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## **THE POWER OF IMAGERY**

**Pauline Andrew**

I've found myself wondering what parables Jesus would tell if he was here on earth today. He knew so well the power of using images and metaphors from daily life to explain what he meant. For example, I wonder if the Parable of the Lost Coin in Luke 15 might be something like...

*"What woman, if she loses her engagement ring, wouldn't turn the house upside down, checking between the sofa cushions, rummaging through the recycling and frantically searching the laundry basket and fridge, until she finally finds it? And when she has found it, she posts all her friends on Facebook saying, "Yeay! Found my engagement ring! Sooo happy!" and receives lots of smiley faces in return..."*

This simple sketch is essentially saying, *"this is how God feels about you!"* It doesn't need an in-depth theological exegesis for us to get the point. A picture or a storyline can convey profound truths and, if we listen carefully, powerful images are often there in the words our clients. The danger is that, like the people listening to Jesus, we can miss the deeper meaning. And in my case that's sometimes because I'm already busy planning what I'm going to say next! We need to slow down and listen harder.

How often have we heard...

*"I felt like I was up against a brick wall..."*

*"His words cut through me..."*

*"I felt so small, so stupid..."*

We tend to major on *"How are you feeling?"*, but a different question: *"What are you seeing?"* can often take the client into a deeper level of process.

Carol was sharing with me that she found it very difficult actually knowing what was going on inside her.

*"I'm all at sea... I can't pin it down. It's like I'm on a rough sea and I feel a bit sick."*

*"Where are you in that picture?"* I asked her. I gave her some silence and waited.

She frowned. *"I'm on a square bit of wood. I'm lying down, looking at the sky... I'm feeling aimless..."*

*"So you're not in a storm?"* I asked.

*"No... it's just a dull day... no sun. Just clouds."*

*"I wonder what you need,"* I asked. *"How can you get out of there?"*

*"I want to be rescued,"* Carol replied, *"I don't feel I have anything I could do to help myself. It's a vast, empty ocean and I'm all alone. No one's going to come. I'm going to have to do it all myself and I don't know how..."*

Carol was identifying that sense of being powerless, stuck and longing for rescue which I have found in many clients. In this instance she simply closed her eyes and saw the image vividly in her imagination, but sometimes I'll grab a pen and paper and say, *"What are you seeing? Draw it for me!"* (It's a good idea to do this very quickly and spontaneously so that the client forgets they don't do art work.)

### **Finding the Picture**

Encouraging our clients to look for symbols and metaphors to express their feelings can bring insight and revelation. I have a folder of hundreds of laminated coloured pictures which clients can browse through until one captures their attention, and then we work with it to see what message lies in the imagery. I encourage the client to reproduce the pictures very simply and then, using Gestalt techniques, we give the drawing a feeling title and find out what the different elements of the picture are 'saying'.

In her wonderful book, *"When the Heart Waits"* (1990) Sue Monk Kidd describes how images and pictures helped her make sense of her midlife crisis. Opening her spirit to what she was seeing in nature, random illustrations in magazines, her own creative journaling and looking with the 'eyes of the heart', all began to take her more deeply into enduring a 'dark night' experience, and finding meaning in it.

*"The picture of the night sea journey, the cocoon, the encased butterflies in my desk, the charcoal sketches of the flapping tent and the home-baked bread – all these, and other images – helped me express the flood of sensations I felt and release the spiritual energy needed to transform them. They*

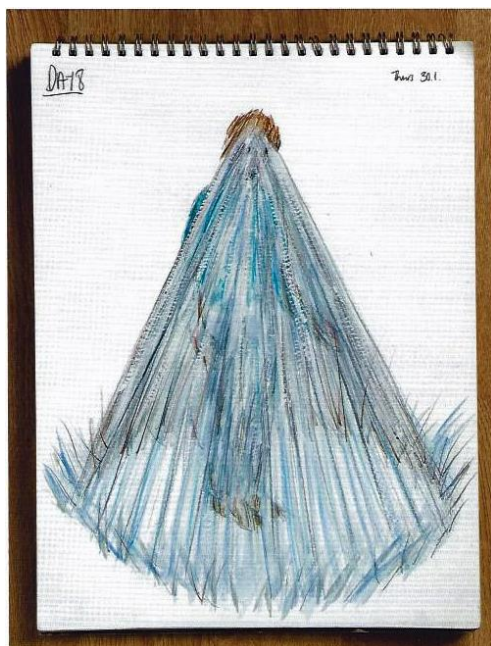
were ways of creating a story for myself to live in – a story that began to hold me up like a pair of arms...” (p. 97) For the author they were “images of hope and transformation”.

