Chris and I first met about a year ago when she came along to the narrative group program at the Langton Centre where I work (the Langton Centre is a centre for people troubled by alcohol and/or other drug problems). In writing this piece I am attempting to tell some of the story of the journey Chris and I have been on in our work together. It is also the story of the ideas and beliefs that had to be set aside in order for this work to take place and the ideas and beliefs that made our work together possible.

Recently, as I walked along the beach one Sunday afternoon, I found my thoughts turning to memories of conversations that Chris and I have shared over some time. I was aware of how positive this train of thought was for me and how at odds it was with some of the training I have received over years - training that dictates: ‘don’t take work home with you’, ‘good counsellors leave work at 5pm and switch off completely from work’, ‘keep work totally separate from your personal life’. This paper, in some ways, is written as a protest to these ideas for they are notions that I find just don’t fit for me and my work.

What does it mean to be expected to ‘switch off’ from people and their stories? How can we provide a truly respectful environment in which to hold conversations with people if we view them as ‘cases’, etc., to be ‘filed’ or
‘closed’? What does it mean that we are invited as therapists to deny any impact of our conversations with people on our work or life? How does this fit with ethical practice? How pervasive are the invitations to hold these thoughts and work in these ways? In what ways can these invitations be resisted? What does it mean to be taking a stand against dominant ways of working? What might more helpful ideas look like? In what ways can I be transparent in my work and attempt to redress the power differential in meeting with people that many of the dominant ways of working serve to only accentuate?

Today at work, I carry with me the knowledges of people I’ve met and memories of our conversations. They inform my work with others and they play a very important part in my life outside of work. This is particularly true of my conversations with Chris.

Deconstructing the dominant story

After Chris had attended the group program a number of times she began to meet with me individually. As Chris had spent time in and out of prison - on sentences related to her drug use - we began to deconstruct some of the understandings that the criminal justice system had recruited Chris into about herself.

A helpful part of this process occurred when I attended a small workshop with David Epston in early 1998. In this workshop David interviewed me playing the role of Chris, and the other group members formed a reflecting team. I took the questions from the reflecting team back to Chris (who had given me permission to speak about our work together) who then wrote responses which we sent back to the workshop participants. Chris also listened to a tape of the interview and was given a transcript. Chris’s responses to the reflecting team’s questions heightened my awareness of what she had needed to put aside for us to work together.

One of the questions the reflecting team came up with for Chris was:

*The criminal justice system operates, from my understanding, on the basis that those people who are subject to it deserve the worst. How is it then that*
your group at Langton came to a very different conclusion - that you deserve the best? Who do you think knows you better, the group at Langton where you were able to trust or those from the criminal justice system?

Chris responded with the following:

It is true that once in prison you’re labelled BAD without exception. The powers that be that run the prison system constantly remind us that we are hardened criminals, will never amount to anything, will never stand a chance, that we are society’s rejects. All my life I have been labelled - no good, born bad, junkie, low life, crim, etc. Comes a time in everyone’s life you get sick of the name-calling, the labelling, you get sick of being pushed around, told you’re no good. All the prison system wants to know is that you’re bad, they have no faith that a leopard can change its spots, no hope for rehabilitation. If you want things to change you have to get off your butt and do it yourself. I woke up one morning and decided I was sick and tired, I couldn’t do it any more, I was burnt out … If I was ever going to amount to anything in this life I had to make the change.

As for who do you think knows me better, the criminal justice system or those I choose to trust at Langton? Without a doubt it would be the people at Langton because they do not judge me, they’ve seen who I really am - not the mask I am forced to wear sometimes. They see a name not a number. They’ve seen me laugh and they’ve seen me cry - the prison system does not care to acknowledge any of that, they see it as weakness. So, yes, by far the people who really know me better are the people at Langton.

Remembering practices

Chris and I continued meeting and later on in the year Chris met with the therapy team and Gaye Stockell, my external supervisor, for a reflecting team session.

