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# Rituals, Images and Stories: A Narrative Conversation

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Left hand extended over the heart, right hand offering tobacco—these symbolize an invitation to Maxine Shawogonabe to lead the smudging ritual. She accepts the tobacco and places it on the sacred cloth that marks the space for the ceremonial event. Offering the healing medicines to the Creator, Maxine places them strategically on the altar; tobacco symbolizing truth and honesty; cedar representing strength; sweet grass embodying kindness; and sage meaning sharing.

Then Maxine begins the teachings of the four doors or four directions. With economy of word and action, she draws our attention to the east, the door to new life and new beginnings; south, the door to youth and honesty; west, the door to the spirit world and adulthood. The northern door symbolizes our grandparents and strength. The circle completed, Maxine reaches for the feather of the eagle, a most sacred animal in Native spirituality. The eagle, she says simply, flies higher than any other bird and it is the eagle that carries messages into the spirit world. Mixing pinches of tobacco, cedar, sweet grass and sage, she lights them in the smudging pot. She directs their smoke toward each of us, gathering it over different parts of our bodies, and requests a cleansing of body, mind and spirit, messages sent to the spirit world. A time of silence and we receive a gift of words with special meaning for each of us. Maxine drums and sings

in Ojibway. We listen and we receive.

Maxine's story of reclaiming her cultural identity as an Ojibway holds resonance for me. Following the many steps to relearn the stories and rituals of her grandparents, leading the ritual gave her an opportunity to honour the story of her people and to strengthen its presence within her. Stories and rituals from my own past ripple and stir into memory.

Through the years, I have been drawn to the stories, rituals, and traditions of the First Nations and have found comfort in them. During this ritual, I became aware that my connections to their stories are threefold. First, there is the thread of the relationship of people to the land and its spiritual expression. Second is valuing the extended family and community. These two threads are stitched into the tapestry of history, beliefs and values my own parents and grandparents brought from their small farming villages in Northern Italy where national borders shifted often. The third and final thread of connection is with a people intent on coming into their own—a struggle which I share.

Four of us took part in the ceremony, all of us women and Canadian. Maxine is Ojibway, two are French-speaking, and my parents emigrated from Italy. All of us desire some form of healing. Each has perceptions, beliefs, and hopes unique to her history. The Ojibway ceremony of healing body, mind, and spirit merges our existence with elements of the earth and our individual stories of hope and redemption. I recall stories and reminiscences from my parents' families, the Marcons and Margarits, and rituals that were once faithfully celebrated and now are almost forgotten. The persistence of these memories underline their former significance. What meaning do they hold for me today?

The ritual provides space on multiple levels for multiple stories: culture-specific stories of identity; stories of the spiritual relationship between human beings and nature; and stories of healing. In the Ojibway ceremony, these stories were integral to the storyteller, Maxine, shaping her sense of self. At the same time they evoked stories particular to me, my family and our culture; stories integral to who I am, how I am, and how I am to be in the world. The ritual provides space for multiple stories—within the storyteller, the participants, and observers.

When Maria Selvina Palazzoli first introduced rituals as a therapeutic technique, their use was primarily as “prescriptions” (1977, Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata). Such prescriptions were designed tasks dictated by the therapist. Later Evan Imber Black and Janine Roberts brought an anthropological approach to the description, composition and meaning of ritual in people’s lives. For Imber Black and Roberts rituals were more than tasks to perform or magical interventions. Rituals were co-evolved symbolic acts (1988, Roberts) which allowed for multiple meanings and which acted on multiple levels. A further exploration of symbol, story, and ceremony by Combs and Freedman (1990) reflects the interconnectedness of these elements and their interplay in a person’s life. Combs and Freedman emphasize the story itself as metaphor as well as the metaphor contained in the story. More recently Michael White (1989) proposed that persons live their lives by stories which he calls self-narratives. He noted:

In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them. Specific experiences of events of the past and present, and those that are predicted to occur in the future, must be connected in a linear sequence to develop this account. This account can be referred to as a story or “self-narrative” (p. 19).

