



# A window of opportunities

## Composing a relational space for living and telling sustainable stories to live by

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### Abstract

This article is based on experiences with the Dreamcatchers, a project involving people living with substance addiction, and their significant others, in which the participants composed and explored narratives through creative, collaborative processes. In the article, we think with a narrative composed by one of the participants in the project to learn from her experiences. Our thinking is inspired by narrative inquiry as a way of thinking about experience. We understand the playful and imaginative narrative processes within the Dreamcatchers project as composing sustainable stories to live by. The Dreamcatchers project demonstrates the necessity of involving people living with substance addiction in naming the problem and in the search for possible and sustainable solutions or improvements.

**Keywords:** neglected narratives, sustainable stories, substance addiction, recovery, narrative inquiry

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### **The Sitting Window<sup>3</sup>**

A “seating window”? What the hell is a “sitting window”? What's its purpose?

The guy who asked had a dream about a red Alfa Romeo.

A sitting window is obviously a window where you sit and do nothing: anything, lounge, rest.

MY window has to be deep enough so I can lean against the glass, and wide enough so that when I shape my legs into a “V”, the tips of my feet will reach the window frame.

There is no room for doctors, shrinks, or social workers on the windowsill, I'm sad to say.

However, I won't bother to tell them. I'm not sure they would be interested anyway.

This window enables me to caress everything I care about. I can write elevated words for my boyfriend, or create paper birds for fallen friends. I can even knit!

When I sit in this very window, I'm a “natural” at knitting, even though I don't possess that skill in real life.

Perhaps I can see a spectacular sunset from my “sitting window”. Maybe I can see a mysterious dark wood.

The view is probably wet concrete, with old chewing gum marks. But it doesn't matter. Through this glass I see what I want to see.

Almost a decade ago, I thought I had discovered this sort of window.

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<sup>3</sup> «The Sitting Window» was originally written in Norwegian and was later translated into English by a participant in The Dreamcatchers project, Cecilie Henne. Cecilie has performed the “The Sitting Window” on stage on several occasions, for example at the RØST conference, a national conference for persons living with substance addiction, significant others, healthcare providers, and politicians. Cecilie has read the manuscript and has requested the use of her full name in this article.

But in order to fit into that window-frame, I had to minimise myself. And I grew smaller. The window fitted perfectly, but the world outside started to look so unmanageably huge.

That window was impossible to open, impossible to break through.

MY window can be opened. It can even be shattered into pieces, in case of emergency. Over the following years I was searching for a window, a window that would allow me to gaze out at the world. Because the room I found myself sitting in was a disaster.

There were sticky puddles of spilled beer on the floor; there were cigarette stubs and ash all over. Frustrated? Music, and people, fed up with life. In the corners there were bureaucratic black holes, where there was supposed to be stardust.

Today, when it gets dark, I get a glimpse of the room behind me in the reflection in my window. And I'm not afraid of it. Because in the room behind me, I see a round table with fresh flowers. I can afford that now. But there's no cheap wine. The price I paid was WAY too high.

I see two dogs, and a man. A lovely man, almost sparkling! The dream is right here; in my living room. I exist in my own dream! In addition, when I look out, I can see a red Alfa Romeo passing by....

I really hope so. Coz every dream is valuable!

## **The Dreamcatchers project**

“The Sitting Window” is one of multiple stories composed in The Dreamcatchers, a project involving people living with substance addiction, and their significant others, with a particular focus on storytelling.<sup>4</sup> The project was initiated by one of the authors (Mette) in 2017 and included five people living with substance addiction, and two significant others.<sup>5</sup> An important goal for the Dreamcatchers project was to create a

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<sup>4</sup> The Dreamcatchers project was approved by The Norwegian Center for Research Data (Reference number 733610). The author of “The Sitting Window”, Cecilie Henne, has given written and oral consent to the inclusion of her narrative and her written reflections in this article.

