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Article

The Six-Part Story and the Potential for Conversational Artistry

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Abstract

Barbara Bloomfield explores the landscape of creative counselling and asks whether using unfamiliar materials such as playdough, drawing and creative writing can generate unexpected and healing conversations. She explores whether such techniques call us to a poetic register rather than a problem-saturated register and whether they thereby can provide a healing reframe for some life problems. Processing data from a six-part story exercise with a colleague, given the pseudonym of Ray, Bloomfield discovers useful new material and gets unexpected answers as she reflects on her own abilities and limitations. This paper is an autoethnographic journey into a therapeutic experience that honours stories of pain or loss while challenging us to step out of our comfort zone to develop new ways of thinking.

Keywords: Autoethnography, narrative therapy, counselling, writing for wellbeing, expressive arts

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Thank you to 'Ray' for his time and honesty during the process of this exploration.
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Opening

As a relationship and family counsellor and supervisor for 25 years, I have had plenty of time to think about what constitutes a healing conversation.

At the first session of counselling, when I ask my clients what would be useful for them to talk about or how a positive change for them might come about as a result of spending time with a counsellor, they usually say 'I don't know.' Despite the not-knowing, I think it is valuable to plant a seed that the way we construct our conversations and what we choose to talk about or not talk about is important. It slows down, formalises, and encourages ownership and reflection on the whole process of discourse and on how we relate to each other as human beings. My aim in this paper is to reflect on the art of conversation and reflect on my abilities, biases and limitations as a counsellor who uses creative writing and storytelling in her work. This article started life as a piece of research into a six-part story exercise that I used with a colleague, but it has ended up being as much about me and my philosophy of enacting the role of counsellor, and my surprising journey of learning. It is an examination of a relatively new way of doing therapy: creative counselling.

It is often said that a piece of counselling work should be 'the difference that makes a difference' (Bateson, 1972, p. 459). If the counsellor's style is too different, the client will feel that we do not understand their problems. But if the questions and reflections on offer to the client are not different enough then the problem they bring remains unchallenged and is unlikely to change. I reflect on why storytelling can create a sweet spot, the right amount of difference to promote positive change with and for the client. I also make a case for the power of story to transform the way we think using metaphor, creating what I call a poetic register that helps to promote curiosity and open-mindedness. With polarising and intolerance of opinions being noted around today's public and political debate (Brooks, 2019), a different way of conversing and being in relationship with others, I argue, is truly needed.

Those who have read 'The Hero's Journey' will recognise the construction of the six-part story exercise which provides the familiar beginning - middle - end shape that is present in satisfying storytelling from all cultures (Campbell, 1968). The six-part story extends this storytelling shape to Opening - Development - Action - Advice - Resolution - Ending. In counselling moments when I feel there is mysterious or unexpressed material that is holding our

work in a stuck place, I often turn to structured stories to try to create a different frame for a problem.

I wish I could tell you what kind of researcher I am, but I do not yet know. I have never done research and have never written an academic paper until now. I would like to say I am a feminist researcher because I am interested in constructions and imbalances of power in our world. I feel close to the social constructionist approach to therapy as outlined by Michael White and David Epston (1990) in their book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. I feel naive and tentative as a researcher and have needed to reflect on some of my own preferences and biases in the way I have worked with Ray.

In the last 15 years, after studying for a master's degree in creative writing (scriptwriting), and taking a diploma in systemic psychotherapy, I have developed my own creative counselling practice, working with individuals, couples and families in a slightly unusual way. Alongside the familiar skills of active listening, paraphrasing, reflecting back, and empathising, I offer an array of small figures, playdough, writing and drawing materials and then I try to weave conversational artistry around the stories that are prompted by these creative materials.

Why do I practice this way? I am not altogether sure but have some ideas and beliefs about the reasons my counselling practice has taken this particular turn. Firstly, the landscape and cultural contexts for counselling have changed greatly.

In 1994, setting out as a counsellor in Relate (the biggest relationship counselling organisation in the United Kingdom), all our training and beliefs about the way we would enact the role of counsellor were based on attempts to adapt psychotherapy to meet the needs of couples and families. Our trainers were well-known psychotherapists, but the therapy profession regarded our counselling work as 'therapy lite', cheaper, less intellectual, shorter, and snappier. We worked 'with' the transference, rather than 'in' the transference, and opinions were divided about whether short term counselling was really going to impact neurosis or distress.

The emphasis in some psychotherapy of 'expressing repressed emotions' has, I think, been overtaken by societal shifts in television and social media towards the 'individual confessional.' This partly led, we could say, to a rethink in terms of the balance between 'thinking' and 'feeling' for therapists, and a close look at the language of therapy. Systemic family therapy has a postmodern determination to place human thoughts and actions in contexts

of meaning, called ‘the social ggrraaacceeesss‘ a shorthand for: Gender, Gender Identity, Geography, Generation, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Caste, Education, Ethnicity, Economics, Spirituality, Sexuality, Sexual Orientation (Dallos & Draper, 2000). Since Michael White and other family therapists at the influential Dulwich Centre in Australia first articulated their narrative theories of counselling (White & Epston, 1990), family therapy has been trying to get the balance right between these highly intellectual social constructionist theories and the practical solutions that ‘troubled’ families are looking for.