Later he cautioned that this narrative metaphor “should not be confused with that which proposes that stories function as a reflection of life or as a mirror for life. Instead, the narrative metaphor proposes that persons live their lives by stories—that these stories are shaping of life, and that they have real, not imagined, effects—and that these stories provide the structure of life” (1992, page 123).

Experiencing the smudging ritual at Lake Wahnapiatae pushed me to consider ritual and its elements of story and symbol as something more than co-creative actions which reflect a person’s belief. They are constructs that comprise the very person.

In this paper I want to reflect further on the statement that people live their lives by stories and that it is not one story but many stories which shape and provide a structure of life (White, 1992). I will use two scenarios: one is from the mythical tale of *The Little Prince* (Antoine De Saint Exupery, 1971); and the other from the clinical

world of therapy. As a framework for my reflections I will use concepts from the school of Narrative Family Therapy. I will conclude by reflecting briefly on the implication of such concepts to our understanding of and response to story, and its role in creating meaning.

### Scenario #1 “The Story of the Fox and Prince and The Observation of Proper Rites”

The story of *The Little Prince* (Antoine De Saint-Exupery, 1971) provides a playful framework for exploring the social construction of the rituals, the stories that are contained in the ritual, and the multilevel power of metaphor within the story.

In Chapter XXI a dialogue occurs between the fox and the little prince which explores the observation of “proper rites”—a ritual used to establish ties. The conversation goes this way:

“If you want a friend [said the Fox], tame me...”

“What must I do to tame you?” asked the little prince.

“You must be very patient,” replied the fox. “First you will sit down at a little distance from me—like that—in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day...”

The next day the little prince came back.

“It would have been better to come back at the same hour,” said the fox. “If, for example, you come at four o’clock in the afternoon, then at three o’clock I shall begin to be happy. I shall feel happier and happier as the hour advances. At four o’clock, I shall already be worrying and jumping about, I shall show you how happy I am! But if you come at just any time, I shall never know at what hour my heart is to be ready to greet you...One must observe the proper rites...”

“What is a rite?” asked the little prince.

“Those also are actions too often neglected,” said the fox. “They are what makes one day different from other days, one hour from other hours. There is a rite, for example, among my hunters. Every Thursday they dance with the village girls. So Thursday is a wonderful day for me! I can take a walk as far as the vineyards. But if the hunters danced at just any time, every day would be like every other day, and I should never have any vacation at all.”

The rite is honoured and when the fox departs he gives the little prince a gift.

“Good-bye,” said the fox. “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye...”

“It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important.” ... “You become responsible forever, for what you have tamed.”

In this myth a number of stories interact with each other to create a cultural reality for the hunter, the village girls, the fox and the prince. The fox is the narrator and at the same time protagonist. The tale is told from his understanding and yearning to create meaning for himself. The fox lives his life according to the stories of safety, expectation and taming that he has learned. This dominant narrative (White, 1990) is the activating force behind the elaborate structure of establishing proper ties to ensure a much valued taming process. For example, the fox knows that “Thursday is a wonderful day” for the taming to occur, while other days pose external rites that act as restraints (White, 1986) to his freedom. He also believes that participating in these proper rites will create an environment of trust and perhaps develop into a relationship.

The little prince’s stance of curious exploration entices and encourages the fox to speak of his reality. The Prince receives his cue from the conversation which brings about the enactment of a rite that is structured by time, space and symbolic interaction.

Established ties are formed between the fox and prince. It is then that the fox relinquishes the secret that lies hidden deep with him. “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye...” The sacred secret is what gives meaning and what guides his action in the world.

This mythical story in social construction terms illustrates effectively how reality is constructed, internalized and written as a dominant self-narrative. Stephen Madigan (1996) asserts that

The questions we ask about events and the realities we construct and practice determine the very distinctions that we pull out of the world...Derrida (1991) suggests that the speaker speaks from a set of pre-existing frames or what others like Heidegger have called pre-

understandings. I am inclined to perceive our utterances as shaped through a scaffolding of presuppositions (Madigan, 1991a), i.e., what we know in our lived experience is shaped through the cultural weave of community discourse (p. 49).

The fox's story of taming and proper rites is shaped by his experience of the community discourse—in this case the hunters.

