

Case Stories as Pedagogy:

I recently sent a pdf of a draft case story to a colleague of mine in Chicago; her reply was absolutely encouraging. “David, reading your story was like being there sitting beside you and seeing the family the story was telling me about before my eyes”. That is what A CASE STORY WRITER intends for THEIR readers.

It should come as no surprise that narrative therapy might take a special interest in ‘case stories’ for pedagogical purposes. Surely it would be odd if this was not the case. After all, as early as 1989, Michael White wondering in the sub-title of a seminal paper: the process of questioning whether it might be considered as ‘a therapy of literary merit’ to use Jerome Bruner’s term.

I am using the term ‘case stories’ because this has been established in the literature but ‘exemplary tales’ might do just as well. In the research literature on what practitioners most resort to for their learning, formal academic research comes last, followed by supervision and consultation with seniors and then perhaps counter-intuitively, informal discussions with work mates. And it has always interested me that much of those discussions are carried on by way of telling case stories. Such a story usually is begun by ‘that reminds me of a person, family or case I met with some time ago...let me tell you about it’. It has always interested me in agencies with long serving staff how what might be called a ‘case story-book’ becomes the joint property of the agency itself and is continually being circulated by way of such story-telling. These are stories that constantly get referenced, not with the expectation of providing explicit instructions or a manual as how to proceed but something rather different—such stories circulate to show colleagues how to ‘think about’ the parallels

between the circumstances the story is telling about and the circumstances that has caused the therapist to consider that they must 'think again'- that the circumstances they are facing are beyond their experience. We might say they are realizing that the terrain they are traveling on is unmapped as yet and they might just have to find their own way. But perhaps others have traveled over similar terrain and had to find their way and drafted a map while doing so. Here these two stories to pursue the metaphor of mapping and the unmapped may overlap to some extent or other. Either one might travel according to the map implicit in their colleague's or agency's story; travel along it until the specific circumstances force them to abandon it and find their own way; or decide they are on their own and for this very reason, are intrigued how their colleague found their way..eg. how did they map the unknown.

It is well known how oral cultures used stories as maps in which to repose knowledges of all kinds. A culture's storybook in oral cultures might be considered their archives or libraries. It is to such literatures/story telling traditions we might turn to for guidance if we intend to do something similar.

I have chosen a book by the anthropologist, Keith Basso, called 'wisdom sits in places' about the stories of the Western Apache in Arizona who in fact refer to their stories as 'maps' and had sought his help to write the 'maps' down now that so many Apaches were engaging in the practices of literacy.

Here is Nick Thompson, an Apache elder describing how such stories work:

"This is what we know about our stories. They go to work on your mind and make you think about your life. Maybe you've not been acting right.. So someone goes hunting

for you- maybe your grandmother, your grandfather..anyone can do it. So someone stalks you and tells a story about what happened long ago. You are going to know they are aiming a story at you. All of a sudden it hits you! It is like an arrow they say. But when it goes in deep, it starts working on your mind right away. No one says anything to you, only that story is all, but now you know people are watching you and talking about you. So you have to think about your life. Then you feel real weak, real weak, like you are sick. The story is working on you. You keep thinking about it. The story is changing you now, making you want to live right. So you want to live better. It's hard to keep on living right. But you won't forget that story. It doesn't matter if you get old- that story will keep on stalking you same as the person who shot you with it in the first place.(p. 59)

What has intrigued us is how some 'case stories' have stalked us in a very similar fashion to the above, perhaps not so much to 'live right' but to practice as professionals to the very best of our capacities. Such stories 'show' us the way(the already mapped) or even moreso how to find our way when we reach terra incognita or the unmapped territories that we enter rather than 'telling' us in manuals or tool kits to use two contemporary metaphors for training in our fields of practice.

THIS IS WHY I WRITE such 'case stories' and to do so I had to find a style, genre and vocabularies that if anything would be frowned upon by the styles our professional ways of speaking and writing sanctioned and prescribed as scientific, neutral, or evidence-based. On principle I objected to such restrictions for that very reason. The 'medical chart' may be regarded as a narrative template for much professional writing. The distinction in literary theory between flat and round characters is helpful here. EM Forster tells us that flat characters in their purest forms are constructed around a single idea or quality.

Once identified as such, they never surprise us; they never waver. They are fixed. They do exactly what we expect them to do. They are in a manner of speaking 'done for'. Round characters, by contrast, possess multiple qualities, shadowy ambiguities and outright contradictions. But most importantly they are capable of change. 'Case stories' portray people according to their moral character as they engage with their plights by means of what matters most to them.

To write such case stories, I had to find other styles, genres and vocabularies by which such stories might be told.

John von Manen is a phenomenologist who has directed his theorizing to the practice of writing what he refers to in the 'evocative', a style of writing and telling that allow for a text to 'speak to us so that we may experience an emotional and ethical responsiveness, that we know ourselves addressed(240/1) He sums up such an enterprise in the following terms:

"There exists a relation between the writing structure of a text and the evoking effects that it may have on the reader(241). The more evocative the text, the more strongly the meaning is embedded within it, hence, the more difficult to paraphrase or summarize the text and the felt understandings embedded within it(241). He calls for a 'poetizing form of writing"(241). Most accounts of what happens in therapy/counseling, when it comes to be represented in professional vocabularies and genres, severs what is presented from what happened between therapists and those who seek their help. These accounts are markedly one-sided. Such versions as we intend by 'case stories' require language that "authentically speaks the world rather than abstractly speaking of it as a

language that reverberates the world, as merleau-ponty says 'a language that sings the world'(1973).

Von manen presents us with a vocabulary of means as how we might proceed to do so.

1) Firstly, Lived throughness: Such language and the descriptions it provides "attempt to bring back experience vividly in to presence"(242). This is a special quality of description and narration such that we 'see before us' so as to speak, what is not as such seen but told.

2) Secondly, Nearness: This method, he states, gives words their full value so that layers of meaning get strongly embedded in the text. This 'speaking' of language gives us the sense that we are brought 'in touch' with something and thus 'see' something in a manner that is revealing of its experiential sense(249). To put it another way, it establishes what he refers to as a 'feeling understanding', producing a nearness and intimacy with the phenomenon. This style means that it is sensitive to the local and particular rather than explicating the universal.

3) Intensification: He purports that a poetic language is necessary if word is to become image and this takes place by means of "literary or poetical allusive power"(262).

Words must be intense, memorable and quotable. "A image presents meaning immediately; we grasp meaning directly by an act of intuition".

4) Tone: Here von Manen is referring to 'the expressive quality of sound in giving voice to words'(264) As Wittgenstein reminds us: "When I read a poem or narrative with feeling, something goes on in me which does not go on when I merely skim the lines for information"(1968). We experience the tone of a text not unlike the way we experience the captivating effect of a

compelling musical score or catchy tune(267)

5) Appeal: Here the aim is for the text to possess the empathic power to appeal, so that its meaning speaks to and makes a demand on the reader(267) Here we are looking for a language that is sensitive to the experiential, moral, emotional and personal dimensions of professional practice and professional life. The attempt here is to try to reveal a knowledge in the action of the practitioner that are the sensual, atmospheric and felt aspects of experience, knowledges that cannot be translated back in to cognitive knowing. This writing intends in fact to 'discover' what we know in how we act.

6) Epiphany: Here is the summation of 1) to 5) whereby the reader/listener is stirred up, challenged primarily in the realm of the ethical and provoked so that the deeper meaning of the text can have a transformative effect on the self of the reader...so that they might think/feel very differently then they might have by other means if they should find themselves in situations that parallel those embedded in these stories which hopefully are not easily forgotten.