

## A Tale of Tales

### A Tale of Tales'

'When our life is complex, which it is more often than not, we hope to find within the story images relevant to our own predicament, hoping maybe against hope, that an answer to our problem might  *dwell within the story....*' (Gersie 1992 p15)

The use of stories, myths, and legends in dramatherapy is a core process underpinning our work. No dramatic work can take place that does not include in some form the use of story. We all have stories to tell about ourselves, and those stories are central to our lives. Irving Goffman has suggested the very moment we walk into a room we have a story to tell about ourselves and at the same time wish to find out the 'stories' of others (Goffman 1990). Joseph Campbell considered that the power of myth, legend and story contained within them hidden codes to enable us to deal with our lives (Campbell 1988).

Bruno Bettelheim in his seminal work on fairy tales suggested '*a child needs to understand what is going on within his unconscious ... He can achieve this understanding, and with it the ability to cope, not through rational comprehension of his unconscious, but by becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams-ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures. By doing this, the child fits unconscious content into fantasies, which then enable him to deal with that content.*' (Bettelheim 1991 pg 7) This is exactly what happens within the context of fairy tale use within dramatherapy. A client (of any age) can latch on to the inert 'collective unconscious' (Jung 1964) which is etched into each story and find meaning through the narrative, characters or happenings within the story.

In 'The Uses of Enchantment' Bettelheim goes onto examine several well known fairy tales which explore the rich diversity of how different individuals relate to aspects of certain fairy tale stories, one in particular 'The Three Little Pigs' we shall examine later.

When working with clients who not only have a learning disability and challenge the service, but also have no verbal speech to tell and make stories for themselves we become the story-teller on their behalf. We hope the client has at some stage in their life absorbed enough of this 'code' from some of the traditional fairy tales they may have been lucky enough to hear so that they can share, as Jung put it, in the 'collective unconsciousness' (Jung 1964) of the meaning of the story. We tell a story we hope to be appropriate to their situation and then using dramatic play and other techniques allow them to reflect and absorb the appropriate images from the story pertinent to their situation; and thus lead the client in the direction of therapeutic healing.

### Once Upon A Time...

'In Dramatherapy, role is the form of one's dramatic action. The content of that action is embodied in stories.' (Landy 1993 pg 31)

'Mary' is an exceptional woman in her mid thirties. I first began to work with her in November 1998. Mary has no speech, loves music and song, and has a history, which includes self-injurious behaviour as well as scratching and biting herself and others around her when distressed. It can be distressing watching her attempt to bang her

## A Tale of Tales

head on walls and floors, attempting to rip her clothes off and lashing out at those around her who are trying to help.

Mary also disliked any word associated with endings: finish, stop, end, etc. which were all trigger words which lead her to become very distressed. Mary has a good relationship with her family and a very close and loving relationship with her mother; she visits her family home regularly at alternate weekends. Though her family were loving and caring they had found it just too difficult for Mary to live with them on a permanent basis due to her behaviours; described above. Mary lived in a small group home with other learning disabled people. This was Mary's story, when we first met.

### Prologue

'Myths are the clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life' (Campbell 1989)

How was I to work with someone like Mary? She was the product of her own myth making. In actual fact a myth had grown up around Mary - in the eyes of all those who worked with her, a woman who was having a very distressing time. How was I to connect with her?

Mary had been working separately in a music therapy/speech therapy session for some two and a half years prior to my commencement. Working jointly with my colleagues Mary had begun to develop tolerance, developed communication skills through sign language and the use of songs, which included turn taking and social skill development whilst beginning to tackle the thorny subject of session endings. I am indebted to my colleagues for their crucial work which carried on throughout the term of my work with Mary. My art therapy colleague took over this joint sessional work when the speech therapist left and was readily welcomed by Mary, a significant achievement in itself. This work was crucial in Mary's overall development and had a dramatic positive impact on the work I was to carry out.

Our work eventually began. Mary's mood was so changeable it was not always possible to judge how she felt at any given moment. On one occasion early on in our work Mary had left the building and was sitting down outside in the middle of the car park. On assisting her to return to the building she bit my hand, very hard; it hurt. The 'myth' around Mary continued...

