

Exploring the meaning of tattoos

by

Mike Boucher¹

In this short paper the author describes some of the multiple meanings that tattoos can hold for people, including 'markings of transitions', 'rejecting normalising judgements' and 'remembering important learnings'. Through describing the stories of one woman's tattoos and their meanings, this paper invites therapists to consider the significance that tattoos hold in some people's lives and ways of taking this into account in the therapy room.

Keywords: tattoos, therapy.

This past fall, I had the opportunity to have a number of conversations with a twenty-six year old woman named Janis. Janis had come to see me following a referral for depression, anxiety and memories of abuse from when she was a teenager. After a few initial meetings that dealt with addressing some of her more pressing concerns, our conversations turned more to the purposes and values that supported Janis' choices in life.

One day our conversation centered on tattoos. Janis described that she had multiple tattoos on her body. I asked if she'd mind telling me a bit about what they meant to her. She started by describing the tattoo on the back of her neck. It read 'perspective of 3'. She said this tattoo reminded her of communion with God and that holiness often came in threes. It also was meant to remind her that life is nothing more than perspective. She had gotten that tattoo after a particularly difficult time in her life and the engraving on her body –

especially on the back of her neck – was meant to push her forward as she headed into a new phase of life.

Janis then began to describe other tattoos. Two which I remember were a bumblebee and the other a compass. Upon my asking, she described bumblebees as insects that 'aren't supposed to be able to fly, but they can (and do) because they haven't been told that they couldn't. And even if they have been told, they just don't listen.' Janis related a lot to this image because, given the experiences of her life, she was not supposed to have done as well as she's done. Also the compass on her leg was the reminder to remain on course, to pick a direction and to remain true to it. Both the bumblebee and compass were laced with a great deal of meaning and symbolism of learnings that Janis did not want to forget.

For thousands of years, tattoos or body art have served as a way to mark a special occasion or life transition.² Specifically, rites of passage and religious ceremonies have

often used a process of tattooing in order to acknowledge the initiate's passing from one phase to another. These rites of passage almost always included some kind of challenge which the initiate had to face. Thus the person who underwent the transformative experience was given a sign which signified both survival of the event and that the person was now irreversibly 'marked' by the experience. In our modern era, we have witnessed a widespread loss of meaningful rites of passage.³ There remain few, if any, ways to signify important transitions. In Janis' life, tattoos offered a way to give public acknowledgement to shifts in her private sphere. They also offered her what author Peter Trachtenberg calls a 'visual reminder of pain, which has the tendency to be forgotten quickly and so sometimes requires documentation'.⁴

This idea of documentation reminded me of the movie *Memento*⁵ – a movie told from the ending to beginning – in which a man has lost his memory and attempts to figure out who he is and what happened to him. But because he has no functional memory, he needs a way to remember what he learns about himself and those around him. Thus he tattoos the things he is learning on his body. When he looks in the mirror he reads these messages back to himself. These messages help him remember who to trust, where to go, personal information, etc. Janis had seen the movie and related very much to the idea of a tattoo as a reminder of some kind of learning. What was amazing is that these 'reminders' were permanently available to her – a memoir in her skin, as Trachtenberg puts it – should she need to refer to them when life got somewhat rocky.

In addition to tattoos being signifiers of past events, they 'may also act upon the future, protect the body from impending danger or consecrate it for some arduous task ahead'.⁶ This was exactly how Janis saw her 'perspective of 3' tattoo. Its presence on her created the space needed for her life to move into a new direction. Furthermore, tattoos often act as signifiers of cultural defiance – an act of identity construction⁷ – and help to create some space for a person to decide what has meaning or significance for them. In Janis' case, this was also true. Her tattoos functioned as a means to reject certain cultural and familial normalising judgements, and gave her the occasion to assert a preferred identity based on her own values.

