

The Healing Touch of a Story

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Abstract

The paper highlights the healing impact of storytelling. The paper considers a specific case, which involved creating a healing story that helped a client to overcome specific behaviour issues and to break barriers. This client was a 6-year-old who was shy, and who struggled to assert herself and speak confidently.

The paper highlights: 1) Issues the client was struggling with, 2) The process by which the story was composed, including the process by which the metaphor that represented the client was chosen, 3) How the healing story's themes were chosen, 4) How the "helping characters" in the story were composed, 6) Other techniques that were used to work with the client, and 7) The outcome of the therapeutic storytelling process, and the impact on the client.

The evidences and support documents are: 1) a written version of the healing story, and 2) a link to a video recording in which the client's mother talks about the journey of the child and the transformation based on the healing story and the Expressive Arts.

The paper also discusses the use of intuition in composing healing stories, and in using the Expressive Arts; and the possible roles of instinct, creativity, transpersonal approaches, and co-creation in creating make-believe realities that can heal.

Full Paper

Introduction

It is often said that the arts can provide a way of survival. I would add that the arts can also provide way of *revival* -- going beyond survival, and reviving one's innate unique potential through the exploration and nurturing of one's inner world.

Deep within each person, there is indeed an inner world. Everyone has a story to tell. The inner world -- also known as the "subconscious" -- uses the languages of metaphors, images, shapes, colours, and symbols to tell its story.

The more one allows this inner world to express itself, the more one opens the gates for deeper self-awareness, resolutions, and clarity.

The way a story can touch a chord within tells us that stories can have a healing touch. This paper considers one particular story -- one that was created for, and told and read to, a little girl -- and how this story may have had a healing effect on this girl.

The therapist who composed this story drew inspiration from Natalie Roger's Person-centered Approach to therapy. The therapist read numerous articles about Natalie Roger's work, to get a clear understanding of the Person-centered Approach. The

therapist realised the significance of a therapist being genuinely empathetic, open, congruent, and caring. The therapist developed a belief in the dignity and inner creativity of each client, and in the client's own capacity for self-direction that stems from inner creativity, outer expression, and deep intuitive guidance. She came to understand the power of listening from one's entire being to the client's inner self and responses. The therapist also focused on the importance and nature of the relationship a therapist may develop with an individual client, or group of clients. The therapist strongly resonated with and tried to incorporate Natalie Rogers' philosophy of "the Creative Connection."

To quote Natalie Rogers directly:

Art modes inter-relate in what I call the Creative Connection. When we move, it affects how we write or paint. When we write or paint, it affects how we feel and think. The Creative Connection is a process that brings us to an inner core or essence, which is our life force energy.
("Person-centered Expressive Arts Therapy")

Method

The client was a six-year-old girl who lived with her mother and father. The girl was petite in frame. This client's issue was that it seemed there was a barrier preventing her from expressing herself freely, and that it seemed she was overly influenced by others' thoughts and ideas. Both parents were very soft spoken, and seemed to be not very assertive. The parents seemed loving and affectionate, and they were attempting to encourage their child to be more self-assertive.

A first step in composing a healing story for the client was selecting an animal that could serve as a metaphor for client's self. The client chose a koala bear to represent herself.

Around the fourth session, the therapist wove a story around this animal, taking into consideration the client's background and objectives. The therapist included metaphors for the barriers that the client seemed to be facing in real life. In the story, the koala bear overcame these barriers with the help of a friend, a lion. That is, a lion was chosen as a metaphorical character that would help the main character.

The therapist told and wrote the following story in a crisp manner, using short sentences designed to hold the client's attention and help the client easily relate to the story elements.

The story was given to the girl's mother, to be read as a bed-time story by the mother before the girl would go to sleep.

Here is the Healing Story, "The Small Wonder":

Once upon a time, in a beautiful house there lived a family of three koala bears. Everyone spoke very softly with each other, even Momma and Papa koala bear.

