

Journey metaphors

by
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In this paper Michael White documents the use of katharsis and rite of passage metaphors within therapy, teaching and community work contexts. This paper was written to be given as an evening address to participants prior to the Dulwich Centre Publications' International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference held at Spelman College in Atlanta in June, 2002. As practitioners from many different countries gathered together in the beautiful grounds of the historically black women's college, there was an increasing sense of anticipation about what experiences lay ahead of us. Never before had such an event been held at an historically black college, and participants and organisers alike felt powerfully welcomed by Vanessa McAdams-Mahmoud of Spelman College and the local African American community. We didn't know exactly where this was all leading, we only knew that we were delighted to be travelling together. What was clear was that thorough preparation would be required to make this event all that it could be. The writing and delivery of this paper was one aspect of these conference preparations. Now, six months later, we would once again like to thank Vanessa McAdams-Mahmoud, Vanessa Jackson and Makungu Akinyela for inviting us to host the conference at Spelman College, and for making possible what was a rigorous, generous-hearted and healing event.

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Therapeutic journeys

Today, as much as ever, ahead of my first meetings with the people who consult me, I experience feelings of anticipation, degrees of apprehension, and a sense of heightened expectations. This is anticipation of other journeys to be had – not just any old journeys, but ones that will, like those before it, take me to destinations that I could not have predicted, by routes not previously mapped. This is an apprehension that relates to the responsibility that I have, as a therapist, for the travelling circumstances, and for the journey's outcome. And these are heightened expectations in regard to yet more opportunities to be transported to other places in life in which I might become other than who I was at the outset of the journey – amongst other things, expectations of opportunities to:

- a) think beyond what I routinely think,
- b) extend upon and to reconsider established understandings of my life and my identity,
- c) engage anew with previously neglected aspects of my experience of life,
- d) question what I take for granted and to have my settled certainties shaken up,
- e) further develop the skills of therapeutic practice,
- f) explore yet more considerations of personal, relationship, and community ethics.

To be sure, on account of this potential for these meetings to take me to unscheduled destinations via routes

previously uncharted, my meetings with people who consult me over a wide range of predicaments, concerns and problems have always been significant personal and professional life-shaping encounters. And more than this, the people who have consulted me over the years have not only opened their lives to me in ways that, in the usual course of their lives, they do not to others, but they have also significantly included me in their lives. This inclusion is such that these people populate many of the territories of my identity – I regard them to be fellow travellers, and they have made a significant contribution to the cast of the characters of my life.

As I pause to reflect on this cast of characters drawn from my meetings with people over many years, so many stories flood into my memory. At this moment I am recalling a rascal of a boy named Harold, who, when I was working at the Adelaide Children's Hospital in the 1970s, after witnessing me riding my bicycle to work, bestowed on me the name 'Michael the cycle'. He quickly encouraged other children to follow suit, and this got around the hospital like wildfire. Suddenly, in the wards and the corridors, everywhere there were echoes of 'Michael the cycle'. In these echoes I experienced a sense of being held in a warm embrace by Harold and by many other children who were at the time inpatients of this hospital. I recall reflecting on this at the time, and became more strongly aware of how this and many developments like it built for me a sense of home in that hospital – in the sort of place where that sense of home is usually so elusive and difficult to establish.

Harold's 'Michael the cycle' also contributed to a wider acceptance of my informal ways in what was, in that era, a domain of high formality. I will always remember the occasion upon which a senior administrator for the first time summoned me with 'Michael the cycle'. Surprised by this slip, she quickly admonished herself, and began to apologise profusely. She then stopped – there was an awkward silence – and suddenly we were both laughing heartily. From that time forward I was to her 'Michael the cycle'.

Teaching journeys

The journey metaphor is not just relevant to my experience of working with families. I have also found it apt in regard to my experiences of teaching, particularly with regard to the more extended teaching assignments in smaller group contexts. These teaching experiences have also set me

on journeys that have provided me with the opportunity to become other than who I was at the outset of these events. Apart from other things, it is in the context of these journeys that I have been able to develop ever more rich descriptions of my understandings of what goes in the name of narrative therapy, and to acquire a clearer appreciation of the relevant skills of narrative practice.

