

THERAPY AS FICTION WRITING

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ABSTRACT

While I was reading *Bird by Bird*, by Anne Lamott, I was both inspired and surprised by the ideas and images that came to me, which made me think of *writing* as metaphor for the narrative approach to counselling and therapy. In this article I develop this metaphor for doing therapy. The formula of Alice Adams (referred to by Anne Lamott 1995:62) for writing is used as an exciting way of story development in therapy. The formula goes ABDCE, for Action, Background, Development, Climax, and Ending

The term *Unique outcomes* has become familiar to narrative therapists. It was originally coined by Michael White and refers to those unexpected, unintentional, and surprising events that change people's lives. The narrative therapist is constantly looking for signs of *unique outcomes* in people's lives. The therapeutic moment arrives when such an *unique outcome* can be recaptured and utilized for the imagining of a better future.

While recently attending one of Jill Freedman and Gene Combs' intensive workshops on narrative therapy in Evanston, I experienced such an *unique outcome*. While Jill was talking to one of the group members during a coffee break, I overheard her saying something about Anne Lamott's new book, *Traveling Mercies*. I heard Jill say that this book had not been as inspiring to her as Lamott's previous one, *Bird by Bird*, which is a book about writing. During lunch break I went to the bookstore down street, took the book from the shelf, sat down and started to read. After about half an hour with the book and reading through the first couple of pages, I was convinced and was myself inspired. I bought the book.

Bird by Bird, developed into my personal *unique outcome*. At first I was just interested in the book because I am interested in writing, and I thought that the book might be of use for my students when writing dissertations and theses. However, I discovered something more inspiring and fascinating. The book immediately and unexpectedly drew me into the world of therapy while I was actually reading about writing. I am not quite sure how it happened, because neither in the book itself, nor in Jill's reference to it, were there any hints of the possibility to use writing as a metaphor for therapy. Thinking back, I can even remember reading that Michael White somewhere used the term *writing* to describe the process of storying. This could have been in my subconscious mind. The fact is, that while I was reading *Bird by Bird*, I was both inspired and surprised by the ideas and images that came to me, which made me think of *writing* as metaphor for the narrative approach to counselling and therapy.

In the rest of this article I will refer mainly to Anne Lamott's inspiring ideas about

writing and try to use these in a metaphoric sense to formulate my own ideas about

narrative therapy1[1].

Unique outcomes

I have started this article by describing my own experience in Evanston as a unique outcome. In both writing and therapy, the author and the therapist have to wait for the arrival of the unique outcome. Unique outcomes are hidden and never obvious. It needs a sensitive counsellor or therapist to look for them, to discover them and to help others rediscover them. People are in need of therapy because the unique outcomes are lying dormant in their past, forgotten, ignored, and even denied. The task of the narrative therapist is to sensitize people to it. People could go through life without discovering what their real potential is, and who the real significant others are for them. Doing therapy with a narrative approach is to go and look for them. Anne Lamott(1995: 53) referred to Frederick Buechner who wrote:

...in the world of fiction it may take many pages before you find out who the major characters really are, just as in the real world it may take you many years to find that the stranger you talked to once for half an hour in the railroad station may have done more to point you to where your true homeland lies than your priest or your best friend or even your psychiatrist.

The “stranger” that has to be found, is the unique outcome. When these unique outcomes are discovered, progress is made on the journey to the “homeland”. The unknown “stranger”, for me, turned out to be Anne Lamott with her delightful book, *Bird by Bird*. I share this unique outcome with the hope that it would enhance the awareness of possible “strangers” on our therapeutic journeys.

Anne Lamott (1995:62) refers to Alice Adams’ formula of writing as an exciting way of story development. The formula goes ABDCE, for Action, Background, Development, Climax, and Ending. It strikes me as another way of developing the story of the narrative approach to therapy. In *Companions on the Journey* I have proposed a model which, I think, compares favorably with this formula²[2]. The idea was the same and therefore I consider my previous model as usable, but what I like about the writing metaphor is that it puts emphasis on the wholeness of the therapeutic process. It has the development of one consistent story in mind.

