

SERIAL STORYTELLING: A THERAPEUTIC APPROACH WITH A YOUNG ADOLESCENT

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Abstract

A seventh grade teacher consulted the school counsellor regarding a boy with learning problems who wrote violent stories in the creative writing class. The teacher was concerned that the boy might begin to act out his murderous fantasies. Based on an aspect of Jung's (1966) theory that psychological growth occurs when fantasies are expressed through a creative medium (i.e., painting or writing) serial storytelling was used as therapeutic technique. In this method, the boy wrote the stories for the teacher who in turn brought them to the counsellor for further discussion and understanding. In all, sixteen stories were gathered over a thirty-two week period. The stories dealt with themes of separation, the struggle between dependency and independency, envy, rage, mystery, the development of a conscience and the emergence of a new identity. The boy's school work improved and follow-up one and a half years later indicated that he was making good progress in grade nine.

Résumé

Un instituteur de 7e année consulta le conseiller scolaire au sujet d'un garçon qui éprouvait des difficultés en classe et rédigeait des histoires de violence. L'instituteur craignait que l'enfant ne mit en pratique dans la vie ses rêves meurtriers. On se basa sur la théorie de Jung (1966) selon laquelle la croissance psychologique s'opère lorsque les rêves sont traduits par un autre moyen d'expression telle que la peinture ou la rédaction. Ainsi, on a eu recours à une thérapie utilisant la rédaction d'une série d'histoires à épisodes. Grâce à ce moyen, l'enfant se mit à écrire des histoires pour l'instituteur qui à son tour, les remit au conseiller pour en discuter avec lui. En tout, seize histoires furent ainsi composées pendant une période de 32 semaines. Les histoires avaient pour sujet la séparation, la lutte entre la dépendance et l'indépendance, la convoitise, la rage, la domination, le développement d'une conscience et la naissance d'une nouvelle identité. Le travail de l'enfant à l'école s'améliora. Une consultation qui eut lieu un an et demi plus tard démontra qu'il faisait de bons progrès en 9e année.

One September when counselling in an elementary school, a seventh grade teacher approached the author with two stories written by a student in his English class. The stories contained considerable violence and the teacher was concerned as to whether this boy was "potentially dangerous and should be referred to a psychiatrist".

In the classroom Tim was an isolate — he had few friends and tended to get into fights easily. He was taller and bigger than the other boys. Also, although in the above average range of intelligence, he was resistant to learning and had failed grade 7 the previous year. He was now repeating it with a new teacher. The teacher thought the learning problem was due to emotional factors rather than to any innate learning disability. He observed that Tim's performance was quite erratic and that persistent daydreaming and fantasy seemed to result in withdrawal, inattention and off-task behaviors in the classroom.

In regards to his family life, Tim was the middle of three boys, all close together in age and his parents had recently separated. The boys lived with the mother and visited with the father on the weekends.

RATIONALE FOR TREATMENT

The teacher was worried about Tim's explosive behavior in the classroom and the violent content of his fantasies. He was concerned that, at a later date, Tim might "kill someone".

The author observed Tim in the classroom, read the stories and felt there was justification for concern. However, he noticed that Tim was communicating his fantasies to his teacher by writing them down and handing them in as part of a class assignment. The thematic content of the stories revealed some positive strength and resourcefulness on Tim's part (see Result section below) and the author felt that this material could form the basis of treatment.

The rationale for this approach is based on the work of Jung (1966) who felt that in times of stress one can look to the patient's unconscious for understanding and direction. For example, Jung believed that the healing potential of the psyche becomes activated when the client begins to symbolize fantasy material over a period of months. By this he means that psychological or inner growth occurs when dreams or day dreams are made tangible through some form of creative expression such as writing or painting. He emphasized the importance of the "serial" approach whereby the counsellor looks not at one dream or story but dreams or stories "in series".

In the disturbed person, the content of the dream or fantasy often reflects the "stuck" or blocked position and the origin of the disorder. If the client shares these images with a counsellor, paints or writes them, Jung argued, psychological growth and movement is re-established. He called this approach, "dream or symbol amplification" while he referred to the growth aspect of the unconscious as the "individuation process" (Jung, 1953). A Jungian therapist, then, takes his cues and direction from the unconscious of the client.

