA, the same holds for

research. Here the constructivist implications of the distinctions drawn by the researcher are more clearly identified and shown to enter into the domain of study. Research includes, and sometimes emphasizes, a study of how the researcher draws distinctions that identify the primary distinctions drawn in a session by therapist and client. However, here the researcher must utilize what took place in the session, rather than remove themselves from the metaphors it presents. This assures that the researcher remains closer to grasping the data (the actually spoken metaphors) rather than slip away into the type of abstractions that are required for qualitative or quantitative methodologies to operate their routines.

It is important to note what is recursive about RFA: the re-entry of a distinction into its own form is a circularity that constitutes more than what was the previous marking, and yet is not distinct from the original form. Here we find recursion, the creation of difference from circulated re-entry. It is important to realize that therapy aims to be both lineal and circular. It is lineal in the sense that it must seek movement from a beginning to an end – an initial departure from impoverished experience toward a transformative middle that culminates in more resourceful experience. However, if therapy were as easy as saying “stop doing that and do this instead,” it would take less than one minute and would not be believable for either therapist or client. We move forward by going round and round a circle. Vicious circles must be transformed into virtuous circles, doing so through a middle ground that enables circularity to tinker with being either.

If a marksman aims a rifle at the evening sky and tries to hit the moon, she will miss because in the course of the projectile’s movement toward the target there

will be constant unexpected influences that can throw it off course. One must take aim and then repeatedly assess the difference between the projectile being on and off course. This difference, in turn, must re-enter, re-adjust, and re-steer the subsequent direction. This circular feedback loop is the cybernetic circularity that enables one to get from the beginning to a desired end, doing so by utilizing difference as a means of governing self-correction. The same holds true for therapy. To get to the transformed ending, we must be inside a circularity that creates and honors difference (also called “error” or “mistake”), utilizes it to make subsequent differences, and continue doing so until we are able to move from here to there, that is, get from the troubled beginning to the resolved ending.

RFA plots the course of this trajectory, indicating the metaphors that contextualize present interaction. Its circularity or recursion involves the back and forth movements that re-circulate previous frames, doing so in ways that foster differences that make a difference in the client’s contextualization of their experience. We go round and round in order to move forward. Or we don’t. When we go round and round to perpetuate a stuck situation, we are part of the clients’ vicious cycle and may even be making matters worse. Getting to a transformative context requires that our participation in an interaction contribute to fostering higher order change. [Here we see that RFA holds both structuralist and non-structuralist concerns: therapy, like all performance, has structure, but also can be free from any fixed form; it can improvise. At the same time, an improvisation, when examined afterwards, moves from a now to a later (a here to a there), inviting an observer to punctuate a pattern, melody, choreography, or structure.]

RFA operates in different domains of analysis and performance. As we have seen, it may be simple and only show a one-page map of a session's conversational movement. Or it may be more detailed and devote a lengthy text to analyzing one session. The purpose at hand determines which is more appropriate and relevant. The future development of RFA should attend to both scales of its operation – making it more conveniently accessible for a therapist in real time clinical work, both in a session and for case reporting, as well as a highly developed set of distinctions that enable more elaborate post hoc inspection and analysis of a clinical conversation.

#### *Frame vs. Content*

In the spirit of recursion, let's begin our discussion of RFA all over again. This time we want to emphasize that RFA builds upon the simple idea that one must distinguish a context and the content it holds. What is most fascinating about human communication is how we are able to reverse context and content and to change them in a variety of logical and illogical ways. Bateson (1972) used the notion of "frame" to indicate the way a context holds or frames the content of experience. He saw, early on, that any piece of content is able to jump from the inside and become the frame, thereby setting the conditions for paradoxical experience. A road sign that says, "Don't look at this sign" may throw us into an oscillation that cannot settle on whether the sign itself or the message on the sign is the frame or context for the other. Similarly, a couple that asks for help with their communication risks being caught in a vicious circle that does not recognize that commentary about

communication distances them from the desired immediacy of non-interrupted communication.

With the idea that context and its content are a primary distinction, we can indicate context as a frame. When clients come in and say, “We need to tell you about our problem”, they are setting forth a frame called “my problem.” As they proceed to report about their life, this frame becomes filled with content. It might include a description of how fearful they are of expressing what they really think about their children. They might also talk about whether their problem is a sickness, a cultural display, or a metaphysical proposition. What matters is whether it contributes more content for that particular frame. Any elicitation of discourse that brings forth more content that fits inside a problem frame keeps them inside that context. However, if a therapist were to say to one of the clients, “Did you notice the way you appear resolved when you spoke? You spoke with calm and certainty. Are you always this way when you speak?” Should the client pick up on any of these distinctions and start offering examples of whether he is resolved, calm, certain, or not, then the frame or context shifts to being about more resourceful metaphors.

The mission of RFA is to keep track of what is the frame and what is being held and contextualized by it. As content and frame reverse themselves, shift, re-enter, and move in endless ways, we find that the circular, recursive, and lineal movement (among other dynamic forms) of their frames can take place. Helping clients move from impoverished frames to nourishing frames is our ethical responsibility. Having the flexibility to both invent and creatively handle distinctions and the way they are framed, unframed, reframed, misframed, as well

as moved in roundabout ways helps the therapist be a more able facilitator of change.

### *The Future of RFA*

The future of RFA should also include further innovations in the kinds of indications it draws upon as a research method. There is no end to the distinctions that can be used to more finely indicate distinctions in the construction of therapeutic realities. The work of Chenail and his associates (see Chenail et al., 1990) has made numerous contributions in this regard. In addition, the application of RFA to other conversational forms concerned with transformation can be explored, from the structure of theatre, film, diplomacy, classroom teaching, mediation, and so forth.

In the domain of clinical practice, RFA offers a teaching tool enabling student and supervisor to more accurately keep track of what is taking place in a session. If a particular model is being taught, a case score can show what distinctions need to be made in order to move the case toward being an example of that kind of therapeutic model. Here a model or school of therapy is seen as a collection of distinctions that must be brought forth, typically in a particularly choreographed way, in order to weave them together so as to reveal a therapeutic reality that self-verifies its construction. [Note: In a previous work, Keeney (1991) created a “periodic table of therapeutic forms” that shows all the possible forms models of therapy can prescribe.]