### The Language of Imagining

Margo Sunderland (2000) differentiates between the “*language of thinking*” and a “*language of imagining*”. Too often we expect our clients to speak out their thoughts and feelings through clearly articulated explanations. If we’re not careful, counselling can become an elitist solution for the verbally fluent, and we are in danger of becoming frustrated with those who are not good with words. How often has our encouraging “*Tell me how this feels...?*” led to silence and the dreaded: “*I don’t know...*”.

James Hillman (Russell, 2013) says words can be “*a terrible impoverishment of the actual experience*”. He gives the example of “**depression**” as a “*big, empty, vapid jargon word*”. In contrast, Bobby Baker’s “*Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me*” (2010) shows page after page of stunning artwork to describe her battles with severe mental and physical illness, drawings which need few words but paint for us a graphic picture of how it feels inside. In her “*Day 8*” drawing from the diary (Fig. 1) she comments, “*This was the start of the weeping. During group therapy sessions I quietly wept and wept and wept. No one, ‘users’ or staff, appeared to know how to react, as no one ever mentioned it.*”

I suspect many of our clients have *quietly wept and wept and wept*, not knowing how to put into words the pain they feel, and maybe not even knowing why they are crying. Sometimes a river of sorrow can join up with many other streams, merging into an ocean of grief which we couldn’t even begin to describe.



But maybe we could draw it.

Or write a poem or story.

Or work with a picture.

Or identify with a fairy tale!

## Working with Fairy Tales

This is one of the most powerful ways I know to work with metaphor and storyline and I like to discover the core script of all my clients by asking them to think of a fairy tale, and then working with it. Interestingly like Carol being lost at sea above, the message has often been how helpless and powerless the client feels - and none more so than the story of Rapunzel.

Grace studied the colourful drawing she had produced early on in our work together. A helpless damsel gazed out from her tall tower, looking longingly into the distance. The words on the page were *lonely, sad, hopeless*. No one could reach her, no one could help her. There was the statutory handsome prince on a white horse some distance away, staring in her direction, but not moving.

The title of the picture had been: *"Stuck"*.

Grace frowned. *"What a wimp..."*

*"You or the prince?"* I asked with a smile.

*"Both, probably!"*

We were many months further on in therapy now and Grace had been working hard at her sense of self. *"Where would Rapunzel be now?"* I asked her, acknowledging that she was in a different place internally. Grace quickly sketched her outside the tower, firmly astride a horse, ready to ride off on her own into the sunset. The prince had become a stick figure with no face, standing on his horse right outside the tower. The princess was leaving both prince and tower behind her.

The story of Rapunzel had neatly provided a metaphor which captured Grace's feelings. *Once upon a time* her story spoke of a narcissistic mother, a drunken father and childhood neglect and pain. No one came to help her, and she still held the child's longing to be rescued. After working hard in therapy, she began to rewrite her story. She made the transition from passively waiting for someone to rescue her to being ready to face her future, even if it meant doing so without a life partner. It was dramatically different from the early days of therapy when she believed all her problems would be solved if only she were married. There would be times when she would run back

to the tower again, but a fundamental shift had taken place. It had become somewhere she would sometimes revisit, but she no longer lived out of that place.

### **Identifying your Life Script**

Back to Sue Monk Kidd (ibid) again, who identified her own inner 'Rapunzel' who wanted someone to come and fix life for her.

*"Rapunzel is the helpless damsel waiting for rescue. Locked in a 'towering' problem or difficulty, she waits for deliverance rather than taking responsibility for herself. Her waiting is negative waiting, not the creative, active waiting that initiates growth."* (p.62)

*Cinderella* is another favourite fairy story that clients choose, and she is frequently drawn as a hapless victim sitting forlornly by the fireplace while her sisters go to the ball. Others have chosen the 'stroke of midnight' part of the story, where they claim Cinderella is revealed as a fraud. She's not a princess, no matter how finely she's dressed. She's really just in rags, a depiction of the shame the client feels.