In regards to the present situation, the writer believed Tim needed some help with his fantasies and that the teacher needed some support and psychological insight in order to understand Tim's inner struggle.

METHOD

It was decided that Tim could write what he wanted during creative writing and that the teacher would bring the stories to the author for discussion of their underlying psychological content.

The author's approach to interpretation followed Jung's framework and was essentially to raise hypotheses such as these: (a) every part of the story reflects slightly different aspects of the writer's inner emotional life, (b) that the emotions reach consciousness through the symbols used (i.e., the symbol is a container for a particular type of feeling), and (c) that the mechanisms of repression and projection are frequently seen.

RESULTS

From September to May, 16 stories were collected. This averages approximately one story every two weeks. Nine stories were selected for presentation and these seemed to depict the psychological struggle of the early adolescent to separate from his mother, father, and brother and to function independently of them.

Each story will now be given with the notes and brief interpretations that were discussed with the teacher.

1. *The Dream*

"You-who" said Aunt Pauli in a high pitched voice. Quickly without listening to any more, I ran to Hell's Island. Step-after-step, gasp-after-gasp, I got away from the old nag. There was only one thing I didn't know. The Island was haunted and I was lost.

Trying to find my way home I saw this dark and creepy figure. Without knowing what it was, it grabbed me, pulling me off the edge of the Island. All of a sudden I remembered, from reading in this book, a way to break this spell. I shouted, "Tag-along" and she disappeared.

Without thinking what to do, I went down to the ledge. Quickly I tied a rope to the stone and climbed my way up to the top. All of a sudden I woke up and found it was a relief to be in a dream.

The story seems to represent an attempt to escape from the critical ("You-who"), blaming aspects of the mother as symbolized by "Aunt Pauli", and the "old nag". The problem is that where he runs to is no better. That is, one cannot run away from (i.e., repress) the feelings of anger at mother because they will return to haunt you (in the form of a "dark and creepy figure"). Psychologically speaking, the feelings leave when they are looked at and integrated into conscious understanding.

He shows some resourcefulness in that he can extricate himself from the grips of the unconscious and be adaptive ("I tied a rope to the stone and climbed my way up").

2. *The Phantom*

It was Saturday, August 7, when we were robbed. My Mom's best jewelry was taken. John screamed, "Help". I quickly ran to his room and he was dead. Gasping, I looked up and saw the phantom. He quickly took a swing at me with his razor sharp axe. I ducked and grabbed him by his balls and landed right where it counts. I grabbed his axe and swung wildly at him. He gasped as I took off both of his legs. I quickly dropped the axe and ran to the phone. I shouted frantically: "Operator, Operator, get me the police." All of a sudden this hand grabbed me and I fell to the floor in shock. It was the phantom. I ran out the door and saw the cops standing there and I told them he was in the house. They quickly phoned an ambulance and picked him up.

This is a classical oedipal theme in that it deals with the envy and jealousy around sharing mother. He feels father ("phantom") and probably brother ("John") have more affection (i.e., "my Mom's best jewelry") than he does ("robbed"). This results in his need to render them "dead" and "castrated" ("I grabbed him by the balls and landed right where it counts"). The purpose of this is to annihilate them so that he has mother's undivided attention for himself. Naturally, this does not work because there is always an unconscious threat of retaliation by the ever-present, phantom father. In addition, the "taking of Mom's best jewelry" could represent the

expression of his repressed anger at her.

His inner strength and positive superego are once more demonstrated by his coping ability and by the presence of the "cops" who phone for "an ambulance" (i.e., a helpful symbol).

Translating this into the every day reality of the classroom and home, I met with the teacher and father and encouraged them to be conscious of spending a little time alone with Tim where they would be open to hearing Tim's point of view and meeting some of his attentional needs. Whereas the teacher was already doing this, it was difficult for the father to grasp. That is, he usually made a request of Tim, rather than letting Tim tell him what he wanted to do with Dad or Mom. Over time, however, the father did begin to understand how important this was and did slowly change.