As I am reflecting on this I am thinking about the inspiration that I draw from so many therapists who have visited Dulwich Centre over the years, and the many others with whom I have had the opportunity to meet in faraway places. I have also felt your embrace, and have been nourished in the linking of the stories of our lives and our work around shared themes and values that are precious to us. Amongst other things, this has made it possible for me to carry on in contexts that would have otherwise discouraged me.

Community journeys

The journey metaphor has also been appropriate to my work with communities. Since the mid-nineties, we at Dulwich Centre have been invited to join with a number of communities in their efforts to address a range of pressing predicaments and concerns. In working with these communities I have been transported to other places I could not have imagined. For example, I have witnessed powerful expressions of the insider experiences of the people of these communities that have taken me into territories of knowledge that I could not have known.

Community members have supported and encouraged my forays into territories of awareness that I would not have otherwise had access to: territories of awareness that, amongst other things, feature a special consciousness of the power relations of local culture that are usually unquestioned and so often rendered invisible. This has also taken me into orbits of my familiar world from which it has been rendered newly strange and exotic. This has had the effect of deconstructing many of my assumptions about life and the world, and has introduced me to new perspectives on my own culture and ethnicity and to domains of personal experience that would not have otherwise been opened to me.

And, as in my work with families and in the context of my teaching assignments, I have found an extraordinary sense of inclusion in this work with communities, one that has touched my life in ways that I often find difficult to account for.

Meaning

In fact, on many occasions I find myself struggling to find appropriate words for the naming of the many ways that these conversations with individuals, couples, families, groups and communities touch my life and move me. To find words that endow these experiences with meanings that satisfactorily portray them to me and to others is a task not always easily accomplished. Often some of these words only come to me through the reflection of hindsight, and in conversations with others with whom I work. I have always believed this naming to be important, because how we think of these experiences of our work, how we accord these experiences meaning, contributes very significantly to how we receive them, to how we take them in, and to how we respond to them. The attribution of meaning to these movements of our lives is, I believe, a significant and important responsibility.

This emphasis on the acknowledgement of movement, and this attention to the attribution of meaning, is, in my mind, linked to the poststructuralist sentiment that is associated with narrative practice. Put briefly, according to this sentiment, all expressions of life are units of meaning and experience, and it is these expressions of life that significantly constitute our lives – it is these expressions that actually make our lives up. This sentiment draws our attention to the significance of the meanings that we attribute to our experiences of our conversations with the people who seek our help, and to the significance of the ways that we shape our expressions of these experiences. It draws our attention to the responsibility that we have, as therapists and community workers, for the meanings that we accord to our experiences of our work, and to the responsibility that we have for the ways in which we give expression to these meanings.

It is in embracing this responsibility that we have the opportunity to more fully recognise the potential of our therapeutic conversations to contribute to us being other than who we were at the outset of these conversations. And it turns out that the responsibility that we have for the making of meaning becomes a significant ethical responsibility, for it powerfully shapes the self- and relationship-forming activities that we engage in under the name of therapeutic practice.

However, having stated this, I want to acknowledge the extent to which engaging with this poststructuralist sentiment can be quite an achievement in our contemporary world. This is an achievement that is often hard-won as this

sentiment runs against another sentiment that is popular, and that is tied to a different ethic, one that has become very much associated with modern liberal-humanist thought. In the context of this popular sentiment, therapeutic conversations are guided by the knowledges of life and identity that are possessed by the therapist ahead of the therapeutic encounter. These are knowledges of life and identity that are invariably informed by a modern rationality that is represented in the 'laws of human nature'. According to this scheme, the therapeutic context provides an opportunity for the people who consult therapists to become not other than who they are, but to become 'more truly who they really are' – to gain access to a life that is a more accurate expression of what it is that is considered to be 'human nature'. According to this sentiment, the therapist is a vehicle for these knowledges of life and identity, and, when all goes to plan, s/he is unchanged by the therapeutic encounter.

Because poststructuralist understandings run counter to this popular sentiment that evokes human nature, engaging with these understandings can be a significantly difficult task in this contemporary world. On account of this it can be helpful for us to take recourse to the sort of frames for meaning-making that provide fertile conditions for us to acknowledge the ways in which these conversations have made it possible for us to become other than who we were. There are many such frames that can assist us in making meaning that is acknowledging of the movement or the potential movement that we experience in these conversations. I will discuss two of these here. Both fit with the journey metaphor that I have been employing in this presentation.