RFA and the conceptual tools associated with it can do more than identify the basic forms that construct a particular therapeutic model. It can also be used to



encourage trainees to invent unique therapies that more fully utilize the frames clients and therapists present in a session. This is where RFA holds promise as a therapy of therapy, a tool that helps free clinicians from being stuck in the habituated routines of a model's non-changing form.

RFA can be applied to itself. One can score one's scoring. Here it becomes a second order methodology that helps reveal the investigator's inclusion in the creation of the experienced<sup>15</sup>. However, unmanageable complexity can easily arise as one maps mapping, as this can become an infinite regress. This reminds us that RFA does not assure that it can always separate the signal from the noise, nor does it promise any more clarity that is already found in the clinician's way of knowing. The value of RFA is found in the way it can help a therapist and research take more responsibility for the distinctions they use and the discernment and participation they bring forth. Its refusal to create any hegemony of method or model, in both research and practice, invites the therapist and researcher to become more responsibly and creatively included in the constantly shifting sands of performed experience.

Finally, Chenail (1990/1991) has accurately portrayed how RFA avoids an a priori metaphor from which discourse can be organized. As he describes it, "RFA can be said to be based upon a *metaphor as metaphor* orientation. This emphasis on *process* allows for the construction of unique metaphors from each conversation's *content*" (p. 12). RFA moves us from being modernists with hegemonic metaphors

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<sup>15</sup> Here, as always, second order refers to the researcher's re-entry into her research, not taking a "step removed" or meta position in which a researcher reflects on herself as the observer/researcher.

(like narrative, system, problem, solution, power, postmodern) and instead shifts us to being weavers and improvisationalists who work with the metaphors (not stories or narratives) that arise in a session.

Most importantly, RFA invites us to creatively *play* with metaphor, rather than freeze frame any pre-chosen metaphor or frame. The same goes for any narrative including the narrative of narrative. The trap of therapy is the same for all schooled approaches – their models are freeze frames that lead to various forms of frame disorder, including the obsessive ordering of preferred frames.

A therapist must remember that life is not a problem that can be solved. Yes, we are free to frame our metaphors as “problems,” “solutions,” “narratives,” “family structures,” or “neurolinguistic programs” and pretend that we are fixing people, but our deeper poetic mind and heartfelt wisdom knows this is at least partially absurd nonsense. Similarly, researchers and scholars must be reminded that life’s complexity cannot be understood. Meaning is as meaningful as our ability to frame our frames as meaningful. This does not mean that life is a forced choice between being either meaningful or meaningless, or that it is necessarily meaningful in any meaningless way, or meaningless in any meaningful way. The performances of our life may be both dramatic and comedic, depending upon the frame and episode at hand.

We become more ready and available to foster resourceful change when we accept everyday life – including therapy sessions and scholarly conversation – as improvised performance rather than scripted narration. The former encourages us to reinvent our roles as clinicians and researchers. This includes not having to

accept any distinction that separates these roles, nor any relational metaphor that connects them in a way that inhibits our being more playful in service to the aesthetics of transformation.

It is time that therapists and scholars recognize that they do not have to be framed by social science and all the presuppositions that the latter name carries. We are free to move to an imagined academy of performing arts. There we recognize that we are performers striving to bring forth contexts wherein resourceful experience may thrive. Our knowing is invented through the choices of distinctions we cast and the way we re-distinguish and extinguish them. Our being arises inside the contexts that either constrain or liberate our creative expression. When we move away from limited models, theories, narratives, and grand schemes of framing, we find ourselves not only more inside a more open-ended theatrical play, we discover that we experience our work as play, a creative production that brings heart and soul to the dramatic comedies and comedic dramas people bring to our performance stages.

## **Appendix**

### **How to Create Recursive Frame Analysis Figures with Microsoft Office**

#### **SmartArt Graphics Tool**

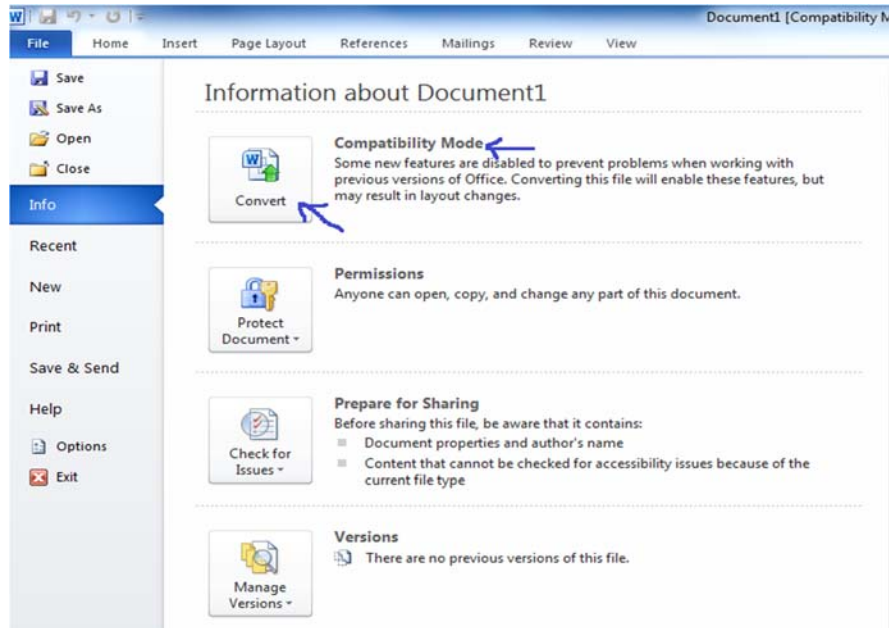
Ronald Chenail and Melissa Rosen  
Nova Southeastern University

#### **Introduction**

We have used the Microsoft Office SmartArt Graphics tool to create the Recursive Frame Analysis figures you have seen throughout the book. Microsoft SmartArt is a visualization tool built into the various software applications found in the Office suite (see <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/powerpoint-help/learn-more-about-smartart-graphics-HA010354757.aspx> for more information on the tool). We have found its various templates are wonderful starting points to present the RFA's you create as you identify the distinctions, indications, and frames identified in the conversation you are analyzing. Some of you may be new to this tool so we wanted to share the steps you can take to create your own SmartArt RFA's. The steps and figures presented in this appendix are from the 2010 version of Microsoft Word so if you are using a different edition of the software then these illustrations might appear slightly different in your program, but the basic steps remain the same in creating SmartArt RFA's.

