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Introduction:
**The Boy Who
Dared To Be
Different**

ANNALS OF THE NEW DAVE: Status: abled, disabled, or weirdly abled¹

Entry #1
**Meeting with
the "old Dave"**

**Chroniced by David Epston,
Dean Lobovits, and Jennifer Freeman
With an introduction by Sharon Murphy**

**Mother
Appreciation**

[This paper is a good one to read for those of you interested a narrative therapy approach to what is referred to in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic Service Manual (DSM IV) as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Although we do not prefer to use such labels in our work we refer to them here because so many visitors to this site have requested information about young person struggling with these issues.]

Entry #2

Entry #3

Entry#4
**REPORT AND
RECOMMENDATIONS:**
**Child and
Young Persons
Service**

**Introduction: The Boy Who Dared To Be Different by Sharon Murphy
(Dave's mother)²**

Entry #5

Dave was different from the day he was born. It wasn't anything anyone could put their finger on but I could SEE he was different. Sure he had two arms, two legs, blonde hair and blue eyes but somehow or other I knew he was different. At school, his class-mates soon noted that he wrote differently. His attempts at writing were always back to front and despite his painstaking efforts looked like chicken scratchings. Predictably his spelling was funny like 'enuf', 'kat' or 'qik'. Dave NEVER passed his spelling. But he seemed happy and cheerful and was always 'doing'. It was as if he was filled with insatiable curiosity. Others would snigger behind his back and occasionally to his face -- "Curiosity killed the cat!" Dave was oblivious because he was happy. Most days he would wander around the playground picking things up to investigate. Teachers complimented him, thinking he was 'tidying up'. But they were not different so failed to realise he was investigating the unknown and learning about it.

Entry #6

Entry #7

Entry #8

A hopeless case

Entry #9

Entry #10:

Affidavit

One day, he found this beautiful bottle full of the colour blue. He lifted it towards the sun to watch the sparkles dance off the bottle when it tipped all over him. Everyone began to scream - 'Miss, Dave's turned blue!' He was rushed off to the sick bay and I was contacted - 'Hurry please ... it's a chemical of some sort. He may have to go to the hospital'. My work colleagues laughed when I told them. 'The Blue Boy ...isn't that a famous painting?' one quipped. I was hurt as was my daughter seeing my hurt. Couldn't they see that he just wanted to know and now he could be injured?

**Chronicler's
summary**

**Notes and
References**

Many questions were asked by the doctors. The 'blue' was analysed

chemically and scrutinised under a microscope. At the same time, Dave was poked and prodded. My fear drained all the colour from my face. Dave wondered what all the fuss was about and tried to tell the doctor about what beautiful sparkles in the sky the bottle made. He also started to enquire how the microscope worked. Could he have a look and "what's that thing around your neck?" Everything turned out alright in the end but for awhile, Dave was clearly different on account of his beautiful blue hair.

Dave busied himself from morning to night taking things apart but not quite getting them back together again. He built wonderful, fantastical structures everywhere but forgot to put the tools away. He cooked fabulous concoctions but overlooked them when something else caught his attention. At school, he went from one thing to another. "He's bright", the teachers said, "but he never finishes anything. When I ask him why, he says "Oh, I know that but I just had to check this outits more interesting." His teachers despaired of coping with him and his work, so full of promise but never completed.

He doesn't have many friends because he is different and they are not, and don't understand him. Dave now knows he is different and copes with it. This is not to say at times he isn't saddened and would prefer to be the same as everyone else and find acceptance.

Dave is going to grow up. He still may not spell and his writing may always be laboured. Sometimes he still may not quite get his clothes right. But I can see Dave working for an advertising agency 'thinking up' ideas all day, wonderful ideas like dancing sparkles in the sky. How would he get such a job, you might ask? They may very well say - "You're different, Dave. You think in wonderful ways that no one else dares to." If Dave replied - "But my spelling!" they might say."Anyone can spell but not many people are different. And you Dave, dare to be different. That takes courage!