Just being in the room with Mary regularly each week was a beginning. I sat with her whilst she listened to her favourite nursery rhyme tape. On the reverse was 'Tom Thumb' she drew comfort from having the tape playing endlessly in the background. Tom was a very small man who exerted very dramatic influences on the world around him. Did Mary relate to this? Or was it more to do with the reassurance of knowing the story well and listening to it repeat over and over again, knowing exactly what would come next? At this time I suspected the latter.

Mary often slept or appeared to be asleep under a large bean bag whilst the tape was playing, I persevered being in the space with her, saying and doing very little, just being there listening with her to the tape. Listening to the story.

## A Tale of Tales

### Chapter One In The beginning

‘...not yet realising that the solution often emerges from our heartfelt response to the tale’  
(Gersie 1992 pg 15)

I had a treasure chest full of brightly coloured material and puppets. After about two months of working with Mary I instinctively picked up some material and made two puppets to represent her and her mother.

I felt using the image of her mother was a good place to start due to the nature of their already strong relationship, and the fact Mary got excited over weekend visits home, and even the mere mention of her mother would create shouts of joy. In his taxonomy of role Landy describes the conventional mother as ‘*moral, loving caring, and nurturing. ...The most basic function of the mother is to protect and nurture her children.*’ (Landy 1993) In essence I was becoming that nurturing mother whose aim was to protect and teach the child.

I told a simple story about Mary and her mother going for a walk in the park. I told the story four times stressing that her mum would return next week. Mary listened. At the end she took the material representing her mother and placed it around her neck, she covered herself with a beanbag and went to sleep. I had told a tale she had listened and she had taken part by physically taking hold of a character symbolically through the material. The tale, our journey together had begun.

Work progressed with the story of Mary and her mom visiting the park. A very simple story which engaged her and through it I tried to deal with the concept that things end, like Mary and her mom’s imaginary walk, but it had the possibility of happening again. Joseph Campbell suggested that ‘*myths have to serve both aims, that of inducting the young person into the life of the world ... then disengaging him.*’ (Campbell 1989 pg 70) In a sense we were dealing with both ‘beginnings and endings’ within the story. This paralleled and highlighted the actual work we were dealing with - the beginning of our relationship, and already acknowledging that one-day this work would end. Again as Campbell suggests this is one of the aims of the more generic myth.

Some weeks Mary was completely engaged, clapping with joy at the story; other weeks she was very distressed – this exasperated by the chaos around her in a centre with few staff no manager and other very challenging clients. I tried to keep our stories in a special space, a bubble that kept the reality of the real world out, but through which the story could connect to the world in a safe controlled way. The purpose of dramatherapy being to provide the safe space in which things could be tried out before an individual has to cope with these issues in the real world where there would be no safe guard.

### Chapter Two – The Princess

‘Stories alert us to the possibility of betterment’ (Gersie 1992 pg 14)

At this time I introduced a second story, ‘The Princess’. She lived in a magic land where the birds always sung. She spent the morning in the castle gardens, rode out on

## A Tale of Tales

her horse through the city, town, and village and into the countryside in the afternoons, and spent the evenings at lavish balls. She was very popular, because she got on with others, others got on with her. The story, which I again instinctively created one day, was an attempt to reach out to Mary and show her the possibility of 'betterment'. What she could do to aid her own 'story' and relationship with others. Mary became fully engaged in the story, dressed herself up in the material from the treasure chest and took on the embodiment of the princess. Our stories were becoming deeper, richer and were beginning to address her needs in a more profound way.

Our work however was no fairytale. Mary still became distressed on a regular basis. I still played her tape, and as soon as it finished she would become at times very distressed. Maybe a glimpse into a possible positive future was still too much to bear at this time. I also emphasised my reason for telling the princess story, a need for Mary to find a way of building positive relationships with others. In one session through sign language Mary acknowledged that this had to happen.

This acknowledgement that things had to change happened early in our work together. Some eight months later our work had deteriorated, Mary spent whole sessions under a beanbag in the corner of the room. She refused to look or communicate with me in any way. I spoke to Mary about ending our work for the time being with the possibility of starting again the following spring should she wish. Mary agreed.

I suspect a combination of events lead to the deterioration of our work at this time. Mary had acknowledged things had to change but was she prepared to do anything about it? The chaos around us in the building had grown through both staffing and managerial issues. Was either of us able to separate that chaos from our work? I was trying to work with Mary about building good relationships, which we were telling through the princess' story. In reality relationships were collapsing in the chaos of the centre around us. For some, all, or none of these reasons our work had for the time being deteriorated to the stage where we were not able to carry on - for the time being our story had come to an end.

