

Crossing the river:

A metaphor for separation, liminality, and reincorporation

Therese Hegarty, Greg Smith, & Mark Hammersley

Therese Hegarty is a family therapist at CARP Killanarden, a community based agency in Dublin, which responds to drug users. Greg Smith is a social worker based in Melbourne, Australia. Mark Hammersley is Coordinator of Galiamble, an Indigenous drug and alcohol residential program for men, based in St. Kilda, Melbourne, Australia. The authors can be contacted via theresehegarty@gmail.com.

This paper explores how the metaphor of a river can be used to illustrate the 'rites of passage' concept introduced to narrative therapy by Michael White, drawing on the work of Van Gennep. The authors document a project using the metaphor with men renegotiating their relationships with drugs and alcohol in a residential program in Australia.

Keywords: narrative therapy, rites of passage, alcohol, drugs, river metaphor

INTRODUCTION

Drawing on ideas of 'the rites of passage' metaphor (Van Genneep, 1960; White, 1997/2000), this paper describes the development and use of 'the river' metaphor for changes in relationships with drugs and alcohol. The metaphor may also be relevant to other changes in identity. The metaphor was used in group work at Galiamble, an Indigenous drug and alcohol residential program for men, based in St Kilda, Melbourne, Australia. Galiamble is a 12-step based program, also offering a range of other approaches including narrative therapy. In the spirit of collaboration, Mark Hammersley, Coordinator of Galiamble, comments on the implementation of the metaphor.

SEARCHING FOR A METAPHOR

Therese Hegarty

Van Genneep (1960) introduced the terms 'separation', 'liminality', and 'reincorporation' to describe the transitions negotiated by peoples in different societies in moving from one stage of life to another, or from one's own society to another. He suggested that many cultures have 'rites of passage' where these stages are formally acknowledged. White (1997/2000) suggests we use these three stages of the journey metaphor to support people who are intending to change their relationship with drugs. White suggests that good preparations need to be made for the liminal phase and that persons embarking on this journey will benefit from articulating many of the challenges that the liminal phase might present to them. The disorientation of this phase must not be attributed to the physiological effects of refusing the addictive substance alone, but also to the loss of their familiar life (White, 1997/2000, p. 28). Appreciating and anticipating the depth of the challenge, and the despair and desperation that will occur, is part of seeing the journey through.

As I considered these concepts, I began to reflect on times in my own life when I experienced sudden change or loss, or took on a major challenge, or had events and decisions throw me into a liminal state. I have often felt disorientated, foolish, confused, and disconnected from everything I know. At those times, the ability to accept the disorientation as part of what I had taken on, and

the belief that it might not last forever, allowed me to tolerate the tensions and at least not give up. I began to appreciate the importance of the acceptance and the anticipation of the liminal stage in the preparation for a major migration of identity. I then began to think more about translating this understanding to those I work with.

With a wish to move away from concepts such as 'liminality', which might be unhelpful to those I work with, I began to wonder if the metaphor of a river might help to express the liminal stage. A river can be calm one day and furious the next. It can be a trickle or a torrent. It has currents and undercurrents. Things can be washed downstream. There could be stepping-stones. I leave one bank and hope to reach the other side, but I might not know which point on the bank I might reach. I need to think about how much I carry so I will not be weighed down. I might need a life raft. I might need to alert others to my crossing.

Now when I am working with someone who wants to change their relationship with drugs, I often draw a river on the whiteboard and we chart the journey of our conversations. I can photograph this and print it for the person. I have chosen some questions, built around the river metaphor, which guide my enquiries.

On the river bank

Why am I choosing now to make this journey? What has led up to this? What is it about this riverbank that does not fit with the life I want to live?

What will I miss about the bank I am leaving? Are there aspects of this bank that I would like to recreate when I reach the other bank?

The crossing

What might wash me backwards to this bank? What could I learn from that?

Who needs to know that I am making this crossing? How might my relationship with them be different as I make the crossing?

What might I need to put in place for them so I can leave?

Are there stepping-stones on the journey across? What might they involve me doing?

What kind of life rafts might I need out there? Who should I instruct about this?

How much 'baggage' can I carry across the river? Is there some 'baggage' I should leave in 'left luggage' as it would be too hazardous to carry and might leave me at risk of drowning?

What would I like to let go of so it could be washed downstream?

What skills do I have for swimming when things get turbulent? What can I bring to mind which will help me stay afloat?

What would 'hitting rock bottom' mean for me? How would I negotiate that? Who can I invite to support me at that point?