<sup>5</sup> Recruitment: A video informing about the project was posted on the RØST conference's closed Facebook group and as an open Facebook post. People who saw the Facebook posts and were

space in which the participants could compose and share stories about their dreams with a focus on the present and the future, rather than on the past, and eventually perform their stories on stage.

In The Dreamcatchers project, the participants composed and explored narratives through creative, collaborative processes. The participants worked with different artistic approaches, and they alternated between collaborative processes, working in pairs, and working individually with their narratives. Each working period lasted from one to three months and included between three and ten collective workshops with up to seven participants. One of the authors (Mette) was deeply involved in these processes through individual and plenary facilitation. As a facilitator, she was a “mediator between the group and the situation (the world of the drama and its layers of meaning) who assists the participants to seek reason (understanding) through the use of the imagination” (DICE Consortium, 2010, p. 29).

In The Dreamcatchers project, the joint efforts of the participants and the facilitator to create a safe space were crucial. The participants had to trust each other before being able to work creatively together, “to establish a safe group which dares to share personal stories, to deal with their past and to trust that both the participants and the facilitator will treat each other with dignity” (Lyngstad, 2021, p. 1).

Core to the Dreamcatchers project were aesthetic learning processes. We used play, drama, drawing and theatre activities as artistic ways to retrieve, compose and share stories.

Through aesthetic activity, the individual processes one’s own physically anchored *impressions* of the world and recreates these into physically anchored aesthetic *expressions*. The driving force for each individual in relation to aesthetics as a learning method is – like the empirical learning method – an inborn drive to comprehend the world, combined with the need for fellowship and a conditional need to communicate one’s perception of the world (Austring & Sørensen, 2006, p. 91, authors’ translation).

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interested in learning more about and possibly participate contacted Mette. All participants were informed about the opportunity to withdraw from the project at any time and without consequences.

For participants, aesthetic practice can be a catalyst for mutual reflection in collective learning processes with other participants. Through aesthetic practice, the participants may engage in each other's narratives and thereby gain new perspectives on their own experiences.

The Dreamcatchers project primarily aimed to have a positive impact on people living with substance addiction, and their significant others. Secondly, the project generated new knowledge about narrative work in the applied field.

This article is based on a narrative written by Cecilie Henne, one of the participants in the Dreamcatchers project. Our aim is threefold. Firstly, we engage with Cecilie's narrative to learn from her experiences. Secondly, we reflect on the potential in projects such as the Dreamcatchers project to live and tell sustainable stories to live by. We argue that engaging with the stories of people living with a history of substance addiction is crucial to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3: healthy lives and well-being for all at all ages, including the target of strengthening "the prevention and treatment of substance abuse [sic], including narcotic drug abuse [sic] and harmful use of alcohol" (UNDP, n.d.). We consider health and well-being as something other than the absence of disease. We are particularly interested in the integrative dimension of health, conceptualized by van Hooft as the "need to give our lives a structure analogous to the narrative form of a history" (van Hooft, 1997, p. 26). Thirdly, we argue that engaging with the experiences of people living with a history of substance addiction through dialogue is closely linked to democracy and social equity, and, thus, sustainable social change.

## **Background**

Bramness (2022, para 3, authors' translation) has noted, "Words matter. What we say and how we express ourselves say something about us, as individuals and as a society. It sends a message about our attitudes towards others". He argues that we should not use other words about people than the words people would use themselves. "Substance use and addiction problems are permeated by verbal carelessness. Conceptual confusion and the use of discriminatory, condescending and judgmental words are extensive" (Bramness, 2022, para 4, authors' translation). In line with this, we use the terms 'people living with substance addiction' and 'people with a history of substance addiction' (Norwegian: *mennesker med rusavhengighet*) in this article.

Many people with a history of substance addiction experience being stigmatized for their past, rather than being given opportunities for the future (Lyngstad, 2021). In Norway, people living with substance addiction are seldom subject to positive attention, and their voices are seldom heard in public discourse and in the media. This heterogeneous group of people is more often talked about than invited into conversation. Research has highlighted that people living with substance addiction experience unworthy treatment in life in general, and in encounters with the healthcare system in particular (Lyngstad, 2021; Malterud & Thesen, 2008). This is not in line with Sustainable Development Goal 3. People living with substance addiction and their significant others have called for better dialogue with the public in general, and with healthcare workers in particular (Lyngstad, 2021).

