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Therapy
as metaphorical
reflection

an interview with

Charles Waldegrave

This interview was conducted by David Denborough, the staff writer of Dulwich Centre Publications.

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Elsewhere you have written and spoken about how the principles of belonging, sacredness and liberation inform all the work that you do at The Family Centre (Campbell, Tamasese & Waldegrave 2000). Could you possibly speak about how these principles influence the metaphors you are interested in bringing forth in your conversations with families?

Charles: The principles of belonging, sacredness and liberation influence all the work that we do. They shape the metaphors we evoke in conversations but also the directions of the organisation and everything in between. They guide our explorations. Let me just say a few words about these principles. By *sacredness* we are referring to our responsibility to uphold the sacredness of life and relationships. By *liberation* we are referring to the process of enabling people to create a destiny of their choosing, which is not only an individual matter but also often associated with a destiny for one's people or community. And by *belonging* we are emphasising that we believe that our health as people is directly linked to our sense of belonging – to land, people and culture.

The ways in which these principles work in practice are quite complex. For instance, although some have misunderstood our work in this regard, we do not simply privilege culture regardless of other relations of power. We have always talked about focusing on the liberative traditions within cultures. Kiwi Tamasese has used the metaphor of archaeology to evoke the idea of exploring the histories of our various cultures to find the liberative elements held within them. By the way, this is just as true for white European cultures as it is for other cultures. Around issues of gender for example, these explorations are informed by the question: 'When were the times in our cultural histories when women and men related in different ways?' Other explorations might be around the question: 'What are the stories of belonging in our cultures that talk about the special place of children and our responsibilities to them?' When families consult with us their lives are complex. We use the principles of belonging, sacredness and liberation to guide us in our conversations.

Can you speak a bit about what you are hoping to occur in these conversations?

Charles: The events that families experience occur in the physical world, and families then create meaning about these events. If a family has turned to

therapy, generally speaking those meanings have become problematic in some way. So, in our therapeutic conversations, what we're wanting to do is to try to create the possibility for alternative meanings.

When we consult with a family the first step is to listen to the stories of the family. We do very little educational work, and the therapist's role for the vast majority of the interview is primarily to listen rather than to intervene.

While the interviewing therapist has been with the family, another therapist is often behind a one-way mirror. After listening to the conversation between the therapist and the family, the two therapists create a metaphorical reflection. This metaphorical reflection is then offered back to the family. We read it out twice as this creates a sense of ritual and acknowledges the significance of the family's stories.

Can you say more about these metaphorical reflections?

Charles: What we try to do with this reflection is firstly to acknowledge any thresholds that have been crossed. If violence has occurred for example, or any act of injustice has taken place, we underline this in some appropriate way. Then the purpose of the metaphorical reflection is to highlight and affirm the qualities about the family that have been articulated in the stories they have told, or are implicit in the stories that have been told. We are seeking contradictions to the dominant problematic story. We are seeking alternative meanings that could assist the family to break from the problems they are struggling with.

Within these reflections we float the alternative meaning on a metaphor. The beauty of metaphor is that there is room for people to make it their own, to interpret it in their own way, to actively make further meaning with it. The use of metaphor can free up what may have become very fixed views within a family. We find that this process of metaphorical reflection generates new possibilities, as long as we've really listened very carefully to people and have reflected something authentic back. By authentic I mean that our reflection must resonate with the experience of all the family members. It must resonate with their individual perspectives, and also their cultural context. This is not simply about creating a metaphor out of nowhere. I think a lot of metaphorical talk can be very empty if it is seen as simply a 'technique' to apply. Offering metaphoric reflections that resonate with family members involves more than technique. It

involves an understanding of context, of history, of language and of culture. When done well, it can be quite stunning and experienced by the family as ‘newsworthy’, to use one of Michael White’s terms.

Where do most of the metaphors you evoke in therapy derive from?

Charles: Most of our metaphors are lifted from the words spoken by the family and family members. Somewhere along the line, families generally speak with metaphors. Sometimes these metaphors are quite violent metaphors, however, and we choose not to build upon these (we may mention them to expose their danger, but we wouldn’t use them to float deliberative meaning). And sometimes in a conversation with a family they might not use a metaphor that we feel we can build upon. In these instances we have to create one.

In situations where we are trying to craft an appropriate metaphor this requires great care. We always try to think of the three principles – sacredness, belonging and liberation – in this process. We try to think through the cultural context of the family, their sense of belonging, and any gendered issues that may be relevant. We take our cues from the words spoken by the family. The family will have offered us a great deal of information about what sort of metaphor would be likely to resonate for them. With Maori, Pacific and Pakeha (European) families, workers from these cultures develop the appropriate metaphors. In situations where we are working across culture we ensure that we have cultural advisors who can assist us in this process. We take sufficient time to create a metaphor which we hope will evoke a profound sense of belonging, sacredness and liberation.

Could you speak a little about how you came to be using metaphors in your work in this way?