Katharsis

The first of these is the katharsis metaphor. Here, I am not referring to a contemporary version of 'catharsis' that is associated with notions of discharge and release, but to 'katharsis' in what I understand to be a central classical understanding of this idea. This is a katharsis that was had in response to witnessing powerful expressions of life's dramas, and was particularly associated with one's response to the performance of Greek tragedy. I believe that katharsis, according to this definition, is an appropriate metaphor through which to attribute meaning to our own responses to the everyday dramas of life that we witness in our therapeutic conversations, in teaching contexts, and in working with communities.

According to this classical definition, an experience is kathartic if one is moved by it – moved not just in terms of having an emotional experience, but in terms of being transported to another place from which one might, amongst other developments:

- a) have a new perspective on one's life and history and identity,
- b) re-engage with neglected aspects of one's own history,
- c) make new meanings of experiences not previously understood,
- d) initiate steps in one's life otherwise never considered,
- e) think beyond what one routinely thinks, and so on.

In taking our experiences of our work into this katharsis metaphor, our attention goes to what it is that we are most powerfully relating to in people's expressions of their experiences of life:

- a) to what it is that strikes a chord for us,
- b) to what it is that we are drawn to,
- c) to what it is that most captures our imagination,
- d) to what it is that fires our curiosity, and
- e) to what it is that provokes our fascination.

This attention to what we are most powerfully relating to in people's expressions is usually accompanied by a heightening of awareness of our associative thoughts, and of the images of life and identity that are triggered by these expressions. These are images of life and identity that are often rich in metaphor and simile, and which can set off reverberations into the history of our lives. Like sound waves, these reverberations set off resonances as they touch the surfaces of our experiences of life – oft-neglected aspects of our lived experience begin to resonate with the expressions of the people who are consulting us, and with the images of life and identity that have been triggered by these expressions.² These experiences light up and come into memory, and this precipitates a sense of our lives being joined with the lives of those who consult us around shared themes.

Further, it is in the context of this katharsis metaphor that it becomes possible for us to identify and to acknowledge movement in the sense of being transported. That is, it becomes possible for us to identify the places that our therapeutic conversations have taken us to that we could not have predicted. And it becomes possible for us to acknowledge

that, on account of these powerful expressions of life, we have become other than who we would have otherwise been if we had not been present to witness these expressions.

This identification and acknowledgement of transport raises new possibilities in regard to the development of ethical practice. It sponsors explorations of how we might express this experience in ways that would:

- a) render it visible to the people who consult us,
- b) at the same time keep at the centre of our conversations the agenda and the lived experience of the people who consult us,
- c) diminish the sort of marginalisation that people feel as an outcome of experiencing oneself as the 'other' within the therapeutic context,
- d) contribute to the further development of ethical self- and relationship-forming activities in therapeutic practice.

Rites of passage

The rite of passage metaphor provides another frame that can assist us in a making meaning that is acknowledging of the movement or the potential movement that we experience in these conversations.

The rites of passage I am referring to are those that facilitate transitions in life, and are composed of three phases: the 'separation' phase, the 'liminal or betwixt and between' phase, and the 're-incorporation' phase (Turner 1969). The first phase is heralded by a separation from some aspect of the known and familiar, and from a specific status in life. In the context of this separation, one's settled certainties are shaken up – what was surely known and familiar is no longer so, and what was taken-for-granted can no longer be so. This separation can be precipitated by a range of circumstances, planned and unplanned, welcome and unwelcome.

This separation catapults people into the liminal phase of this passage, one often characterised by heightened expectations, periods of confusion, and degrees of disorientation. At times this gives rise to despair, and when this cannot be apprehended in the context of a progressive journey, it can be difficult for people to endure it. When this is the case, people usually express a growing desire to bring about a premature closure of the journey through efforts to recapture what was – to reinstate old certainties, and to resurrect the previously familiar and taken-for-granted realities of life. However, when this discomfort can be

understood within the context of a progression through the liminal phase of a rite of passage, it becomes more possible to endure this discomfort and to keep travelling. This understanding of such discomfort brings acknowledgement of the fact that there is always some distance between the point of separation from the familiar and taken-for-granted, and the point of arrival at another location in which aspects of life and identity are experienced anew.