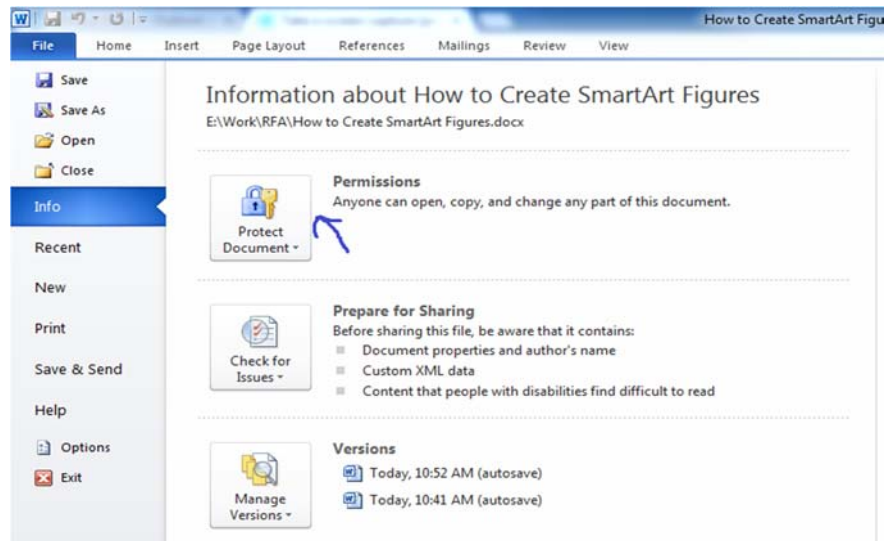
**Step 1:** Open a Word document and save it. Make sure that the Word document is not in compatibility mode, or you won't have all of the options for SmartArt figures available to use. To check if the document is in compatibility mode click the file tab. The screen should look like this if it is in compatibility mode:

**Figure 44:**



If your file is not in compatibility mode then the screen should look like this:

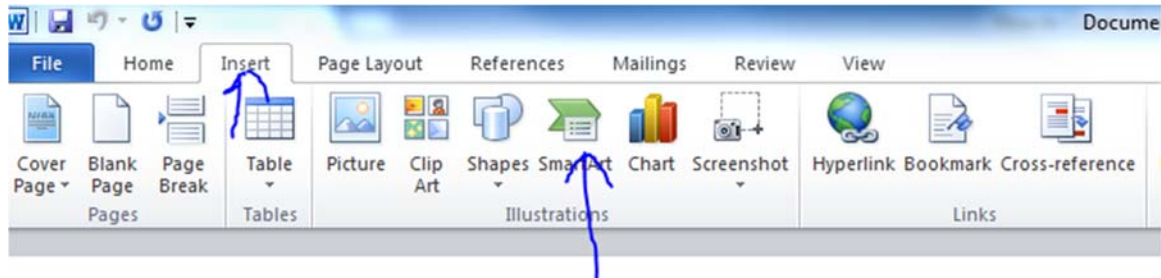
**Figure 45:**



To change the document out of compatibility, click the convert button next to where it says compatibility mode (see Figure 44).

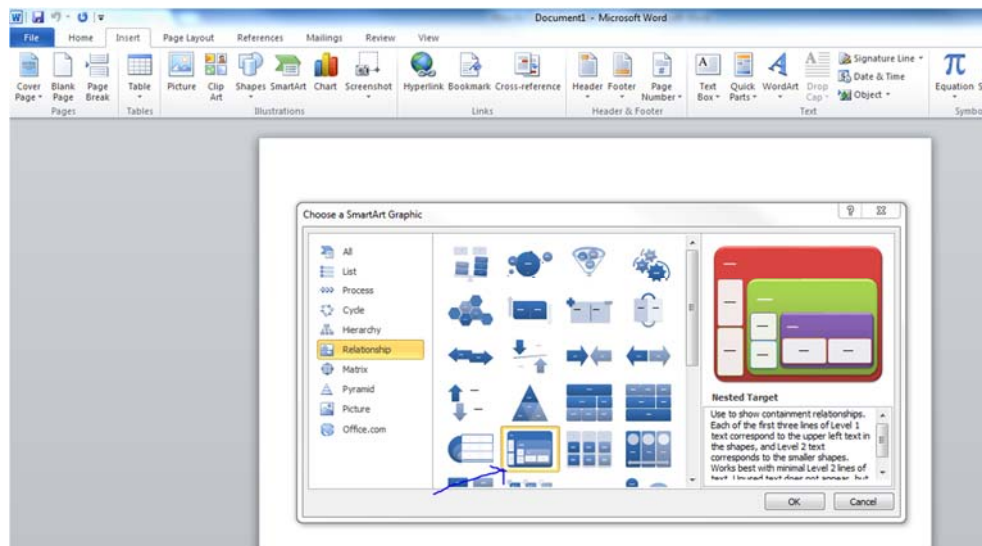
**Step 2:** Choose the category of SmartArt you want based on the purpose you are using it for. This is located under the insert tab and it is a button called SmartArt.