In this meeting Chris spoke about some poems her mother had written for her many years ago. Chris spoke of how she had treasured them and how present her mother still was in her life through these poems. Chris spoke of her mother
being her ‘guiding light’. The memory of Chris’ mother, and thinking about the words of encouragement and support she would have had for Chris in a number of situations, have been part of our conversations on a number of occasions. Having Chris’ mother’s presence evoked in such a way in our conversations stood in stark contrast to traditional ideas of grieving and everyday ideas such as ‘you need to let go’, and ‘put it all behind you and move on’.

**Detoxifying toxic ideas**

Towards the second half of last year Chris decided to detoxify from methadone. She went first into a non-medicated detox and then, as the withdrawals she was experiencing from methadone became worse, she entered a medicated detox program. Chris and I kept in touch during her time in these detoxes by phone and in person by visits I made to Chris at each centre.

In the process of deciding whether to visit Chris, a number of powerful ideas about working in this area invited me to stay away. Ideas such as ‘she’s not your “client” if she’s at another service’, ‘don’t get too involved’, ‘what about boundaries?’, all encouraged me to keep my distance.

What practices do these ideas lead to, and how might the people who meet with us experience these practices? What does it say that the people we meet with are spoken about in such objectifying ways? What invitations to work in unhelpful ways need to be put aside to work in truly respectful ways with the people we meet?

**Imprisonment**

I visited Chris once at each detox and our conversations continued. A couple of weeks later, however, our journey took a new turn. I received a letter from Chris telling me that heroin had drawn her back once more and that she was now in prison. Chris asked if we could continue our conversations together by letter and so began our ‘meetings by mail’. Once more, questions from dominant ways of working came to haunt me.

*Sally Tomkins 43 Gecko 1998: Vol.3*
Should you be exchanging letters even though they are the continuation of the work you have been doing together?

I also had questions of my own that needed thought and careful consideration.

What effect will it have to know that my letters to Chris and possibly Chris’s letters to me will be opened by staff at the prison? Will this silence me in naming and writing about the abusive and oppressive practices within the prison system? How can I resist this push to remain silent and instead take a stand against these positions? How can I take a stand without making Chris’s life more difficult? How great an effect might these same and other silencing practices be having for Chris when they are so real to me and I am not incarcerated within the prison system? What questions of accountability must I ask myself? Are they really any different to the type of accountability questions I ask of myself when working with people who are not in prison?

After we had exchanged a number of letters I met with Chris at the prison. As I approached the entrance to the prison I felt the oppressive silencing power of the place begin to weigh heavily on me. This continued through the checking of my ID and the search process before I was able to see Chris. I was very appreciative of the information Chris had put in her letter to me, information about the visiting procedures, so that I knew what to expect. However, I was amazed at the enormity of the power of silencing which I felt. After all, I was only visiting.

I was relieved to see that, as my visit was classified as a ‘professional visit’, Chris was spared the indignity of being forced to wear white overalls which zipped up to the neck at the back and were fastened with a lock. The women at the prison were required to wear these overalls during non-professional visits, ostensibly to stop the exchange of contraband from visitors who had already been thoroughly searched. I was shocked by the sight of these overalls on other women even though Chris had let me know she would probably have to wear them during the visit.

In the actual meeting with Chris the silencing powers seemed to lift to a great degree. It was almost as if Chris’s way of being and the way of working we
had developed together was able to rob the prison of a lot of its oppressive power. Chris and I did a lot of talking that first visit, and I had many questions as I left:

*How many degrading/oppressing/undermining practices might there be in a place like this? How could things be different? How do people hold onto a sense of self in a system which demands conformity and submission in so many ways and often works actively against supportive relationships developing between individuals? How can Chris and I find ways to create the space to continue our work in the face of such opposition? How had we created the space up until now? How will this experience affect the way I view and value my own lifestyle and freedom which I so often take for granted?*

**Reflecting teamwork**

Towards the second half of 1997 a very exciting event took place. Chris met with the team for a second reflecting team, this time at the prison. I remember feeling very daring at the time - daring that within a system of such oppression Chris and the team could create space for supportive conversations, space for Chris’s plans and dreams; daring that we had been able to take a tape recorder in with us so that the conversation could be documented; daring in such a fabulous way!

Once more, I experienced the silencing power of the prison on arrival but found it was less powerful than I had experienced it before. I suspect this may have been due to a number of things: the support and presence of the team, the excitement of anticipation, and knowing from her letters how much Chris was looking forward to this time together.