3. *My Last Night Alive*

It was a cold mysterious night when I noticed my Mom wasn't home. I called all her friends on the phone and found out that she wasn't there. Then I heard a shot coming from the direction of the backyard. She was lying there in agony, screaming for help. I called an ambulance but it was too late, she was dead. After five days I got over it and told my Dad. As the weeks went by the sniper came back but what he didn't know was, I was ready for him. When I saw him climb on our roof, I got the sights right on him. The next morning I found out that the man was just repairing the roof. After explaining to the police they took my gun and gave me a fine of \$200. I raised the money in a week by helping my Mom's friends clean up the house. That night he came and shot me in the head, I died the same way my Mom did, in agony. I came down from the heavens and watched the murder. That night I was going to kill him. With all my spirit powers I drove him to his death.

This story reflects the ambivalence of the early adolescent — the wish to separate from mother, to live independently of her, and the fear of doing that. The separation is often manifested by a tremendous amount of rage and hurtful impulses, hence the emphasis on "shooting" and "agony". In other words, the separation only becomes possible when one has symbolically rendered the mother (or father) "dead". At this point one is psychologically free. But with the freedom comes the experience of pain, loneliness and loss (i.e., the desolation of the low of dependency). In this case, Tim's separation is very brief, because he in turn is shot "in the head" (i.e., the centre of consciousness) and returns once more into a state of unconsciousness and union with mother ("I died the same way as my Mom").

This pattern is common. Psychic energy moves in a spiral fashion (Jung, 1960); that is, there is growth, then regression (i.e., a falling back into the unconscious), then more growth, regression, etc., until a new plane of psychic life is attained.

There is an ironic twist in the story in that he mistakes the repairman for the sniper; that is, he "shoots" (or denies) someone who is trying to be helpful (probably his father). In reality, then, he is probably denying or refusing to see the helpful overtures that his father is making to him.

This process is normal in adolescence because paradoxically to respond to the parents' help results in one still depending on them. It is normal experience of the "double bind". Growth comes from giving consciousness to both feeling, to struggling with the tension of opposites until there is a transformation and resolution. This does not occur here because the "death wish" (i.e., the sniper) wins out in the end, as the storyteller is "shot".

4. *The Mad Dog*

Once in a lost village of Gorden there was a Dog. Everyone was afraid of it and when they saw it they would lock their doors and stay in.

That night, the Dog struck out. He ripped open the doors and murdered the people. In the morning there was a hunt for him. They broke up into groups: one took the lost lagoon and the other took the land. Searching quietly one of the boys spotted him. The Dog came chasing him and killed our last man. Quickly I ran to the village and told the women to arm themselves with stakes. One-by-one, two-by-two, the women came out of their house and the chase was on. I spotted him and speared him with the stake but he didn't die. Then I remembered how to kill him. I quickly got some salt and followed his trail of blood. I poured the salt down his mouth and he fell to the ground. Quickly it grabbed my legs and I fell to the ground in pain. All of a sudden it screamed. It was his last scream because he was dead and my people were safe.

Some emotional growth is demonstrated in this story which reflects the heroic struggle between his conscious ego and his murderous aggressive instincts as represented by the Dog. Indeed it is the classical tale of the youthful hero. The "last man" of the village was killed and the boy-hero organizes the women in the chase. However, it is not brute strength that defeats the Dog — rather knowledge and understanding.

The pouring of salt down the mouth seems to be a symbolic attempt to reduce the pleasure that one experiences in dependency much as antebuse is used in treating alcoholics. For psychological growth to occur one has to transcend or sublimate one's oral needs. Here the oral aggressive instincts are being dowsed or salted!

His relationship to the feminine is more positive in this story. Women are seen in a helpful role. This is important because for the male to deny the feminine principle is to cut himself off from any depth of love and leaves the psyche devoid of renewal and any ongoing nourishment.

5. *The Unwelcomed Man*

Three nights three days I had been waiting for the prize from the Daily Bugle, Rod and Reel Club. "Knock-knock. This is the Rod and Reel Club." Then all of a sudden the man pulled out a gun. My first reaction was to jump but then I realized that if I panicked he might shoot me. So I said: "What are you going to do with me?" All he did was laugh. Then as he fell asleep, I went into the kitchen and I pulled out 25 knives, 3 forks and two beef cutters. I rigged it so when he moved he would be filled with holes. I made a whole bunch of noise and he woke up. He pulled out his gun: "Ahh" he screamed. And there was silence; he was dead. But I got grounded for a month by my parents so see you next month.

