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A Palimpsest Narrative of Becoming a Therapist

Abstract

Written by an experienced psychodynamic therapist, this paper likens one's narrative of becoming a therapist to an ancient palimpsest manuscript, where layer is built upon layer, yet traces of earlier texts keep coming through. Dipping into his personal archive of writings on this theme, the author revisits earlier constructions of his narrative, appraising them from his current perspective. Moving between past and present, personal experience and theory, clinical practice and research, this paper builds a rich, densely woven narrative account of becoming a therapist, while interrogating the process through which such a narrative is constructed and the purposes it serves. It concludes with reflections on the insights gained through the process of this inquiry, acknowledging the significant ontological and epistemological shifts that have occurred in the author's approach to both asking and answering the question 'What brings me here?'

Keywords: Narrative, palimpsest, therapist, becoming.

Introduction

My reasons for becoming a therapist change every few years. Or at least my understanding of those reasons changes.

In my younger years, my first stated reasons related to my faith-based education and the injunction to serve others, which, at that time, I valued unquestioningly. As I became more political in my student years, social justice claims came to dominate my narrative and the imperative to fight inequality and oppression called me to action. With my first experience of therapy, I came to understand that working towards the healing of others, particularly children and young people, was also my indirect way of working through my own troubled childhood. This realisation, common for trainee therapists, as Mander (2004) and Barnett (2007) explore, challenged the altruistic foundations of my earlier narratives. Awakening to the intersubjective dimensions of gender and power, I later came to the realisation that therapeutic work suited my desire to be intimate with others yet in controlled and bounded ways (Burch, 2004): a typical male solution to the problem of the need for others, as Hawkins and Shohet (2012) argue.

Deepening into my psychodynamic training, the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970) and the conceptualisation of the decentred self caused me to question the self-aggrandisement and the triumphalist sense of invulnerability that occupying the therapist's chair gave me. Like a pendulum swing from my first narrative of saintly self-sacrifice, I began to experience my motivation purely in a negative light. I could see only manic defences and a-relationality at work and this painful awareness of 'the shadow side' of my motivation dominated (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012).

Then, near the end of my training, through immersion in Bollas's (1987) work on the 'unthought known', what felt like the profoundest of all my self-discoveries occurred: that it wasn't 'I' who had

'chosen' whether consciously or otherwise to become a therapist, but my parents, or more accurately, the unconscious traces of their own traumatised childhoods. This felt like a point of arrival like no other, as if I had finally found a long-elusive truth and I felt its truth in my body, so powerfully in fact that I became physically unwell.

Some two decades on, that insight too, which felt at the time to be the only truth, has been folded into the palimpsest of layers that make up my narrative of becoming a therapist. Like the palimpsestic ancient manuscript, each new layer appears the most vivid and clearly articulated version of the text that is being written, yet traces of earlier writings persist; they are never fully rubbed out. My current narrative-layer has undergone a teleological shift: from searching for the 'true' reasons, buried under the layers of defensive reconstructions or hidden behind the façade of the 'performance of self' (Butler, 2005), to a perspective which accommodates the simultaneous co-existence of multiple threads of meaning, purpose and action, coming together to make the life I am living.

Now that I am a counsellor educator, I am often in situations where the topic of one's reasons for becoming a therapist arises. I teach largely through examples and the case study I am most entitled to draw upon is my self. Which layer of my palimpsest narrative I choose to peel off, expose and inevitably rework, as all revisiting necessarily entails a reworking, depends on context and purpose: What does this situation require? What are these people asking of me in this time and place? How can I respond to their call? Which part of me wishes to speak here? I respond to the call of this special edition in a similar vein. Though I do not know what you as a reader seek to find in reading this paper, I offer you a more detailed telling of the narrative sketched out above, informed by the stories of others who have chosen similar paths and in dialogue with the conceptual resources which have illuminated my own way.

The editors have asked for narratives of becoming a 'healer'. However, this is a term I will not apply directly to myself. For me, it ascribes too much power and expertise to the therapist. A wound heals of itself, under the agency and care of the wounded person first and foremost. As a therapist, I work with my client to facilitate a space for some of that healing work to occur: a therapeutic space.