One day the young koala bear was invited by her animal friends to attend a party in the forest. But when the young koala bear arrived at the party deep in the forest, she heard all the animals and birds speaking very loudly. The young koala bear thought, "How do I make myself heard?" She decided not to even try to speak, but rather just to listen to everyone else -- and to think what they would think, and to do what they would do.

Then one day, a lion came to her and said, "My dear koala bear, you too have a mind, a heart, and a voice of your own. So you also should think and speak the words that come to you from within. Let your heart feel what it wants to feel." By saying this, the lion had presented a gift to the koala: it was the gift of courage. The lion hugged the little koala bear, and walked away.

The young koala bear took the gift of courage and went home. The next day when the young koala bear woke up, the sun was shining brightly in the sky. From that day onward, the young koala bear thought, felt, and spoke on her own. She had learned to listen to the voice of her own heart.

Discussion

The story was read to the client by her mother on 21 consecutive evenings.

On each day following the reading of the story, the girl was asked how the protagonist of the story was feeling. The girl generally answered that the koala bear really loved what the lion had told her (the koala bear), and the girl repeated the lines, "My dear koala, you too have a mind, a heart, and a voice of your own, so do what you think, and speak the words that come to you. Let your heart feel what it wants to feel."

When the therapist would ask the girl, "What do you like about the story?", the girl would also refer to these words of the lion.

The parents reported to the therapist that their daughter was happy with the story, and that the more the girl listened to or read the story, the more confident she was feeling.

The therapist hoped this story might serve as an inspirational model and guide for the client, to help enable the client to express herself more freely, and to strengthen her belief in herself.

As mentioned, in the story, the young koala bear was meant to represent the client. The therapist hoped that the title of the story, "The Small Wonder," might also prompt the girl to identify with the physical attribute of the story protagonist, and also connect with the term, "wonder," referring to an innate power and potential within both the koala bear and herself.

The story was designed to illustrate a behavior of the protagonist (and the client) in a social setting. Socially, the girl would not be able to express her own opinion assertively and would rely on other influences. The therapist wanted to bring this aspect out in a fun and imaginative setting. The choice of a forest was a shift from a cocooned setup with her parents, to a big forest. This was meant to represent going from a cocooned home into the external big world.

Instead of just writing that the young koala bear lived with parents, the therapist emphasized on Mamma Koala and Papa Koala, showing her closeness with both parents, which had also come out in the art assessments. It was important to bring into the story that both parents were soft spoken and that perhaps the young koala bear had learned these behaviors from her parents.

The choice of using the lion came from the therapist's intuition and mental associations. A lion is considered to be the king of the forest, and the term, "lion-hearted," is widely-used. The therapist felt there was a need to have the lion hug the young koala bear. Something within the therapist told her that there needed to be an energy exchange through a physical touch. Adding a transpersonal element to the

healing process, the therapist also felt it was important for the lion to give the koala a gift, a gift of inner virtue, in this case, courage. This gift came in the form of the encouraging words and the hug.

Outcomes

Feedback from the girl's family and immediate social groups began to reach the therapist approximately two weeks after the healing story had been introduced to the girl. This feedback indicated that the girl was beginning to stand up and assert herself in various situations.

The client speaks and expresses herself much more freely post the therapeutic journey. As a routine, she plays the piano and narrates the story to her toys. Enclosed is a link to a video recording in which the client's mother shares her child's transformational journey.

The experience with this client has strengthened the therapist's belief in the power of social connections and the interconnectedness of human connection. We give, we receive, and we co-create the experience of healing through one another!

Conclusion

We are moving towards a highly-mechanized world, which in some cases can undermine the power of human connection. Metaphorical stories can open the door to the wisdom of the heart, and to one's inner self. A story can become a rallying cry for self-expression, and can celebrate the unique potential of each human. One can also bring the power of social, interpersonal connections into stories, thereby bringing in the magic of interconnectedness. These are the elements that can give a story "a healing touch."

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