Charles: I guess the person who’s taught me more about metaphor than anyone else is Warihi Campbell. Warihi thinks in metaphors. I know that white therapists have written about the use of metaphor in therapy for many years, but for me personally I never took it particularly seriously until I recognised how characteristic metaphorical speech is within Maori and Pacific people. In order to understand what people were saying I had to learn to understand the use of

metaphor. Obviously white people have been evoking metaphors from the beginning of our language, but for me I learnt about the significance of metaphor by being closer to Maori and Pacific Island people. It wasn't that they were teaching me, it was just that they speak in metaphors all the time. For instance, when we did the research into Samoan mental health and I read the transcripts of the conversations of the elder women, they spoke in metaphor, the meaning of which was quite incomprehensible to me. I had to ask Kiwi to explain it. I may have been living with metaphor for a long time but I just could not understand, while Kiwi, being Samoan could follow the meanings easily.

Coming back to Warihi though, let me offer an example of the ways in which he uses metaphor in his work with families. I recall a particular Maori family with whom he was working. The man in this family had had a terrible accident. He'd been riding a bike and a drunk driver had hit him and knocked him off his bike. He was totally innocent and was now substantially disabled. He walked very strangely and was not able to work in the way that he could before. This accident had totally changed his life. It was a chance event that just seemed very, very unfair. This man was really struggling to come to terms with the unfairness. He had a wonderful wife and neat kids and they'd given him considerable support. He came into therapy about two years after the accident because his partner had just about had enough and was thinking of leaving. It was a tragic situation. It made complete sense to me why this man couldn't cope and why he was so focussed on the unfairness of life. And it also made complete sense why his partner would be thinking of leaving. She had carried him through the period of the accident, and all the recovery period. She had hung in there with the kids, supported him, been really fantastic to him, and was now overburdened. The situation was just too much for her. In turn, he really loved his family and certainly didn't want them to go. Everybody was losing.

Now the obvious thing was to try and help this guy to move on in some way – to face the unfairness and acknowledge it but then to try to get on with life. And any number of people had tried to facilitate this, but nothing had worked. Warihi was sitting behind the one-way screen trying to work out the metaphorical reflection. He wondered if there was something there that could talk about rejuvenation in some way. He then went on to describe a famous indigenous tree, the totara. Most Maori carvings are from the totara tree. And there's a famous Maori proverb about the totara that Warihi evoked – 'whenever

one totara falls another one grows in its place'. Building on this we crafted a metaphorical reflection which acknowledged the unfairness of the situation and also the strengths and actions that had been taken by all the family members. Warihi quoted the saying about the totara tree falling and a new one growing in its place. He then said straight out in front of the whole family, which I couldn't do with a Pakeha family but was certainly quite appropriate in this situation as Warihi is a Maori elder, 'I've seen the totara fall, but I haven't seen the new growth'. And he just left it at that.

A couple of weeks later the man came back. He walked in the room and looked straight at Warihi. There was no sense of politeness and he said 'I was so bloody angry with you last time'. Warihi was a bit taken back, and I thought 'I wonder what's going to happen here!' The man then said, 'I knew exactly what you meant. You're right, I died but there was no new life'. This guy had completely transformed in the meantime. He had begun re-building his life. This was a number of years ago and the family has gone from strength to strength since then.

What is it about the use of metaphor in this situation that you think was significant?

Charles: What's so important about metaphor is that it works its way beyond normal conversation and even beyond rationality in a sense. This metaphor evoked history and culture as it is a very old saying. It evoked the sacredness of life and spirituality. And it evoked the rhythm of the seasons, of life and death. In these ways it was congruent with the principles of belonging, sacredness and liberation. The use of metaphor can also protect people's prestige in a way that direct talk cannot. If Warihi had said something like, 'If you go on focusing on the unfairness of this situation you're going to lose this wife, you're going to lose your whole family' it would have gone nowhere. But a metaphor can land in a way that doesn't deplete the status of the person. I'm sure this is why it's used so much in Polynesian poetry. Metaphor can protect relationships while still communicating significant messages. In this situation Warihi used a metaphor that he sensed would resonate with the family due to its cultural context. He delivered it in the way he did because it was culturally appropriate as he is a Maori elder. All these sorts of considerations are important in this work.

We offer these metaphorical reflections and families can either take them up and make meaning with them or they can leave them. In my experience, if we've done our job properly, if we've created a reflection that resonates with the stories told by the family, then they will incorporate them into their lives in some way.

What are some of the other sorts of metaphors that are evoked in your conversations with families?

Charles: There are many types of metaphors that we evoke, such as natural images – of tributaries coming into rivers and becoming part of the mainstream, of sunsets. We also use lots of images in relation to culture woven mats, and other cultural crafts. And if children are involved then sometimes television characters are very useful – I recall a time when Thomas the Tank Engine was a metaphorical friend. Children's ways of being are often very metaphorical and we make use of this.

How do you use metaphor when you're with a number of family members who have quite divergent views on what's going on?