Then, at last, there is reincorporation, as one begins to derive a sense that one is arriving at another place in life, at new ground. This is new ground that can feature novel understandings of life and identity, a modified sense of self, a different appreciation of life, new sensibilities, and fresh proposals for directions in which one might proceed in life. Through inquiry, whatever it is that one has arrived at can become richly known and publicly acknowledged – at times this acknowledgement occurs in the context of ceremony. It is this public acknowledgement that significantly contributes to the endurance of the new.

Complexities

I have proposed that the katharsis and rite of passage metaphors can be of assistance in engaging with the poststructuralist sentiment. These metaphors provide frames that make it possible for us to:

- a) attend to the responsibility that we have for the meanings that we accord to our experiences of our work, and for the expression that we give to these experiences,
- b) acknowledge the potential of our therapeutic conversations to contribute to us being other than who we are at the outset of these conversations,
- c) step into the ethical responsibility that we have in the shaping of the self- and relationship-forming activities of our therapeutic practice.

Apart from assisting us to engage with the poststructuralist sentiment, these frames are of assistance to us when we find that we are touched by our work in ways that unsettle, in ways that are initially difficult for us to find any comfort in. Experiences that have the potential to contribute to a sense of movement in our lives and work do not always go smoothly. These experiences are not always associated with a sense of new possibility, do not always bring a sense of heightened expectation, and are not always associated with

pleasure. These experiences are not always, in the first place, welcomed. In fact, in this movement we can at times find ourselves being taken to places that are quite painful, and this can discourage meaning-making efforts that might be identifying of the transporting nature of our work.

For example, at times there will be occasions in our work upon which some of our taken-for-granted ideas and settled certainties about life are significantly confronted, and, as an outcome of this, we might find ourselves struggling with degrees of bewilderment, embarrassment, hurt, humiliation, disappointment, and general discomfort. On some of these occasions our immediate response will be to attempt premature closure of the journey by striving to reinstate our familiar and taken-for-granted ‘truths’ about life, and to reinvest in these. We can, in these responses, even find ourselves reproducing the very notions that contradict values and beliefs we hold dear. On such occasions we can wind up feeling very much out of sorts with ourselves.

At other times we will find conversations touching on painful memories, including those experiences of life that were disqualifying of and diminishing of us. On these occasions our immediate response can be to instigate efforts to bring about closure. There are many ways that this can be done, including through the development of negative interpretations of the motives of the people who are seeking our help. When we succeed in these efforts to bring about closure, what was potentially a new initiative in our lives becomes stalled.

In our supervision meeting, Judy chose to talk about what she was finding unsettling in her work with a newly referred family. Within the context of her conversations with this family, Judy had experienced what she described as a ‘negative psychological reaction’ that she found quite painful. She couldn’t figure this out, as, in these conversations, she hadn’t been aware of anything that she believed could account for this reaction. In her efforts to quickly resolve this, she had begun to manufacture some negative interpretations of the motives of the family members, but felt that in doing so she was compromising her values. In inviting Judy to take this experience into the meaning-making frame provided by the katharsis metaphor, I encouraged her to:

- a) *discern which of the family member’s expressions she might be responding to,*
- b) *describe the images of life and identity that could have been triggered by these expressions,*

- c) *speculate about what it was in the history of her lived experience that might be resonating with this, and to*
- d) *reflect on the ways in which this was potentially moving of her.*

In endeavouring to define what it was that she was responding to, Judy became aware that she had been drawn to some significant expressions of acceptance of the daughter by the parents of this family. In describing the images that these expressions had evoked, and in tracing what it was from her own history that had resonated with these images, Judy became aware of how this had awakened a significantly contrasting experience – that is, it had awakened, in her, memories of the painful rejection that she had felt from her own parents. In responding to my inquiry about why this rejection was so painful to her, and about why this pain had arisen in the context of what she had witnessed in this family, Judy gave voice to a powerful ‘longing for recognition and acceptance’. This was a longing for recognition and acceptance that she was not generally conscious of, and that she had rarely publicly acknowledged.