Entry #1 First meeting with the "old Dave" and his family

Sharon Murphy sank into the nearest chair in David's office and started drawing deep and audible breaths that indicated utter exhaustion and the cessation of a great effort. Vestiges of her determination to manage the behaviour of her 14 year old son, Dave, lived on in her constant but half-hearted remonstrating with him to desist from his constant flurry of activity.

Jenni, Dave's 13 year old sister, observing that her mother's admonishments had little or no effect made desperate and reckless attempts to take over from her by insisting that he 'Stop It!' These only seemed to provoke Dave to more excess. Jenni's seething rage was palpable. Such was the frustration of her indignant forays to reign Dave in, that she would be reduced to tears on each and every occasion. However, for Dave, the room seemed a marvellous source of novelties that he had to explore, touch, and touch again.

When there was the first break in these proceedings, David began the conversation by inquiring about Sharon's visible despair. She bravely related to him the intolerable strain she was under as a single parent, as 'bread winner' for her family, and as the manager of Dave's mind and body. She spoke of her "weariness" from having lived "on the edge" since Dave's birth. She declared that this meeting was her "last ditch stand" to avert her own

"nervous breakdown" and to avoid placing both her children in foster care - a prospect which she was the opposite of everything she had devoted herself to over the past fourteen years.

When he heard this, Dave ceased his activities for the first time - but only momentarily. Sharon was becoming more and more despondent as she spoke of her plans and Jenni alternated between wrath and crying. To emphasise her point, Sharon gave the example of having to delay toileting herself until after her children's bedtime. This was due to the constant and hazardous fighting between Dave and Jenni. She told how she had been ordered by a government department to surveil her children at all times to prevent Jenni being injured. She now considered that what was required of her was well beyond both her emotional and physical capacities.

With due respect for Sharon's exhaustion David invited her to take a break from trying to discipline Dave for the time being. The moment she relaxed her vigilance, Dave threw himself to the carpeted floor and began rolling over and over around his room. Despite this, David and Sharon were able to maintain a semblance of a conversation. Jenni, however, continued her expostulations to cease his activity without any success whatsoever.

After a while, David essayed a conversation with Dave, who dutifully responded to his enquiries but not in a manner he was given to expect. Dave's replies were orated with dramatic and rhetorical flourishes and wild metaphorical excursions. Their sense seemed just outside the reach of David's mind but tantalisingly so! It was very frustrating for David to be quite so close (in any particular roll, Dave would often pass within inches of his feet) but be so far away. No matter how hard David tried to catch up to Dave's mind, he was unable to close the gap sufficiently to pull alongside. In spite of this, David determined to do so no matter how long it might take and no matter how far he might have to stretch his mind in doing so.

David thought of an idea that might acknowledge his understanding of Sharon's dejection and total exhaustion. He initiated it by asking her consent for a secret meeting with her children in which the three of them would "cook up a secret." David reassured her that although this secret would be kept from her for a specified period of time, it would be revealed to her in it's entirety in due course. Sharon quickly consented, appearing somewhat relieved to absent herself from the room.

Mother Appreciation

When the three of them were alone, David asked Dave and Jenni what their thoughts were about the prospect of foster care placement. They deeply dreaded the prospect but what concerned them even more was the well-being of their mother. David consulted them as to what ideas they had "up their sleeves" to provide her with some relief. They took his question very seriously and told him they had already begun nightly foot massages for Sharon. To this news David replied, "What I have in mind is certainly in line with your initiative! What about a Mother Appreciation Party?"

Not surprisingly, they had never heard of such an event. David readily acknowledged that such occasions are relatively rare in anyone's social

calendar. They launched into an enquiry about their appreciation of Sharon and their mother's "friends" appreciation of her.

For the first time since they arrived, Dave, Jenni, and David were able to collaborate over a shared concern - mother appreciation! The effect was dramatic. Dave was attentive and Jenni regained her good spirits as they agreed to 'plot a surprise mother appreciation party'.