In 2022, the Norwegian government initiated a change in policy regarding people living with substance addiction, and a prevention and treatment reform will be published as a white paper in 2023. According to Minister of Health and Care Services, Ingvild Kjerkol, the aim of the reform is twofold: “We will strengthen prevention and give better treatment and follow-up to people with substance addiction. We will improve the prevention and early detection of substance use, and offer fast and effective help, in particular to young people at risk of developing problems” (Regjeringen.no, 2022, para 2, authors' translation). The Stayer study, which has been conducted by KORFOR (The Regional Centre for Drug And Alcohol Research in Western Norway Regional Health Authority) since 2012, is one of the most comprehensive long-term studies of people living with substance addiction (Helse Stavanger, n.d.). According to one of the publications from the Stayer study, meaningful activities in recovery processes are connected to “a) the central role of work; (b) mastery and commitment; and (c) repairing the bridge to community life” (Veseth et al., 2022, p. 264).

To be able to repair the bridge to community life, and to be able to achieve the sustainability goal of prevention and offering effective help, we need to know more about who these people are and what they want. We must listen to their stories and their visions for the future (Lyngstad, 2021).

### **Storytelling, playfulness and identity work**

Bruner (2003) highlighted the nature of narrative as an integral part of our everyday experiences. Bruner was interested in “narratives of the imagination and with the question of how fiction creates realities so compelling that they shape our experience

not only of the worlds the fiction portrays but of the real world” (Bruner, 2003, p. 9). Through imagination we may find “alternative worlds that put the actual one in a new light” (Bruner, 2003, p. 10). In the Dreamcatchers project, these processes of imagination were crucial. Imagination is closely linked to playfulness. According to Lugones, playfulness requires an openness to surprise that acknowledges that we, as humans, “are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves” but “are open to self-construction” (Lugones, 1987, p. 16). In other words, through playfulness, we are open to composing new stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Clandinin noted that the concept of “stories to live by”:

allows us to speak of the stories that each of us lives out and tells of who we are, and are becoming. This highlights the multiplicity of each of our lives – lives composed, lived out and told around multiple plotlines, over time, in different relationships and on different landscapes (Clandinin, 2013, p. 53).

Stories are closely linked to identity, and both our stories and our identities are always in the process of becoming.

### **Situating ourselves in the inquiry**

Clandinin has noted:

As a narrative inquiry progresses, we, as narrative inquirers, are also making and remaking our lives. We, too are in the midst [... and] need to pay close attention to who we are in the inquiry and to understand that we, ourselves, are part of the storied landscapes we are studying (Clandinin, 2013, p. 81-82).

We enter the inquiry into the Sitting Window with different experiences and different fields of expertise. Mette is a professor of drama and applied theatre with several years’ experience of working alongside people living with substance addiction, and Bodil is a professor of gerontology. We share an interest in narrative and engagement in the lives of people living lives that are marginalized. For Mette, the interest in narrative started several years ago when a general practitioner invited her to collaborate on forum theatre about oppressive situations in the health care system. At that point, the only experience she had with people living marginalized lives was her engagement with people in her church living with substance addiction. For Bodil, the interest in narrative and people living marginalized lives started with her PhD

work on Indigenous Sami older adults' life stories (Blix, 2013). We have known each other for four years, and our friendship and research collaboration have grown gradually and in parallel.

The relationship between Mette and Cecilie has grown and been sustained over time. Cecilie was part of the Dreamcatchers project for several years. She has performed her narratives publicly on several occasions; she has talked about the Dreamcatchers in a podcast, and she has been involved in the teaching of Mette's classes for students. Retrospectively, Cecilie has provided written reflections about her experiences in the Dreamcatchers project. Parts of these reflections are included in our unpacking of The Sitting Window narrative below. Unlike Mette, who was involved in the co-composition of Cecilie's narrative, Bodil has never met Cecilie in person. She has only engaged with Cecilie's narrative through reading and re-reading the narrative and Cecilie's written reflections, and through conversations with Mette.