Another tale depicting the emerging young hero "waiting for the prize" and ending up killing the father. Often the adolescent male gets inflated (over kills) and has to be brought down to earth by the limits set by parents and teachers ("I got grounded for a month"). One sees here the typical adolescent intensity of negative affect towards father figures ("I pulled out 25 knives, 3 forks and two beef cutters") and also a subliminal awareness that "winning the prize" (freedom and independency) is not going to be easy — you lose it just when you think you have it. For example, when he asks the man what he is going to do with him, the man just laughs as if to say: "So you thought you were going to win a prize!"

The story also reflects the growing ego strength of Tim; that is, the growing mastery over his impulses by his intellect: "My first reaction was to jump but then I realized . . . he might shoot me." In other words if he just reacts he will get into trouble. What he did was to use his head and to ask a question.

Another variable here and sign of strength is that of humor, for having been "grounded for a month", he closes by saying to the reader: "See you next month."

6. *A Parcel*

It was Saturday when we saw this guy bring these giant boxes. After he left we looked and saw these boxes full of machine guns. We notified the police, and they set out a search for this man. Our description of him was exactly right but the guy said he didn't know a thing about it.

When we went home we read on one of the guns the name: Mr. Marcida. We dropped these parcels off and found out this guy worked for the Mafia. The next day we sent the police there and they asked for details. All the guy said was that he had a right to remain silent and all that jive. We followed him as he went to one of his gang meetings and we did a little snooping around. This guy asked us if we belonged here and we said, "Yes". Then he asked us if we knew the code. Luckily we heard another guy talking and saying the code. As we left we sent the whole cop squad to bring in the Mafia. We turned on the TV and saw that they had been brought in and the one who gave details would be rewarded \$1,000.

Another hero story, reflecting a reduction in expressed violence and the establishment of better controls. This time he is no longer operating in isolation but joined by his peers ("we"). In reality, he was beginning to make some friends in his class at this time.

His aggressive energy seemed more contained ("these giant boxes . . . full of machine guns") and there were no more gruesome details. One can see an ethical sense developing (and a superego) as he reports his findings to the police. This is a positive movement as he abides by the rule of the Law and does not try to deal with the Mafia himself. On a subconscious level it might reflect a dawning awareness that if he does not control his own violent feelings (the Mafia), he will end up like them — in trouble and in jail.

Once again his resourcefulness is manifested throughout the story ("our description of him was exactly right . . . we knew the code") and this time it looks as if he will receive his reward!

7. *Hurricane*

The wind was blowing and a hurricane was started. Powerful gusts of wind were hitting our area. Our family took cover. We packed boards against the windows and took cover behind strong support. Swish, a gust of wind took off the roof. Scared, I ran for more support boards, tables, chairs and anything in my reach. "Ahh." My brother had been crushed by a board. I dashed to see if he was still alive. He was, but barely. I ran to get the first aid kit but it was too late. He was dead. When I woke up, I found it was a bad dream.

Though he has been trying to contain his destructive impulses, this story reflects that the energy is still alive and indeed it is strong enough to blow off the roof (i.e., to dismantle the controls) and to make him act out symbolically his death wish for his brother.

His ambivalence is also reflected here as he tires to make good with the first aid kit.

To date it seems that through the stories, Tim has expressed symbolically some of his unconscious feelings towards his mother, father, and brother. The next story seems to reflect his struggle with more of the collective, archetypal forces of the unconscious (Jung, 1959) rather than those of his personal unconscious.

8. *The Thing*

Half man, half monster, the incredible Thing noiselessly springs over towns. All is quiet until suddenly the stillness is shattered by a noise. The town spread wildly in excitement as the Thing struck. His green face and the strong, big arms were thrashing down killing people. His strength was unreal. As seconds went by changes came over his body. Armies surrounded the Thing and then in a split second rockets fired. Their purpose was to destroy the Thing. A spray came out of the rockets. The spray solidified into rockhard ice covering the Thing. The Thing was now isolated from the world,

but not for long. With all of his strength he tried to break the ice but could not. However, the heat from his body slowly melted the ice and freed him. From anger he became wild, swinging everywhere and trying to escape from the world. Then the army realized there was no other way but to kill him. Stung from the ice the Thing went for an attack. Using thick slabs of rock from the ground, he charged with fear.