Systemic Family Therapy rejects essentialist thinking and the kind of language that might seem to ‘fix’ the client into tramlines of thinking (‘you’re fragile’, ‘he’s depressed,’ ‘I’m mentally ill,’ etc.) and tries (some might say tries too hard!) to create new, tentative and provisional languages (Burnham, 2012). But systemic therapy has not had so much to say about the use of creativity and, with its sometimes convoluted discourse, comes across to many as ‘too different’.

In terms of my own counselling style, I try to open a big, spacious field in which meanings can be generated, whether they be about feelings or thoughts. In the words of Native American poet, Joy Harjo, I see myself as working with ‘makers and carriers of fresh meaning’ (Harjo, 2015, introduction) and I believe the creative arts, including writing, offer a non-elite and democratic way in which we can make and remake fresh meaning. I want my clients to develop the capacity to connect outwards - with each other and with nature - rather than be stuck in their neuroses, looking inwards. I am influenced by the work of Mohsin Mohi Ud Din, an inspiring American who runs MeWeSyria, education and empowerment programmes with refugees and displaced persons. He makes a plea for story/narrative reframing to be a communal/societal action, not an individual one:

> MeWe’s hypothesis is that an arrested narrative of oneself translates to an arrested development of the person and their community. A plural and resilient narrative of oneself can translate to unlocking the potential of the person and their community. (‘What is #MEWEINTL’, 2020)

Development

When I was ten years old, my seven-year-old brother died very quietly over the course of an afternoon. One minute we were bickering and playing with our Christmas toys, the next minute, it seemed, he was in a coma and then dead of a cerebral haemorrhage. The fallout from this loss was awful, catastrophic for our family and for me personally. I could never make any sense of it until I wrote my full-length film script, 'Gray's Amazing Flea Circus' at the age of 50. This has been 'the gift that kept on giving' and has continued to provide new insights and new meanings to my life ever since. It reached a poetic place that therapy and counselling had never been able to reach. Perhaps that is why I believe in the power of story for my clients and encourage them to explore their own narratives in different ways. I only use these methods with people when there is a therapeutic 'opening' which suggests that they are curious and interested to operate in the register of story or the register of creative arts. I do not force this way of thinking on clients and always give them the opportunity to say 'no.'

Writing this paper has made me reflect on whether I have turned to children's toys and primitive, childlike drawings as a way of reclaiming part of a childhood that was stolen from me at the age of ten. As I write, I need to process whether this 'creative counselling' I'm so passionate about is serving my writing for wellbeing and my counselling clients as well as it serves me personally, or whether it could be a selfish way of working that meets my own needs for repair? As a person who has never written a research paper before, I am unsure how much of myself to put into this story and I am aware that I am exerting all sorts of control over Ray's story, in the way I shape and present it for you.

Dialogue Between Barbara and Ray

As part of peer supervision with a colleague, I started the six-part story exercise with Ray in a two-hour session and then in four episodes of follow-up spread over six weeks. Ray is a 50-year-old white British man who is married with three teenage children. He experiences periods of depression, especially in the winter, and our first creative session was carried out in February 2020 during his bad season but just before Covid-19 arrived to turn the world upside down. This first session was followed up with three later conversations, spaced at two week intervals and conducted by email and in person. As the UK went into lockdown, we were forced to conduct our conversations online, but we also managed a face-to-face conversation while walking in the

woods. Ray works as a counsellor and I asked him to take part in this exercise because he is not professionally interested in writing or creative arts as a therapeutic tool. In fact, we had never used creative methods in any of our previous discussions.

It is outside the scope of this article to look at the haptic benefits of touching and moulding materials at the same time as writing and drawing, as ways to alleviate mental distress and promoting wellbeing. The benefits of 'fidget gadgets' and distractors are well documented, especially in family therapy (Sunderland & Armstrong, 2018). Links are also made between the way that our hands, which convey so much expression when we touch, hug, write and gesture, bring sensations into the present moment and bring us back into our bodies (Sunderland & Armstrong, 2019). I think there is a link between the 'unusual situation' of using creative materials like plasticine and writing and the acceptance of ambiguity. Put simply, if you do not know what is the 'right answer' to a life problem and the stories you generate sneak past your frontal lobes to create unexpected narratives that come as a surprise even to their creator, then I believe this helps to develop a relationship with the state of not-knowing that creates a climate for interest and curiosity. Being in a place of not-knowing and being in a state where we encounter the world moment by moment and let it unfurl in front of us, is akin to a state of being in play. As a family counsellor, I know how to create a level playing field between children and adults who are having family issues, by using play techniques. If anything, using play techniques and materials can put adults who have become 'problem-saturated' at a disadvantage because they have 'forgotten how to play' (Bloomfield, 2013, p. 86). Developing a facility for being flexible, playful, and using humour are elements in developing greater resilience to life's problems, a significant factor in successful counselling work.