Action

“You begin with action that is compelling enough to draw us in, make us want to know more.” (Lamott 1995:62). People come to counsellors and therapists in order to discuss a problem, and the problem has to be dealt with. But when thinking about the therapeutic process, it is perhaps a good idea not to emphasise the problem part of the story, but rather the action part. One of the first objectives of the narrative approach is to develop an alternative story which is not so problem oriented³[3]. People who feel themselves haunted by problems, normally experience trouble in telling alternative stories. They tell their story only from the perspective of the problem while the therapeutic process has to open up other possibilities of telling the story. It seems to be helpful to use the term “action in stead of “problem”. It could help both counsellor and counsellee into an alternative mind frame.

The action part includes the problem, but it is more. It is about the NOW of the story. The counselor must learn to stay in the now - “not the last now, not the next now, *this* now” (Lamott 1995:48). According to Lamott (1995:48) the question to be asked is: “what holds the ectoplasm together - what are the person’s routines, beliefs?” She (Lamott 1995:47) says that she always uses the following passage by AndreDubus to talk to her students about character:

I love short stories because I believe they are the way we live. They are what our friends tell us, in their pain and joy, their passion and rage, their yearning and their cry against injustice. We can sit all night with our friend while he talks about the end of his marriage and what we finally get is a collection of stories about passion, tenderness, misunderstanding, sorrow, money; those hours and days and moments when he was absolutely married, whether he and his wife were screaming at each other, or sulking around the house, or making love. While his marriage was dying, he was also working; spending evenings with friends, rearing children; but those are other stories. Which is why, days after hearing a painful story by a friend, we see him and say: How are you? We know that by now he may have another story to tell, or he may be in the middle of one, and we hope it is joyful.

The now is never fixed and it never acts as a given or even as a curse. In the narrative approach the now is action, and therefore dynamic in nature. To take the action seriously and to have it told, is to open up a possibility, to create a new now for tomorrow.

Background

“Background is where you let us see and know who these people are, how they’ve come to be together, what was going on before the opening of the story.” (Lamott 1995:62).

Lamott (1995:74) uses the image of the designer for a play or a movie or story.

It may help you to know what the room (or ship or the office or the meadow) looks like where the action will take place. You want to know its feel, its temperature, its colors. Just as everyone is a walking advertisement for who he or she is, so every room is a little showcase of its occupants’ values and personalities. Every room is about memory. Every room is about layers of information about our past and present and who we are, our shrines and quirks and hopes and sorrows, our attempts to prove that we exist and are more or less Okay. You can see, in our rooms, how much light we need - how many light bulbs, candles, skylights we have - and in how we keep things lit you can see how we try to comfort ourselves. The mix in our rooms is so touching: the clutter and the cracks in the wall belie a bleakness or brokenness in our lives, while photos and a few rare objects show our pride, our rare shining moments.

“Every room is about memory.” When we invite people to tell us not only about the now, but to revisit the rooms and places of their past, we are working on the design of the set. We help them place the action against a certain background. The action in the now is played within a background that must be pictured, but this background is alive with associations and connotations of the past. Therefore working on the design, often means revisiting the childhood years.

Flannery O’Connor says (according to Lamott 1995:4) that anyone who survived childhood has enough material to write for the rest of his or her life. In order to rewrite our stories, and that’s what happens in therapy, we have to revisit our childhood. Lamott gives the advice to focus on holidays and big events, to write (tell) about everything you

can remember, about birthdays and Christmas, about every relative who was there. “Write down all the stuff you swore you’d never tell another soul.” It is not appropriate for us, counsellors, to push people into telling sensitive stuff, but when we sensitively invite people to tell the background stories, they most probably would surprise themselves with the detail they give. And by doing so, they develop a more coherent story.

Development

Talking about writing, Lamott (1995:62) says: “Then you develop these people, so that we learn what they care most about. The plot - the drama, the actions, the tensions - will grow out of that.”

I found the metaphor of the Polaroid, used by Anne Lamott (1995:39) very useful. She says writing a first draft, (and doing therapy, I would add),

...is very much like watching a Polaroid develop. You can’t - and, in fact, you’re not supposed to - know exactly what the picture is going to look like until it has finished developing. First you just point at what has your attention and take the picture...maybe *your* Polaroid was supposed to be a picture of that boy standing against the fence, and you didn’t notice until the last minute that a family was standing a few feet away from him...Then the film emerges from the camera with a grayish green murkiness that gradually becomes clearer and clearer, and finally you see the husband and wife holding their baby with two children standing beside them. And at first it all seems very sweet, but then the shadows begin to appear... .