This story can also be a strong metaphor for the pastoral counselling relationship. As in the story, clients invite the counsellor into their constructed reality; the counsellor accepts, not as an expert, but as one who is honestly curious about a story that is unknown in its meaning and construction. The conversation focuses on the initiators' account of their self-narrative. The dominant story is told and the telling provides an opportunity for further interaction with the story itself, and for insight into less dominant stories. White (1994) believes that "Our lives are multi-storied. No signal story of life can be free of ambiguity or contradiction. No self-narrative can handle all the contingencies of life." Therefore he suggests the role of therapy "is to bring these alternate stories out of the shadows and to elevate them so that they play a far more central role in the shaping of people's lives."

How and where did the fox learn the secret? How does this influence him in his living? Has he experienced other incidents when proper rites were honoured and relationships developed? Are there other secrets that are important to him? Other stories of taming?

Persons live their lives by stories that are told as they try to reach some goal or strive to make meaning out of something that is perplexing or contrary to the norm. The story is about themselves and out of necessity, about the other. The fox wants to establish ties with the prince. He does this by structuring a rite that provides the ingredients and determines the day that will ensure safety.

From this narrative perspective a pastor in the parish can explore the stories that he or she lives by. Is there a dominant story? What is the influence of these stories on his/her ministry? How has this dominant story been shaped culturally? Does his/her congregation have a dominant story that has been shaped culturally?

## Scenario #2 "I Only Have a Penny"

In this clinical story which I have entitled "I Only Have a Penny" I would like to explore two stages that are essential in bringing to light an alternative story that is not troublesome.

A couple married over 10 years, came into therapy distraught with grief. Their eleven year old son had recently died after a long term illness. The couple wanted to deal with the son's death and at the same time begin to re-organize their life together. The parents described their son as someone "who fell between the cracks" of the community health system. The wife, herself chronically ill, described herself as having been the child's advocate, nurse and playmate. The husband burdened by his son's death and wife's illness was struggling to keep it all together. Another therapist saw the couple for more than a year before I was invited to join the system. In the debriefing I was intrigued with an image described by the husband and was convinced that it was an important narrative metaphor to explore with the couple. This is an excerpt from the session. Names and other identifying information have been changed. Permission to print was given for teaching purposes. (W=wife, H=husband, C=counsellor).

W. I want to see the room where Jimmy passed away. I really have to see the room and really remember.

C. You are in a different space this week. What I like is that you are talking about each other in the third person. Today you are addressing each other even though you are in different spaces. Today you are letting each other be where each is.

W. It was a bit rough at first, but then we clarified it. We could just be. I told him why I felt happy and that seemed to settle things down. We were tense at first.

H. It's funny I am starting to feel feelings. Loneliness I guess. When I think everything is falling apart it really isn't. Pressing on, things get better. We've been talking a lot lately. Last night I just said, "Let's look back a wee bit. Christmas is coming...Jimmy's birthday...and you are going through what you are going through. You know I'll be there for you. But on the other hand I need for you to respect when I need to go to the YMCA.



W. I know I thought I might be an inconvenience.

H. But I said to state what you need.

W. It is O.K. if I want to go to the Mall or White Rose and he needs to go some place else...

H. I realized something about Sarah. I guess in the past it would have been something to argue about this but now it's not. In fact we can laugh about it. She doesn't express herself the way she wants to. In a round about way I have this picture that helps me. I picture her in these little red shiny boots, standing with a penny jumping up and down, in front of a gumball machine that takes nickels. But all she's doing is jumping up and down screaming "I've just got a penny! I've just got a penny."

W. (After laughing she states:) I picture myself not in red shiny boots but in black patent boots and wearing culottes standing with a penny jumping up and down in front of a five cent gumball machine screaming "I only have a penny!"

H. What she could say "could I have a nickel for the machine". She is not stating her needs for whatever reason. That I won't be able to meet them?

Although there was a shift in the couple's ability to communicate and an increased sense of the need for emotional differentiation (Bowen, 1973) they were still fragile and feeling very challenged by the absence of their son and the long-term impact of his illness on each of them. The story of loss—loss of a son, loss of roles (nurse, advocate, mother, provider and father), loss of a daily ritual of attending, loss of self and loss of a relational intimacy between them—was understandably fresh and raw. This cumulative loss burdened each of them. Their emotional, physical, financial and spiritual resources were depleted. They only had "a penny" and their interactions and physical appearance reflected that reality. This was the over-riding story they were living.