Why is play so valuable? When we play, we are ready to respond in certain ways, spontaneously, and we are extemporising in the moment of now (Michopoulou, 2019). Play is improvisation and improvisation is play. During a typical playtime that Michopoulou observed in a Greek park, the children showed an ability to embrace ambiguity and, she says, when we see ambiguity as a result of 'spontaneous participation in unique living situations', we are able to develop our ability to see difference in a positive way, instead of seeing sameness or tropes (Michopoulou, 2019, p. 20). Spontaneous participation leads to fresh sensory experiences, fresh mindfulness, and fresh ideas (Michopoulou, 2019, p. 20).

Action

I was struck by Wright and Chung's (2005) neat summing up of an ongoing debate in the western therapy world in terms of 'mastery or mystery'. This refers to the insistence that therapy should be able to evidence its benefits if it wants to be part of mainstream UK National Health Service (NHS) provision. Over the past 15 years there has been an avalanche of opinions on this subject. To some extent, the arts have pushed back against what some see as a sterile discussion about evidence. As a former counsellor with Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT)—mental health counselling paid for by the NHS—I'm glad I don't need to explore this here.

Influential in the pushback against statistics has been the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPG) (2017) whose report *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing* seemed to capture a blossoming of new ways of doing therapeutic work which cuts across art forms. Dance for Parkinson's, singing for dementia, yoga with writing, and poetry therapy are just four examples of these blended art forms designed to improve physiological and psychological health. The word 'therapeutic' has increasingly been replaced by the word 'wellbeing' and this change seems to distance the practices from the 'mastery' camp and move them into the 'mystery' camp. The public sector is already starting to make creativity for wellbeing commonplace in many different contexts and settings, such as classrooms, workplaces, hospitals, hospices, community spaces, festivals, and even government (Wall & Axtell, 2020).

Rather than look at this piece of research as 'evidence' for the success or otherwise of creativity for wellbeing, I prefer to try and examine my practice within existing frameworks. My family counselling training draws on systemic and other counselling theories (Dallos & Draper, 2000; Rivett & Street. 2009; Armstrong, 2015; Dallos, 2006; White & Epston,1990). Karl Tomm's influential papers (1987a, 1987b, 1988) on interventive interviewing explain in detail how conversations can be used to promote healing. My writing for wellbeing work draws on a different body of writing on the healing potential of writing (Pennebaker, 2002; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; Etherington, 2020; Van Der Kolk, 2014; Wright & Thiara, 2019; Sunderland & Armstrong, 2018, 2019). Explorations of the role of play draw on a limited body of writing about using play and creative techniques with adult clients (Pawsey, 2015; Michopoulou, 2019; Colapinto, 1982; White & Epston, 1990; Bloomfield, 2013).

The Six-Part Story Exercise

This exercise was developed by two Israeli family therapists, Ofra Ayalon and Mooli Lahad (Lahad, 1992), who proposed that the newly-created story demonstrates the way the client habitually perceives or reacts to the world and that this storytelling by metaphor is useful to therapy.

The exercise, as I have adapted it, starts with a pot of playdough and a sheet of A4 paper divided into six squares, numbered 1-6. I invited Ray to mould the playdough in his hands to warm it; to enjoy the sensation of squidginess and the almond scent of the playdough when he brought it up to his nose. I noticed that he looked a bit worried. He said he was worried he did not know what to do and I reflected inwardly that the six-part story exercise feels like play and, to an adult, play can be the scariest thing of all. I asked him to close his eyes and quickly mould the playdough into a shape. There would be no right or wrong and the first shape he made would probably be fine.

Then he opened his eyes and I asked: 'Can you give this character a name?'

Ray looked a bit surprised and, uncertainly, said: 'Table.'

Figure 1

Playdough 'Table'

I had also been moulding my own pot of playdough in a different colour and I created a shape and gave it a name, which was ‘Bimble.’