Doing therapy is, in the first instance, to have a good, long look at the “Polaroid”. A narrative therapist waits for the plot to develop. A narrative therapist is patient and interested and curious. What Lamott (1995:54-5) says about character development, is just as applicable to story development in therapy. She says that rather than worrying about plot, we should worry about character.

Plot grows out of character. If you focus on who the people in your story are, if you sit and write about two people you know and are getting to know better day by day, something is bound to happen.

Find out what each character cares most about in the world because then you will have discovered what's at stake.

Often I have found myself as therapist in a situation where it seems as if I have all the boxes and decorations for the Christmas tree, without the tree (see Lamott 1995:60). The things are all there, but they are lying around without a plot that binds them together. Often I was near to despair because the "characters" (clients) were there, but the plot seemed to avoid us. What is their secret? How could they function like this? What is the glue that keeps them together? Where is the tree for the decorations?

Anne Lamott (1995:60) helped me. She says:

...I would stay with the characters, caring for them, getting to know them better and better, suiting up each morning and working as hard as I could, and somehow, mysteriously, I would come to know what their story was. Over and over I feel as if my characters know who they are, and what happens to them, and where they have been and where they will go, and what they are capable of doing, but they need me to write it down for them because their handwriting is so bad.

Isn't that wonderful? To stick to your "characters", to trust them, to know that they will in the end provide the plot. You as therapist just have to wait and be willing to "write it down". That is your contribution, to reflect and facilitate and wait until the plot emerges. It's more than just to be a scribe. It's like being the assistant for someone who is writing an autobiography.

In order to do that, you have to listen to your "characters", and you have to have compassion for them. The better you get to know them, the better you will be able to see things from their perspective. Anne Lamott (1995:69) puts it like this:

There shouldn't be just a single important character in your work for whom you have compassion. You need to feel it for the villain - in fact, especially for the villain. Life is not like formula fiction. The villain has a heart, and the hero has great flaws. You've got to pay attention to what each character says, so you can know each of their hearts.

The good fiction writer stands by his or her characters and the good therapist stands by his or her clients. The good therapist, like the good writer knows the hearts of the “characters”, while the ordinary therapist and writer judges them from the outside.

Climax

“You move them along until everything comes together in the climax, after which things are different for the main characters, different in some real way.” (Lamott 1995:62).

Until everything comes together... It sometimes takes a long time to reach a climax. The more complex the situation and the plot, the longer it takes. Anne Lamott (1995:82-3) has also written a part from the perspective of the reader and says:

When you write about your characters, we want to know all about their lives and colors and growth. But we also want to know who they are when stripped of the surface show. So if you want to get to know your characters, you have to hang out with them long enough to see beyond all the things they aren't. You may try to get them to do something because it would be convenient plotwise, or you might want to pigeonhole them so you can maintain control. But with luck their tendrils will sneak out the sides of the box you've put them in, and you will finally have to admit that who they are isn't who you thought they were.

This is about “understanding” too quickly and therefore not to understand at all. This is also about the desire to maintain control⁴[4]. Lamott says (1995:85) that her students always assume that well-respected writers, when they sit down and write their books, know pretty well what is going to happen because they have outlined their plot and this is why their books turn out so beautifully. And then she reacts by saying: “I do not know anyone fitting this description, on the way to finding a plot and structure that work. You are welcome to join the club.” Likewise, well-respected therapists shouldn't know and therefore control the plot and climax of the story. You may perhaps just envision a temporary destination, but you must allow your “characters” to develop from there in their own way towards the end.

Lamott (1995:114) uses a wonderful metaphor to describe how the writer should allow the plot to develop into its own climax. "If you're lost in the forest, let the horse find the way home. *You* have to stop directing, because you will only get in the way." And also another striking metaphor: "...we (writers) need to align ourselves with the river of the story, the river of the uncounscious, of memory and sensibility..." (Lamott 1995:121).

The way towards the climax is not an easy one. Therapy, like writing, is seeing people suffer and finding meaning therein. "But you can't do that if you're not respectful. If you look at people and just see sloppy clothes or rich clothes, you're going to get them wrong." (Lamott 1995:97). And further: "I honestly think in order to be a writer, you have to learn to be reverent. If not, why are you writing? Why are you here?" (Lamott 1995:99).