### A New Tale.

'Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials.... The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural...he here discovers for the first time there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in supernatural passage' (Campbell 1988 pg 97)

It was a year and a half later that Mary and I resumed our sessions together. On our first session Mary threw up her arms scratched me and lunged at my face whilst knocking the glasses off another member of staff's face. Was Mary reminded of the difficult memories associated with our first period of work and her acknowledgement that things needed to change, and in the intervening time they had not? I very much felt that Mary and I were beginning a new adventure together and that as the hero she was aware there were forces around her that could support her and allow her to develop, but this would not be without fear or pain. The use and power of the story within a dramatherapy structure, I hoped, would provide the 'amulets', 'secret agents' and 'benign power' to travel on a journey together.

## A Tale of Tales

In our second session Mary allowed me to resume with our past stories, about her and her mom going for a walk and the princess story. She also allowed me to introduce a new story about Mary and her mom making an imaginary visit to the zoo. This story came out of my own childhood memories of visits to the zoo with my own family, and was a way of reflecting to Mary happy memories I had of childhood, which may be very different to her past reality. Within a short period of time Mary was listening to the stories and responding positively. Towards the end of each session she began to physically prepare herself for the ending by slowly drawing herself under her beanbag and finally disappearing under it at the end of the session.

As we were building up a repertoire of new stories I devised a simple system through which Mary could choose the story she wanted. I drew a picture of each story on a sheet of card, and presented all the cards to her at the beginning of each session. I would tell her what each story was and Mary would choose the card she wanted and put it under her chin. That became the story for that session.

### Chapter Three – ‘The Ugly Duckling’

‘It has been suggested that people know certain fairy tale motifs and stories and then pin them onto a local situation.’ (Von Franz 1996 pg 24)

It was at this stage I introduced a new story - rather nervously – ‘The Ugly Duckling’. I was acutely aware the title itself created all kinds of negative images for us. I even changed the title to ‘The Swan who thought he was a Duck’. In hindsight I realise I was attempting to hide the ugliness that Mary felt in her life and situation. In reality she would know what the story was called, we both to an extent acknowledged the ‘motif’ as Von Franz suggests; maybe it was I who was trying to avoid the issue at this stage. Mary chose ‘The Ugly Duckling’ regularly for a few weeks, and we began to explore its meaning. During one session as she listened to the story tears began to flow down her cheeks. Mary had made a connection to this story, she connected to the ugliness of the situation, but she surely also acknowledged that at the end the swan was to fly away to be with its own kind. Mary was able to apply this story to her own local situation as Von Franz suggests people do. Mary was an intelligent lady able to understand the imagery, metaphor and symbolism of this powerful story and connect with it in a personal way. Using stories with her had been right and I felt our second series of tales together had begun.

### Chapter Four – The Three Little Pigs

“I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house in,” said the wolf. “Not by the hair on my chinny, chin, chin, replied the third little pig.” (Traditional Tale)

The introduction of the ‘Three Little Pigs’, was again an instinctive guess which led to a major shift in our work. It is only now I know why. At the time I discussed the need for the third little pig to build strong walls for his house, to keep out the big bad wolf. The wolf possibly represented the chaos around us in the centre. For Mary the wolf could also be her emotional state which she could not always contain or deal with, likewise it might represent at the bleaker times in her day the inability to develop good relations with all of those around her. The wolf represented I suspect all



## A Tale of Tales

the things in Mary's life that were bad and negative. Mary listened and at the end of our session led me out of the room to her next activity.

Thus began our mobile dramatherapy story-telling sessions. Each time I entered the room Mary would stand up take me by the hand and lead me straight out. The concept of the little pig going on a journey building a strong wall to keep out the wolf was something we were suddenly embodying dramatically and literally, by walking around the building. Our walls had to be strong too, not built of straw or sticks but out of something more solid –bricks, which survive tempest more easily.

