DETOXIFYING ANGER: A NARRATIVE THERAPY APPROACH

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What is Narrative Therapy?

Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990) is not defined by its techniques, but by a belief system. It is as much a philosophy as a form of therapy. This is why writings about it tend to be so difficult to follow. And this is why probably no two practitioners of narrative therapy do the same thing. (I have heard Michael White say so, and I agree.) The best book about Narrative Therapy is Freedman & Coombs (1996).

Aaron Beck's Cognitive Therapy (eg., Judith Beck, 1995) has been used to develop a manual for helping people who suffer from depression. No such manual is possible for Narrative Therapy. A mechanistic use of 'Narrative techniques' such as externalisation is almost guaranteed to lead to failure.

And yet, once you get the feel for it, Narrative Therapy is easy to practice, and fun for both client and counsellor. All you have to do is to take a certain ethical stance, and to accept the implications of certain well-known facts about human perception and cognition. The techniques grow naturally out of these beliefs.

1. The ethical stance can be expressed in many ways. My favourite form is:

   A person never IS a problem
   A person HAS a problem

This has several implications. If everyone acted in accordance with this belief, we would never experience shame or guilt, we would not damage our children with put-downs, and of direct relevance to my topic, we would not assign blame, practise vengeance, poison our existence with anger at another person.

It is important, however, to distinguish blame from responsibility. Suppose I was an epileptic, and during a fit I broke something precious to you. I was unconscious at the time, so no way can I be blamed. Just the same, I was responsible for causing damage, and in all decency should make suitable restitution. Taking just this attitude, Narrative Therapy does not excuse irresponsibility such as acts of violence committed while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

If you are violent towards me, your problem is that you haven't controlled your violence, not that you are 'a violent person'. This apparently trivial distinction makes all the difference in the world. If violence is part of your nature, well, you can't do much about it, can you? But if it is a problem you are struggling with (or ought to be struggling with), then you have a chance of beating it.

Conversely, my problem is not you, but the violence that has come from you. So, I don't need to hate you or fear you. I need to stop you from doing nasty things to me.

2. It is a well-established fact that perception and memory are creative acts (for a summary, see Cade & O'Hanlon, 1993). Six reliable witnesses to the one event will report six different, and often conflicting accounts. Each one has taken the same set of data, and has constructed a different reality out of it. Inevitably, my construction of my reality will be influenced by my
past experience, my likes and dislikes, prejudices, knowledge and tastes. Sense data, memories and conclusions that are not in line with the reality I have constructed will be not even noticed, or passed over as unimportant, or swiftly forgotten.

This is fine in most cases. Most people are reasonably happy in the world they have created for themselves, and their friends and relations are not unduly distressed by their actions. A problem arises if my reality makes me unhappy, or leads me to cause problems for others.

This is where the power of Narrative Therapy emerges. It is 100% certain that you have had experiences that do not fit your current view of the world and yourself within it. By patient and sometimes ingenious questioning, a Narrative Therapist can make you aware of these occurrences. Once you are aware of them, you are forced to create a new reality, one that includes these events as well as the information you previously acknowledged.

Like other good therapists, Narrative Therapists avoid 'laying down the law', but lead the client by questions. Advice, lecturing, hectoring may get a person to change 'in the head', to accept a new intellectual awareness. Such a change doesn't lead to a change in feelings or behaviour. Change implemented by oneself does, and it is the only thing that does.

And that's all there is to it.

In my practice, I think and talk the language of Narrative Therapy, but use the techniques of a wide range of approaches. To return to Beck's Cognitive Therapy, he talks about a client's 'automatic thoughts'. Instead, I ask, "What are the thoughts Depression usually pops into your mind?" or "Have you always believed the lie that you are a worthless person?"

**Anger as a toxin for a grieving person**

When relevant, I tell my clients that grief is like a broken bone. It hurts; in fact there is something wrong with you if it doesn't hurt. It takes time to heal, and the injury often leaves scar tissue. There are distinct stages, but you can get stuck in a stage if something goes wrong, and while you are healing you are vulnerable to a relapse, a new injury.

