

"Fairytale Therapy: A Type of Storytelling Therapy"

by Eric Miller, June 2017

Storytelling therapy is emerging as one of the creative arts therapies. This article especially concerns one type of Storytelling therapy: Fairytale therapy. The article begins with brief introductory overviews of 1) Healing/counselling/therapy, 2) Storytelling, 3) Storytelling Therapy, 4) Fairytales, and 5) Fairytale Therapy. Then three Storytelling Therapy activities are described, and ways the activities can be customised for Fairytale Therapy are suggested. Finally, some thoughts are offered regarding the 3th annual Fairytale Therapy Seminar in Sintra, Portugal, which occurred 4-8 April 2017.

Overviews

1) Healing/counselling/therapy.

Healing/counselling/therapy may involve the client becoming more aware of the defense mechanisms and other negative habits that have developed in the client in part as a result of experiencing a trauma. One way of becoming more aware of such mechanisms is to revisit, in one's memory and imagination, the original scene of the trauma. In this way, one can get to the roots of one's negative habits, and see where and how these habits came about. Then one can possibly choose to change, and make a plan for changing. Working with a client's perceptions of traumas the client has experienced is a primary method of healing/counselling/therapy.

Healing/counselling/therapy in general involves a healer/counsellor/therapist who facilitates a client's own ability to understand, heal, and grow.

Two possible reasons a person may engage in healing/counselling/therapy are for self-development (growth), and to solve problems within oneself.

Anyone can present oneself a healer. It seems to present oneself as a counsellor or therapist, the minimum requirement is a Master's degree in Psychology or Social Work, and licensing as a mental healthcare professional (in countries in which such licensing exists.)

2) Storytelling.

Story can be defined as a series of events. Storytelling can be defined as *relating* a series of events to one or more other people in a social gathering. Storytelling refers to an activity in which the primary means of communication are one's body and voice, although masks, costumes, props, and various types of visual accompaniments may also be used.

3) Storytelling Therapy.

These terms -- from least "institutionalized" to most -- refer to a similar activity: Storytelling and Healing. Therapeutic Uses of Storytelling. Storytelling Therapy.

I propose Storytelling Therapy as an umbrella term for all healing/therapeutic approaches that utilize Narrative Psychology.¹ An advantage of including "telling" in the term, Storytelling Therapy, is that doing so draws attention to ways the *process* of telling can be therapeutic.

In a sense, talk therapy in general is a form of Storytelling Therapy. However, various styles of therapy especially utilize story. One such style of therapy is Narrative Therapy, which focuses on the client conceptualizing and telling the client's life story so as to recognize and celebrate the client's coping mechanisms.^{2,3} Another is Narrative Medicine, which focuses on training the care-giver to elicit and listen to patients' stories of their experiences.⁴

When metaphors are utilized in relation to a client's personal-experience narratives, Storytelling Therapy involves Metaphor Therapy.⁵ Metaphors may help a client to connect the client's experiences with happenings outside the client, even with processes of nature. If a metaphor is conventional, using it may remind a client that others have gone through similar situations, and that the client's culture can suggest ways of handling the situation. Metaphors involve the imagination and emotions: using metaphors can help a client get a solid grasp on what the client is experiencing emotionally.

All of the characters and objects in a story can be thought of as representing aspects of the storyteller's psyche. As part of healing/therapeutic, and growing and maturing, processes, a client might tell a story from the points of view of the various characters and objects in a story.

4) Fairytales.

Folktales are stories that developed in the oral tradition. Most folktales are timeless and placeless: they occurred *once upon a time*, in, for example, a forest -- but not in any specific forest. Folktales are developed by communities, and have no individual author. Fairytales are a type of folktale. One distinguishing element of fairytales is that they often involve magic.

In Fairytales,

- * A good character (GC) often does something kind, and the kindness is returned to the GC.
- * The GC is often oppressed by a wicked, greedy, self-centered character. These opposite natures are very pronounced. In real life, a person may have positive and negative aspects. In fairytales, these personality traits are often projected onto separate characters.
- * The GC goes out into the world beyond the GC's home, often going on a journey. The GC may make allies, do tasks, and/or compete in contests. The GC comes of age -- winning a fortune and an excellent spouse in the process. The story often ends with a marriage. The GC is set to live *happily ever after*.

A formulaic opening for fairytales is, "In the olden days, when wishing still did any good ..." Thus, wishing often plays an important role in fairytales. The GC may be granted three wishes.

The GC is optimistic. The GC often hopes for some way out of a seemingly insurmountably problematic situation. In such cases, in fairytales typically the GC's dream comes true: help arrives, magically and miraculously.