To aid me in this exploration, I have chosen to consult parts of my personal archive in relation to the theme of becoming a therapist, rather than relying on autobiographical memory alone, fallible as it is and prone to retrospective reconstruction, as Marzillier (2010) testifies. I have accessed specific documents which have a bearing on the topic at hand, including the personal statement I made in my application for training, my course essays and process notes related to practice. These represent a set of variations on this theme of conscious and unconscious motivation to train as a therapist, as it has emerged, developed and shifted over the course of my career. In the spirit of Frank's (2013) narrative methodology, I take these accounts as stories to 'think with' from my current perspective and position.

Childhood Adversity and Personal Therapy: Tailwinds and Directions

Rediscovering my Counselling Diploma application from nearly two decades ago gave me pause for thought. In relation to the criterion 'Ability to make use of and reflect on life experience' I submitted the following paragraph:

My life has been very rich in experiences, both difficult and fortunate. While I haven't always been able to make use of them at the time, reflection has helped me integrate and make sense of them over time. I now see growing up in Belfast at the height of the Troubles as highly influential on my development. It has been a source of distress which has led me into personal counselling. It has shaped my values and beliefs in justice, mediation and anti-discrimination. It has left me highly intolerant of bigotry and sectarianism, which is both a strength and a weakness at times. It has acted like a tailwind directing me into child care work, social work and now counselling. In my mid-twenties, I lost someone very close to me in difficult circumstances. At the time I couldn't cope with his decline and impending death and cut myself off. While deeply ashamed and guilty at the time, I adopt a more forgiving stance toward my younger self now, recognising that I had neither the emotional strength nor support to cope with his illness and death at that time. This experience influenced me to train in social work at a time I was uncertain about my future direction.

November 2000

In this excerpt, I was firstly particularly struck by the use of the word 'tailwind' in reference to my growing up in the Troubles. I recall one of my first experiences of a powerful tailwind, aged fifteen, cycling the broad straight road from Coleraine to Belfast, flying with the wind and feeling so alive, in tune with nature and my surroundings, and arriving home so much earlier than expected, feeling exhilarated, strong and powerful, knowing that I had just experienced something magical and life-affirming. That I should have used this term to refer to the influence of my growing up in a war zone struck me as perverse and discordant, and further reflection on this impression helps me recognise that, for some years now, I have seen only the negative consequences of my Northern Irish childhood. The younger me who wrote this personal statement was closer to the positive power of adverse life experience and to the determination to do good that can derive from the experience of harm, as our colleagues working in the field of post-traumatic growth have long been attesting (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). This theme also echoes the strength of orientation and clarity of determination I have witnessed in my practice and research with survivors of child sexual abuse (citation anonymised). The tailwind that drove the boy out of Northern Ireland also drove him into a future career of helping which has proved, in its own way, life-affirming and magical.

In deciding to include the story of losing an ex-partner to AIDS in 1993, I recognise my choice to foreground the 'wounded healer' in my presentation of self. I can no longer recall my reasons for writing in this rather oblique way about my first adult experience of bereavement, but I suppose I wanted to let the selection panel know that I had experienced suffering of my own and would be able to draw on that in therapeutic work. In developing the theme of forgiveness, the story also contains a process of moving towards self-acceptance which was perhaps the most significant theme in the early phase of my personal therapy. That said, the qualitative researcher in me recognises the incomplete nature of the act of forgiveness espoused in the particular wording of this narrative, where I *adopt a more forgiving stance*, rather than actually *forgive*, the younger self who ran away from his dying friend, unable to cope with the harrowing impact of losing a friend and partner, still in his twenties, to this devastating disease. Adopting a stance of forgiveness sounds more like an intentional act of will, a cognitive accomplishment, than a spontaneous gesture of the heart.