On this analogy, anger is like an infection in the wound. It prevents healing.

It is entirely natural and proper to feel angry at a certain stage of grieving for a loss. It is definitely one of the stages. But sometimes the sufferer hangs on to the anger. The result is invariably unresolved grief. The loss stays a festering wound for years.

This is a particularly high risk for the victim of a crime, or for a person close to one. Hate and anger can eat up a person, preventing the normal progress of grief. Narrative Therapy is an ideal tool in such situations.
Three brief case studies

"Frances"

Whenever possible, I see my clients at their home. "Frances" was a VRAS client, whose younger brother Jason had been shot by a drug dealer 18 months before. Her home was spotless yet welcoming, with photos and her son's football trophies on the walls. She sat me at the kitchen table, and insisted on making a cuppa. And yet, somehow, I didn't like this woman. She was a clenched fist: mouth pursed, and the lines showed this to be a habit, shoulders rigid, movements ponderous. Her first words to me were, "Nobody likes me. It's because I am a vengeful person." Even though she was facing a stranger, I could see that tears were not far away.

Almost the entire first session was an unloading of emotion, Carl Rogers would have been pleased with me. But also I plucked some words from her account, and named her monster Ongoing Anger. By the end of that session, she also spoke of Ongoing Anger as a problem she had.

There is insufficient time to go through all the complications of her story. One example: her son Warren was very good friends with Jason, and started drinking after the tragedy. He then got into serious trouble, and Frances felt during this session that she had lost her last few remaining friends because of this secondary issue.

I lent Frances a wonderful book I always use in cases of grief: Seven Choices (Neeld, 1990).

One of my (non-Narrative) interventions was to suggest that she pretend to be forgiving, using Socrates' dictum, "Seem the man you wish to be." We agreed on three items of 'homework' designed to give her opportunities for this.

At the end of the session, I felt that I had done little to help her. I left with a sense of failure. She seemed too full of bitterness and hate.

One week later, things were very different. She had read Seven Choices from cover to cover, and completed all the rest of what she had undertaken. She had decided to try and get permission to visit her brother's murderer in jail, and wrote a bridge-building letter to her parents. However, she started the session with the belief that all this would be useless: things would never change in her life.

As I kept asking questions and reflecting back her answers, I suddenly saw her in a new light. I shared this with her, and with considerable excitement the two of us composed a Statement:

I am a person who hangs on to things.
I remember both the good and the bad.
This makes me a wonderful friend and a terrible enemy.
I'm a good person to have around when you’re in trouble...
But you’d better not hurt someone I love!
I am a protector.
But...
I am now working on not being an Avenging Angel.
At home, I made up a fancy copy on my computer, printed it and had it laminated. I posted it to her with the letter in the Appendix.

The funny thing was, I left the house this second time with a strong liking for my client. This was not 'counter-transference', as proved by the sequel. She phoned to postpone the next appointment, because her whole extended family had decided to go away together during the school holidays. And after the holidays she didn't contact me as arranged. I phoned her, and she told me the holiday was so enjoyable, and now she was getting on with her relations so well, that sorry, she forgot all about therapy.

As you can see, sending a letter is poor business. David Epston has found in some follow-up research that one good letter has the therapeutic worth of five face-to-face sessions.

"Lisa"
"Lisa" was a young woman who surprised her de facto while he was raping her 7 year old daughter. She reported him to the Police. During the legal processes, the daughter was traumatised yet again. Then the perpetrator was acquitted. Child Protection, Department of Human Services retained me to counsel the family three years later, when young Anne was 10.

I won't be talking about my work with Anne, but with Lisa. She was in a state of continuous outrage, her thoughts obsessively went round and round the injustice of the man's acquittal, the trauma her daughter had suffered, her guilt at not having saved Anne from suffering, more guilt about the way the so-called justice system treated the girl, on and on. Things were so bad that the case worker from Child Protection threatened Lisa with a court order if she continued talking about things like a bleeding anus in front of her kids ever again.