I invited Ray to draw (but not write) in the six boxes:

Box 1: To draw Table in the place where he/she/it lives

Box 2: To draw an issue that is preoccupying Table today

Box 3: To draw how others in Table’s community would respond to this issue

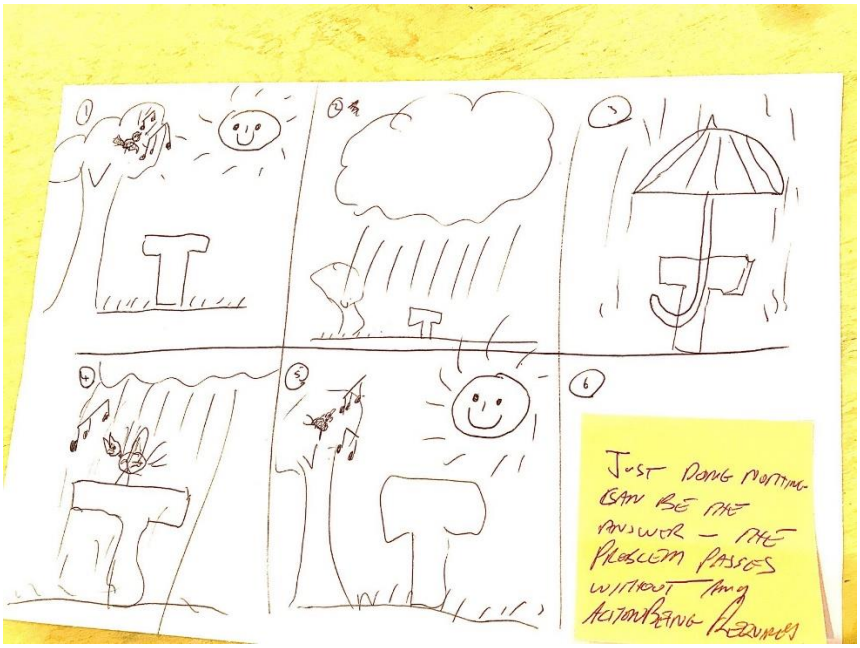
Box 4: To draw what advice Table’s best friend would give.

Box 5: To draw the resolution of the story

Box 6: To draw or write what is the moral of the story.

Figure 2

Ray’s drawing



Ray was able to create drawings quickly and he seemed to be ‘in flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992/2002). We each then wrote the stories of our character and their problem. In Ray’s story, Table was sitting in the sun under a tree listening to a bird singing.

Suddenly, the weather changed, and it started to beat down with rain. Other people saw the solution as to get an umbrella and protect yourself but Table waited and waited and his friend the Bird came down onto his tabletop and splashed about while it rained. Finally, the sun came out and the Bird went back to his tree to sing again.

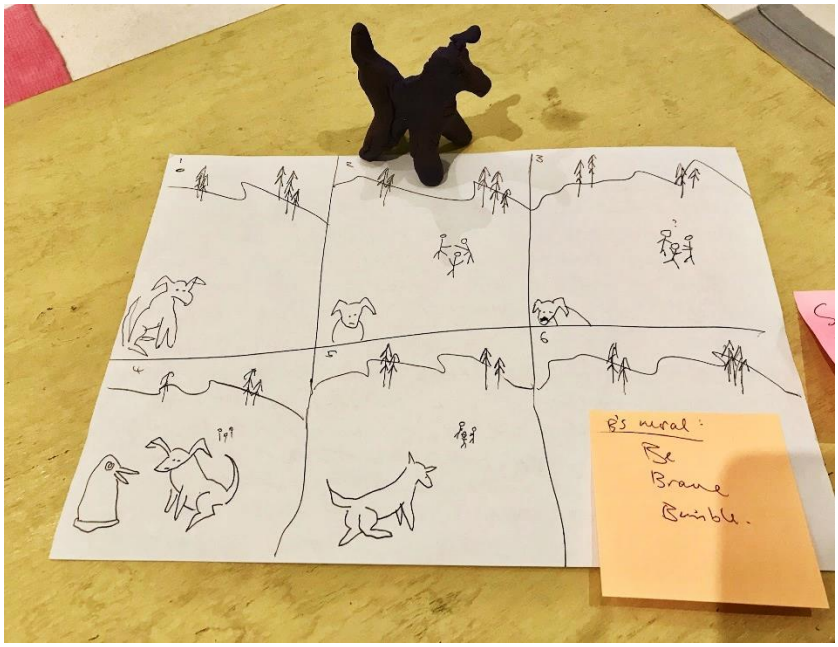
Ray wrote the moral of his story on a Post-it note: 'Just doing nothing can be the answer - the problem passes without any action being needed.' I asked Ray to comment on his story and drawings and he replied:

> Table is a wooden table, not very comfortable to hang out around. A picnic bench would have been better but too complicated to draw. I'm reading *The Overstory* by Richard Powers and that's about trees, or seeing trees as living things, and I'm finding this book very powerful and moving. A table is an abused and mutilated tree but it's a happy table, though I guess Table would rot if it came from a poor quality shop. It would rot within a year. I'm making an association of sitting round with friends in the sunshine, drinking beer. I see Table literally as a table, not as a person. He lives outdoors in a beer garden and it's all idyllic. The umbrella should be the kind you see in a pub garden. The bird is having a bath on the surface of the rainy table. Then the rain goes away, and the sun comes out again. If you can sit it out (rather than do something about it) it never rains forever. (2 February, 2020)

I also did a six-part story with my character at the same time as Ray. In my story, the lonely dog, Bimble, lives in a wide meadow with some tall pine trees. Three kids were playing in the distance but Bimble feels too isolated to join in the game. His friend, Sandy, advises him to stop worrying and start acting 'brave' and eventually he goes over to join them and they welcome him. My moral was 'Be Brave, Bimble!'. I made my story into a short, animated film (Parkin, 2017).