The other side

When the bank comes in sight, what thoughts could I bring to mind? Are there thoughts or ideas or fears which might sabotage my stepping ashore? How can I prepare for this?

As I may be carried downstream, I cannot see the bank I will reach. How will I know I have reached the bank? What will be my priority when I reach that bank?

Who will I tell about my journey? Are there skills and knowledges from living on this bank that I want to remember when I get there? Who will I need to make contact with at that point?

Are there new practices I want to develop? What are my hopes and dreams for living on the far bank? Who shares those hopes and dreams with me? How long have I held those hopes? How have I kept those hopes alive?

White suggests that attention be given to activities that authenticate the decision to set out on the journey; articulate the intentions, purposes and values involved; recognise courage; and mobilise the support of others (1997/2000, p. 30). A ritual celebration at the point of arrival at the phase of reincorporation, he suggests, will be a significant part of the arrival at that territory (1997/2000, p. 31). Greg Smith, on reading my thoughts at this point, developed a booklet in which people could write or draw their responses to the questions in group settings. I'll hand over to him to tell one story of implementing this work.

USING 'THE RIVER' METAPHOR

Greg Smith

Galiamble is a residential program for men dealing with alcohol and other drug addictions. It is a service of Ngwala Willumbong, an Indigenous cooperative based in Melbourne, Australia. I facilitate weekly group work sessions using narrative approaches. All residents attend the sessions during their 16 week residency at Galiamble, with group sizes of 8–12 men. The group includes comparable numbers of Indigenous and non-Indigenous men.

I first used the model in 2008, and again with some refinements to a new group of men in 2009. Both groups were immediately engaged. Rather than work on individual booklets, they wanted to work on the approach together through talking, or 'yarning'. I superimposed graphics of a river on a whiteboard, including questions associated with various stages of the crossing. The men's responses and discussions were summarised on the whiteboard, and photographed before moving to a slide with the next question. The men's input was typed and presented at the following session for discussion. Despite limited reading skills, the men preferred to read the text aloud, taking it in turns and supporting group members who had limited skills or confidence in reading. This seemed to have an important ceremonial role, and helped to develop their ideas further.

The men also preferred their comments to be edited into prose, based on the themes raised by them. Each question resulted in several poems.

I took care to retain the original words and expressions. I suggested melodies to develop several of the poems into songs. The men changed the words and tunes to reflect their intent and musical preference.

The River discussions with the 2009 group extended over five weeks, involving 17 men, with some residents later becoming involved in recording and a concert. Here are some of the poems and songs the group created in response to questions.

How is changing your relationship with Drugs and Alcohol like crossing a river?

Standing on the river bank

I'm standing here.
Thinking of where I am.
What's behind me.
What's around me.

Looking at the river.
What's on the other side.

I'm sick of the way things were.
Too much shit.
Boring.
Monotonous.
A roundabout.

It's not easy to move.
The mud seems way too thick.
It feels hard to move anywhere.
It feels like there are too many bushes
Too many blackberries to get through.

But something is pushing me.
A fire.
Pushing me to the river bank.

I want life to be exciting.
Energetic.
I want to be able to do things.

I want to be able to blend
To fit in.

I want to feel good
without the drugs and the alcohol.
I want to have Pride.

How might my relationships be different as I make the crossing?

Going back home

Back home will be like walking
on eggshells.
Others not knowing what to say
Me being so unpredictable
Getting Belief back
Getting Trust back.
You've got to paddle your guts out
to get there.

What might I need to put in place for them, so I can leave?

I can understand

I can understand the damage I've done
the criticisms
the lack of belief.

I can understand that it's hard
for others
to 'let go' of things I have done
and said.

I can understand that it may be hard
for others
to get used to me saying
that I want different things.

I can understand that it's hard
for others to accept me.
I can find out where I stand.

When you have finished the journey, what would you like people to say about how you'd managed it?

The legacy

I want to feel like I have left a legacy.

I want people to say ...
That I was loving.

I want people to say ...
That I was a good person.

I want to be remembered ...
as someone who battled the fight.
Who did not give up.

Who kept punching.
A hard worker.

I want my kids to be able to look at me
and say 'he is alright'.

I want to be remembered ...
For being somebody:
Not just a name.