5) Fairytale Therapy

The classic European, Scandinavian, and Slavic fairytales came into existence after the outlawing of the worship of numerous gods and goddesses, and the implementation of Christianity.⁶ It seems that composing and sharing fairytales have been parts of society's process of compensation and healing after the banishment of its nature spirits, goddesses, and other local divinities. Many of these fairytales involve characters such as old women who live in the forest, witches, and fairy godmothers. These characters share many attributes with pre-Christian goddesses. Thus, it seems likely that lore about these goddesses were recycled into fantasy characters in "harmless" fairytales. In this way, these fairytales involve the Divine Feminine, often related to nature (Mother Nature, Mother Earth, etc). Following this line of thinking, working and playing with these fairytales today could involve both individual and social-cultural healing.

A growing body of literature is being written about Fairytale Therapy.⁷

The following three examples give a sense of what Fairytale Therapy is and could be.

Three Storytelling Therapy Activities

Three Storytelling Therapy activities are:

- 1) The Client Works and Plays with the Client's Life Story.**
- 2) The Client Starts with a Real-life situation, and Gathers five or six related stories.**
- 3) The Client Creates a Story from the Client's Imagination.**

1) The Client Works and Plays with the Client's Life Story.

A client can be invited to tell a brief version of the client's Life Story. Options include: One may invite the client to focus on traumas the client has experienced, and on how the client has responded to them. One may invite the client to focus on the client's unique interests, skills, and talents; on how the client discovered them; and on how the client is developing and applying them (and hopes to do so in the future).

Client and therapist can then together identify some of the outstanding turning points, and themes, in the client's Life Story.

Among the questions that can be asked regarding the client's Life Story are: Might the client like to change anything in the client's Life Story? Remove anything? Add anything? Insert any imaginary characters or behaviors? Becoming aware of such inclinations can be very illuminating.

One can also ask: Might the client like to say anything to any of the characters, at any point in the client's Life Story? Might the client like to play any character who might like to say anything to the client? These are methods that have been developed in Psychodrama: they are also optional methods in Storytelling Therapy.

If the client might be interested in developing a metaphorical story version of the client's Life Story, the client and therapist might think about major motifs in the story, and see if any metaphors for these motifs might come to mind. A story could then be composed around these metaphorical images, objects, characters, etc.

2) The Client Starts with a Real-life situation, and Gathers five or six related stories.

The six steps of this activity are:

- A) Select a real-life situation.
- B) Identify and think about important motifs in this situation.
- C) Gather five or six similar stories.
- D) See if any metaphors for the real-life situation motifs come to mind -- and if they do, use them to create new stories.
- E) Tell the above-mentioned stories.
- F) Discuss.

To elaborate:

A) One Situation/Episode/Incident/Story in one's Life Story can be chosen to explore. This might be a challenging situation. It may be a situation has not yet been resolved. It may be a situation that is occurring in the present.

B) Think about Motifs (Story Elements) in the chosen Story: Characters, Relationships, Situations, Actions, Images, Objects, etc. Do any of these Motifs seem to be outstanding, remarkable, memorable? Do any of them seem to be Archetypal (universal in human experience, in many places and times)?

C) See what associations come to mind. Brainstorm to come up with similar situations and stories. Consider all types of stories, including i) those from experiences of family and friends, ii) history, iii) movies, and iv) Folktales, such as animal fables and fairytales. Seek to recall 5 or 6 similar instances of this motif in stories. Considering different ways various characters have handled similar situations may give the client ideas regarding ways to handle the client's situation.

D) See if any Metaphors relating to the original situation/story come to mind. (We discuss how and why Metaphors can be useful -- to bring up emotions, to connect one with the world beyond oneself, etc). Let one's imagination wander and explore, to possibly represent what occurred with fantasy and symbols. Perhaps create a story inspired by the original situation -- or add to, or otherwise modify, the original situation.

Steps C and D may help one to realize that what one is experiencing is not just a personal issue, but is something many people have experienced.

E) Tell and enact the stories. Role-play methods that can used include:

- 1) Role-reversal (first play one character, and then the other character, who are speaking to each other); and 2) Doubling (speaking the thoughts of various aspects of a character, possibly involving a debate within a character).

F) Discuss.

3) The Client Creates a Story from the Client's Imagination.

To do this, one can use the 6-Part Story Method (6PSM), or a story model inspired by this method. The 6PSM itself draws upon numerous theoretical models of folktales and epics.⁸ The 6PSM involves a character wanting something, the obstacles to attaining this goal, and ways the obstacles are overcome. Thus, it focuses on a character's ability to overcome challenges.

Here is the story-composition method I have developed, which is partly inspired by the 6PSM. This method invites the client to free associate in relation to the character in various ways:

Instead of speaking, it is suggested that this activity begins with the client drawing a character and the surrounding story. It may be that material from the unconscious may come more easily through drawing, rather than words. Of course, the drawn material could be discussed afterwards.