Figure 3

Barbara's drawing



Looking at the strategies used by the two characters to resolve their different problems, Ray and I had a discussion which started face to face and continued over six weeks. When I thought about the different strategies for 'being' that Ray and I were adopting in our lives, I was amazed at how much had been revealed by this exercise. I also reflected that these different strategies had sometimes led to Ray and I getting into arguments and misunderstandings which were illuminated by our different life philosophies. I made contemporaneous notes in the two sessions that we did face to face about his six-part story and the other data below is the result of email correspondence. It would have been preferable to do all follow-up sessions face to face, but the COVID-19 lockdown precluded this.

> Barbara: What do you notice about the ways out characters resolved their problems?
>
> Ray: The difference that struck me was that being brave was quite a big thing and a bit YUCK, like a 70s motto: 'Feel the fear and do it anyway!' Whereas there is not a lot of bravery in being friendly.

Barbara: I actually feel resistant to the idea that Table gets such good results from doing nothing. Can this be a good way to set about life? Bimble is always out there, wagging his tail, and, yes, not always getting the results he hopes for. Maybe Table is better than Bimble at letting things wash through him?

Ray: I'm trying not to get bogged down with all the little crap. I am Table. It will all blow over. In your story I felt Bimble had the option of hiding 'cos he wasn't seen by the others. I saw Table as an inanimate object whereas yours is more of a live character which is quite a difference in our outlooks.

Barbara: Hiding!? No way! Bimble doesn't HIDE!

Ray: Well, no. But why not hide? It's another option.

Barbara: I see what you mean in the sense that Table is 'planted' in the earth and Bimble is running all over the place. How would it be different to keep this story in metaphor: i.e. only a story about Table and Bimble? Or does it feel more useful if it's about your story or my story?

Ray: At the risk of sitting on the fence, I think there are advantages to both. Keeping the story in metaphor would allow it to develop in more interesting/unexpected ways as I think it encourages a 'looser' brain to express itself. It could also, of course, lead to disappearance down a rabbit hole of nonsense! I think that allowing enough time for the metaphor to run is important (my sense is we did not have quite enough) and that ending by slowly moving into the personal experience of the creator and interpreter (me and you) is quite a nice way to end it. This was particularly interesting in the stories of Bimble and Table I thought: the different morals that arose out of broadly similar stories—brave(you)/friendly(me)! Comparisons with friendship (you)/do nothing (me!)—were fascinating and we could, perhaps, have reflected on these longer.

> Barbara: Did you feel that the story resonated with interests in your own life, or not?
>
> Ray: Not consciously at the time but upon examination I realised that my interest in wood/trees from reading *The Overstory* ran through a lot of it. Also, my generally depressed state at this time of year and my habit of hibernating (or 'doing nothing' as I framed it) as being a way of managing it. Also the power of being friendly (easier than being brave I think!) even when feeling awkward/shy/wanting to run for cover!
>
> Barbara: Did it further your thinking?
>
> Ray: It was an interesting perspective using Table and Bimble to tell the stories, particularly as I regarded Table as inanimate (and you didn't). Perhaps this was partly that I didn't know what was coming next but I suspect it also reflects my changing understanding around trees and wood. Also, how we both had quite a lot of common experiences/points of view in our respective stories and I thought the way we framed these differently said something about us as people, although I am not quite sure what. (10 February, 2020)

The *leitmotif* from Ray of not having enough time is interesting and I definitely have the sense that I could have usefully extended the metaphor so that we both became more immersed in the story and in human relationships with trees. We followed up with an email exchange:

> Barbara: Have you had any further thoughts since we last spoke?
>
> Ray: I suppose I have developed my thoughts and ideas a bit while writing this email and I do think it is interesting how we value (or not) things. In this example, 'bravery' being generally seen as a positive attribute whilst largely ignoring the disaster/misery/pain that often results from it and 'doing nothing' being seen as lazy/suffering from inertia/fearful when it often allows space and reflection and strategising and enables better quality decisions to be made.

Barbara: On reflection, I'm feeling there is something both childlike and profound about the idea that 'just being friendly will make you happy.' I almost cannot believe I am saying this because it's so at odds with my action-facing nature. It has made me think about my life philosophy. How do you feel now about Table's motto?