By opening up space for her to talk about her tattoos, I learned a great deal about Janis, what is important to her and what values form a foundation for her life. While each tattoo had its birth in a painful experience, the 'perspective in 3', the

bumblebee and the compass now formed a visible record of learnings that could stand against the story of depression or abuse which seemed to gain the upper hand at various points in her life.

My conversations with Janis helped to also reform my ideas about tattoos. While they may mean different things to different people, I now tend to see them as visual narratives that represent things people do not want to forget and thus are granted permanent status on a person's body. The markings that people decide to grant permanent status, offer some indicators of what is or was important and meaningful to them. I now find myself more inclined to ask questions about tattoos and what they mean to people. Some of these questions have included:

- *Recently, I've had some really interesting conversations with others about tattoos and what these mean to people ... I've noticed that you have a tattoo ... would you be interested in talking about it?*
- *Could you say a little about the meaning of that tattoo?*
- *Does it symbolise or stand for anything in particular?*
- *What led to your decision to get that tattoo?*
- *Does that tattoo represent a stand for or against something?*
- *Did it mark any particular transition in your life?*
- *What difference does that tattoo's presence make in your life?*
- *Does the tattoo suggest anything about who you are or what you might hold to be important?*

The conversations that have followed have been quite rich and vibrant. Some of these conversations were about rites of passage, some were about love, some about pain, some of friendship. While I do not have any insider knowledge about tattoos, my conversations with Janis have encouraged me to think more about what I would put on my body as a record of learnings I wouldn't want to forget.

Later in our conversation, I asked Janis if she had any plans for more tattoos. The next one, Janis said, would be the inside of a bamboo stock in Zen art. That one would be about 'just being where you are'. This led to a discussion of what she had been learning in recent weeks and what she now appreciated about her life and herself that she, perhaps, had not seen as clearly before.

A few weeks later, I told her that this conversation around tattoos had really remained with me. I asked if I could write a bit about it to share with other people – especially other therapists who might find themselves wondering about the ‘markings’ on the bodies of those who consult them. She gave me some ideas about how to go about this and agreed that it might be a worthwhile venture. I appreciate the contribution she’s made to my work and hope that this might contribute to the work of others.

Notes

1. Mike Boucher, CSW, can be reached at the St. Joseph’s Neighborhood Center, 417 South Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA. Janis can be reached c/o the same address.
2. The earliest known tattoo was found on the ‘Iceman’ who was found frozen in the Tyrolean Alps. He lived around 3300 BCE. Tattooing has been found in almost every part of the world in some form or another and has been used in a variety of cultural, ceremonial and artistic ways. For a brief overview, see Chapter 1 of *The Body Art Book*, by Jean-Chris Miller (Berkley Book, 1997).
3. *Body Piercing and Tattoos: Examining pop culture*, by J.D. Lloyd (Greenhaven Press, 2003), p.91. Lloyd provides a brief description of rites of passage in this book. For more thorough descriptions, see Arnold van Gennep’s classic work *The Rites of Passage* (University of Chicago Press, 1961) or Victor Turner’s classic *The Ritual Process* (Aldine de Gruyter, Reprint edition 1995).
4. *7 Tattoos: A memoir in the flesh*, by Peter Trachtenberg (Crown Publishers, 1997), p.37. Trachtenberg’s book is an account of the seven tattoos he has gotten in his life and the stories/context that accompanied each one. His book, similar to my conversations with Janis, offers the ‘narrative’ which brings each symbol to life.
5. Columbia Tri-Star, 2000.
6. Trachtenberg 1997, p.79.
7. Lloyd 2003, p.111.

Further reading

- Gilbert, S. 2001: *The Tattoo History Source Book*. Juno Books.
- Caplan, J. 2000: *Written on the Body*. Princeton University Press.
- Mifflin, M. 2001: *Bodies of Subversion (2nd ed.): A secret history of women and tattoo*. Powerhouse Books.

Other resources

- www.tattoo.com
- *Body Art* (video recording), Wellspring Media, 2001.

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