Choose and draw a character. This character can be you. It can be an aspect of you. It can be based on some other person or character. It can also be a purely imaginary character.

Draw the character's hair and clothing. Is the character holding anything? Is anything next to the character? Might any animals be present? Where is the character? In what environment is the character? What expression is on her face? What is her posture? Is she posed in any particular way? Does the character seem to have any special abilities, powers, areas of expertise (for example, can the character understand the language of a particular type of animal?) How does the character feel? If the character might be feeling any particular emotion -- imagine why the character might be feeling that way. What might have happened that has led to the character feeling this way? Has the character recently come from somewhere? If yes -- Why did the character go there? Did the character get something, do something, or meet someone there? Does the character want anything? Has the character lost anything? Is the character seeking anything? Does the character want to go anywhere? Want to do anything? Make anything? Meet anyone? If yes, what happens along the way? -- what adventures, twists and turns, advances and setbacks, helpers (teachers, friends, etc) and enemies, obstacles and solutions, etc, occur? What happens at the end of the story?

Using these three approaches, the client and/or therapist might find or compose a story that especially feels like a Healing Story for the client. Healing Stories can be inspirational, guiding and stimulating the client towards healing and growth.

Customizing the Three Methods for Fairytale Therapy

1) The Client Works and Plays with the Client's Life Story.

To Customize this Activity for Fairytale Therapy:

First, the therapist could ask the client if the client might be interested in representing the client as the good character (GC) in a fairytale? If yes:

To create a fairytale-ish version of a Life Story: One might look for a point in the story where the GC feels distress. Where does the GC really need help?

Metaphorical characters and/or objects could be created to represent how the distress comes, and how the help comes.

The GC in a fairytale is kind to someone or something. The GC may suffer, or be in danger. The GC remains good and kind. The GC is saved and rewarded -- set for life -- by a magical, miraculous occurrence. Does any of this relate to the client's Life Story? If yes, see if any fantasy versions of the Life Story come to mind.

Has anyone been like a fairy godmother who helped the client, in the client's Life Story? The fairy godmother role might have been played by a senior family member, or a teacher. Have there been incidents in which things worked out, or did not work out, seemingly by coincidence or luck? If yes, at what points in a fairytale-ish version of the client's Life Story might a fairy godmother (or some other magical or divine character) appear, and what might this character do at these points?

In real life, gifts are often intangible, such as expressions of praise, encouragement, and support. Could such gifts be represented by objects? In a fairytale, the inner self of a character is often represented by objects that are manifestations of the character's inner self. For example, gold may come to a good character, whereas dirt may come to a wicked character.

2) The Client Starts with a Real-life situation, and Gathers five or six related stories.

To Customize this Activity for Fairytale Therapy:

When gathering associated stories (Step C): Look especially for fairytales that relate in some way to the real-life situation.

When looking for metaphors for elements of the real-life situation (Step D): Look especially for metaphors that might relate to fairytales (talking animals, magical spells and transformations, etc), and use such metaphors to create fairytale-ish stories.

3) The Client Creates a Story from the Client's Imagination.

To Customize this Activity for Fairytale Therapy:

One might ask these questions: In the past, present, or future --

Has the character suffered in some way?

What kind of help might the character need?

In what ways has the character been kind, gentle, and generous?

To whom might the character be kind, gentle, and generous?

Who has helped the character?

From whom might the character like to receive help?

Who might the character like to help?

Might the character like to make a wish?

Who or what might be able to grant the character's wishes?

What might happen if the character's wish(es) might come true?

Might the character be hoping for some kind of transformation?

Might the character benefit from some kind of transformation?

Might there be some special object the character is hoping to obtain? If yes, what is it?

What might this object be useful for? Might it represent something?

The 3rd Annual Fairytale Therapy Seminar in Sintra, Portugal, on 4-8 April 2017

Sintra itself was an important element in the Seminar. Sintra is in a mountain forest area. The climate was cool and refreshing. There are numerous palaces and castles, most of which can be visited. Also present are references to Artemis/Cynthia/Diana, the Divine Feminine as a young nature goddess of ancient Greece and Rome.

There is documentation that at least since the Renaissance, Sintra has been considered by many inhabitants to be named after the goddess Cynthia, a name for Artemis, the goddess of ancient Greece. Artemis is said to have been born on Mount Cynthus, on the Greek island of Delos. She was sometimes known as Cynthia, the feminine form of the name of that mountain.