Not revealed in this brief account of bereavement, yet very significant for me, was that this experience also contained within it my first experience of counselling. It was as if that story needed to be included, but it could not be included directly, for it was so very painful. In the last months of my friend's life, he insisted that there should be no long faces, no tears and sadness, there should be

only fun, pleasure and joy. While I respected his decision, I also found it impossible to give him what he wanted and, over time, even to be in his presence. Visits became intolerably awkward, characterised by false cheer, dominated by the inexpressible. To discuss this in our friendship group felt disloyal and I knew my family would only worry were I tell them about a dying friend, so I sought counselling for the first time, approaching a local AIDS charity. The build-up to my first appointment was a very emotional time. I began to open up to the emotions I had been feeling for some time, the distress, anger and confusion I had been keeping at bay, knowing they were there, yet also knowing that I was not in a sufficiently strong place to address them. Later I was to understand this experience as lacking what Winnicott (1965) termed the 'holding environment' in which such potentially overwhelming feelings could be processed.

But this first counselling session was disastrous. I began to tell my story, voicing the feelings that had been dammed up for so long. After only five minutes, the counsellor interrupted me, stating, 'I know the person you are talking about. I cannot work with you. You need to go somewhere else', and I was shown to the door. The next thing I knew I was out on the street. I couldn't recall how I got there. I was holding onto the black-painted railings of the grand Georgian building the charity was located in. I was utterly unable to think or to move. I was without direction, standing, yet falling inside.

While the counsellor did not intend to hurt me, I was deeply wounded by this experience. It confirmed what I knew inside. My feelings were too much for others, I had to manage them alone, there was no-one I could turn to. Attempts to have my pain met or known by another were futile. My 'militant fantasy of self-sufficiency' (Phillips, 1988, p.95) was strengthened. It was five years before I tried counselling again. Two years later, seven years from this first attempt to access counselling, I was myself seeking selection for counselling training. While not aware of it at the time, I have come to see the 'reparative impulse' (Segal, 1964) at work here: I wanted to occupy the counsellor's chair so that I could right the wrong that was done to me those years before, so that no client who came to see me would ever experience what I had experienced. My story echoes Geller's (2005) account of how, as a trainee therapist, he moulded his practitioner self as much on his counter-identifications with his own therapists ('I will never be like s/he was to me') as on his identifications with them.

'Unto us a child is born': Genetic Reconstructions

Sussman (1992) invites the therapist, as much as the client, to address the question 'What brings you here?' Through my training, I was working full-time in a therapeutic service for children and young people who had experienced sexual abuse. While I knew my political commitment to tackle gender-based violence was authentic, I also recognised the gratification I gained from the positive appraisal of others who saw courage in a man who was prepared to enter a field that most men chose to avoid. In this sense, I felt myself the special one. Nonetheless, these explanations did not satisfy and I continued to puzzle over my choice. I had not been sexually abused myself. No matter how much I contemplated it, I realised I did not really know why I was there. In my final course assignment, I reflected on the further exploration I undertook on this theme and the insights that ensued. Addressing first the theme of 'guilt of maleness by association' (Wheeler and Smith, 2001), I went on to write:

Additionally, part of my guilt originates from the fact that I was not sexually abused as child, while my parents had both been abused and neglected as children, although the full extent of their abusive experiences was only explicitly communicated after I had begun to talk about my work in this field. I see this as an example of Bollas's (1987) 'unthought known' and the individual's creation of their early object relations in their adult life: unconsciously I have recreated in my professional life the matrix of my first object relations and the environment which handled me as an infant. My child clients act as substitutes for the hurt and lost children of my parents and my role is, as it always has been, to care for them, to offer them hope and rescue from hopelessness and despair. As Bollas (1987, p.51) states, 'Our handling of our self as an object partly inherits and expresses the history of our experience as the parental object'. This is my 'genetic reconstruction.'

June 2003

This sparse academic prose belies the profoundly challenging personal experience occasioned by the emergence of this insight. As ever in my academic work, I was only partially revealing my truth. When I first told my parents that I had been offered a job working with sexually abused children, they were shocked and deeply disturbed, questioning my choice and attempting to persuade me not to take it. This was most uncharacteristic of them, as their approach to our life choices had always been facilitative, respectful and supportive. Only over the course of several years, through deepening self-awareness, gaining greater knowledge of abuse dynamics in families and through conversations with family members, did I begin to piece together the fragments and lacunae that surrounded my parents' histories to identify the true extent of trauma in their childhoods.