**Figure 46:**



Once you choose the type of SmartArt category, you must choose a specific figure in that category. For this book, a “relationship” SmartArt was utilized

**Figure 47:**



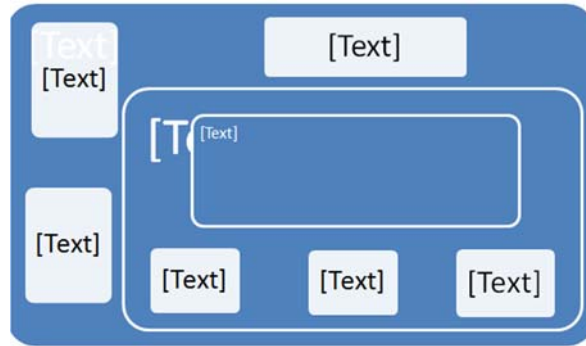
The SmartArt that was utilized for this book was one in which shapes were able to be added and moved within other shapes. Below is the original SmartArt shape we used.

**Figure 48:**



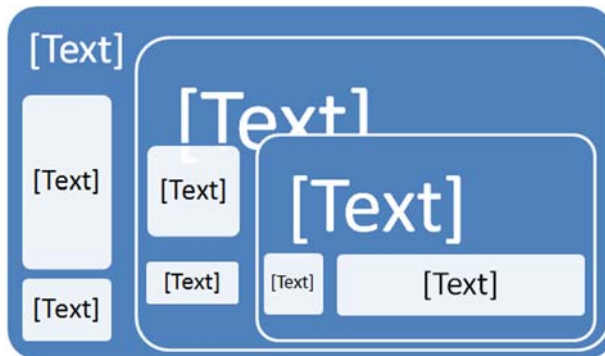
**Step 3:** Now you can move the shapes around in whatever order that you wish. To move shapes, click on a shape and drag it to the place that you want it to be located.

**Figure 49:**



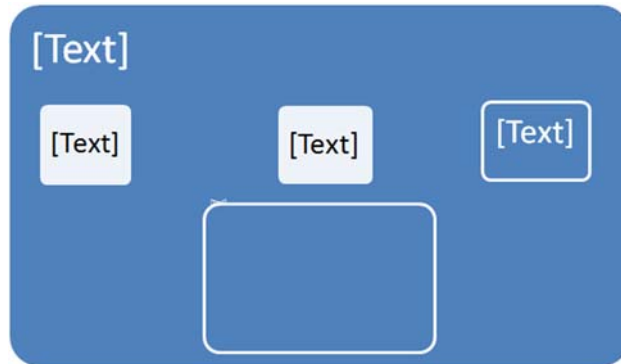
You can also resize the shapes by clicking on them and moving the cursor to the side until the cursor looks like two horizontal arrows.

**Figure 50:**



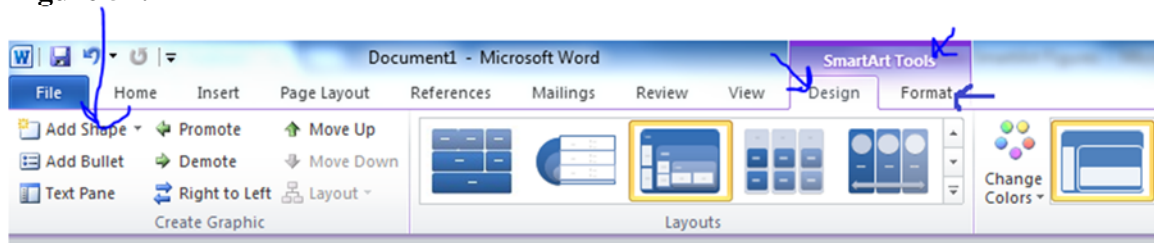
**Step 4:** Shapes can be added or removed. To remove a shape, click on the shape and then click the backspace or delete button on the keyboard.

**Figure 51:**



If you want to add more shapes to the figure, click on the figure so that you are working in that space. A new tab (SmartArt) will appear at the top of the screen with two options (Design and Format).

**Figure 52:**

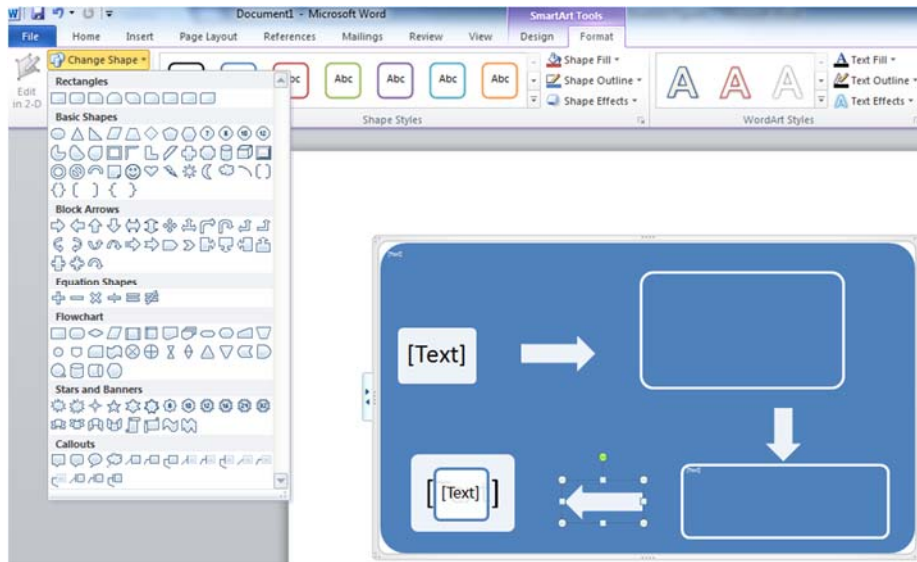


Click on the design tab to access an option to add shapes. You will have options to add the shape before, after, etc. when clicking the add shape drop down button. Note that when you add a shape it may make other shapes smaller in certain instances. You will have to resize the shapes carefully in order to implement the format that you want (Please refer to Figure 50 in Step 3 on how to resize shapes).



**Step 5:** Once you have the number of shapes that you need for your figure, you can choose to change the shape to something different. You can make them into arrows, circles, etc. for whatever works best for your figure. To do this, you must be in the SmartArt tab (refer to Figure 52 in Step 4 as to how to get to SmartArt tab) and click on the format tab option under the SmartArt tab. There will be an option to change shapes on the left side.

