

STORYTELLING IN PSYCHOTHERAPY, COUNSELLING AND COACHING

STORYTELLING AND PERSONAL POWER IN THERAPY

(Contributed by David England)

Empowerment is an important part of any psychotherapy or counselling, as the following three stories illustrate.

Vasillisa - A Story About Personal Power

The story of Vasillisa is a powerful Russian tale. To obtain fire, Vasillisa must make a journey through the forest to the dreaded Baba Yaga.

The story was told to a group of health worker managers at the end of the first day of a seminar on personal development and improving team performance. Overnight, the story had a profound effect. One participant said the story had stayed with her all night, and like Vasillisa she had been fearful of the flaming skull she had received from Baba Yaga - which to her carried not only the power but also the daily burden of responsibility she was called upon to bear - and wanted to thrust it away. Working with the story she was able to reaffirm her personal power and her capacity to fulfil her vocation.

Personal Awareness, Will And Power

I worked with a woman, I'll call her Marianne, whose severe panic attacks were undermining her work as a high powered IT sales executive. This story tells a little bit about how we addressed the problem by using visual imagery in a creative way to characterise her internal drama:

Marianne is in her late twenties and holds a senior position in IT sales. She is a good manager, an assiduous networker, a powerful person.

*Marianne is seen as highly successful. She has this successful sales person part who is engaging, disarming and persuasive. She calls this part Johnny Vaughn. She says, "I see myself putting on Johnny Vaughn." She knows she **has** this part Johnny Vaughn, and she also knows, "**I am not he.**" She speaks about her "core," the "centre of my values," and adds, "I would never let Johnny take decisions."*

She also has a vulnerable, anxious child part which becomes triggered when she has panic attacks, typically in the lifts of tall buildings. She feels her vulnerable child undermines and limits her and she says she wants to get rid of it. By paying attention to the child we find how she brings to Marianne's personality qualities of connectedness, empathy and authenticity which can help her focus on the real needs of her clients.

*Marianne says it is from her core that she can **choose** to put on Johnny Vaughn. And equally, from her core she can **choose** to bring in the qualities of her vulnerable child.*

Personal Power – Counterbalancing ‘The Carer’

The Director of Patient Services for a hospice discovered and brought out a previously undeveloped part of her personality by encountering it in another member of the group:

"I'm in this job because I care for people. But the daily demands often exhaust me and override my roles as Director – prioritising, setting a clear course and motivating people to make it a reality."

On the course, dominated by the Carer part of her personality, she tries to help out another participant, Belinda. "Bugger off!" shouts Belinda.

"If only I had that powerful 'Bugger Off' energy," she muses, "But how can I say that?" She can't stifle a wicked laugh. Returning to her office, she pinned a notice saying 'Bugger Off' to her office wall. No longer did she allow herself to be swamped by the demands of others, and instead scheduled meetings with them and gave clearer direction and firmer delegation.

"This has had a major impact and helped me to do my job much better. It has really helped me to increase my personal power and autonomy to fulfil my director role. I care passionately for the people I serve. But I was letting this drive my priorities at the expense of better patient services.

I now feel much more in control of the choices I make. Which is good for me and for my patients and staff."

THE USE OF CREATIVE IMAGINATION IN COACHING

(Contributed by David England)

Here is a series of stories from individual and group coaching sessions. They illustrate how the use of creative imagination and visual imagery – and in particular recognising the characters which populate inner stories – can help people grow and develop and become more effective in their work.

Self-Belief – ‘The Doormat’

A Primary School Head Teacher in London tells this story about how the use of visual imagery helped her to be more effective in her leadership role.

As the leader of a school it's easy to get pulled in so many directions by conflicting demands – the children, governors, staff, parents, my family and myself.

I used to avoid a part of myself I called 'The Doormat,' which found it difficult to resist the will of others. Now I've faced it full on, I can really listen to others without the dread of having to do what they want.

Where this has helped me so much is in keeping a sense of control and perspective. I feel different – so confident in my decisions. I'm more resilient and less likely to waver in my resolve. This has improved my leadership and my decision-making no end. It has led to a greater sense of awareness and self understanding that I feel. It really helped me to believe in myself. It has had an enormous impact on my work and my life.

Leadership – 'Attila the Hun'

A Managing Director in the Thames Valley tells how he made the transition from self-motivation as a sales executive to building a highly motivated team as Managing Director. This meant coming to terms with his sales persona, which he visualised as 'my Attila the Hun.'

This was my first time as MD. I'd built a successful, vigorous company - £11M revenue and 75 people - in three years. How to take it on from there?

As MD my challenge now was to put together a powerful management team. This meant relinquishing my beloved sales role. It meant transforming the good people I'd chosen as board members into an effective force with a coherent focus – to be even better.

When I met David, my Executive Coach, and heard of his approach to developing extraordinary leaders I went for it.

It was a bold step. To be on a course exploring my inner motivations alongside my team. It meant being willing to reveal something of myself. Such as my Attila the Hun persona!

But it was worth it. Afterwards the performance of the team was significantly improved. We worked together with an affinity, mutual respect and with such a will as had not existed before. My talk with David had paid dividends.

Change – 'The End of the Conveyor Belt'

The Divisional Manager of an international parcels delivery company, which makes extensive use of conveyors, used the metaphor of a conveyor to understand where he stood in relation to a major change programme and what he had to contribute to it:

I'm at the end of the conveyor belt. The end of my career." At the outset of a massive change programme, I felt shocked to hear myself say this to Simon, my Executive Coach.

I sat with my coach in silence for some time, in feelings of gloom, grief and despair. The feelings were almost unbearable.

Then, somehow, I found a new impetus. "What am I saying?" I exclaimed, as my will and passion for the job kicked in, "I'm not at the end of the conveyor belt. I have a clear vision . . .

To make change happen, I had to be in the right frame of mind about myself. I had to face uncomfortable and deep-seated issues and feelings.

I was really fired me up. In the past year I have led the company through a period of unprecedented change. We have achieved record levels of quality, productivity and unit cost improvement.

The coaching sessions were very powerful. I have committed myself to take on new challenges. I will always be indebted to my coach for making me realise that leadership and a career can be kick started even in your mid fifties.