Our different positions – Mette's as deeply involved in the Dreamcatchers project and Bodil's as an outsider with access only to the Sitting Window narrative and Cecilie's written reflections – resulted in fruitful dialogues during the unpacking of the Sitting Window narrative. As an outsider, Bodil asked questions that draw Mette's attention to aspects of the Dreamcatchers project and the Sitting Window narrative that she took for granted or had not previously reflected on. And as an insider, Mette provided context that deepened Bodil's understanding of the project and the narrative. Equally important, Cecilie read and responded to our unpacking of the Sitting Window. We do not consider her responses as 'member checking', but rather as opening to further and deeper understanding.

### **The Sitting Window – a story to live by**

Although The Dreamcatchers project was not a narrative inquiry study, our reflections on The Sitting Window are inspired by narrative inquiry as a way of thinking about experience, in which story is understood as “a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375). Our aim is not to find 'a true interpretation' of the narrative about The Sitting Window, but rather to learn from the narrative in order to reach a new understanding of the complex experience of composing a new story to live by when living with a history of substance addiction. We consider The Sitting Window neither as a representation nor a metaphor for 'the

real world'. Rather, we consider it as a way of experiencing and making sense of the world. By engaging with the narrative, we hope to be able to learn from Cecilie's experiences by metaphorically travelling to her world and trying to see the world through her eyes (Lugones, 1987), well aware that this research text is written "still in the midst. There will never be a final story" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 203). Following this, we consider this text more as thinking *with* The Sitting Window than thinking *about* The Sitting Window:

Thinking about stories conceives of narrative as an object. Thinking with stories is a process in which we as thinkers do not so much work on narrative as allowing narrative to work on us (Morris, 2002, p. 196, cited in Clandinin 2013, p. 29).

The Sitting Window is a beautiful, poetic narrative that was composed within a relational space and that composes spaces for relationships. We understand the window as both a very concrete place and as a vantage point from which Cecilie looks at her life in the past, present, and future, and we see it as a window of opportunities.

### **The Sitting Window as relational space**

Clandinin (2013, p. 30) reminds us that "our stories are always in relation, always composed in between, in those spaces between time and people and generations and places". The Sitting Window was indeed *composed* in a relational space, in the community of The Dreamcatchers, as expressed in Cecilie's written reflections:

I began to reflect more on the fact that all people carry important stories, and that these stories not necessarily have to be spectacular (good or bad) to be important. Although those of us who participated did not know much about each other personally, we came to know each other quite well in a very short time.

The introduction to the narrative – the question posed by the person dreaming about a red Alfa Romeo – adds another layer to the relational. Narration as meaning-making is a relational endeavour. Rather than framing the question as a dismissal of her dream of a Sitting Window, Cecilie treats the question as an invitation to elaborate on her dream. Just as we need someone to co-compose stories with, we need someone else to confirm our stories (Blix, Caine, Clandinin, & Berendonk, 2021). Cecilie's statement "*I won't bother to tell them [doctors, shrinks, and social workers]. I'm not sure they would be interested anyway.*" is a profound reminder that

our stories may be silenced if they are met with silence or lack of interest. Perhaps has Cecilie learned, through her own experiences of being silenced, the importance of acknowledging other people's stories, as she does in the final sentences of *The Sitting Window* (*...when I look out, I can see a red Alfa Romeo passing by... I really hope so. Coz every dream is valuable!*).