It seems the imagery Tim uses here, the movie monster Thing, captures the crescendo of feeling. He gives voice to all of his rage — the rage that is impersonal and wants to destroy the whole world. The Thing reflects an archetypal energy source — the destructive force itself, from a very deep level of the psyche. The personal consciousness of the adolescent alone cannot contain this force. It needs the collective support of society. In earlier stories it was the police and in this one it is the army. He attempts to use personal ingenuity to contain the Thing by the freezing process (i.e., by personal repression) but it does not hold for long.

In the adolescent phase of development, this destructive force can only be contained by the collective morality of the society (Neumann, 1962). It is appropriate for Tim then that the "Thing" is eventually killed (i.e., repressed).

9. *Escape*

For more than a mile the forest was left in blackened, bare desolation. I was lost in the darkest and coldest part of the forest. Walking at a steady pace I knew I would be out of this mess soon.

Then I heard a sharp scream. It was the scream of a hurt lady. I ran faster and faster until I reached the end of freedom. But I was trapped inside a cave and it wasn't a forest at all. Scitter, scatter, I heard slimy, dirty, ugly rats but then I knew there must be a way out. I would follow these rats until I was right on their tracks. This made them run faster and I knew it gave me a chance to get out. Then I saw light, the peek, a hole but only small enough for a rat to get through. Then, just within my reach, I touched something shiny with a slim, jagged edge. This would free me from this cave. I hammered and hammered until BANG I was free. I could now go home and tell my Mom my whole story.

The heroic struggle is over. He has fought his way through the pain, loneliness and darkness of the unconscious and come through. In a psychological sense there is a rebirth — from being trapped inside the womb, to the struggle to freedom, to the scream of a hurt lady. It seems that now he is free from infantile needs and will be able to relate to mother as a person in her own right and from the standpoint of a stronger self-concept. This means that his psychic energy and assertiveness can now be used for learning purposes and for relating to the outer world. In a way, he has by writing out these stories and sharing them with his teacher, worked his way

through some of his inner world conflicts and has emerged with a new and separate (from the family, that is) identity.

Over the year Tim's explosive behavior diminished as did his frequent withdrawal into fantasy. He successfully completed grade 7 and was advanced to Junior high where one and one-half years later he was maintaining good progress. Naturally all this change was not due to serial story telling — it was but one aspect of a support system that involved input from his classroom teacher, other teachers in the school and his family.

DISCUSSION

The building of a positive self-image or identity is a key developmental task of the adolescent (Erikson, 1968). Often this process involves considerable pain and anxiety as the child changes from boy to young man or girl to young woman. Historically this difficult transition was facilitated by rituals such as the "rites de passage". Currently our culture no longer provides such protection and our youth are frequently left to struggle on their own with this difficult phase of development (Tanner, 1970).

Jung (1964) notes that the inner struggle of the adolescent parallels that described in hero myths. The search for one's own identity involves an initial separation from one's parents and often several difficult encounters with certain basic emotions and instincts — fear, rage, pain, loss, greed, envy, death, and birth. On the successful completion of the tasks, the hero returns home with a new identity and one which enables him to relate to his parents more or less as equals without undue dependency needs.

This process is clearly depicted in these stories of Tim where one sees the act of separation ("without listening any more, I ran to Hell's Island"), the continual struggle with basic impulses, and pull between feelings of dependency and independency, the accomplishment of heroic tasks and the emergence of a developing conscience and superego. This is followed in the last story by a psychological re-birth (i.e., the solidifying of a new identity) which lets Tim conclude: "I could now go home and tell my Mom my whole story."

Tim's stories give one a picture of the unconscious "at work". In them one can see the themes reflecting the slow maturation and evolution of the storyteller's personality. For example, in the early stories, the storyteller is struggling to survive. He is often overwhelmed by destructive and aggressive impulses while near the end he demonstrates mastery and effective coping in the face of threat.

On a more general level, the argument is made that serial storytelling can be a helpful approach for teachers and counsellors to use with children who display excessive fantasy behavior. When fantasy material is symbolized in some form of creative expression, given definite time — space boundaries (i.e., in Tim's case in a creative writing class and in a special note-book) and tied to a caring relationship (his teacher), psychological growth can occur (Allan, 1976, 1977a, 1977b; Wallace, 1973). When these conditions are not met, fantasy behavior becomes time consuming, circular in nature (i.e., the same fantasies erupt time and time again with no psychological growth or change in content) and disruptive to learning (Klein, 1976).

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