

Therapeutic Storytelling – two brief examples with author’s notes

Lesson from the swamp ([full story](#))

A client of mine works with Indigenous men in prisons. His friend, incarcerated for domestic violence and breaching intervention orders, was approaching a Parole Board hearing and had asked: “My wife and kids need me at home, what can I do so I don’t end up here again?”

My client, familiar with the HG approach, was given a standing ovation at a national conference after describing his use of therapeutic storytelling with Indigenous men. His success comes from an awareness that a well-constructed and appropriate response could elicit intellectual assent with lots of head-nodding and agreement, but have little effect on the emotional brain that drives the abusive behaviour. He realises that to impact the abusive behaviour he has to use the language of the emotional brain – metaphor, or stories with sensory-rich metaphors embedded in them. He asked me if I could write a story to raise the prospects of his friend not ending up in prison again. His friend’s totem is the eastern brown snake.

I use a segment of the story here to illustrate how metaphor works at the emotional brain level. Take a few deep breaths, and try and imagine the story play out.

<p>It was a long time ago, and a long way from here but it is like yesterday and where we are now. A big eastern brown snake, you know what they are, they strike and bite. Everyone is afraid of them and keep out of their way even their mate and little fellas. That’s why they are nearly always on their own. Dangerous and lonely.</p> <p>Well one day this big brown was in the swamp looking for eggs. He was not looking for trouble but trouble found him. It sure did. Somehow the reeds wrapped themselves around his scales and held on and no matter what the big snake did, he couldn’t get free. The harder he tried the tighter those reeds hung on. He was a goner for sure.</p> <p>Tired and beaten, he was almost ready to give up when all of a sudden he heard someone talking. A deep voice, one of those voices where you wish he would start singing. If a didgeridoo could talk it would sound like this. That’s strange he thought “I’m not one to listen to anyone, deep voice or whatever. I just do what I do. I don’t need anyone telling me what to do”. But somehow he sort of listened - well you see he was caught - couldn’t do anything and couldn’t go anywhere. Well and truly tangled in those rotten reeds.</p>	<p>Author’s Notes</p> <p>Keep in mind you are simulating a dream. The listener is in trance, his rational capacity neutralized, and the pictures he sees have few distinct categories – meaning ‘mate and little fellas’ will almost certainly be his own, not the snake’s.</p> <p>One thing I have noticed with Indigenous men is the way anything to do with ‘country’ resonates with them. So it doesn’t matter if the listener has ever gone after turtle’s eggs or not, he will relate to it well.</p> <p>He will also relate to the birds and animals, and then of course his totem; ‘everyone afraid of them’ suits the story as well as actually being a characteristic of the eastern browns.</p> <p>When using creatures as speakers, it is essential that the voice has distinctive characteristics.</p> <p>“I’m not one to listen ...” Now I don’t know if this is true of the listener or not. I can however, make a guess that having broken intervention orders, somehow the message hasn’t got through to him.</p> <p>For this listener, as with a lot of Indigenous men, very likely a selective listener. ‘Someone talking’ could be ignored, but not ‘one of those voices’. Notice the suggestion ‘I just do what I do’, and ‘I don’t need anyone telling me what to do’. Very powerful, remember this is now the man’s totem – the very core of his identity speaking, not just ‘someone’.</p>
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NOTE: The parole application was successful, and board members were clearly impressed.

Camp Dog [\(full story\)](#)

This story is more generic – it does not use a person’s totem and therefore is suitable for group use. It includes several important life-affirming principles for those in prison, soon to be paroled or recently released. It begins with the memory of his grandmothers talking:

<p>“You got good blood ... way back in your family was pure dingo and big mob ... very smart, some people say sly and cunning, but we say smart and clever”. “People call you mongrel but we say smart and clever, and emu thinks so too. And one day when we go and join our old people, emu who lives forever will tell you himself”.</p> <p>In the cage late one night, the camp dog remembered all this. Looking through the wires he thought he could see the emu in the sky, He wanted to be out of the cage so he could see without wires in the way. As he fiddled with the lock it came undone and the cage was open.</p> <p>You might think he would be off and running, but no, he waited. Something told him no point in going back to being a mongrel camp dog again. “This time, go back different” it said. He waited some more, wondering about how he could be different. He wondered about the voice too, it certainly wasn’t a dog’s voice. Something sweet and gentle, must have been a bird, probably a night bird, a curlew, ones you hear but don’t see.</p> <p>“You need to believe in miracles” the curlew said. The camp dog gave a snigger. “I don’t believe in miracles - they don’t work” he said. The curlew continued “You don’t have to believe in miracles ... the cage is open whether you believe or not. You are free to go. You don’t have to believe in anything but it is best if you do”.</p> <p>The camp dog thought about that. Something about it made sense. Maybe he would go back to the camp different if he believed in something but he didn’t know what, yet. He walked past the other cages, most dogs were asleep but one, a big black mongrel pushed his nose through the wires and snarled, ugly teeth and bad breath “Who do you think you are ... think you are better than us do you?”</p> <p>The camp dog didn’t know what to say and just kept going, so glad his cage was open but the black mongrel’s wasn’t.</p>	<p>Author’s Notes</p> <p>Camp dogs don’t have owners. They slink around the edges looking for scraps and dodging sticks thrown at them. Nobody looks after them, they don’t belong, so have to survive the best way they can.</p> <p>Older people have the authority to have these comments carry weight. It doesn’t matter for the story if they actually said it or not.</p> <p>Notice the shift from ‘sly and cunning’ toward ‘smart and clever’. It is repeated for effect.</p> <p>The emu of the night sky is an important representation of the Great Spirit. It is formed, not by the arrangements of stars as in Western thought, but by the dark sky between constellations.</p> <p>Impulsive behaviour suggests a lack of reflective thinking, and an over-reliance on immediate sense-making. Hence the idea of ‘hearing not seeing’, and ‘miracles’.</p> <p>The statement from the black mongrel is one of the biggest challenges ex-prisoners face. What plays out here between the two dogs is crucial to the story. Indigenous culture discourages any rising above the mob. If it were not for Ruby Hunter encouraging a modest singer/songwriter to overcome this idea, we would never have an Archie Roach.</p> <p>Also, a major part of a therapeutic story is to prompt thinking toward identity and where they fit in the world. As the camp dog grapples with this thought, the story is impacting the listener at a deep emotional level.</p>
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He realised he didn't know who he thought he was, but felt for the first time he wanted to find that out. Perhaps that is something to believe in, as the night bird said. He didn't feel better than the black mongrel, but knew he wasn't in jail now, and at least he knows what a brush and toothpaste is for. Maybe there is nothing wrong with being better after all.

It felt great to be free, and it wasn't long before all the cages were a long way behind him. He walked through the night, but soon enough the sun started to come up. He paused, still panting from his long walk and just looked at the sky changing colour, and then that big bright ball started to rise. "This is a miracle!" he said out loud, looking at it as though he had never seen it before. Certainly he hadn't seen the sun rise for a long time. After a night of drinking and fighting the sunrise was the last thing he wanted to look at. Perhaps, he thought, this is what it means to go back different, noticing things and believing in something.

Sounds a bit confusing, and as straight prose it certainly isn't clear. But remember, you are simulating a dream and such clarity is not needed. If, while reading it, you are concerned, just slowly go over it again, perhaps leaving out "thought": "he didn't know who he was".

No, there isn't. Especially for a person being released from prison, a sense of not being the person they were before is essential.

Similarly, the feeling of being free with the cages behind him will allow for new possibilities, things he needs to discover, noticing things instead of a living in an apathetic fog.

The story continues along similar lines, culminating in a return to camp, and a new sense of belonging.

Additional Notes:

Some thoughts on therapeutic storytelling. The above are edited examples of prepared stories, usually read when the listener/s are deeply relaxed (in trance) sometimes with added phrases as the situation allows, including humour. During therapy, one doesn't have the luxury of a prepared story and must make it up on the go. As stories go, you could say they are usually pretty poor. After many years of doing therapy I have come to see that it doesn't matter, and realise I wasted a lot of energy in the early days trying to 'get them right'.

I realise now that I am more effective if I don't try too hard, and don't overthink it. At the rational brain level, you could ask what is the connection here ... where does that fit ... what is the point of saying that, and so on. Well the point is the listener is in trance, their rational thinking is being bypassed and you are embedding metaphors based on information they have given you. You are talking their language so to speak.

A quick word on trance. It is a perfectly natural state. The sign of a healthy person is one who can go into and out of trance anytime they want. Problem is when one can't get out of trance (addiction) or can't get into it (concentration).

My favourite start "It reminds me of a story ..." It doesn't matter what the reminder is.

It is crucial that at the end of the story, and after an appropriate pause, to 'close the curtain' with a present-state observation like 'it must be time for a coffee'. Avoid any reference to the story, and certainly never try to explain it. A final point, encourage anything that raises the prospect for a good night's sleep for the listener/s. The real benefit of the storytelling session will be the embedding of metaphors (or patterns) during REM sleep that night.