If writing is more than mere technique, if it is about reverence and awe, how can therapy be a technique only? In the end, therapy, like writing, is the development of an awesome relationship with your characters/clients.

This often involves God and religion. Both good writing and therapy moves on the edges of life, are interested in the essence of life and of relationships. Like the writer, the therapist doesn't bring God in from outside, he or she just discovers God in the writing and in the therapy. With Lamott (1995:100) I rejoice in the wonderful poem by the Persian mystic, Rumi:

God's joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box,

from cell to cell. As rainwater, down into flowerbed.

As roses, up from ground.

Now it looks like a plate of rice and fish,

now a cliff covered with vines,

now a horse being saddled.

It hides within these,

till one day it cracks them open.

Writing (and therapy) always includes a moral responsibility. “To be a good writer, you not only have to write a great deal but you have to care. You do not have to have a complicated moral philosophy (theology - JM). But a writer always tries, I think, to be part of the solution, to understand a little more about life and to pass this on.” (Lamott 1995:107). Lamott went on to argue that a moral position is not a message, or a slogan, or wishful thinking. “It doesn’t come from outside or above. It begins inside the heart of a character and grows from there.” (1995:109).

Ending

“And then there is the ending: what is our sense of who these people are now, what are they left with, what happened, and what did it mean?” (Lamott 1995:62).

The therapist easily gets discouraged towards the end of a therapeutic encounter. Was I of any help? Did these people really change a bit? “You may feel a little as if writing (therapy -JM) a novel is like trying to level Mount McKinley with a dentist’s drill. Things feel hopeless, or at least bleak, and you are not imaginative or organized enough to bash your way through to a better view, let alone some interesting conclusion.” (Lamott 1995:177).

“The problem is acceptance, which is something we’re taught not to do. We’re taught to improve uncomfortable situations, to change things, alleviate unpleasant feelings.” (Lamott 1995:178).

After our involvement with people in a therapeutic situation, and after we have waited for our “characters” to develop within their own plot into their own climax, we have to accept the ending that is appropriate for them. We have to allow them to draw us into their story and to make us part of their lives. We must be able to imagine with them and within their boundaries. The narrative approach wants to teach us to sacrifice our own created endings and to be happy with our “character”’s imaginative endings.

To be a therapist, like being a writer, is to be able to dream for and with people. Lamott (1995:231) says:

You are lucky to be one of those people who wishes to build sand castles with words, who is willing to create a place where your imagination can wander. We build this place with sand of memories; these castles are our memories and inventiveness made tangible. So part of us believes that when the tide starts coming in, we won't really have lost anything, because actually only a symbol of it was there in the sand. Another part of us thinks we'll figure out a way to divert the ocean. This is what separates artists from ordinary people: the belief, deep in our hearts, that if we build our castles well enough, somehow the ocean won't wash them away. I think this is a wonderful kind of person to be.

To be a therapist, according to the narrative approach, is to be engaged in writing. Novel writing, autobiographic writing, re-writing, all kinds of writing. To live is to write. Living is authoring. Although life is a given which we merely receive, it is also the raw material for the lives we are creating. We author our stories.

The therapeutic process equals the writing of a story, the creating of a book. It involves many of the stories of those involved: the clients; the families; the therapists; the patients. But the therapeutic process is not only a mere reflection on those stories, it is always a new writing. Therapy creates its own story.

As writing, therapy sets off with **action** of some sort. In the description of the action the need arises to have the **background**. And with background and action you have characters, and with characters it is inevitable to have **development**. With development there is dynamic and one can expect to move to some sort of a **climax**. Therapy is like any other story, bound to have an **ending** somewhere. Hopefully the end will be happy, but in any case, there will be an end that's different from the beginning. In that sense the end will always be better than the start. It provides a new, although not always pleasant, perspective.

Doing therapy is as uplifting, inspiring, exhausting, and hurting as it is to do writing. Those who are called to do it, will continue to do so because it gives meaning, in spite of, and through suffering.

Writing, and therapy, can only be done when one has the commitment and patience to do it “bird by bird”. I would like to close this article with the story of the title of Lamott’s book:

...thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he’d had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.” (Lamott 1995:19).

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