Bettleheim has since contextualised this work for me in 'Uses of Enchantment', something I had not previously read. Bettelheim suggests *'the houses the three pigs build are symbolic of man's progress in history: from a lean-to shack to a wooden house, finally to a house of solid brick'* (Bettelheim 1991 pg 42). He goes on to suggest that *'identification with the little pigs of the fairy tale teaches that there are developments-possibilities of progress from the pleasure principle to the reality principle.'* (Bettelheim 1991 pg 42) Without thinking it through in a conscious way I had been able to latch onto a story from my own childhood that somehow related directly to Mary's experiences and her needs to develop at this time. I had managed to distil for Mary the right kind of story which she could identify with. This allowed her to make development in her situation as the cleverest oldest and wisest of the three pigs had done too to fight off the wolf. Bettelheim suggests that *'the wolf's badness is something the young child recognises within himself: his wish to devour, and its consequences - the anxiety about possible suffering such a fate himself.'* (Bettelheim 1991 pg 44). Mary too had clearly picked up these motifs. And as Bettelheim concludes *'the wolf is an externalisation, a projection of the child's badness – and the story tells how this can be dealt with constructively'* (Bettelheim 1991 pg 44).

We were meeting other staff, moving into uncharted spaces and standing on the fringes of rooms Mary did not normally enter, and all the time in our private bubble I would tell the story of the pigs and their journeys. Our story telling was now having direct effect on what we were doing. Mary engaged in the story and used it to engage in real life. So much so that in one session we left the building and walked round the block where staff happily picked us up in a mini bus after following us at a distance and brought us home - to our safe little brick house. Bettelheim concludes *'The Story of the Little Pigs suggests a transformation in which much pleasure is retained, because now satisfaction is sought with true respect for the demands of reality.'* (Bettelheim 1991 pg 44). It again is no coincidence that we both unconsciously began to feel the need to move onto stories which now had more of a basis in reality...

## Chapter Five - Thoroughly Modern Mary

*'When the hero-quest has been accomplished... the hero shall now begin the labour of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the Kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet...'* (Campbell 1988 pg 193).

At this stage I began to introduce new semi realistic stories. I imagined what Mary might have done on the weekends she spent with her family –Sunday lunches and

## A Tale of Tales

walks out. I began a new story about a woman named Mary who worked in the city, in an office. She spent her leisure time at the pub or cinema with friends. The reason for moving onto these stories about normal everyday life was I felt a need for Mary to move on from fairy-tale stories – this also connected with her obsession with all things to do with the centre office. Mary loved to stand in the small rather cramped office, pick files from the shelves, pick up the telephone and have imaginary conversations with her mother, and sometimes answer the phone when it rang. This was sometimes a little difficult, as Mary had no speech.

I used this 'city worker' story for a few weeks. Mary and I both knew we were partly talking about a wish fulfilment for her. In reality this was not Mary's life. Her life was being bussed each day to the centre and bussed to family reunions every other weekend. These stories though real were not her reality. We needed to be truthful and honest we needed to face up to the word I was struggling to deal with directly with her, the 'ugliness' of a word we often try to avoid – disability. Mary was disabled.

Our stories were beginning to take these issues from the half-life consciousness they existed in into a more real world. We were in essence beginning to use story in a different way, as a vehicle for moving from a fantasy into a reality, moving from dealing with emotional states into a world where we were dealing with the cold reality of everyday life. As Campbell suggests above when the 'hero' returns from his journey he capitulates his treasures to the community. In Mary's place I was beginning to believe she was capitulating these 'runes of wisdom' and finding a way of embedding them within her own personal community, her own personae. Just as she symbolically took the material representing her mother puppet in the early part of our work she was now attempting to personally embody her own 'golden fleece' of knowledge which would allow her to move on in the next stage of her real 'life' journey.

I began to make up a story about the reality of Mary's own life, no fairy tale, no job in the city, but Mary attending the centre and walking into the office. Could she have a job here working in the office? We confronted and acknowledged the hitherto unspoken truth that Mary had a disability. In reality she could not work in a city office – though maybe, just maybe she could carry out some simple tasks in the centre office. Helping to file things, putting books on shelves, simple tasks, which gave her a sense of purpose.

I suddenly realised that our stories had gone full circle. We had started with an imaginary walk in the park; used fairy tales to move inside and examine personal issues and come out the other end and finish in the reality of the here and now. The stories had allowed Mary to go on a literal journey around the building and a metaphoric interpersonal journey, which we shared together looking for the prize of the 'golden fleece'.