We also see how Cecilie composes *The Sitting Window* as a space for relationships between herself and the physical world, and relationships between herself and other people. From her spot in *The Sitting Window*, Cecilie can observe the physical world outside in all its mundaneness (*The view is probably wet concrete, with old chewing gum marks.*). However, the window is also an opening to the world in all its splendour (*I can see a spectacular sunset*) and enigma (*I can see a mysterious dark wood*). Cecilie shows us that our physical world is constituted of both grimness and beauty, both everyday realities and occasional mysteries. She also reminds us that rather than being passively subjected to our surroundings, we enter into conscious relationships with them (*I see what I want to see*). *The Sitting Window* is also a space for relationships between people. The window provides safety from unwanted relationships (*There is no room for doctors, shrinks, or social workers on the windowsill*), and it provides space for significant past, present and future relationships. We see in Cecilie's narrative the sustaining of present relationships (*I can write elevated words for my boyfriend.*), and the honouring of past relationships (*...or create paper birds for fallen friends*).

### **The Sitting Window as place and embodied experience**

Cecilie composes the *Sitting Window* as a concrete place by describing what it looks like and its size. However, when describing how the window looks, she does not refer to objective measures. Rather she does so by describing its size and shape in relation to her own body (*It has to be big enough so I can lean against the glass, and wide enough so that when I shape my legs into a V, the tips of my feet will reach the window frame*). The close relationship between the window and her body illustrates that "place is in us, as we are in places; we are shaped by, and shaping, the places within we live" (Caine, Clandinin, & Lessard, 2022, p. 112).

We see in Cecilie's description of previous "windows" in her life, the close connection between experience and body (*...in order to fit into that window frame, I had to minimize myself. And I grew smaller.*). Experiences are embodied – they "reside in the actual ways the body moves, the voice or artefacts that are used" (Hydén, 2013,

p. 235), and it is through the embodied act of composing a story to live by that meaning is created. We wonder if Cecilie's previous experiences with trying to 'fit', and the experience of 'growing smaller' stripped her of agency (*...the world outside started to look so unmanageably huge*), but we see tremendous capacity in the statement about The Sitting Window that can be opened, and "*even shattered into pieces, in case of emergency*".

### **The Sitting Window as vantage point**

There is a duality in windows. Windows are both a very concrete physical barrier between worlds, and they are openings through which one can observe or enter the world on the other side. Windows provide both protection and distance, and they provide transparency and (in)sight. We wonder if perhaps these two seemingly opposite properties of the Sitting Window provide Cecilie with a safe space in which she can choose whether and when to engage with the worlds on the other side of the window.

In the reflections of the Sitting Window, Cecilie sees her past (*In the corners there were bureaucratic black holes, where there was supposed to be stardust*), and she sees her present (*I get a glimpse of the room behind me in the reflection of my window. And I'm not afraid of it.*). The Sitting Window provides Cecilie with the safety and perspective to draw connections between her past and her present, to compose a coherent story to live by. Although the memories from the past may be painful, coherence provides us with a sense of continuity (Caine et al., 2022, p. 76) and "coherence is important in that it shapes our ongoing life-making. It helps us think who we are and are becoming over time" (Caine et al., 2022, p. 22). Crucial to 'life-making' and 'becoming' is also the capacity to compose forward-looking stories – to engage in "what if [...] a world [...] which might still be" (Andrews, 2014, p. 4). We see in Cecilie's narrative, glimpses of a future (*I see two dogs, and a man. A lovely man, almost sparkling! The dream is right here: in my living room. I exist in my own dream!*). The sentence "*I exist in my own dream!*" is a profound statement about the importance of dreams, hopes and faith in a future as an antidote to narrative foreclosure, the "unshakable conviction that it is simply too late to live meaningfully" (Freeman, 2000, p. 83). The capacity to compose forward-looking stories shapes our meaning-making and life-making in the present.

In her written reflections on The Dreamcatchers project, Cecilie writes about her experience of composing a story to live by integrating experiences from the past, the present, and her hopes for the future:

Just the fact that the project and its working title were both forward-looking and optimistic made it quite undramatic to deal with previous difficult experiences. I felt a need to be nuanced; not smoothing over everything that has been difficult, but taking advantage of the opportunity to talk about the aspects I myself think are important and worth saying something about.

[I had] the feeling of having a valuable past, and a clear picture of a worthwhile future.

