**A Dialogue in Another Room: Meetings with Young People Through Story**

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* My current work: practice-based PhD research into storytelling with adolescents, via York Theatre Royal, and York St John University. Working in mental health settings, schools, youth work. Long-term practice with groups of young people aged 11-18.
* Story as therapeutic metaphor.
	+ **Our minds work through narrative** – we are in fact more intelligent inside a story than we are outside it. That’s why we read the case studies first in a journal article – that’s why newspaper reportage always begins with a single suffering individual or family.
	+ And we can look things in the eye in a story about someone else’s life, that we would not be able to face in relation to our own life. Emily Dickinson: Tell all the truth, but tell it skance. Thus Margot Sunderland’s (2000) injunction to therapists using story with children: **‘stay within the metaphor’.**
* But I am going to lead you step by step away from this explicitly ‘therapeutic’ territory and try to persuade you of the complementary role of storytelling that is playful, artistic, not therapy, ‘unprofessional’, maybe even subversive, in therapeutic environments. On the way, however, I’m going to pick up a few lessons that have been vital for me.
	+ Groups as well as individuals: Alida Gersie guides groups masterfully through a story using a structure she has planned out for them, so as to reveal all its possibilities and help them to **‘story their own lives’**. An individual who lacks a robust narrative of their life is a person adrift. We need nourishment to find it. But there is a sense with Gersie in that she thinks the story is wise, and she is the one who knows the way through it – which I bet she does – but that is not what I do.
	+ Playback Theatre – Nick Rowe (2007) discusses how this is about **‘opening up’ rigid narratives**. Not showing someone how they should think about their story or problem, but loosening the knots that bind them to a particular interpretation of it.
* I am interested not so much in the potential of stories to show the right answers, as to **pose questions and provoke imaginative investigations**. The way the strangeness of a story from another place or time might shock you into realising your assumptions about life are not shared by everyone. This is the ‘loosening of knots’ Nick Rowe was talking about.
* Thinking of Bakhtin (Morris 1994) who talks about ‘heteroglossia’ in novels – the dialogue that results when different social languages rub up against each other and **point out each other’s boundaries**. So for example, reading Angela Carter’s collections of fairytales for the first time, I realised I might have thought I was an emancipated woman, but I had no idea of the hundreds of ways there were in the world to be female.
* So the questions remain**: a) what sort of stories do this? And b) what sort of investigation is it?**
* To (a) I say: stories I like to tell. Stories without too much interpretation (with ‘chaste compactness’ as Walter Benjamin says in his essay ‘The Storyteller’). Stories which I feel might take place on useful territory, but where I do not see a clear moral. Stories where there are lots of choices as to whom to identify with, what to hook onto. Stories reconstructed in each moment afresh, rather than already fully formed.
* To (b) I return in a moment. First, a couple of stories from a CAMHS setting:
	+ Girls Washing Their Hair (not a story told by me, but developed by young people and retold to them by me)
		- The unanimity of their response
		- The political rage in it
		- The unexpectedness of this – I could not have made it happen
	+ Wormwood (Italo Calvino) – the story and the artistic process we pursued with it
		- The vast spaces in this story
		- The provoking nature of characters’ actions
		- The multitude of possible ‘hooks’
		- The demand for dialogue – the irresolvability
* To return to **(b) – what sort of investigation is taking place?** What is happening is that both storyteller and listener are using their own experience to construct the story in their heads. I can prove this to you easily: what does Wormwood’s castle look like, when she lives as a queen? I told you nothing about it.
* What happens then is that your life experience and mine **meet in ‘another room’** – your reaction to the story affects how I tell the story, and each of your reactions affect each other’s. When we go on to use it as the basis of a workshop, this will happen all the more so. You will draw or make something that is in some form a retelling of the story, making full use of all these elements of your memory and imagination. Without us talking about any of your ‘problems’, we are genuinely meeting each other in that space, in what Martin Buber called an ‘I-Thou’ relationship. I am not second-guessing who you are based on what I can see of you, or your diagnosis. I am not analysing you, you are not a patient, we are creating a story together.
* **What role do I adopt in this process?** A playful one, a fallible one, a subjective one, an argumentative one, a provocative one, not always a nurturing one. Ready to meet their interpretations and respond with intensity. A full human being.
* This recalls Felix Guattari’s slightly obscure expression of unwell people’s need to ‘detach mutant nodes of subjectivisation’ – essentially, to recreate their relationship with the world, as an artist does. And even more so, to project images of that relationship into the world and see how they affect others. If it’s possible for Wormwood’s garden to become a shared, negotiated symbol that emerges from two young people’s experiences and imaginations, and then becomes a meme that goes out into society through three performances, those young people have been the diametric opposite of patients.

HOWEVER

* Sometimes this ‘dialogue in another room’ can start to lead us into dark places. By definition, I as storyteller cannot fully control where a story is going to go. Example of 12 Wild Swans.
* Thus there is a balancing act here. A tension between entering fully into this dialogue without trying to direct it, leaving myself open for surprise, and on the other hand being present as a guiding adult, ‘holding the space’ safely. This latter role is a second-guessing one, trying to stay one step ahead of the group, judging in the moment when and how to bring things back to a mood of hope.
* AND of course **every storyteller has an agenda.** Everyone has their own underlying beliefs and things they feel they need to persuade the world of. The use of folktale and myth can hide this and so I forced myself to examine my choice of stories and the slant I put on them to see – what is it I am always saying? I could only get close to defining this in the space of a poem.

**A Storyteller’s Agenda**

Cath Heinemeyer

These things that are inside you –

Your anger, your uncontainable longings, your lostness, and your newness to yourself –

They are heavy and good and necessary.

The world would stop turning without them.

So cup them carefully in your hands;

Do not sell them,

Or spill them on the ground for the world to spin twisted fables from.

We face terrible things and awesome challenges. You may have a poor inheritance.

So resourcefulness is everything;

Feel it resonate in others here present.

Keep your eyes and ears open and your instinct tuned,

See the human in everything.

And be persistent!

Don’t aim to please but to endure;

Don’t consume but generate…

It is these things that will enable us to prevent – or transform – the deluge.

Arrogance is a hindrance,

Prejudice is a burden.

People are complex systems but every cause has an effect.

What you give will come back to you,

What you take will be taken in double measure.

No matter what surrounds you, even in the closing moments of your tragedies, you always have these choices.

But first rise above that ‘you’, that ‘choice’,

Float high above them and view the whole landscape.

See its lofty vantage points and its sullen swamps,

Its mires and its traps set by the powerful.

But others have trod this country before and left signs.

The things that are inside you are good and true –

Even the unspeakable things –

Here in this moment we will cup them in our hands together.

After that it is up to you.

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