When they reviewed their shared knowledge about parties in general, they realised they had a lot ahead of them such as deciding on the guest list, catering, baking the 'Mother Appreciation' cake and of course, their respective 'Mother Appreciation' speeches. Hearing the last proposal, Jenni's eyebrows spontaneously raised almost to her hair line. They fell back into place when David quickly reassured her that he would only be too glad to assist. "How?" they asked in unison and he replied, "Why, I will ask you 'mother-appreciating' questions so you can come up with 'mother-appreciating' answers! And then all you will have left to do is to roll them up into your speech!".

Despite their uneasiness with this project, Dave and Jenni agreed to proceed with the planning, one step at a time with the speeches coming last. As a Mother-Appreciation Party was a complicated undertaking, they agreed to "scheme together in secret" over the next few meetings and decided against any deadlines. Everyone agreed that when they were ready it would be only too obvious. David now felt able to risk seeking their consent to ask them a very serious question that he had been burning to ask.

A Burning Question

"Before I ask you this question," David began, "I want some reassurance from both of you that you will promise not to even consider answering it until you have heard it out to the very end." If their facial expressions were anything to go by they considered this request somewhat odd, but nonetheless they agreed. "Well, here goes," David resumed, "By any chance, do you think you are weirdly abled?" Before they could respond David leapt to the edge of his chair, holding his palms outwards and admonished, "Hold on ! Hold on! You promised!" Then he continued: "By that I mean, are you so abled that many adults and kids your ages believe you are WEIRD when in fact you are WEIRDLY abled?" They both looked quite miffed. Jenni piped up: "What do you mean by that?"

To answer this important question, David read them Emily Betterton's (Freeman, Epston and Lobovits, 1997) published account of 'weirdly abledness' (p179-182). After doing this he took a Lynda Barry cartoon out from his desk entitled Marlys' Guide to Weirdoes (1993). In this cartoon the following guidance is offered: "Third knowledge is the first time someone calls you a weirdo. You about start crying, or you sock them in the stomach, or you act even more weirdo, or you just sit there and don't do nothing, or you get happy because at least someone is talking to you. But Fourth knowledge is people get fascinated by you that's why they buy you. But it's not your first pick of a kind of fascination of you. You will pray to God to take it back but God is busy. What is he busy doing? Making more weirdos. He's a weird God.

Fifth knowledge is when sometimes you meet a man or a lady who is a grown up weirdo - the good kind - and they know you. Even if they never saw you before, they know you and say HiHiHi and your whole life can change - even if you know them for only around one week. My brother Freddie who drew the pictures on this has got a teacher like this, Mrs. LeSense. I go with him early to her room every morning and we open the window shades for her. Her face is always happy to see us, I love her. She cured my brother's life. This is a true story.³"

Both read their copy of the cartoon in silence. If anything it was like sealing a pact. They both were determined to show it to their mother and their social worker.

Entry #2 A brief summary of the second meeting and accompanying letter

Dave and Jenni were excited to relate the responses of their mother and the social worker to the cartoon. It wasn't long before David turned to Sharon and asked her if she was of the opinion that Dave and Jenni came to their "weirdly abledness" through "nature or nurture" ? For the first time since David had met her, Sharon then broke into laughter and began to tell stories about various members of the Murphy Family. David lead a very detailed enquiry into the history and genealogy of the 'weirdly abled'. It took up the entire meeting and then some.

Dear Dave, Sharon, and Jenni,

With all your help, I have started to more fully understand the history and genealogy of the 'weirdly abled' in your family and it certainly seems to go a long way back. Dave, you told me that sometimes you're happy with your mind and that sometimes you're not. You said that "unpredictability" was a strong feature of how your mind works. You said, "No one knows what I'm going to do next - it can be good or bad."

What was clear was that you took your place in the family lineage when you stated that "I've got a mind of my own." I certainly agree with you there. You left me with no doubts whatsoever. Sharon and Jenni, you fully concurred.