Prior to this session the couple made a move to another house—a significant attempt to begin anew. Sarah was committed to remembering her son's room and to locating a space for him in their new home. She was also aware of the tension between herself and

her spouse. John was consciously noting his long submerged feelings of loneliness, and of not being able to get on with life. They were in a fragile space, awkwardly facing each other. This change of direction from son, illness, and death to each other and the absence of their son was a new, tentative step the couple was cautiously exploring. They were in a new home experiencing the stark reality of only having a “penny” and recognizing that it was not enough.

Combs and Freedman (1990) state that symbols refer to the smallest units of metaphor (words, objects, mental images) in which a richness of meaning is crystallized. The image of the “penny” crystallized a number of important meanings. The couple knew at some level that the dominant story of cumulative loss and their overwhelming feeling of emptiness and deprivation was too much. They needed a nickel for the gumball machine. Responding to their fragility within this conversation required a belief in the clients’ resilience, their growing ability to trust themselves and their forgotten resourcefulness.

The Pastoral Counsellor utilized this to open up new stories, meanings and possibilities. In doing so a shift occurred. The penny became the symbol of what is and what can be gotten if used.

Developing a less overwhelming story of loss and a more freeing self-narrative involves two stages. Deconstruction (White, 1991) of the dominant story is the first; and the second is the re-authoring (White, 1995) of a new, preferred narrative. The deconstruction stage in this clinical story involved bringing into the light that which was experienced as restraining and the subsequent supporting structures. Included in that process was the identification and examination of the beliefs which were embedded in the experience. This step demanded a naming of the restraint as something separate from the person—an act of externalization (White, 1990).

In this case, the image of standing in front of the gumball machine with only a penny was selected to loosen the client’s dominant story and at the same time to allow other, forgotten stories to surface. The goal was not to get rid of the grief but to attend to the deprivation experienced in the grieving process. A transcript of the image was prepared for the next session.

At the outset the couple reported going for a walk around the new neighbourhood, and of experiencing the newness of the sur-

roundings. Sarah was still searching for the right spot to hold and honour the memory of her son. As they talked, their stories were punctuated with fear and glimmers of hope; and with fine threads of emerging control over their lives. The metaphor was introduced to the couple. John was asked if the image also related to him as well. Sarah recalled the discussion they had on that very point. Both shared ownership of the metaphor.

As they held the transcript exploratory questions guided the conversation among us. Were there other times in their lives when they experienced possessing only a penny? How was that penny used? Was there ever a time when the penny reflected their basic resourcefulness? The couple recounted and identified with the scripture story of the ten talents. They were the ones who had only one talent. Without prompting the couple began to assure the other of the many talents they thought they had. At that point a single penny was given to each of them. The question posed was: "What did the penny represent?" Their attention shifted. Each revealed personal qualities and skills they experienced in themselves in the past, a step in remembering other stories that were pushed into the background by this story of loss. If they were to spend time with their pennies would there be other stories? What did they do then? Were there times when the penny was enough to raise a nickel? The stories were intentionally noted and recorded as we listened. At the end of the session the couple was asked to take the stories and the penny home with them and to think further about what was shared today. I also asked the couple to read the scripture passage of the talents and to consider its meaning to them today. The couple spent time in the session discussing how this could occur, resulting in a broad structure being set up.

The first step in the re-authoring process is to identify the dominant story that reflects the couple's basic belief about themselves individually and collectively. In this incident the dominant story of depletion is contained in the image "of standing in front of a gumball machine" that requires more than they have. The metaphor of having only a penny describes in monetary terms the couple's self-narrative or dominant story.

The narrative is the couple's story. The counsellor is an astute and respectful listener who sincerely and curiously interacts with both

client and story. She reflects their story using their language and perceived reality. At the same time the totalizing belief of insufficiency is externalized and given an identity separate from them. What happens when they find themselves with only a penny? How does this occur? What meaning does this have? The conversation between the counsellor and the couple is about their self-narrative, its reality and their understanding.