As this was a longing that Judy had continued to hold onto despite discouragement, I was curious about what experiences of life might have been sustaining of this longing. After some discussion, Judy began to recall her connection with the parents of one of her school friends. For a time these parents had included Judy in aspects of their family life in ways that she felt recognised and accepted. This came to a sudden end when Judy’s family relocated to another part of town.

Judy assumed that it would be possible to discover the whereabouts of these parents of her school friend, and she was enthusiastic about the prospects of informing them of the significance of their act of inclusion of her as a young girl. She believed that this action would constitute a further expression of, and an open acknowledgement of, this longing, and that this would be transporting of her in significant ways. She also formulated a plan for acknowledging, in an appropriate fashion, to the members of the newly referred family, the ways in which her life had been touched by their expressions.³

I believe that explicit engagement with these metaphors of katharsis and rites of passage can provide a context that will be sustaining of us through these difficult experiences. Such explicit engagement with these metaphors contributes to:

- a) the presence of mind that is required to render these painful experiences meaningful,
- b) our capacity to endure what would otherwise be unendurable,
- c) options for us to resist the desire to bring about a premature closure of the journey, and to
- d) the further development of our ability to respond in ways that fit with the ethical responsibility that I have discussed in this paper.

This conference

This brings me to the subject of this conference. As in our meetings with families, groups, and communities, and as in teaching contexts, there is the potential for this conference to be transporting of us in ways that we could not have imagined. As an outcome of attending this conference there will be many possibilities for us to be transported, to be moved in ways that we could not have expected, to become other than who we were at its outset. In the course of this, there will be experiences that will:

- a) stretch our minds and our imagination,
- b) invite us to think beyond what we would otherwise be thinking,
- c) connect us with our own histories in new ways, and that will
- d) raise possibilities for action in the world that would not have otherwise occurred to us.

Some of these experiences will include challenges to what is widely known and accepted about culture, race, class, heterosexism, gender, and sexual identity. Some of this will go smoothly, and will be a source of delight and celebration. But some will be difficult and unsettling of our familiar worlds. These more difficult experiences are potentially fraught in the sense that they can contribute to a desire to bring about premature closure of the journey, and a reassertion of what is generally known. I say potentially fraught, as this is not inevitable. These experiences will only be fraught if we do not attend to the responsibility that we have for the making of meaning, and to the consequences of this in our expressions of life.

In regard to experiences of discomfort, I believe that for us to organise our experience around these metaphors of

katharsis and rites of passage will make it possible for us to persist with our journeys in a way that we would not otherwise be able to persist. I believe that for us to organise our experience around these metaphors can render what is potentially fraught a source of inspiration in our lives and work.

In closing, I offer this paper as an invitation to us all to engage with the events of the coming days of this conference, and with each other, in ways that might contribute to:

- a) a heightened awareness of the ways that we are becoming other than who we were at its outset,
- b) the plotting of the courses of our journeys to destinations that we might not have predicted,
- c) attention to the making of meaning in response to our experiences of the events of these days, and to how we are giving expression to these experiences within the context of this conference,
- d) navigating transitions that might not always be comfortable to us,
- e) a consciousness of the images of life and personal resonance that we are encountering in this event,
- f) appropriate acknowledgement of the ways that this touches our lives, and of the places that this has taken us to.

Notes

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2. Gaston Bachelard (1969) employs the terms 'reverberation' and 'resonance' in accounting for the inverse history of the images of reverie.
3. Judy did subsequently acknowledge this in the context of a meeting with this family. This act assisted family members to more deeply appreciate certain developments in their relationships with each other, including the headway made by the parents in accepting and appreciating their daughter's decisions about her own life, and the daughter's openness and responsiveness to this acceptance and appreciation. This experience of being joined in the acknowledgement of diversity contributed significantly to the resolution of the problems for which this family had sought therapy.

References

- Bachelard, G. 1969: *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Turner, V. 1969: *The Ritual Process*. New York: Cornell University Press.

For up-to-date information about publications, training courses and our up-coming International Narrative Therapy & Community Work Conference in Liverpool, in July 2003, please consult our webpage:

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