Dave, you went on to say that over the last two years you "have been teased a lot" and that you have been using confusion tactics on the teasers. However, there are those who understand you and appreciate you as a "weirdly abled" young man - like last year's math teacher, Mr Johnson. You said, "He is the only one who understands me." But Jenni and Sharon disagreed because they thought they had a pretty good understanding of you too. Dave, had you just taken them for granted?

Sharon, you thought Mr Johnson was able to understand because he "has a daughter with ADD" and he has had teaching experience with some twins with ADD. In addition, Sharon, you were of the opinion that "his approach is different - he is interested in the person and doesn't care about spelling. "Dave, you added, "He knows I've got a great sense of humour." Do you suspect that in his own way he is "weirdly abled" too, but because he is a

teacher he has to tone it down? What do you think?

When I realised that you, Sharon, had also always been 'weirdly abled', you spoke of the effects this had had on your life. You told me that you were "an advanced and lateral thinker as a child but that you were ignored a lot as a girl." Instead of acknowledging and cherishing you for you, you told us that some members of your family "didn't know what to do" with you. Sharon, you told me the tragic story of how your mother has "never been" your mother, that you "offended her as a baby" and that you "don't know what it was" that did this. Sharon, do you think, on reflecting, that your mind was too fast for hers? That you, in a manner of speaking, were always ahead of her or out in front of her?

Then I asked you, Sharon, that if you knew what you know now, and could have been there as an adult in your little girl life, what would you have done differently? You said: "I would have put more pressure on my parents to allow me to be with both sets of grandparents. Both sets had expressed a desire to adopt me." Sharon, is that because your grandparents knew that you were "weirdly abled" and not weird? Were they not afraid of you? Were they more encouraging rather than discouraging? You told me how Grandma Peg insisted when you were 8 that you buy Jane Eyre even though people doubted you were capable of it. Do you think she knew you better than anyone else? Sharon, was it because she recognised herself in you that she knew that you knew?

Sharon, you summed up your experience of both sets of parents when you said: "They encouraged me". They appreciated your mathematical gifts when they learned that at age 8 you could add faster than a cash register. They understood that you were "mathematically abled". Sharon, did you realise quite quickly that you had a fast mind? Do you suspect that people with slower minds than yours resented the quickness of your mind?

Jenni, you agreed with Sharon's opinion of Grandma Peg by saying "she's cool". And Dave you had this to say and from you, I would consider it a great compliment: "She has the best sense of humour I've ever heard". Coming from a pretty witty guy, that seems high praise! Sharon, you also commented that Dave has inherited his Grandma's "dramatic nature and humour" and Dave, you put on a pretty good show to demonstrate this and you told us some of her quips. Then Dave, you informed us that your humour was the key to understanding you. And Sharon, from a wider perspective, informed me about the importance of the Murphy sense of humour

Sharon, you then acknowledged that your "weird abilities" have been something of a mixed blessing for you. You were happy to acknowledge that your weird abilities helped your scholastic abilities which were very good - maths in particular. You described yourself as "mathematically gifted". Dave you said that you were "trying to turn my abilities to my school work" but that it wasn't easy for you. Jenni, you seemed to find it relatively easy to do so. You were lucky in this regard I suspect.

We then went on to review what seemed at least in your eyes, Sharon, to be a 'miracle'. After our last meeting, Jenni and Dave went "two days without fighting". And this was not a mere allegation but testified to by all concerned

parties: Dave, Jenni and yourself.

Jenni, you were amazed by this but you said "I was trying to see how long we could go for". Jenni, would you have believed that you could go for one hour without fighting? Dave, when I pressed you for some explanation for this change of fortune you said: "We were working together." Dave, does that mean under normal circumstances you are working against each other? Dave, what did you prefer: working together or against each other? Jenni and Dave, haven't you got enough people against you already? Or do you think I am getting too preachy here? Let me know when we meet again. Jenni, you summed up the two 'miracle' days by saying they were "good." Jenni, why do you say that?