I realised I had brought Mary full circle. During this time socially she had bloomed, she had come off all of her psychiatric medicine, incidents of challenging behaviour had decreased significantly, and they had become more rare and occasional instead of the norm. Mary no longer spent hour upon hour in the sensory room with a beanbag on her head. Mary and I had used and travelled with stories in a way I had not

## A Tale of Tales

perceived before. We could see the progression from our earliest most primitive stories and we had travelled through a story landscape and dealt with many complex issues on the way and now emerged into the most important story for Mary, the story about being here, now, today.

Mary's next story will be about what she chooses to do in the future. It was at this stage that Mary and I mutually agreed to end our tales together. For the time being Mary had out-grown the stories I had to offer her.

### Conclusion

'One reason people may seek out and generate stories is to find themselves therein.' (Landy 1993)

In *Personae & Performance* Robert Landy describes taxonomy of characters, a systematic view of role types, which have archetypal qualities, which can allow the individual to decode the character types and stories. Sadly we have no such room to do this to any depth here. However I found through my work with Mary we had used stories in ways I had never realised I could use stories before. The stories were not only dealing with the deep rooted emotional aspects of Mary's personality and life, not only dealing with the social structures she needed to develop for her interpersonal development. The way in which we were using the stories was actually mirroring and charting the work we were doing together and affecting her everyday life.

The structure at the beginning was dealing with the beginning and ending of sessions and in reality dealt with how our work began and the fear of knowing it would eventually end. Through the Princess story we dealt with development of social structures. Through the ugly duckling we dealt with the complexities of identity and disability. Through the 'Three Little Pigs' we dealt with the attempt to deal with the bad feelings Mary had inside, through the metaphor of the wolf, and with the developmental processes through the images of the three houses – and as it was a story about travelling, we actually travelled in our work. And finally through the 'Thoroughly Modern Mary' story we emerged from fantasy into reality and actually examined the reality of Mary's everyday life.

As Bettelheim suggests: *'Myths and fairy stories both answer the eternal questions: What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself? The answer given by myths are definite, while the fairy tale is suggestive; its messages may imply solutions, but it never spells them out'* (Bettelheim 1991 pg 45). Stories then are an extremely powerful diagnostic tool, which also allows us to reflect on and deal with the realities of our own life situation through which we can learn develop and move on.

### Epilogue

It has now been some six months since Mary and I finished our work together and Mary is doing incredibly well. She is mixing and communicating really well with everyone within the centre and there have been only three instances where Mary has become distressed in the last month. Her care workers continue to tell stories with Mary which she responds to well. Mary continues to be fascinated by the office, and



## A Tale of Tales

has her own file filled with pictures and photos. She has her own treasure chest filled with her dressing up things and is the official collector of post from the letterbox.

Much credit must go to Mary who has had the courage to face up to her own issues within her life - and with the support and help of her carers, day centre staff, my fellow therapy colleagues and I hope a little dramatherapy magic – we really can have a happy ending.

### A Final Tale - The Fairy of Inner Smiles

It was a bright warm sunny afternoon in mid October. I arrived somewhat nervously at the day centre to meet Mary for the first time in six months. She was aware I was coming to get her permission to tell 'The Tale of Tales'.

For a few seconds Mary stood shyly looking towards me, then moved across and the hugging began. She took me by the arm and led me around building then the garden. I read parts of the paper reminding her of the stories we had told, Mary squealed with delight and laughed. She sat me down and hugged me closely whilst I reminded her of the stories we had told and she gave her permission for me to share them with you. I reminded her of how brave I thought she had been and how pleased I was to see her progress. Mary continues to stun everyone with her change in relationship to all around her.

An hour passed and it was time for Mary to go home. We had a few anxious minutes where Mary did not want either of us to leave. She bit the back of her hand, but coped with the saying goodbye incredibly well. We hadn't met for six months for her to cope with a one off meeting like this was incredible. I had promised to visit again with a completed copy of our work. I gave her a copy of the draft to put in her folder along with her photos and other precious things.

Talking to staff afterwards I spoke to Simon one of the care workers. He had taken over and began to work telling Mary stories and had built up a good bond. He didn't know why he sometimes felt sad or happy but his manager had helped him understand the transference issues that were going on. He had created a new story with Mary which was all about Mary showing her love to others in her own way. Their story is called - 'The Fairy of Inner Smiles'. The Tale continues....

This article is dedicated to Mary and all of those who have assisted her in her development. It also proves that with the right support and help anyone regardless of their abilities is able to change move on and attain a greater quality of life.

## A Tale of Tales

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