Ray: I feel quite strongly about this as a positive thing in my life. The good stuff for each of us in life so often comes from an unexpected direction and by adopting a 'friendly' approach (a version of 'doing nothing' in my mind, incidentally) we can develop and generate these more easily.

Barbara: What is the relationship between''doing nothing' and 'being brave''? What kind of relationship would you like to have with them?

Ray: I think the relationship between these two is largely a reflection or your and my perspectives on, well, everything, really. We each of us pulled out of the story what resonated with/made sense to us (do psychologists call this confirmation bias or something like it?). I suppose I see doing nothing as a wise, reflective observer type position (rather than the more popular 'inertia' one most people might see) and being brave as impetuous and foolish sometimes. If doing something is that brave, would it not make sense to reflect upon it a while rather than just launching straight into it?

The relationship I would like to have with these two things is probably not too far from the one I actually have. Whilst there is a tremendous need for being brave and taking action in the world, I do see much of what actually goes on as reactive instead and this is what fuels conflict, war, fear, Tories etc. This could be mitigated by a (temporary) 'doing nothing' approach to consider the possible outcomes before committing to a course of action. (28 February, 2020)

On 10 March, we followed up by email as the UK was in Covid-19 lockdown at this point of 2020:

> Barbara: Reflecting on the six-part story, is there anything that strikes you now as interesting?
>
> Ray: I suppose the bit that jumps out at me is running out of time and how it would have been really interesting to have further developed/explored/reflected upon the stories of Bimble and Table, particularly with regard to the themes of bravery and doing nothing. I guess I have done this below really, but I think a face to face conversation with you would have been more interesting and, perhaps, moderated my thoughts and made them a bit less ranty! (although I think ranty has its place and gets an unfairly negative press generally!)
>
> Barbara: I was wondering whether it resonates with any previous story from your life in any way?
>
> Ray: Boarding school I suppose. All those willy-waving twats swaggering about and ending up in positions of power later in life and how their perceived 'bravery' is actually just psychopathy or similar that actually masks a deep existential loneliness and creates such massive problems in the world. Sorry to be a bit negative, but that's what popped into my head!
>
> Barbara: I'm struck by that Image of Table sitting there stolidly while he's being rained on. For you, does this sit with the word 'depression'?
>
> Ray: I would never had made the link. I saw Table as inanimate. I never made a conscious link.
>
> Barbara: Is there a link between acceptance (can I use the word 'passivity'?) and low mood?
>
> Ray: Possibly. I'm not convinced. I think the description of depression I like the most is that depression is internalised emotion.

Barbara: Say more...

Ray: Depression facilitates a lot. You get, at school, to opt out of anything such as games that you don't want to do. For me, it was concurrent at school with developing asthma. And, as an adult with depression, you can get out of things, a boring job, kids you can't stand. How lovely to retreat to bed. I enjoy retreating to bed once in a while.

Barbara: Does this link to your philosophy that 'it's enough just to be friendly'?

Ray: The friendly thing is more of a default potion than a philosophy. There is something I've developed over the years that others don't seem to have which is that I have no fear of rejection. I take a chance by smiling at strangers, but I don't fear rejection if they don't smile back.

Barbara: Do you think the difference in our philosophies has led us to clash at points in the past and misunderstand each other?

Ray: Yes, we do misunderstand each other quite a bit but we are good at checking out any misunderstandings. I think in this we differ from many people. Rejection is key here: most people don't check out their misunderstandings because they quickly go to a place of feeling rejected.

Barbara: Your story is so fresh for me. But am I right in sensing that maybe it's not so exciting for you? I'm excited by your beliefs and the way you go about life! Haha.

Ray: You were in charge of the exercise and therefore you attach more meaning to it than I did. Elements of it have stayed with me but not as much as for you. But I did enjoy the way it highlighted our very different philosophies of life.

One reader of this paper commented that some of my questions above are 'leading questions.' By this time in our conversation, I was feeling challenged by what I saw as Ray's

passive attitude to life. But at the same time, I felt he was saying something important and that I was beginning to understand his different way of looking at things much more clearly through the story of Table.

I also reflected on the fact that Ray saw me as 'being in charge' of the exercise rather than it being co-constructed. He seemed to be getting tired of being asked questions about the exercise and he might have felt I was pressurising him to say something different or pressurising him to 'have more reflections.' I felt uncomfortable because the discussion started to remind me of disagreements that Ray and I had had when it felt like I was the older sister to him as the younger brother and I was bossing him to behave differently. Poignantly, this is what I was doing as a ten-year-old girl to my brother when he went into a coma and died.

Resolution

For the purposes of commenting on the data from the six-part story, I am going to use concepts outlined by one of the grandees of therapeutic writing, James Pennebaker, in his epilogue to *The Writing Cure* (Lepore & Smith, 2002).