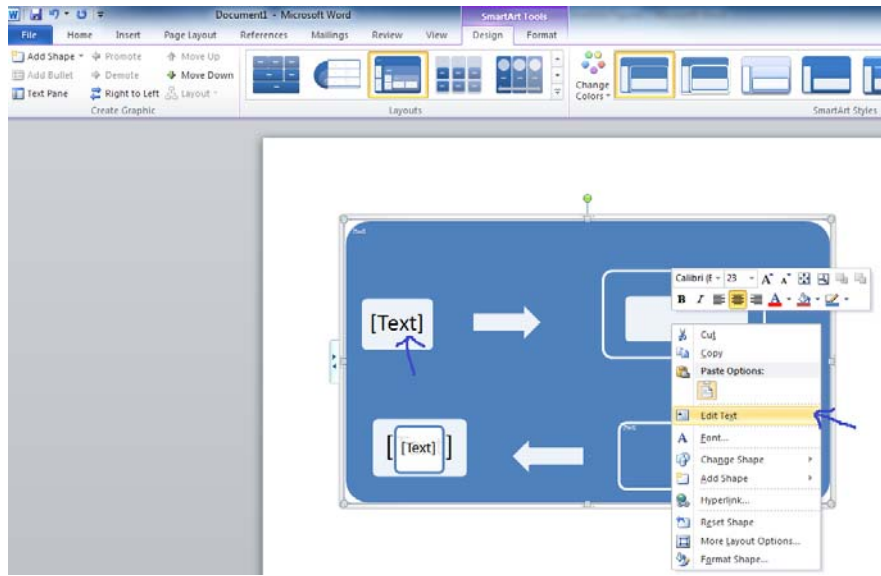
**Figure 53:**



Click on the shape you want to change and then choose the option to change shape. Choose your desired shape. You can do this throughout the figure.

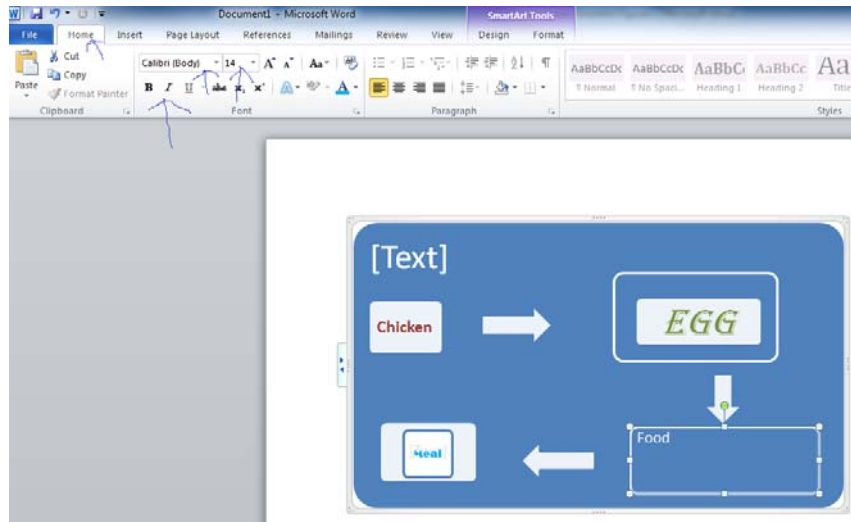
**Step 6:** Once you have all of your shapes and the sizes and types of shapes you can move them in the proper order so that it fits with the diagram that you want. To move shapes just click and drag them to the place you want them. You can insert text into each shape by clicking on the word “TEXT” located inside the shapes. If the shape doesn’t have the word “TEXT” in it, simply right click and select edit text and it will allow you to type.

**Figure 54:**



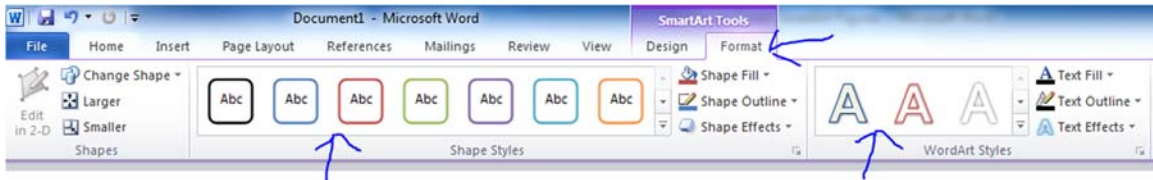
You can change the size and font of the text on the regular home tab as you would in your word document.

**Figure 55:**



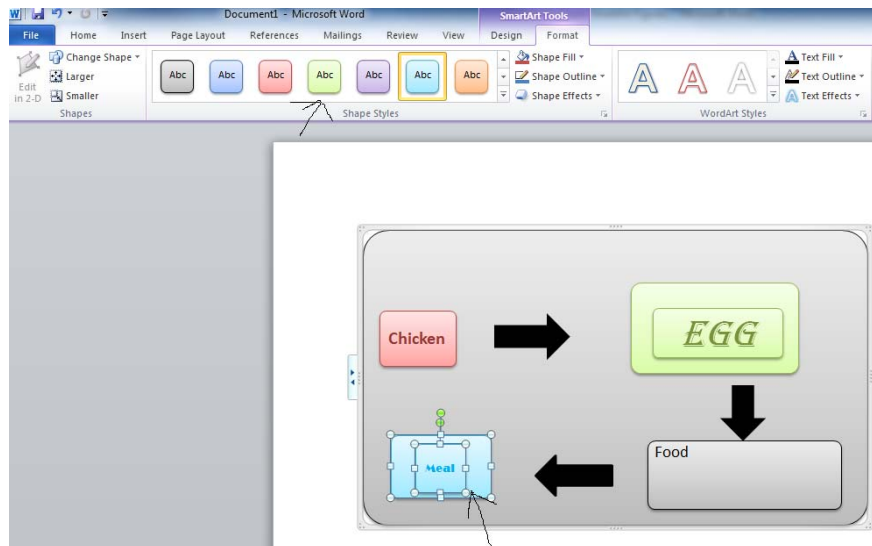
**Step 7:** The SmartArt figures come with pre-set colors; however, you can choose to change the colors if desired. To do this, click on the figure and then click on the format tab above.