The second stage of reconstruction is taking a new position within the restraining dominant story that to some degree begins to refocus the lens of the clients' perceived reality. This new position acknowledges the narrative and at the same time reflects great curiosity about other times when the penny did not have such insufficiency attached to it. What was different about those times? How did the penny accomplish such outcomes? These kinds of questions begin to build a basis for new possibilities and a new story. The latter is what White refers to as the re-authoring stage.

The ritual helped to externalize the constraining story in a tangible way and at the same time positioned the couple toward a broader understanding and reflection of past courage and resourcefulness. In their response the couple connected with other stories and investigated the meaning they assigned to them. Does it give a different perspective about themselves? How does it change the way they perceive themselves?

There is danger in assuming the client will automatically proceed because the broad steps are outlined and some insight and understanding have occurred. The counsellor should instead encourage painstakingly small, measurable, and observable steps. The new conversation needs to be strongly anchored, as do the clients' spirits and sense of self. For example, when the couple returned, their conversation included a story of their talents, a story of unpacking boxes and of finding a place for their belongings in their new home, and a story of the possibility of setting up a room for Sarah's crafts which had been put away for years. Included was a story of establishing a place for their son's memory. An important consideration was to pre-empt the temptation of recruitment into the old story of loss. Questions for present and future include: How did they want to honour the memory of their son today? Is there a temporary place they could use until they become more certain? What role did their faith

play in this? Were there special events they wanted to remember this year? How would they do so? Were there members of their church community they wanted to invite? How? Perhaps it would be more helpful to consider how they wanted to say hello (White, 1988) to their son. If it were timely for Sarah to return to her crafts, how would she know? Would John know? How could he help? How could they use their penny to get what they need today?

The two stages of deconstruction and reconstruction prepare for and tease out a new story born out of the dominant story and the dormant stories that were forgotten. Clients are challenged to reconsider their choices and the way they want to re-author their life.

### **Rituals, Images and Stories, A Narrative Conversation**

I began this paper with a personal story about a smudging ceremony. My attention was on the power and effect of the stories embedded in the ritual. Next, I elaborated on the basic principle of the Narrative School—that persons live their lives by stories; and that it is these stories that shape life. I reflected on two different examples which clarify some components of the multi-layered stories (cultural, intergenerational and religious) persons live, and how clients can be helped to make choices about preferred stories, meanings and outcomes.

In the story of the fox and the prince I proposed that the fox's dominant narrative came out of his experience of a narrative bigger than his own. The influence of the broader community shaped his reality and formed the structures he put into place to enhance a taming process defined by the observation of proper rites. Zimmerman and Dickerson (1994) state that,

Cultural stories determine the dimensions that organize people's experience. These narratives about what is canonical provide a backdrop against which experiences are interpreted. Cultural stories are not neutral (Bruner, 1990). They lead to constructions of a normative view, generally reflecting the dominant cultural specifications, a form which people know themselves. Along with White (1991), we believe that it is important, perhaps even responsible, to bring forth the effects of these constructions to help clients decide if they lead to preferred outcomes. Narrative work, as

White (1991) suggests, allows the therapist to bring cultural and political realities into the room and to open space for marginalized perspectives (p. 235).

Becoming more imbued with this philosophical stance I find myself striving to understand the dominant discourse in any narrative including my own. My challenge is to put aside old loyalties that tend to maintain the status quo of expert power. I find myself wondering how I have maintained the privileged place of the "hunter" in my social/political interactions, or religious and spiritual practice.

The clinical story entitled "I Only Have a Penny" illustrates how metaphors may crystallize the meanings that become lenses through which we view life. The pastoral counsellor gives space for multiple points of view, and encourages individuals to decide how and where they would like to situate their lives based on preferred values and intentions. Self-directed questions like these allow diverse systems beliefs, values and ways of being to surface, calling for a re-examination of what is already there and an identification of what needs to be brought to light. The result can be a reorganization of central relationships and a challenge to the couple, family and community to maintain their connection in the midst of diversity and multiple meanings.

It is my hope that you the reader have considered the dominant story that shapes your life and the life of those you live with and work with in your ministry. Are there stories that need revisiting? Is there a dormant story that needs re-awakening?

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