> Journal writing creates a trustworthy setting for reflection. It forces us to stop what we are doing, briefly, and reflect on our lives. It's a chance to see where you have been and where you are going without having to please anyone. It encompasses theoretical stances associated with self-regulation, search for meaning; creation of coherent stories about one's life; habituation; emotional awareness and expression ... Emotional processing, creating a coherent story, post writing procession and a trustworthy setting are the most important elements of therapeutic writing. (Pennebaker, 2002, epilogue)

Although Pennebaker is referring here to journaling, by taking three of these important elements, I can look at Ray's story through the lenses of the trustworthy setting, creating a coherent story and the post-writing procession.

A Trustworthy Setting

As a counsellor working with couples, families, and individuals, I must wait for the sense that the time might be right during the counselling to introduce creative arts. I want to build up

trust with my clients beforehand by listening carefully and actively to their worries, their traumas, or their mental distress. The reason for this is not necessarily that I am a highly empathic or caring person. It's something to do with the expectations of clients that they will be able to express themselves fully by telling stories of hurt, abuse or distress. Some systemic counsellors don't believe these sorts of stories are useful and tend not to listen very carefully to them. They believe that *changing* the stories we live by, through asking different and strange questions and developing a state of 'ambiguity and not knowing' in the discourse between client and counsellor, tends to soften 'problem-saturated narratives' and lead to a reduction in symptoms. It could be argued that systemic counsellors are more skilled at looking outwards and at connecting their clients to global and social justice concerns than they are at understanding that trauma and past hurts hold people back. But critics of the systemic way of working can call it 'uncaring' or 'overly intellectual' in its use of complex questions and language, and therefore inherently undemocratic to clients. Sometimes the questions can be so intellectual and so different that the client is turned off immediately and never returns.

That is why I have turned to creativity as a fresh route to help clients develop new ways of thinking that still honour their stories of pain or loss. Ray suggests that creative therapies can 'disappear down a rabbit-hole of nonsense' and that is certainly possible. However, if introduced with sensitivity, I believe that creative counselling is more accessible to a wide range of clients than the intellectualism of a lot of systemic therapy.

So how to introduce creative counselling? I usually signal my intentions with clients the week before we start, saying: 'Next week, how about we try something different, like writing or using small figures? Would you be interested in trying that?' Professor Rudi Dallos, cited in Bloomfield (2013, pp. 61-62), reflects that the process of contracting and negotiating in counselling is so important in constructing both a trustworthy setting and in setting a tone for self-regulation. Taking time to have these process conversations about what we are doing, why we are having THIS conversation and not THAT conversation, and what we want to achieve in our work together, is vital and often under-developed in the communications repertoires of individuals, couples or families with 'problems.' As an impatient person myself, I have had to learn the hard way to take a step back and deconstruct the communications in my family before they get snagged, circular, and repetitive!

But now we come to a very important factor. In today's world, we need to self-regulate: to be able to, in the Buddhist saying, 'slow down to the pace of wisdom.' Creativity helps us because it invites us to sit in the moment of NOW, to slow down our thought processes and then to *reflect* on them. We need to reflect on the good things of life: the joy, the achievements, the gratitude, and the love we experience. Neurobiologists tell us that our neural networks are primed to remember flight, fight, and frozen more quickly than joy, gratitude, and enjoyment. Many of us need to know how we can build a tolerance for joy and gratitude inside ourselves (Sunderland & Armstrong, 2018, 2019).

Creating a Coherent Story

The purpose of using a six-part story during a counselling or writing for wellbeing session is to uncover hidden psychological material which may be of use both to the client and to the counsellor. As a counsellor and a writer of fiction, I tend to see links between metaphors, stories and psychological processes very quickly and this means that I can construct stories from other people's scribblings and drawings almost in the blink of an eye and faster than any pen can write. As a counsellor, I need to guard against this, to guard against turning other people's six-part stories into MY stories and over-privileging my own interpretations.

Complete stories with a beginning, middle and end are useful in several ways. Firstly, they call us to a poetic register rather than a problem-saturated register. We all tend to get wedded to the age-old tales we tell and re-tell about our own lives, especially the 'negative' stories that may have been generated in our early experiences, our families of origin or communities. I notice that some clients who have done many years of psychotherapy can get extremely fond of stories that keep them tied to the past. This may keep them stuck in a neurotic or ruminating place, rather than releasing them from pain or pressure. My belief is the stories which 'loosen' us are those that by-pass the frontal lobes and access unconscious material. To bypass gate-keeping mechanisms, we need to provide a setting that is relatively different and one where the client cannot 'guess' what answers are expected or desired. When he warmed his playdough in his hands, Ray could not have guessed that I would ask him to create a character and complete a whole story. This is why, I believe, Ray's story released some important and unconscious material that came as a surprise to him and, indeed, to me.