Jenni and Dave, you thought you might go a week this time but Dave, you said in a Taurean way that if I told you to be co-operative, that would be like a red rag to you. So I was quite neutral here and kept my opinions to myself. You both insisted that "if we get up to a week, you've got to reward us." I said I would, but in a 'weirdly abled' way. So don't expect anything conventional because if you did, you would be a lot less 'weirdly abled' than I believe you all to be.

I agreed with you, Dave and Jenni, that we should set aside half the next meeting to go over the 'secret'. Once again, Sharon, let me explain that although we do have a 'secret', it will be divulged to you in full in due course. Please be patient with us. There is no malice whatsoever in our 'secrecy'.

Yours Respectfully,

David.

Entry #3 Third meeting

By their third meeting, Sharon was of the opinion that "it's touch and go with me to keep going" and "I still need to warn them about foster homes." However she was glad to report that "they are getting on better and are not at each other with knives and daggers. They are appreciating each other more."

The miracle had now endured for an entire week. The rest of the meeting was taken up conspiring about the imminent 'Mother Appreciation' party.

Entry #4 Fourth meeting

At their fourth meeting a month later, after reviewing recent developments, it was agreed by Dave, Sharon, Jenni and David that a report would be written to the statutory agency that was funding the therapy. This report was required in order for the therapy to continue to receive funding. They all agreed at the outset that the report was something that they would "all do together."

This report, or 'counter document' (White & Epston, 1990), not only served as a request for funding, it more importantly verified that Dave and his family were problem solvers. This was the first entry into the file on Dave in particular and the Murphy family in general in which they participated as

authorities on their own lives. It proudly took its place in their file which was already the size of a phone book and filled with the documentation of problems.

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Child and Young Persons Service of New Zealand

From: David Epston

Re: Progress report with the Murphy family

As agreed, I am providing you with an account of the meetings so far with Dave, his sister, Jennifer (Jenni), and his mother Sharon. It seems to be a particularly timely point for a review of our meetings. We have welcomed the opportunity to provide you with this record of them.

Jenni contends that "Dave has been a lot better and we don't fight as much." Before our first meeting, according to Jenni, fighting consumed 50% of the time she and Dave were in each other's presence. Sharon estimated it at 75% of the time and Dave at 100% of the time. Jenni now estimates that the current level of fighting is about 1% of the time. Dave's estimate is 10% and Sharon deemed it to be "within normal boundaries".

I have attempted to establish how Jenni and Dave reduced fighting so substantially. Jenni's explanation is: "I don't choose to pick fights with him. I wanted to see how long we could go without fighting." Neither Jenni nor Dave were willing to disclose the specifics of what they referred to as "our strategy" for reducing fighting. However Dave has stated that "if we sold our strategy to the United States, we could be millionaires."

Dave was willing to comment that when he "saw Jenni trying...I tried." He also said: "I figured out one simple thing - I could be bullied into fighting. I looked at fighting as if it were homework." Like homework, Dave was very reluctant to do it. Sharon was of the opinion that it had a lot to do with them finding "that we had to work together because we wanted the 'Mother Appreciation' party." And they found that cooperation wasn't so bad after all and in fact was quite enjoyable. I suppose any reader might be curious to know what a 'Mother Appreciation' might be and what it might entail.

Well, Dave and Jenni acknowledged that they were very worried for their mother and her psychological well-being. They feared that on the one hand she was nearing a "breakdown" and on the other that they would be placed in foster homes. Consequently, they decided to take it upon themselves to plan a surprise party for their mother in order to fully appreciate her and so that her friends could also have an opportunity to do the same. This required considerable guile on their part to keep their planning and preparations a surprise, but they were able to pull it off. Although they spent some time with me preparing their respective 'Mother Appreciation' speeches, embarrassment and shyness got the better of them and they decided against giving their speeches. Nonetheless their mother basked in the appreciation of her.