Charles: We would evoke a divergent metaphor. If we are talking with an educated Pakeha (European) family and we know they are interested in music, we might speak about an orchestra. We could speak about the wind section and the string section and the need for variation within both of these. We may also speak about how in order for an orchestra to be able to function there are points of co-ordination – these occur within gentle pastoral symphonies, and also within discordant pieces. We could also draw upon the analogy that different instruments play at different times wind instruments don't have to be playing all the time. Often they are not playing at all, and yet there are times when they're really highlighted. If the metaphor is richly described, and remains resonant with the family, it can sometimes address situations in which one voice is dominating and create space to acknowledge a diversity of voices.

Alternatively, if this sort of metaphor would not resonate with the particular family, we could turn to other images such as the colour of feathers. When you look closely at all the finer bits that make up the colour of a feather

the diversity is extraordinary. We normally have feathers in our room that we can look to as a symbol of how a vibrant diversity of colours come together in one beautiful form. I think it's important to say again that we don't prepare these metaphors. They evolve from the conversations we have with the families. In ninety percent of the time the metaphor would grow from what a family member has said or alluded to in conversation.

I remember a Canadian family who had recently immigrated to New Zealand and who were struggling. We had just been in British Columbia and in our metaphorical reflection we spoke of the salmon that we saw on Vancouver Island that swam upstream. These salmon have an incredible strength to swim upstream every year. We built the whole struggle that the family was having around the metaphor of the salmon. At the end of the reflection, which we always read twice, the family was very moved. We discovered that the whole reason the family was in New Zealand was because the father was a fish scientist who had been brought out by the New Zealand government! He said, 'I've come here to help with the trout who do the same thing'. The trout and the salmon go up the rivers, against the current. It really drew the family together. These sorts of things can happen when using metaphor and when you are listening to the cues given by the family. These metaphors can then take on a life of their own.

As you are speaking I can see how the use of metaphor in these ways links people's lives to broader landscapes and histories. I can also imagine how the metaphor can then become a focus of meaning, a symbol through which families can understand their lives and imbue them with meaning. It seems as if you are engaging the family in making new meaning about life through the use of metaphor. How do you see this process playing itself out?

Charles: We have tried hard to break free from the language of medical metaphors and also to break from biological metaphors, systemic metaphors. We have found it far more helpful to create a language of hope. Metaphors contribute to this beautifully. All of our cultures are full of metaphors and stories about people, animals, natural events that evoke success through struggles. Religions and spiritualities also contain stories of hope and regeneration. When people come for therapy they are seeking change and are looking for hope in doing so. Metaphors often provide an opening to an alternative meaning. It is no good just

to say, 'Okay, you've got this problem but there is hope'. This is just imposing meaning upon the family. It gives no scope for people to engage with their imagination and their own interpretations. But a metaphor can open new possibilities.

For instance, today, given that we are on one of the beautiful little islands of Samoa, we swam around for ages and for a time all we saw was dead coral ruined by the hurricane. But then we came across a patch of beautiful new coral and there were small tropical fish swimming around. It was a place of many different depths. The different colours of the coral and the fish were quite awesome. This experience could be used as a metaphorical reflection. If we used a metaphor like this it would be linked to the stories that the people had told us and the experiences we had together. It would be offered in a culturally appropriate manner. The moment of coming across the patch of beautiful coral and tropical fish would be linked to a moment in the conversation in which an alternative meaning was found. This could have been an important insight shared by a member or members of the family, or the certainty of achievement after a period of struggle. Metaphors can powerfully acknowledge what a family is going through and can also offer a strength to hang on to.

It is possible to use metaphors to land your messages gently. They can preserve people's status. They can also be non-judgmental and this is really important. We avoid metaphors that imply a moral imperative of any sort. Where there's a moral element people can so easily feel judged. Saying something like, 'Come on, hang in there' can imply a moral obligation and can breed resentment or a sense of failure. Metaphors can offer different possibilities. With them we can paint a picture of the struggle that the person's having, but paint it from a totally different perspective, one that leaves them without feeling obligated, and one that takes the story into a new realm of possibilities.

A metaphor that we have found helpful in explaining our role in therapy and in understanding the many perspectives that inform the creation of reality is that of a mountain. You can look at a mountain from the north or you can look at it from the east. From each perspective you gain a completely different view and yet it is authentically the same mountain. This idea can be very liberating for people. The reflections that we as therapists are offering are endeavouring to give an eastern view of the same situation that the family's been looking at from a northern view.

It is really interesting to me to consider therapy as a place in which metaphors are co-constructed and how these metaphors in turn open space for alternative meanings and preferred stories. Is this the sort of realm you see yourself working within?

Charles: Yes. The use of metaphor in therapy is sophisticated and at times subtle. Metaphors are representations or pictures of what we go through in life. They can capture people's hopes, loves, sorrow and struggles, in ways that offer new meaning. Our role is to make metaphors of sacredness, belonging and liberation more visible, to assist people to engage in meaning-making through metaphor, and at times to craft metaphors on which to float new meaning. We hope that these metaphors will be of assistance to those who are consulting us.

Reference

Campbell, W., Tamasese, K. & Waldegrave, C. 2000: 'Just therapy.' In *Family Therapy: The field's past, present and possible futures*, 1(1). Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.