In Greek mythology, the goddess Artemis was a daughter of Zeus and Leto. Having been born in a mountain forest, Artemis loved, and felt at home in, such environments. Her father, Zeus, approved of her association with mountain forests and gave 30 of them to her. Artemis became the goddess of the moon, the forest, wild animals, and of hunting these animals. She is often portrayed holding a bow, with arrows in a quiver, with a deer beside her. In stories she could turn herself and others into deer. In ancient Rome, which flowered after ancient Greece, Artemis/Cynthia was known as Diana.⁹

Sintra is located in the midst of forests on the east side of a mountain range: not far beyond that mountain range, to the west, is the Atlantic Ocean. The Sintra area has its own micro-climate: the air is fresh and breezy, and is easy to breathe. Many shops and businesses are named after the moon. Sintra is becoming a retreat center for the international creative class.

Two sightings of relics of the young Greek-Roman goddess were: In Sintra's National Museum, which used to be a palace, an outside area is labeled, "Diana's Garden." And in the lobby of the Tivoli Hotel -- the most elegant hotel in town (and where most of the Fairytale Therapy Seminar occurred) -- there is a life-size stone statue of the young goddess.¹⁰ I learned of a shop on the outskirts of town that is a center for the local Pagan community and I wanted to visit and inquire further about the goddess, but I was not able to visit this shop during its limited open hours. It seems the Portugal headquarters of the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids (OBOD) is in Sintra.¹¹

The Seminar featured numerous sessions relating to Fairytale Therapy. Two pre-Seminar workshops have proved especially memorable for me:

Josie Felce's workshop focused on ways animals can represent human personality traits. In groups of three, participants developed stories about three animals facing challenging situations and having adventures together.

In their workshop, Shai Schwartz and Olga Lipadatova called for suggestions regarding what fairytale would be worked with. The group settled on the story of a young woman who needed to disguise herself in various ways to escape from her wicked father, and her home; she travels through a forest, comes a palace, and eventually marries the prince. From a distance, a fairy godmother watches over the young woman throughout.¹²

The workshop participants were invited to choose to play characters and objects of the story -- as they occurred at various stages in the story. Participants had time and materials to make costumes, masks, and props to represent their chosen characters at the various stages. The participants were invited to sit in a large circle -- in chronological order of when their character or object would appear in the story. As we went around the circle starting at the beginning of the story, we were invited not to act out the story, but rather to have our characters or objects (in particular stages of the story) address characters or objects in other particular stages of the story.

In the story, the young woman wishes for and receives three dresses: one made of the sun, one made of the moon, and one made of stars. Then, in order to escape from her home, she also receives a cape made of the furs of every kind of bird and animal in the kingdom. Disguising herself, hiding under this cape, she runs away into a forest. There, a group of trees protect her.

The role I chose to play was the young woman, when she was wearing the cape made of many furs. I imagined that the the fairy godmother had arranged for the three wondrous dresses, for the animals and birds to give up their lives to provide the furs for the cape, and for the trees to protect the young woman. In character, as the young woman, I thanked the fairy godmother for whatever part she might have played in these events.

The youthful, vital goddess Artemis/Cynthia/Diana was in the air during the Fairytale Seminar in Sintra. However, in this fairytale, in my imagination at least, magical-divine gifts were given by a fairy godmother.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a full review of the wonderful 3rd annual Fairytale Therapy Seminar. Information about, and photos of, the Seminar are available on the Seminar's event webpage.¹³

Eric Miller was born, raised, and trained in storytelling in NYC; he earned a PhD in Folklore from the University of Pennsylvania (in Philadelphia); and has settled in Chennai (on India's southeast coast). He co-founded (in 2007) and directs the World Storytelling Institute (www.storytellinginstitute.org). He is currently working towards a Masters degree in Psychology. eric@storytellinginstitute.org, storytellingandvideoconferencing.com

Notes

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_psychology .
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_therapy .
3. In this essay, I am avoiding use of "his/her" due to my awareness that some people are non-binary (they do not identify as male or female).
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_medicine .
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor_therapy .
6. Carolyn Emerick, "The Divine Feminine in Fairy Tales," 2017, accessed in May 2017 from <http://tinyurl.com/m8mvr6> .
7. http://en.benessere.com/psychology/articles/fairytales_therapy.htm .
http://olga29011.narod.ru/skazkoterap_ingl.html .
8. For a discussion of the 6PSM and related approaches, please see my essay, "Story and Storytelling in Storytelling Therapy and Expressive Arts Therapy," pages 7-12, at <http://storytellinginstitute.org/368.pdf> .
9. <https://greekgodsandgoddesses.net/goddesses/artemis> .
10. A photo of the sculpture of the goddess in the lobby of the Tivoli Hotel, Sintra, is at <http://storytellinginstitute.org/23.jpg> .
11. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order_of_Bards,_Ovates_and_Druids .
<http://druidry.org> .
12. The story we worked with was a combination of numerous versions of "Thousand Furs," Brothers Grimm Tale number 65.
13. Please see <https://www.facebook.com/events/543097089218052> . Under "Recent Posts," please click "See All Posts."