To summarise, Sharon has assessed that the situation at home is "a heck of a

lot better" and that "it couldn't have gone on. They would have ended up in foster homes. It was touch and go. I was worried about them 100% of the time. I couldn't leave them for a split second. In fact, I couldn't even get through going to the toilet because I feared for their safety." Dave agreed that he too was a bit scared that he would harm his sister: "I didn't know if I could stop it." Sharon believed that Jenni feared for her safety as she had overheard her daughter saying so.

Dave recommends that the sessions be extended. He said that he "still has some fits of anger and although I've come a long way, I've still got a long way to go." He wanted me to add: "I thank you (the funding agency) for getting us this far and helping me to stop myself from fighting with Jenni."

This report has been read and signed by Dave, Jenni and Sharon who in signing their names agree both generally and specifically to its content.

After this fourth meeting, no mention of Sharon "breaking down" and fostering Dave and Jennifer was ever made again.

Entry #5 Fifth meeting

Following their 'Mother-Appreciation' Party and the letter to renew the funding, David got very busy knowing Jenni's and Dave's minds at the same time as Dave and Jenni got equally busy knowing their own minds. Admittedly there were surprises for all of them, but all of the surprises turned out quite pleasantly. In spite of other people's opinions about her that would have caused her to doubt herself in the past, Sharon became more and more comfortable trusting in her 'weirdly abled' parenting.

There was one notable occurrence. Dave's knee-tapping was winding up to a crescendo when David leaned over towards him and placed his hand above his knee. He inquired: "Can you feel your knee touching my hand?"

Dave replied that he could. David then asked, "Were you aware that your knee was going up and down before I placed my hand above it?" Dave and David realised for the first time that he didn't.

This seemed significant so David asked some more questions. "Does your body have a mind of its own? Does it pay you any mind? Does it ignore you? Is this a sign of disrespect?"

Everyone agreed that such a project of enquiry would be a matter of concern for the future of the therapy.

Letter sent to Dave after the fifth meeting

Dear Dave:

I really enjoyed talking to you the other night. It all began when Jenni started the ball rolling by saying: "Dave has made a tremendous effort to

keep out of my room. He learned really quickly. He did it because he was being polite. I think Dave is a whole lot nicer." Your mum also agreed that "Dave has made a concerted effort". She told us how relieved she is that she can now stand back from 'the edge' that she has been on for so long.

We then all became aware, even you Dave, that it was possible that the self-control you had been exercising could be "the first of the summer wine". When I asked you about this, you had a very good explanation indeed: "Something in my brain knocked something over which changed the gear into behaviour mode." When I asked how long it would last, you thought it might endure for another week or two. However, Sharon recalled one summer in which you went throughout it self-controlling yourself. Can you remember that summer, Dave? Was it a summer to remember? Certainly, it seems so for your mum.

Sharon, you referred to 1989 as "the summer of self-control". Your mum remembers that she did a lot of work with you like gardening. And this seemed to have helped you be in control of your body and mind. We also talked about how when you look after Auntie Sue, you bring yourself under your own self-control. That also connected with 'duty day' and the way you looked after the teachers.

Here are some questions that I have for you, Dave:

- 1. How does physical activity, e.g. gardening, bike riding, lead to you to being self-controlling?*
- 2. How does looking after people lead you to be self-controlling?*

Dave, I felt very sorry for you when you told us how at times your mind and body seem to have minds of their own and don't pay you any mind. And at times as you said, "I'm not aware they are doing it". Dave, it is time for this 'therapy' of ours to put all our heads and WEIRD ABILITIES together in order to assist you in some weirdly abled way to have more of your mind and body under your self-control???

I hope we will be able to talk together about this next time. I look forward to such a discussion.

Yours sincerely

David.

This letter marked a transition. The Murphy family was now engaged on its own 'weirdly abled' terms to address a persistent problem in their lives. It was time for a less 'weirdly abled' therapist to sit back and see what they came up with.

Entry #6 Letter sent to Dave after the sixth meeting