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A story of psychotherapy

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Abstract: In this short report I offer an autoethnographic vignette — a story — of my experiences as a client of psychotherapy over a two-year period. I frame this creative response to the therapeutic process with a discussion of how and why my arts-based, narrative approach came to be. The story itself has been crafted and reworked with attention to creative technique; thus, it offers — I argue — additional phases of reflexive inquiry than are typically available in the cathartic “expressive writing” paradigm made popular by James Pennebaker. I also reflect upon some potential implications for the practice of psychotherapy. I present this case study as an example of a sympathetic mode of data collection, as well as a therapeutic intervention all its own.

Keywords: Autoethnography, narrative inquiry, reflexivity, creative writing, expressive writing

It's a profound idea in life, that you can make a story that releases you from the tyranny of your past. (Yuknavitch, 2020a)

This short report documents my own reflexive, creative, narrative inquiry into my experience of psychotherapy. What results is an “autoethnographic vignette” (Humphreys, 2005; Wright, 2009) — a story of psychotherapy.

In publishing this story in this way, I have two principle aims. The first of these is to offer a potentially useful case study of sympathetic data collection for psychotherapists: I hope there is evidence here that the task of creative narrative inquiry into one’s lived experience of therapy can, with support, offer at once personal fortification and valuable research insights — “to lower the barrier between researcher and researched” (Etherington, 2017, p. 86) — providing a gift for both parties, therapist and client.

My second aim is to offer myself an initial foothold into a longer creative project: a memoir. My intent is to yield from this seedling an extended piece of narrative nonfiction capturing much more about my therapeutic journey, as well as the many other “small stories” (Karr, 2016) that this journey has helped me unbury and begin to process. There is, I feel, much “showing” to be done, where here I have principally “told” — so the maxim goes.

Methodology

I was first prompted to write what follows by my psychotherapist, with the objective that a short, written narrative might punctuate our two-year journey together. As it turned out, this seemingly simple exercise, approached creatively (i.e., with attention to voice, observed detail, figurative language, structure, and so forth) came to have rather more profound implications — for me and for her. It’s

an example of what Etherington (2017, p. 85) would call our “reflexively co-constructing knowledge and meaning making.”

After this initial prompt, I sat with the task for several weeks — not writing. Then, one afternoon, a more-or-less complete draft materialised, tapped zealously into the Notes app of my iPhone — the result of what Goldberg (2005, p. 18) would call many weeks of “composting” these ideas, feelings, and memories.

I then reworked my material, shared an initial draft with my therapist, and later re-entered the narrative again to shape it anew with additional detail. I have therefore moved beyond the cathartic release associated with the expressive writing paradigm (Pennebaker, 2018), to, as Nicholls (2009, p. 174) writes, “craft and redraft it, ultimately developing a new relationship with aspects of [my] self-experience...” I share the story here in full.

The Story

“You’re laughing, Megan,” she says, “but I sense some sadness underneath?”

Her words ring out from *Zoom*, from my little laptop on my kitchen table, with her kind face on the screen. I have the sudden feeling of wanting to cry. Perhaps it is here that my therapeutic journey begins. Perhaps there is not reason to laugh, I learn in that moment. Perhaps there is reason — very good reason — to cry.

Something is unlatched.

Therapy has felt like this: a gradual unlocking of a realm of secret tools — ways of being I’d not known were available to me. The journey has come, also, with the grief of realising that these tools were not secrets to everybody. It was implicit for some, this strange new language that I have felt myself learning from scratch: one of embodied safety and autonomy, wholeness and sovereignty, the ability to know what one needs, and then to find it in the right places, and to leave the spaces where it’s not. My tears — suppressed that first day, but which would soon come — have been, in part, for this language I might have been speaking all these years. I think a good therapist sits with you as you mourn; they validate your grief.

My therapist seemed to say, over and over again: “Yes, I see it.”

In these moments of being seen — by someone soft, unshaken, undeterred — you learn that it’s safe to mourn, that perhaps it’s safe after all to have that vulnerable, spongier part of yourself witnessed by other humans. Perhaps, most importantly, it’s safe for you to witness it yourself.

For a while, I existed like a scared child: all my wounds raw and on the surface. Just the sight of my therapist’s face on my

computer screen would make me cry. She was an island shore in a vast ocean, upon which I’d learned I could collapse.

At first, I collapsed weekly. Everything hurt a little more; I think because I was allowing hurt for the first time. This, like we once laughed, is the “health warning” of therapy.

Then, the collapses were monthly. The corpse of an ancient grief had begun to be exhumed. There was space for new, present-day grief. I got better at holding it — perhaps because I felt myself being held.

Eighteen months passed. Eventually, there was room again for joy. Though this was an unfamiliar, easy joy: not joy as a cover-up, not a joy I had to chase, or for which I felt I had to work extremely hard. It was a simpler, steadier, contented joy.

I said: “there’s this sense of just being as I am in the world as it is.”

She smiled with me.

My experience of psychotherapy has been that you go inward, safely watched over by another, not to get lost there, but to — eventually — peek out at the world again and find it seems a more bearable place. Not because anything out there has changed, but because you have changed.

Discussion and Conclusion

Writing this story has been the summation of a therapeutic journey — as I’ve so far explicated. Importantly, it has also been a therapeutic exercise in and of itself. I have offered myself a story with which I can live—in the vein of memoirists such as Winterson (2012) and Yuknavitch (2020b). As Etherington (2017, p. 86) writes, “when we enable other people (and ourselves) to give voice to experience, those voices create a sense of power and authority.” Producing this narrative has been part of my process of becoming what I have called elsewhere a *flourishing writer* (Hayes, 2017) — or *flourishing writer-researcher-facilitator* (Hayes & Nicholls, 2020) — someone engaged with creative writing as a reflexive practice (Hunt & Sampson, 2005) in the endeavour to live well.

Creative writing is a way to capture, construct, and complete what I have come to call “worded selves” (Hayes, 2019). It is through sharing worded selves such as this one — crafted dispatches of my being-in-the-world — that I feel able to access, yes, a sense of my individual agency and efficacy, but also an intrapsychic sense of connection with others (first my therapist, and now with a wider community). Writing and sharing writing, then, also offers a way of belonging.

To conclude by returning to the words of Yuknavitch (2020a): This is a story that releases me. Yet it is also a catalyst for what might come next. It is a wording of myself at a threshold, in-

between, or — as Audre Lorde wrote in her poem *A Litany for Survival* (1978) — “at the shoreline”. I find myself, in Lorde’s words:

*looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures...*

I hope I have shown the potential of creative narrative — of story — to offer psychotherapists and their clients, researcher and researched, a space for releasing, and for seeking.

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