RECORDING A CD

The men decided to make a CD recording of the poems and song. This was completed with minimal practice during groupwork, using a digital recorder. Residents and staff added didgeridoo and guitar backing tracks, based on their response to each poem. Songs were recorded by the whole group, directly onto the recorder. Several of the songs consisted of choruses sung by the whole group, with men sharing the reading of individual verses, as prose. This format enabled all the men, irrespective of musical confidence, to make a prominent contribution to the recording. It also reduced the need to structure the prose into the form of sung verses.

A CONCERT

On finishing the CD, the men decided to perform their work to friends and family, which they titled the 'Straight from the Heart' concert. More than 60 people attended the concert, including family members and elders, held in a meeting room at Galiamble. This number was well beyond the expectations of the men. CDs and a booklet of poems based on The River sessions were distributed at the concert. In working with the men on The River, I continually had a strong sense of privilege to be involved in such an honest sharing of experiences and hopes for the future. The concert was particularly emotional, with tears shed by many of those present.

As a non-Indigenous person, I have found it important to work closely with an Indigenous co-facilitator. During 'The River' sessions, I was supported by Gary Gordon, a resident of Galiamble at the time. Gary provided feedback on the progress

and directions of the group work sessions. As a respected member of the group, Gary had an invaluable role in supporting the participation of the less confident members in the recordings and the final preparations for the concert, for which he also took on the role of Master of Ceremonies. A DVD of the concert, including interviews with residents, friends, and family and community members was provided to the men as a record.

WHAT IT MEANT FOR THE MEN

Mark Hammersley

In coordinating Galiamble men's recovery centre, I have been involved with Greg's narrative program as both a program coordinator and participant, gaining from the therapeutic processes of the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006) and other metaphors. I was not involved directly in The River group work sessions, other than attending the concert. I would like to comment, however, on the success of the program in supporting men at Galiamble, based on my observations and informal discussions with them during the program. In preparing for this article, I also contacted eight of the men to ask them for detailed feedback. All of the comments on the program were positive.

A PICTURE

Rivers, water, and the land all have a deep cultural significance for Indigenous people. This seemed to help the men visualise their journey. Several of the men talked about how The River gave them a 'picture' of where they were, where they wanted to go, and how they could get there. This seemed to help the men to stay positive about changing their relationship with drugs and alcohol.

'The River idea worked because it was like going from the 'dry side' to 'greener pastures.'

'The River booklet helped put into context a picture of where you are in life, and getting an idea about where you have come from.'

– Participants

After finishing the residential program at Galiamble, men often have intentions to stay 'clean' or abstinent from alcohol or other drugs. In practice, many men may 'lapse' or 'relapse', which can be a normal part of the recovery process. This can lead the men to feel 'shame', and a reluctance to re-engage with the service in the near future. If I met an ex-resident on the street who was using drugs or alcohol and asked how they were going, they would previously have been reluctant to talk to me. Talking about The River program, however, has given me a neutral ground to engage with them.

In talking with men who had finished the residential program, several had used alcohol more than they had intended when they left. These men indicated, however, that because of The River program, they were drinking less alcohol than before they had started with Galiamble, or were open to returning to the program in the near future. One of the residents who left Galiamble during The River program because of drug use indicated that he had returned because he wanted to complete it.

SPIRITUALITY AND CULTURE

The program had a spiritual feeling to it. It contributed to interconnectedness between the men and staff at Galiamble. The group work resulted in them sharing feelings that they had never shared before.

'The River touched on stuff that they had never shared with anyone, that they had bottled up. It developed stronger spiritual and emotional connection.'

– Participant

It resulted in men walking taller, being happier with themselves, and looking forward to the program. Several of the men talked about how The River helped them recognise that they had different paths, but were united in their support for each other.

RECORDING, PERFORMING

The main benefit from the CD was the engagement of the men in the recording process.

It gave everybody the chance to contribute in different ways, through playing guitar and didgeridoo, singing or reading poems, or mixing the sound. It was very therapeutic. The men seemed more calm and at ease with themselves. On the night of the concert, I was blown away. They really put themselves 'out there'. They allowed themselves to be vulnerable. Men who had never done any performing before got up in front of everybody and 'had a go'. Men also exposed their emotions, regrets, hopes and dreams to their families and to strangers. They were who I think of as 'real men'. Since the program, I have heard of no regrets.

'It was really good to see [my partner] perform in the concert. It made me really proud to see him express himself: I've never seen that part of him before. He was more motivated and insightful and had a desire to change. It helped me feel more positive about our future. It was also great to see the men getting it out into the community, so they see people with drug issues aren't pieces of shit or losers; we are just people.'