During this meeting, Chris also spoke of the importance of the team for her:

*I feel like I have something no-one else has got when I think about my connections with Langton, I really do. I’ve got some people there that know me, that want to help me and will never turn on me, turn their backs on me. And what I put into that is what I’m going to get out of that, and it’s just*
knowing that I’ve got that is a big, big asset to me … I wouldn’t swap that.

Within this meeting we (the therapy team members) were able to speak of the two-way process of our work, and acknowledge the contribution Chris had made to our lives and work practices. We acknowledged that we now have different questions to ask people who meet with us that we wouldn’t have had if we hadn’t met with Chris. We also acknowledged the ways in which we would take with us into our lives some of the knowledges, ideas and hopefulness that Chris had shared with us. This practice of acknowledgment, from my experience, seems to stand outside of mainstream practices.4

This meeting together seemed to provide a great amount of excitement amongst us all. In a letter Chris wrote to me after this meeting, she wrote of the excitement she had felt and how she had spent a lot of time thinking of what we had talked about. This was also true to the team. We were energised by our time together and we spent considerable time afterwards thinking and talking about the meeting we had shared.

Upon release

The letters between Chris and I continued, as we counted down the weeks to Chris’ release. Chris did not contact me for a number of weeks after her release despite our having made plans to meet. Chris bumped into another member of the team and passed on messages to say that she was okay although was having a difficult time.

At first, I wondered if in some way the work we had done made it difficult for Chris to contact me. Our conversations together had focused on the positive things Chris had done, the pride she has in her achievements. I wondered if this had in some way made it difficult for Chris to meet with me in the hardest times. Our work together had been a place for Chris’ preferred story. What could I/we have done to create more room for this preferred story when Chris faces difficult situations? These sorts of questions often arise for me when people I have been meeting with don’t attend sessions we have arranged.

Ongoing conversations

Sally Tomkins 46 Gecko 1998: Vol.3
As it turned out, Chris did come to the Centre to see me, in the midst of very difficult times, and our conversations have continued. We have explored how Chris negotiates difficult systems and what sustains her in this.

These conversations continue to impact on my life and work in positive ways. Thinking of Chris helps me to keep hope alive, to be constantly inspired by human spirit and to believe in people’s ability to make change in challenging times.

Acknowledgments

I am fortunate to work with colleagues who are committed to continually questioning work practices.

My team leader, Gary Thornell; external supervisor, Gaye Stockell; and colleagues, Anne Sloss and Alison Daniel; continually provide me with support, encouragement, and inspiration. The team I work within is very sustaining of myself and my work. Chris also knew the other members of the team. In meeting with Chris and writing to Chris it was almost as if the team was there with me – certainly their support always was. They were always willing to take part in conversations around the sorts of questions I have written about in this paper.

Writing about the things that make this work possible would not seem complete without paying tribute to my grandfather. My grandfather, whom I called Papa, has contributed an enormous amount to the beliefs and ideals which are so important in my work. When I meet with people at work my Papa’s voice and way of being are there with me. They are constant reminders of the way of being I am striving for. I have many wonderful memories of the time I spent with him, but it has only been in having re-membering conversations (White 1997) with others and with myself that I have been able to acknowledge what an enormous contribution this very special man has made to my life and the way I work.

I remember being very comfortable in Papa’s presence, of experiencing a feeling of contentment and safety that comes from feeling truly respected and cared for, and of his wonderful way of being with people. I can remember
feeling as if I was very special when I spent time with Papa. I remember the way he always signed his cards or letters to me with 'with love to my favourite violinist/pianist' and the way he always included our much loved family dog, Danny, and later Mindy, with 'and love to my favourite dog'. I remember as a child never feeling brushed aside by him, but instead being listened to attentively. No doubt everybody else who had the good fortune to spend some time with this gentle man felt the same.

I remember the way my Papa had time for everybody and I remember how he treated everybody he came across with genuineness, sincerity and respect. My memories of Papa enable me to keep his voice alive in my life and make his presence strong in my thoughts in a way which I can only describe as magical.

Notes

1. Sally can be contacted c/- Langton Centre, 59 South Dowling St, Surry Hills NSW 2010, Australia.