Bollas's (1987) book erupted like an explosion in my life. While not usually somatising, I fell sick, took to my bed and wept for a week. I wept for my mother and father, and for myself, my brother and my sister, so well nurtured and protected, in ways my parents had never been, but also conditioned to be happy, strong and never angry, always kind, caring, thankful and unselfish. In all that we did and all that we were, we three children had to keep showing our parents that they had succeeded where their own parents had failed; a burdensome responsibility. Our parents had broken the intergenerational 'cycle of deprivation' (Rutter & Madge, 1976) that haunts so many troubled families, but at some cost to their children. They had created parentified children; children who learned to care for their parents above all else, who struggled to identify their own needs and wishes, as well as own and regulate their negative affect: a not uncommon story in the background of therapists (Bager-Charleson, 2010).

Within two years of this discovery, I left the work that I loved and had thought I would practise for life. After fifteen years working with children and young people, I passed the baton onto the next generation and took up an academic position, reducing my practice hours to one day per week, focused on working with adults. The 'unlaid ghost' had been laid to rest (Freud, 1909).

Ethics and Needs: Declared, Hidden and Evolving Motivations

Recently, for a six month period, all of my clients were young gay men and I paused to reflect on my work with them late on a Friday afternoon, after the last had left my counselling room.

What does it mean to me to be an older gay man working with younger gay men? Am I a father, a big brother figure? Am I working with and for my younger self? Am I satisfying myself as regards my own settled place in life, choosing to work with young people who are less settled, more troubled?

Does it enhance my smugness? Do I get some vicarious sexual excitement from hearing about their sex and love lives? Does that boost my 'I've made it' feeling, because I enjoy a satisfying love and sex life?

All questions with some element of truth, but only part of the picture, a small part, for my heart-strings are pulled too. I bring these young men home in my heart over the weekend. I nurture them inside. So often, as we are settled around the fire with our Friday night glass of wine, I am full of the sorrows of these young men, taking their anti-depressants, trying to find a place for themselves in the world, trying to find love and safety, and I am quiet in my thoughts. How can I speak of these things? I cannot. I hold them inside, in a heart place. I speak to them as I would to my childhood dolls, in an internal monologue, a lullaby of sorts, but I know I am also consoling myself and all the parts of me that have felt these things too and still sometimes do.

So, it is a strange, ambiguous thing, this work. It unsettles me and keeps me in touch with the suffering of others and at the same time, it confirms me in the hard-won satisfactions of my present life, while reminding me of the transience of all that I have. For I know that this too will pass. There will be times of loss and fear and dread ahead. And this reminds me that these young men suffering are not just the others, they are me too, the person I have been in my younger years and the person I will be again in the future, when the world turns, and loss, insecurity and fear are back in my life. As I puzzle this out, far from confirming my smugness, this work keeps me in touch with the precariousness of existence, attuned to the potential for loss and change and grateful for all I have now.

Coming back to these young men, I see myself helping them up the ladder a rung or two, so that they too can enjoy some security, freedom, joy, satisfaction, knowing that they will not have them forever, but that they are entitled to have them for some of the time at least. Yes, I know that in reality, none of us are ever really entitled to anything in this life, and yet somehow it is only fair that they get their chance at happiness, or some measure of it. I cannot make them happy. I can only orient them towards it, hold out the hope of it to them, help them quell and disrupt the parts of them that sabotage, punish and hurt themselves, mute the voices that speak only of abandon and rejection, loneliness, dejection, that keep them locked in despair. I suppose that that is all that I can do: speak to an alternative truth, one of hope, happiness and freedom from fear. That is all. There is no magic wand, no eureka moment, no end of the rainbow. There is only the everyday magic of hope in a better time to come, the hope of another life, but not in another world, in this one, as broken, fragmented, problematic and troubled as it is.

June 2016

I recall writing this piece and feeling at the time that it was an important piece of 'writing as inquiry' (St. Pierre, 2005): namely, that I started with a question, not knowing what would emerge and simply wrote into my experience, arriving at something quite unexpected, yet significant. I feel rather exposed now, reproducing it in this paper, as it was never intended for a wider audience. I feel exposed in several ways which I will now explore: in its sexual references at the start; in what could be interpreted as the patronising and emotive tone of the story of metaphorically 'taking the clients home'; and in its spare account of what lies at the essence of therapeutic endeavour. Yet now, at this stage in my life and career, I can no longer settle with the partial disclosures of earlier submissions. I must take the risk of exposure.