**Figure 56:**



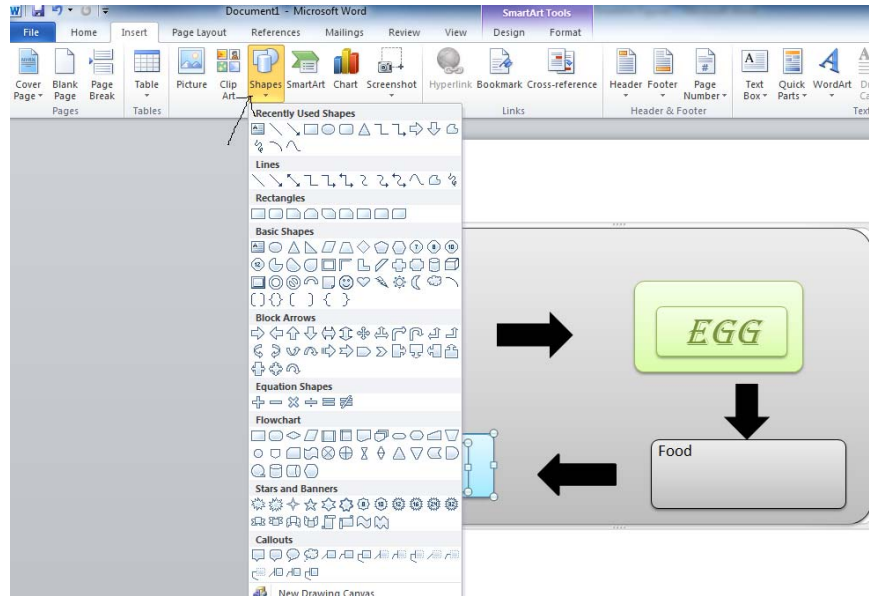
This tab will give you options to change the shape styles and text styles in each individual shape. Click on the colors you want and it will change the color of the selected shape. You can change more than one shape color at a time by clicking on each shape you want while holding down the Ctrl key.

**Figure 57:**



**Step 8:** You can insert other shapes such as lines or arrows by utilizing the insert shapes tool on the insert tab.

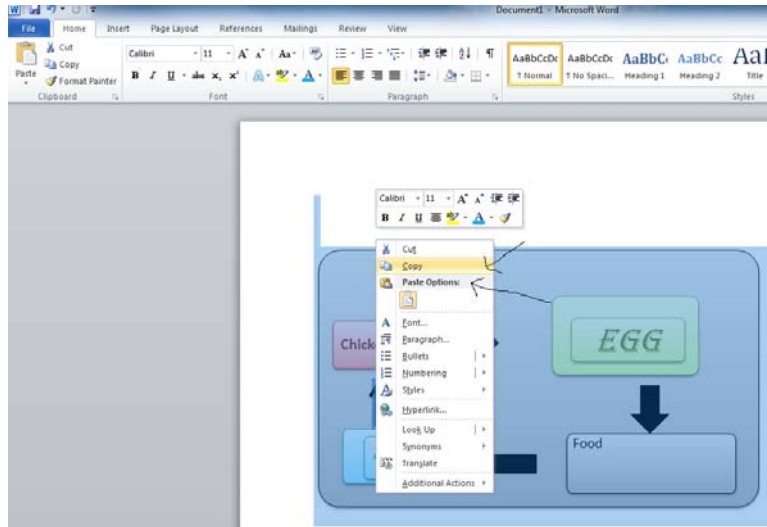
**Figure 58:**



Although you can add those shapes, they won't move with the SmartArt figure when you go to move the figure to a different place. In order for you to have everything able to move at once you will need to convert the SmartArt into a picture.

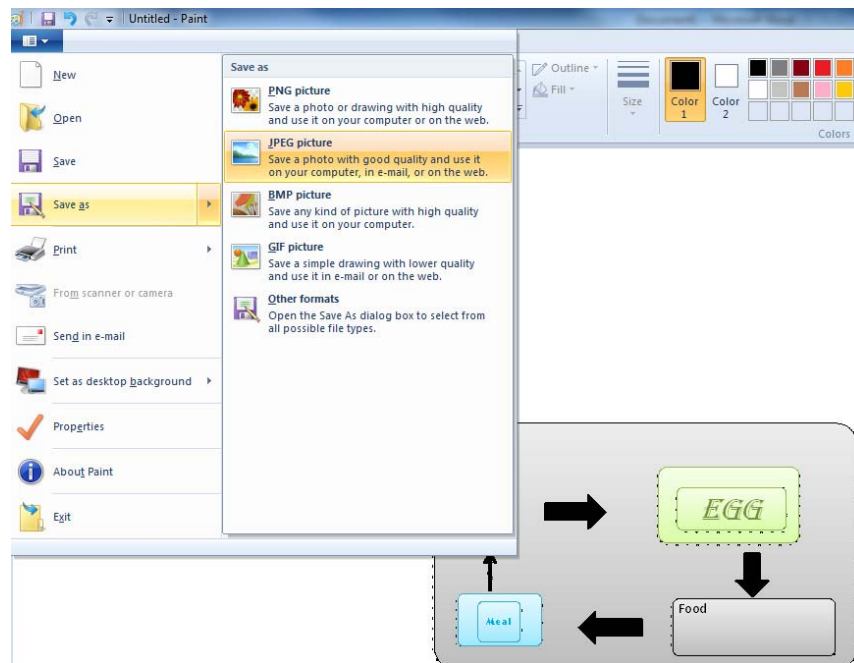
**Step 9:** In order to convert the SmartArt into a picture, you can select all (Ctrl A or click and drag over the figure) for the SmartArt figure and copy and paste it into a Paint document. Then you can manipulate and change the size of things as one figure in there.

