

"Storytelling can be used for therapy",  
by Dr Eric Miller, a native New Yorker settled in Chennai. Sept 2019.

Storytelling has traditionally been used to give comfort, guidance, and warning. Hearing about a character who has faced challenges that are similar to those one is facing may give one ideas about how to handle a situation.

Working with stories -- and with metaphors and symbols in general -- can help a client to see that he/she is not the only one who has experienced a particular challenging situation.

Using metaphors and symbols may help a client to get a grasp on what is on his/her mind. The feelings and thoughts are no longer just vague and fleeting. By the way: a metaphor is a thing that represents another thing, and a symbol is a thing that represents a concept.

A premise of the arts therapies is that through artistic play, material can come up from the client's subconscious which can provide a key to what is in the client's mind and heart.

Just as all of the arts -- singing, expressive movement, drawing, etc -- can occur within storytelling, they can also all occur within Storytelling Therapy.

Storytelling is a very specific and distinct way of sharing stories -- it involves primarily using one's voice and body in a social gathering. People tend to bond as they share stories with each other. Only now is Storytelling Therapy emerging globally as one of the arts therapies.

The Storytelling Therapy process can culminate in the client being assisted to compose a fantasy story that encapsulates, in metaphorical form, what the client feels he/she needs to do to move forward in life. This story may be healing and/or inspirational for the client.

Storytelling can help a client to get in touch with him/herself by -- perhaps metaphorically -- bringing up and working with personal and/or social issues that the client is experiencing. Fantasy can be an escape from reality, but it can also take one -- on an imaginative level -- to the heart of one's existence.

Steps in the Storytelling Therapy process can include the client,

- \* Gathering stories that are similar to aspects of the client's Life Story. These stories could be called, Associative Stories, and could include Grandmother Stories, stories of movies, historical stories, and stories about things that happened to someone one knows.

- \* Role-playing: the client may talk to and as the characters in his/her Personal-experience Stories and/or Associative Stories.

- \* Changing the stories. For examples: adding characters and episodes; telling a Personal-experience Story as if it had happened to an imaginary character; and transposing a story to other social settings (such as royalty, or animals).

- \* Finding metaphors for aspects of his/her Life Story. These metaphors may first appear as sayings or proverbs.

Stories of ancient times can certainly help to solve issues of the present generation. The relationships, emotions, and types of situations in traditional stories are universal and timeless.

People may be more interested in stories from their own cultures or from distant cultures. The client takes the lead in deciding what images, metaphors, characters, and events should be used in his/her Healing Story. The facilitator can make suggestions, but the client decides, because only he/she knows what clicks with him/her.

Working with Healing Stories affects clients irrespective of their age and gender. However, some clients are more sensitive about and interested in matters of the imagination than others. People who were told or read stories in their childhood tend to have the most respect for and awareness of the power of story.

Any type of story can serve as a model of the past and a model for the future. However, Healing Stories tend to have the feeling of Fairytales.

Why use metaphors? Metaphors 'lift' us into our imaginations, often extending and refreshing the way we see the world and understand things. Metaphors speak directly to the imagination, bypassing our rational brain, and helping one build connections through images and feelings. If a metaphor is traditional and conventional, using it could help one to feel related to and supported by one's culture and society. If a metaphor involves nature, using it could help one to feel related to universal processes of nature. Moreover, a metaphor can take an experience that is intensely personal and relate it to the outside world.

Two examples of Healing Stories are:

One client was a very shy young girl. In her Healing Story, a small domesticated cat went wondering in a forest. Here the cat met a lion, and was encouraged by the lion to be more expressive and self-assertive. The small cat took this advice and encouragement to heart -- and so did the client.

One client, a young woman, was feeling somewhat alone and depressed, perhaps in part because as a child she had lost her mother. This client also recalled that a pet rabbit of hers had passed away around the same time she had lost her mother, and that she had buried the rabbit all by herself. In this client's Healing Story, a ship carrying some senior women came to where a young woman character (representing the client) was living near a beach. The senior women came ashore and showed to this character a ring with the rabbit's image on it. This image also appeared on the moon. The women were members of a healing tribe, and they had come to invite the young woman character to come with them and be their student. In this story, the losses of the client's mother and pet rabbit are transformed and compensated for in order to give the client a sense of social and cosmic belonging.

Once a client has helped to compose a Healing Story for his/herself, telling and discussing this story tends to give the client a feeling of confidence that he/she is dealing with his/her issues. Now the story can "do its work" on the client.

My wife, Magdalene Jeyarathnam, has been a psychological counsellor based in Chennai for over 25 years. She is the director, and I am the assistant director, of the *East West Center for Counselling and Training*, which is an Expressive Arts Therapy center. Expressive Arts Therapy (which includes Storytelling Therapy) is the combined use of all of the arts for therapeutic purposes.

The *East West Center for Counselling and Training* deploys psychological counsellors trained in the arts therapies into schools, colleges, and other organisations to do counselling, both one-on-one and with groups.

Having earned an MSc in Psychology along with a PhD in Folklore, I also work as a psychological counsellor (primarily with adults, one-on-one); as well as direct the *World Storytelling Institute*, which conducts various kinds of storytelling workshops.

One needs to have earned a Masters degree in Psychology or Social Work to provide Counselling/Therapy, but anyone could use the methods of Storytelling Therapy to facilitate Healing, or Personality Development. Please call 98403 94282 for details regarding courses on, and counselling utilising, Storytelling Therapy.