The search for the handsome prince features in a number of different tales, including *Sleeping Beauty*. A client of mine with Dissociative Identity Disorder drew the part of the story where the princess is woken with a kiss, 100 years in the future! She is shocked and bewildered by her rescuer and doesn't know how life works in a completely different time zone. She was trying to tell me that many parts of her were stuck in the 1960s, the time of the original abuse, and couldn't just time travel to the safety of the twenty-first century!

Perhaps the most famous name connected with the power of the fairy tale is Bruno Bettelheim (1976) who writes about how important this genre is in helping children face their fears and handle their baffling emotions. He comments:

*"The unrealistic nature of these tales (which narrowminded rationalists object to) is an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tales' concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner process taking place in an individual."*

### **Inside Out**

The new Pixar animation, *"Inside Out"*, also explores 'inner processes' – in this case, those of Riley, the main character. She is a 10-year old girl whose life changes when she and her parents move from idyllic Minnesota to San Francisco where everything begins to go wrong. The main focus of the film is the interaction between Riley's different emotions of Joy, Fear, Anger, Sadness and Disgust

which are personified as colourful characters who inhabit her head. (The funniest parts of the film, including the sequence right at the end alongside the credits, are when other characters' heads are equally explored. I'm particularly fond of the cat...)

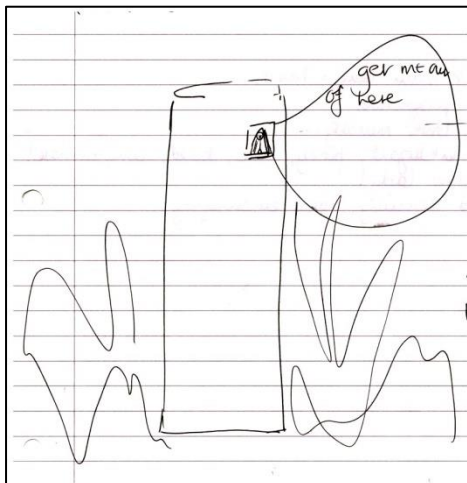
The film manages to explore a whole range of feelings and thoughts, plus memory storage and retrieval, the subconscious, the realm of the imagination, abstract thought, repression and suppression, self-concept and relationship dynamics: psychoeducation all wrapped up in just over 2 hours!

Hey, I thought, that's *our* territory, what's it doing in a Disney film? But this film has shown me more than ever the power of storyline to evoke explanation, understanding, possibilities and hope.

### Putting Pen to Paper

I know only too well that many clients are intimidated by the thought of drawing. *"I can't draw, I'm not artistic, I'm useless, it'll be pathetic..."* The resistance can be powerful and is often successful in making the counsellor back off. I worked with one client for weeks looking at the fear and shame she felt that would leave her physically shaking as she stared at the blank paper and set of coloured pens. It wasn't just memories of feeling inadequate at school, it was a perfectionist mother (with ironically high standards on getting the perspective right) and perhaps more... deeper pain, scary places. The voices in my client's head were so loud she could not hear my gentle encouragement to try. Eventually though she pushed through and produced some quite amazing art work.

I don't easily give up when encouraging a client to draw for me. Stick figures are fine, it's not about



being *artistic*. *Figure 2* shows one of the earliest 'Rapunzels' a client ever drew for me. It was the simplest line drawing, yet still revealed a heart cry. It's about being *creative* and *expressive*, and this taps into the unconscious to bring up hidden pain and deep-seated belief systems.

**Figure 2** Rapunzel in the tower

So, listen hard and listen deep, and don't forget to explore what happens if you ask your client, *"What are you seeing...?"*

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*Pauline Andrew*

*Pauline is and ACC accredited Counsellor and Supervisor (Register. She is Director of Deep Release and Managing Director of Barnabas Counselling Training and has written two "Handbooks of Creative Counselling" . She also teaches the Level 5 Certificate in Creative Interventions in Counselling (CPCAB).*