**Figure 59:**



Once you get it to look as you want it to, you can save it as a jpeg or other picture format.

**Figure 60:**



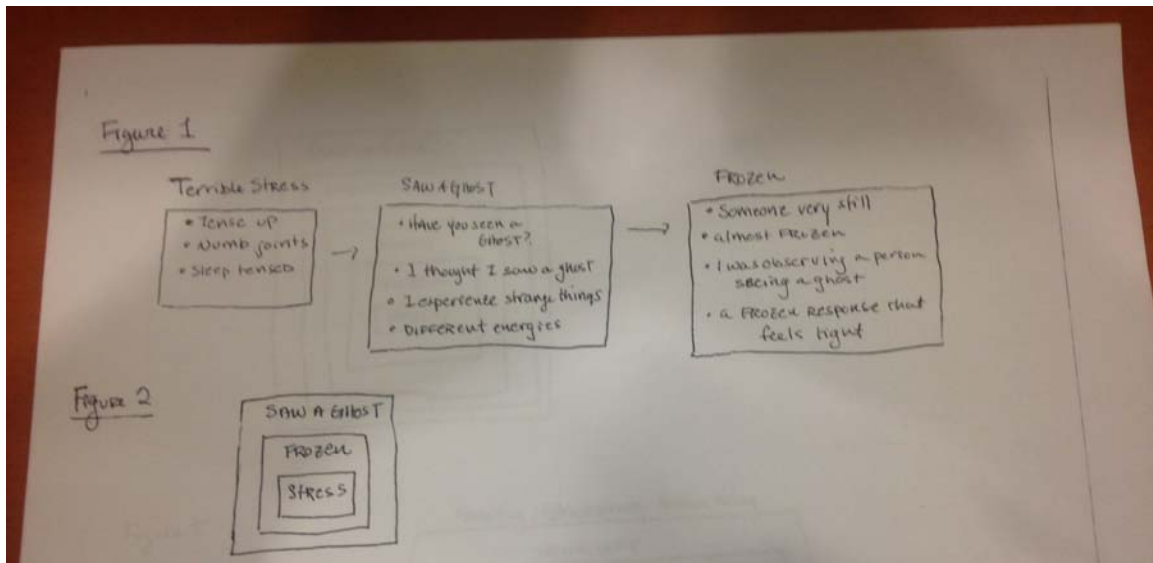
**Step 10:** For best results when creating figures, it is easiest to create each figure in a separate document in case you want to change the figure into a picture format. To do this, create one SmartArt figure per document and save them in a folder on your computer or a flash-drive naming them specifically for you to remember. For example, Ghost1 or Ghost Figure 1.

**Figure 61:**

Name	Date modified	Type	Size
Ghost - Figure 1	11/15/2013 11:57 ...	Microsoft Word D...	27 KB
Ghost - Figure 2	11/11/2013 11:48 ...	Microsoft Word D...	24 KB
Ghost - Figure 3	11/15/2013 11:58 ...	Microsoft Word D...	26 KB
Ghost - Figure 4	11/11/2013 12:11 ...	Microsoft Word D...	25 KB
Ghost - Figure 5	11/15/2013 12:01 ...	Microsoft Word D...	27 KB
Ghost - Figure 6	11/15/2013 1:41 PM	Microsoft Word D...	35 KB
Ghost - Figure 7	11/11/2013 2:38 PM	Microsoft Word D...	38 KB
Ghost - Figure 8	11/15/2013 1:49 PM	Microsoft Word D...	27 KB
Ghost - Figure 9	11/15/2013 1:50 PM	Microsoft Word D...	25 KB
Ghost - Figure 10	11/15/2013 1:56 PM	Microsoft Word D...	45 KB
Ghost - Figure 11	11/15/2013 1:59 PM	Microsoft Word D...	28 KB
Ghost - Figure 12	11/12/2013 11:39 ...	Microsoft Word D...	37 KB
Ghost - Figure 13	11/15/2013 2:01 PM	Microsoft Word D...	41 KB
Ghost - Figure 14	11/15/2013 2:03 PM	Microsoft Word D...	34 KB
Ghost - Figure 15	11/25/2013 12:04 ...	Microsoft Word D...	160 KB

**Here are a few examples of hand-drawn RFAs:**

**RFAs of “Seeing a Ghost” Session – Hand-drawn Figure 1 (Chapter Five-Figure 29) and Hand-drawn Figure 2 (Chapter Five-Figure 30):**

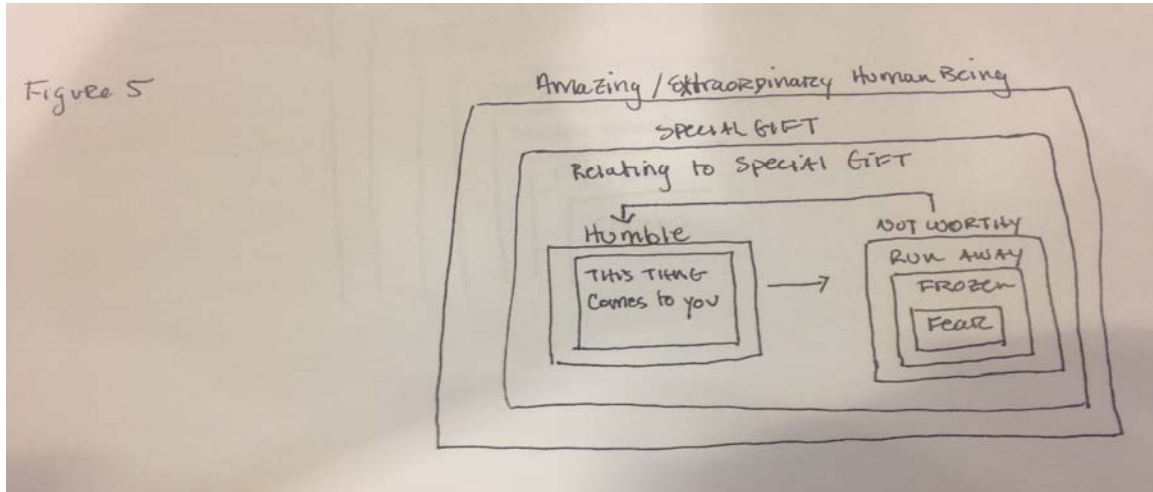


Hand-drawn Figure 1, which became Figure 29 in Chapter Five, presents an RFA illustrating a sequence of frames, each identified by the metaphor spoken in the conversation that marks its theme. Inside each frame are held the distinctions,

indications, and re-indications of the frame’s theme. This RFA also shows movement from one frame to another.