A second reason why complete conversations and stories are so useful is because, if we look at the psychotherapeutic three-stage model of counselling as Exploration - Understanding - Action (Egan, 2014), then the problem with many therapeutic encounters is that they never get to the action stage. Solutions-focused Counselling and Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy have become popular for this very reason, because they recognise the tendency of counsellors and clients to 'collude' in avoiding the change part of the work and get stuck in the more spacious, relaxing and comfortable arena of 'exploration.' Focusing on solutions also recognises a more mundane factor, that many clients will end their counselling before they get to the action stage. The six-part story, on the other hand, sneakily encourages the client to own their inner wisdom and their change agenda at an early stage by taking the observer/witness position in square four (what would a 'best friend' advise they should do?) and in squares five and six (by asking for the resolution to and the moral of the story).

Using story as a vehicle for exploring traumatic events and mental distress is an externalising device that lightens the telling of distressing material. When we tell the stories of Table or Bimble we create a story that exists outside the person of the teller. There is no longer 'THE truth,' there may be a variety of stories and several truths. It is easy to see the potential for reframing narratives and for developing preferred narratives which provide more hopeful or more balanced accounts of difficult experiences (Dallos, 2019).

Post-Writing Procession

What Pennebaker (2002) calls the post-writing procession has been, for Ray and me, a period of several chances to reflect on our reflections which has ended up with me feeling like a dog with a bone (perhaps Bimble with his bone!) Like Bimble, I have become 'dogged' in my pursuit of answers with Ray but perhaps failed to be poetic and spacious enough in the exploration of Table's metaphors. I needed to give Ray a bit more space to feel comfortable.

Personally, I find that metaphor captures my imagination, leads me to have fresh thoughts and more positive thoughts. Fresh scenes and fresh ideas come into my mind. I think of different scenarios and answers to my worries. New colours, shapes and patterns come into my mind instead of the grey, colourless and shameful feelings I've sometimes experienced when bearing my soul in psychotherapy. What is the colour of shame, I wonder? When I speak about my own troubles using metaphor and story, I feel energised and fascinated by this new material. I

experience myself as outside my body and am able to take a curious and interested witness position rather than a shamed or vulnerable position. I still experience a sense of vulnerability when working in story, but the vulnerability seems connected and survivable because it is not inside me. Instead, it exists in a lighter form as a written or a filmed or voiced story over which I have control and which I could choose to share with, publish, and have witnessed by others.

Being involved in creating stories and metaphor about difficult stories feels, to me, like being part of a web of alternative possibilities, rather than being in a well of shameful vulnerability. I recognise that Ray possibly feels differently to me, though was too polite to say so. He did not feel as energised or interested in the six-part story as I did. I will be returning to ask him in six months' time whether he feels the same way, or differently? He told me his strategy for getting through 'depression' was to be able to phone one of a group of friends who also experience low moods and 'have a moan.' I would never think of doing this in a million years and respect Ray's way of handling his low moods. Ray and I both want to look outwards, but we do it in different ways. Whatever works, works, as they say!

In narrative therapy, there is debate about whether, or not, to stay in metaphor when working with story (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001). Psychodynamically-trained family therapists will come out of metaphor at the end of the storytelling ('So, how does Table's story chime with your experience?') whereas systemically-trained family therapists tend to stay in the story and keep the story/metaphor separate from the teller. As Ray himself said, there are advantages to both and it's a matter of judgment whether the storyteller would benefit from owning the links between their story and their own experiences. Perhaps most important of all is that using story is a way of widening a conversation so that the person is aware of their community context. In the west we have become so individualised and atomised that we tend to lose sight of our wider communities.

Ending

The moral of this story is that, through using storytelling with Ray, he and I have learned new things about our philosophies of life. For my part, I am seeing Ray in a different way and I am going to use my own reflections to guide our future peer discussion. The attention I have given to writing this paper has been worthwhile and has started in me a real curiosity about research.

What would it be like if we lived in a world where the poetic register was admired? A place where curiosity and interest were stimulators of fresh conversation about difference and privilege? A place where problem-saturated conversations could be chunked down into smaller, more connected pieces? And a place where using story provided a useful and lighter way of surviving the sharing of painful experiences with others?

What would it mean to be a conversational artist? I think movements like MeWe International understand the decentralising power of conversational artistry and its potential to give voice to those who are under-heard. If we could take a curious and interested stance in the world, how would the registers of politics change? I can't be the only politically-engaged person who is bored stiff by the same old political tropes and discourses. Using story, as Ray and I did together, is a way to bring back curiosity and interest in different ways of approaching life and of valuing other people's experiences.

By decentralising the power of narrative, we speak truth to power and stop power defining our life stories for us. We start to positively redefine our stories and our role in society and rebuild an ecosystem in which we can organically work towards social change and personal growth.

> Bless the poets, the workers for justice, the dancers of ceremony, the singers of heartache, the visionaries, all makers and carriers of fresh meaning—We will all make it through, despite politics and wars, despite failures and misunderstandings. There is only love. (Harjo, 2015)

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