

Trusting the Story: Learning Disabilities and Bibliotherapy

by Wendy Woolfson

I had been working in Glasgow with a group of adults with learning disabilities in a therapeutic reading group for a few months. This group consisted of people who knew each other from the day care centre but had not worked together as a group before. This was their first time in a library and for most of them, their first experience of reading. This is a group who does not have access to books at any other time and have virtually no reading ability. Oral stories are therefore one of the easiest ways to reach this kind of group and offer them something of meaning. This type of space can allow them to take control and offer them satisfaction in the creation of a story that belongs to them.

The group arrived and we settled down with tea and coffee. The group seemed a little subdued and we had some of our usual conversation around what we had been up to since we last saw each other, events of the previous week and how we were all feeling. I always brought a selection of story books to read to the group and offered them to choose which ones to read, they also made the suggestions for which poems to recite.

We began our readings with a couple of poems about summer to make up for all the rain we had been getting. The poems made us all smile and remember some sunny days we had had.

I had received some supplies which I brought out; A plush, hollow tree with holes and

different animal finger puppets in each one. I suggested we make up our own story using this prop. I took out the badger to begin with and John remembered that they once had a friend at the day care centre whose second name was 'Badger' – I'm not sure if that was his real name or a nickname. They told me he had died about a year and a half ago and I suggested that maybe this could be a story in honour of him. They agreed with this and the tree was passed round for each person to take an animal from it. Alison chose to take the tree itself and so there was a puppet for everyone including the support worker and volunteer. We also had a small wicker hamper with objects from nature within it such as seed pods, dried skeleton leaves, dried flower heads, carved wooden mushrooms, smooth agate stone hearts, fractal mirror scope, pine cones and pebbles on a mat and they each took something from that.

I took on the role of narrator of the story and led the journey through the story as the character of Badger. Whenever Badger met a friend I would ask the individual what their character was doing and help them along if necessary. The plot came from the participants themselves.

This was entirely improvised from the beginning. I had no idea where this story would go and how the problem would be resolved but I did know from experience that when a group, or individual, is allowed to trust their instincts and given the time to think and express themselves, it happens naturally. The role of the facilitator is to observe the responses and reactions of the group, noticing facial expressions and body language and using that information to help gently lead the story; to be a story-listener and honour the content given, carefully weaving it into the structure. It is

about conscious listening and not allowing our own stuff to get in the way of the story that needs to be told and heard.

I set the scene and began the story with Badger going for a walk in the woods. First he met with Bluebird and his problem was that he was stuck in the tree, looking at all his friends flying and he couldn't join them and didn't know why. Badger said he wasn't sure how to help him but he would go and see if he could find some friends to help. So, Badger goes on his way and meets up with many of his friends: Hedgehog with his nose stuck in a flower trying to get a fly, Fox being silly and Squirrel looking for nuts – the funny thing was that at the beginning Badger picked up one of the fractal mirrors and didn't know what it was and wherever he went he showed it to his friends who decided to carry it all through the story which caused a lot of laughter as they looked through and saw multiple images of their friends and tried to work out what it was.

Lastly, they met with Wise Owl and she suggested they all go to see Bluebird to talk to him. When all the friends were gathered at the tree to see Bluebird they asked him what was wrong and Bluebird said he was hungry, and they realised that was why he couldn't fly. They all ran off and gathered a pine cone and seed pod and gave it to Bluebird who ate it all up and flew away happily.

Then the tree was passed around in reverse for all the animals to go back into the tree to go to sleep until next time.

Everyone cheered and clapped their hands at the end and it was clear they had

really enjoyed this story session and got so much from it. It's maybe interesting to speculate on some of the possible deeper meanings within the story told: of Bluebird being unable to do what all his friends could do; of the Wise Owl having been chosen by the quietest and hardest to reach person in the group and the one who offered the need to talk to find out what the problem was; this was also the first time she ever spoke during a session, and the tree which holds all of the creatures being held by the person who had been recently bereaved. I think this particular session was one of the most significant insofar as group participation and valuable therapeutic content goes. I believe this is because we let go of the books for a while and allowed their own stories to be told naturally through the objects and puppets. However, it was the previous week's work of reading and reciting together that enabled them to find their voices, bond as a group and have the courage to share.

We agreed it was a nice way to honour their friend who had died; and then Alison told us that her mum was ill again and that she was also going to a funeral of a friend who had died recently. I think if we hadn't told this story and lit upon the subject of death in such a gentle way she wouldn't have mentioned any of this. I now understood why she had been so subdued earlier and so we then listened to her story about her friend and we honoured her as part of the story too.

We closed with reciting another poem and looking forward to the following week.

<http://healingstory.org/>

"HSA explores and promotes the use of storytelling in healing."

<http://www.tracscotland.org/scottish-storytelling-centre>

"Storytelling is a unique human skill shared between people, and one of our oldest artforms."

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