– Partner of one of the men

'It gave the guys the chance to be themselves, especially while involving their families. It helped them 're-bond' with their families. It helped the families get more confidence in their men.'

– Participant

'The performing made a difference. It moved you the way the guys expressed themselves, articulated themselves. It gave them a voice in public.'

– Participant

PRIDE

Many of the men talked about how the program increased their sense of pride and self-esteem. Weeks after the program, men talked about feeling 'six foot tall' because of it.

Men also talked about increasing their skills and confidence in communication and self-expression, as well as production and performance.

‘It helped the men believe more in themselves, and what they could achieve.’

– Participant

The program brought everyone closer to together. It brought a harmony throughout the house, with a tinge of excitement. All of the participants have indicated that they would be involved in a similar program if they had the chance. Men have suggested that the program be repeated for every new group of residents coming through Galiamble. I would suggest two facilitators involved, according to the numbers of men and the issues that they raise. Greg followed up with several of the clients who sought additional narrative support, outside the group. It would be preferable if individual narrative therapy could be available for all clients, to complement with the group work program. Men have suggested an ongoing narrative program for men, who have finished their time at Galiamble, and an interest in travelling to other Indigenous communities to share poems and songs.

FINAL REFLECTION

Therese Hegarty

I am humbled and grateful for the way a simple idea has been developed and explored with such commitment by the men at Galiamble. It reminds me to search again for metaphors to translate helpful theoretical ideas into language that is meaningful for the people I am working with.

I think of the work between Greg and these men as a ‘unique outcome’ (White & Epston, 1990, p. 15). Men spoke openly about their hopes, their shame, and their regrets in ways that seemed new and in ways that created a bond. Men read aloud to each other when, in the past, such a reading might have brought shame and embarrassment. Men became performers for a night and communicated honestly with their families and communities about the tough parts of their experience. This reminds

me that sometimes when an identity story is ‘problem-saturated’ (White & Epston, 1990, p. 16), we need to do more than search for ‘unique outcomes’ as an entry into a new story. We also need to consider creating ‘unique outcomes’.

‘Definitional ceremonies deal with the problems of invisibility and marginality; they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one’s own terms, garnishing witness to one’s worth, vitality and being’ (Myerhoff, 1982, p. 267). The ‘Straight from the Heart’ concert represents for me all that Myerhoff describes in a definitional ceremony. In a way, it also represented a form of ‘rite of passage’. I wonder where on the landscape the men would locate this rite of passage. Would they say it was a ‘stepping into the river’ rite, a rite ‘from the river itself’, or ‘closer to the bank’? I am curious to know also where the men would locate their lives now.

Most of my thoughts, however, are drawn to the challenges they face on return to their families and communities. Here, I imagine worlds can collide; new and old identities can collide. The men describe ‘walking on eggshells’. This is also a liminal state. Can the solidarity and emotional honesty which the men have valued at Galiamble be found here – and how will that happen? This draws my attention to the need for a new set of questions to explore this phase of the journey – questions that include families. Maybe these questions could lead to the rich description of what men value in joining others and in connections. It draws my attention also to the role of the receiving context into which the person returns and how as families and communities the beliefs we hold about addictions shape that landscape. Van Gennep (1960) describes many rituals where new members are welcomed into new territories of life, events which confer membership status.

I do not know of rites of passage in my culture for people who break from substances. I hear in those I work with a longing for some sort of social acknowledgement and for ongoing connections. Michael White (1997/2000) valued the work of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) highly. Although it is different in many respects from his own approach, he believed the originators of AA understood the rite of passage metaphor. AA convenes forums where people give testimony to their decisions,

commitments and purposes, and these intentions are witnessed. Buddy systems and regular meetings provide for connection with others 'who have a strong appreciation of the desperation that is experienced in this struggle' (White, 1997/2000, p. 32).

Some of the people I have worked with, who have changed their relationship with drugs, have found AA very helpful. Others search for a connection and a sharing with people but resist AA as they want the story of drugs or alcohol to fade into the background, as they build connections and join with others around new stories. I am challenged as a worker to create a social space for the sorts of solidarity, honesty, and performance of worth and vitality which took place at Galiamble to be available to people with a tentatively 'clean' aspect to their identities.

We wonder if the river metaphor might be useful to others working in a similar field, or if it might seem a useful metaphor for other life experiences which involve a migration of identity. We would welcome any thoughts from you, the reader.

NOTE

The booklet of poems and CD can be obtained from Mark Hammersley, at m.hammersley@ngwala.org

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