It begins with my well-versed psychodynamic introspection, questioning my motives and unearthing potential unconscious narcissistic needs, whether for self-aggrandisement or idealisation (Barnett,

2007). In particular, I give voice to the sexual, questioning what I may be gaining from hearing stories of troubled sex and love lives, and the potential for both sexual titillation and evaluative comparison from which I emerge the winner. In this, I recognise my inveterate competitiveness. Having given voice to these questions and put them down on paper, I saw the validity of their inquiry and the importance of bearing these thoughts in mind, yet I also recognised that they failed to address the important affective dimension of the work: the emotional labour involved in working with these unhappy men.

In contrast to an earlier perspective which would have regarded 'taking clients home' as unprofessional, unboundaried, a failure in self-care, I openly explore the curious experience of sitting with my partner on Friday evening, relaxing into our weekend together, while a part of me, which cannot be voiced, remains with the young men who have spoken their sorrows to me that day and whom I carry still 'in my heart'. I see that my thinking here is influenced by Lanyado's (2001) writing about working with troubled adolescents which served as a significant source of inspiration during my training. It helped bridge my traditional psychodynamic conceptualisation of practice, with its emphasis on boundaries and separation, with my growing recognition of the ineffable, relational and intersubjective dimension of being with another in their pain, more akin to the transpersonal perspective on the therapeutic relationship (Clarkson, 1995). Nonetheless, my psychodynamic male academic self remains somewhat embarrassed by my repeated use of heart-focused references, even now uncertain that a journal called *Counselling Psychology Review* will offer space to an emotional man who writes of carrying his clients in his heart.

As the reflections deepen, I am struck most strongly by the 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' position that emerges. My work is both for myself and for my clients, it seeks to serve them first and foremost, but it also serves me: it responds to the needs of my younger self, who was once troubled as these young clients are, and it also foreshadows the needs of a future self who will likely be troubled again. It works with the past, present and future of both my clients and my self. It addresses the transience of happiness and well-earned achievements, while also affirming their worth and the effort of accomplishment. I recognise the element of self-aggrandisement, while also espousing a position of humility and gratitude. While I am dedicated to being there for my clients, offering them a consistent, reliable, supportive presence, I acknowledge that they also unwittingly teach and support me in living my life.

Finally, despite all my years of practice, training, teaching, writing and research, this account concludes with a simple statement about what I see as lying at the core of being a therapist, a statement that is closer to an aphoristic message in a spiritual text than to the theorisation of a psychotherapy textbook: my job is to hold the hope, stay the course, keep faith in what I can offer and keep caring. That is all.

Conclusion

This process of peeling off, revisiting and reworking some of the layers of my palimpsest narrative of becoming a therapist clarifies for me the significant shift that has occurred in my onto-ethico-epistemological position, the position I adopt towards making sense of my own life, taking myself as an object of inquiry and concern. By implication, it speaks too of a transformation in my orientation to my practice with clients. My previous epistemological stance was dominated by an archaeological search for buried truths and unconscious desires, mostly painful and unpalatable, its ontology

dominated by determinism, implicitly guided by a pseudo-scientific causation model, and its ethics coloured by a hermeneutic of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970). In contrast, my current position is more open, pluralistic, contingent and relational.

This new perspective allows for both agential and non-agential factors: my path is partly chosen, the product of an act of will on my part, and also partly unconsciously driven, meeting the needs of others and my own, outwith my direct and conscious control. I no longer seek to demarcate the good from the bad. My suspicious quest, seeking out the more venal lurking behind the outwardly-appearing saintly, is past, as I have come to recognise the existence of all such motivations, no longer needing to valorise some while condemning others. I now understand my narrative of becoming a therapist as one that is never finished, always becoming. It is an open story, open to the influence of ideas and experiences, of relations with others and the changing times in which I live. Its incompleteness no longer disturbs me or drives me to an archaeological quest. I have come to understand my narrative as a 'story to live by' (Polkinghorne, 1988), not a fixed or certain truth. Yes, a defining story, but never a finished or final one, nor one by which I am bound.

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