### **A window of opportunities**

Closely linked to the capacity to compose forward-looking stories are imagination and playfulness. In her written reflections, Cecilie writes about The Dreamcatchers project as a space for imagination:

Using my imagination to create inner images and then reproducing these with words initially felt almost unachievable. It's one thing to have plans for life, or to have hope. Imagining life in the future, or observing the present, can be completely different. Then I also had to decide whether I actually believed in, or really wanted, the life my story outlined.

Cecilie composes The Sitting Window as a window of opportunities, a space for the shaping of new stories to live by (Blix, Berendonk, Clandinin, & Caine, 2021). While sitting in her window, Cecilie possesses skills she has yet not achieved (*I'm a 'natural' at knitting, even though I don't possess that skill in real life.*), and she maintains lost relationships (*...create paper birds for fallen friends*). The Sitting Window is an imaginative space. According to Frank (Frank, 2012, p. 45), "Stories provide an imaginative space in which people can claim identities, reject identities, and experiment with identities". We wonder if Cecilie's statement about previous windows in her life that were "*impossible to open, impossible to break through*" reflects limitations on her imaginative space imposed by dominant narratives about people living with substance addiction circulating in society. The Sitting Window provides Cecilie with a very literal capacity to break free from the restrictions imposed on her imaginative space by dominant narratives (*MY window can be opened. It can*

*even be shattered into pieces, in case of emergency.*) The Sitting Window is an imaginative space in which Cecilie can retell and relive her life in ways that provide her with the opportunity to always become otherwise (Greene, 1995).

### **Concluding reflections: Dream-catching and composing sustainable stories to live by**

This article is based on one of several narratives composed in the Dreamcatchers project. An important goal for the Dreamcatchers project was to create a space in which both persons living with substance addiction, and significant others, could compose and share new stories to live by. As such, in the project, narration as relational processes was considered more important than the products of these processes; that is, the narratives eventually performed on stage. In that sense, we understand the playful and imaginative narrative processes within the community of the Dreamcatchers as closely related to van Hooft's integrative dimension of health (van Hooft, 1997) and what we could perhaps name composing sustainable stories to live by. That is, stories that both acknowledge people's lives in the past, people's lives lived in the present, and people's hopes and dreams for the future. Stories in which we are always in processes of becoming, where we can always become otherwise (Greene, 1995).

Nonetheless, we strongly believe that narratives such as Cecilie's Sitting Window are important beyond the relational space within which they are lived and told. We believe we, as society, can learn from the experiences of people living with substance addiction. And in order to learn, we need to engage with people's stories. We need to stop talking *about* people living with substance addiction, and rather engage in dialogue. For the American radical pragmatist Jane Addams, dialogue and joint experiences were closely linked to democracy and social equity (Addams, 1902). She considered the avoidance of others' experiences and stories as a violation of the democratic spirit (Hamington, 2001). Addams was, however, well aware that people are unequally positioned when it comes to being heard (Seigfried, 2002). According to Baldwin (2006), narrative agency is a matter of both being able and having the opportunity to compose stories. Sometimes, people's opportunities to compose stories to live by are restricted by circulating dominant narratives about 'people like them' or about what constitutes a good life. The Dreamcatchers project clearly demonstrates that people living with substance addiction are able to compose stories when provided with opportunities. The Dreamcatchers project aimed to create a space that did not restrict who people with a history of substance addiction were,

and who and what they were becoming, based on dominant narratives about them or what they should dream about. Rather, new narratives were composed by and with people living with substance addiction.

Addams explicitly noted the difference between doing good *for* others and doing good *with* others (Seigfried, 1999). The former, which she named charity work, is characterized by knowing what is best for the other, whereas the latter, which she named settlement work, requires dialogue. One important lesson learned from the Dreamcatchers project and our thinking *with* C's narrative, is the acknowledgement of the necessity to involve people living with substance addiction in the naming of the problem and the search for possible and sustainable solutions or improvements. Doing good *with* rather than *for* requires the willingness to compose spaces for the co-composition of new stories to live by, and to do so, we need to be willing to see the world through the other's sitting window.

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