Hand-drawn Figure 2, which became Figure 30 in Chapter Five, is an RFA that only works with the names of each frame and is therefore more general in its presentation than the previous RFA (Hand-drawn Figure 1). Here each frame is shown embedded in the other rather than depicted as a lineal progression of frame changes.

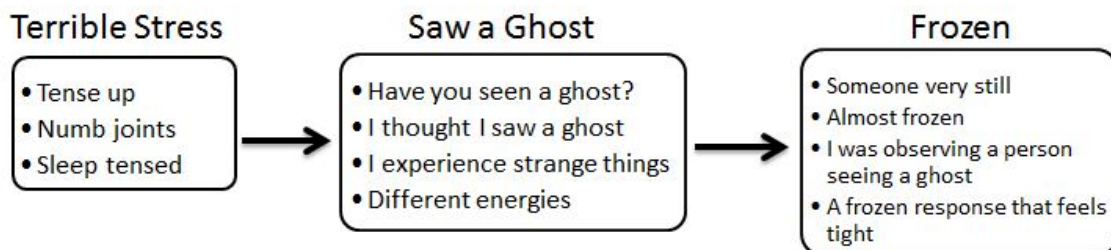
**“Seeing a Ghost” Session – Hand-drawn Figure 5 (Chapter Five-Figure 33):**



Hand-drawn Figure 5, which became Figure 33 in Chapter Five, is an RFA with many frames embedded inside each other. This RFA holds more complexity, including how different embedded nests of frames can be identified in both their lineal progression and their circularity.

**Here are examples of how we turned the hand drawn RFAs into RFAs using SmartArt:**

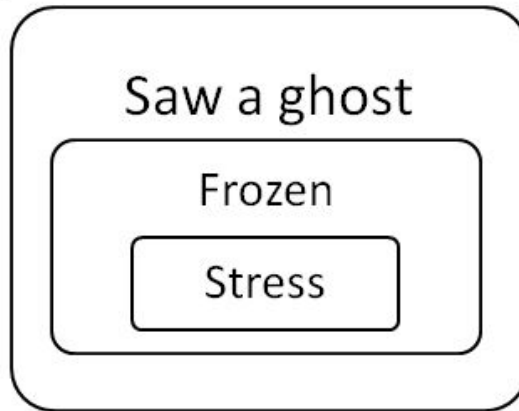
**“Seeing a Ghost” session – Hand-drawn RFA Figure 1 to SmartArt RFA Figure 29:**



In this figure we simply created an RFA using a relationship SmartArt and deleting some of the extra shapes and changed some of the shapes into arrows. We inserted text to make it match the hand drawn RFA.

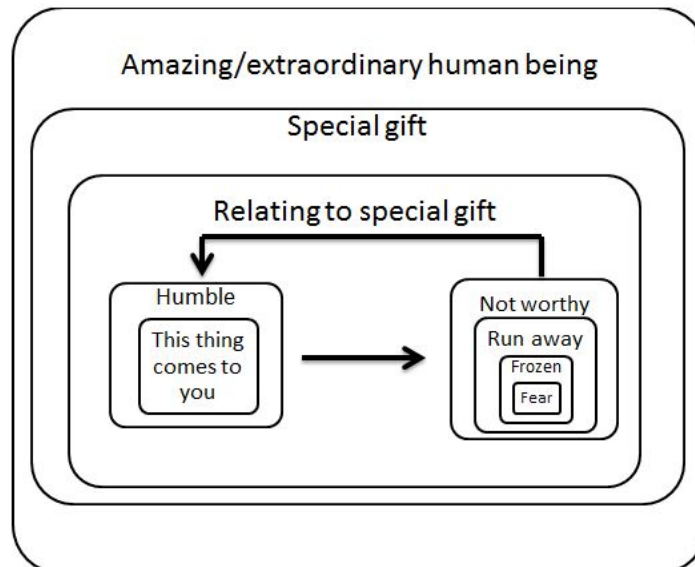


**“Seeing a Ghost” session – Hand-drawn RFA Figure 2 to SmartArt RFA Figure 30:**



In this figure we created an RFA using a relationship SmartArt and deleted some of the extra shapes. We didn't change any of the shapes; however, we did resize them and move them inside one another to illustrate what was drawn in the original RFA. We also added text to match the original RFA.

**“Seeing a Ghost” – Hand-drawn RFA Figure 5 to SmartArt RFA Figure 33:**



In this figure we used a relationship SmartArt and added shapes to what was already there. We moved the shapes around and put them inside one another to illustrate what was drawn in the original RFA. We also changed a few of the shapes to arrows in order



to match the hand drawn RFA. We added the necessary text to help understand the relationship.

### **Drawing your own RFAs**

The great thing about Recursive Frame Analysis is that while investigators may have different theoretical opinions about a session, the analysis is limited to only working with the actual words spoken in a session. While there can be variation in how we illustrate the way talk brings forth distinctions, indications, and frames, we will have consensual agreement that we are addressing the talk of clients rather than our assumptions or hypotheses about them. Of course, we can transcribe our interpretations of a session (our “private talk” that was not part of the session) and subject it to a separate RFA, thereby generating a different order of analysis. We have found Microsoft SmartArt Graphics to be a useful tool to communicate these RFA figures. However, you may find other means and media to express the distinctions you identify in communication.

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