Lisa and I typically talked for half an hour before the kids came home from school, and several times I took the family on an outing such as to the swimming pool. We talked while the kids played. She was into Astrology and aromatherapy, and had 'New Age' posters on her walls. She told me she believed in reincarnation, so I asked her, "Why were you put here into this life? What is the lesson your spirit must learn from these terrible events?" I told her that my clients invariably felt the need to do something new and challenging when they found an answer to this kind of question.

She honestly struggled with this question through some five or six weeks.

She never actually gave me an answer, but soon after, she decided to organise a school play, with the 'worst kids in the school'. To my surprise, the topic was to be reconciliation with Koories, not sexual abuse or the like. I questioned her about this, and she told me, "No good dwelling on the past, it only drags you back."

Was this Narrative Therapy? It was, in that I consistently used externalising language during my work with the family. I had 23 sessions with them, including perhaps 15 hours with Lisa, and she overheard much of the rest. I think that even while engaged in Logotherapy (Frankl, 1984) with me, she also picked up the way of thinking, through osmosis.
"Denise"

"Denise" had been a member of a Fundamentalist Christian sect. She married a man in the congregation. He started 'playful' violence on the honeymoon, and got angry when she resisted. The violence escalated, and was part of a complex including emotional abuse and financial restrictions.

Denise appealed to the Church Elders, but they told her to be an obedient wife. They forbade her from going to the Police.

Eventually, a neighbour rescued Denise when the husband was choking her at the front door. She took out a restraining order against him and left the Church. However the abuse continued, in that he took all the money, leaving her destitute, then disappeared.

Despite her terrible present and recent past, Denise chose to spend much of our first session talking about her brother, who had died four years previously. She told me she kept dreaming about him.

I offered her an insight of Michael White's to help her with this. People keep telling you to 'forget him'. And sometimes this is precisely what keeps the grief going. I said instead, "He's been dead for four years. It is time you invited him back. Feel free to think about him. Write him a letter, ask his advice about your current troubles."

I also lent her Seven Choices.

Denise felt useless, weak, a pawn at the mercy of others. On the contrary, I saw her as admirably, incredibly strong in a situation that would have defeated almost anyone else. I made the mistake of saying this, trying to convince her that my view was correct. She resisted, so I backed off, instead asked her specific questions about where she had found the strength to continue. Her main supports were God (despite her wretched church), and the fact that her daughter relied on her. And after the second session, to my delight, she added the memory of her brother.

Denise's healing came with a reframe I'd had nothing to do with. She was thinking about some task we'd agreed on when she realised that her father, whom she'd always feared, was merely to be pitied. This insight had no obvious connection to the task. During our next session, she did an admirable Narrative Therapy analysis of what had gone wrong in Dad's life. Soon before our parting, she had started to do informal counselling for friends of hers who were grieving, and I strongly recommended that she train as a counsellor of some kind.

Conclusion

Not all my cases are successful. I chose these three to illustrate something Steve de Shazer once said: "Therapy is magic. I don't know how my clients do it." I cannot claim to know why these three women managed to conquer their problems. Something I did stimulated them to cut through the bonds of the problem that imprisoned them. In each case, they could complete grieving with surprising rapidity once they got rid of past emotional baggage, and then they were able to move forward.
References


Appendix 1: Letter to "Frances"

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Dear Frances,

Thank you for allowing me to witness the good side of your character. It is very impressive. I do hope you are around if I am ever in trouble.

You have been in the grip of Ongoing Anger for a long time now. Actually, until today I hadn’t realised that the court hearing is only three months past. It is simply inevitable that such an event rakes up old hurts, so that a person needs to start grieving all over again. The wonder is that you, and from your report, the rest of your family, are coping so well only three months after this secondary trauma.

Please don’t change. You are a wonderful person the way you are. All you need to do is to get out of the clutches of Ongoing Anger.

Now, this is difficult. Over the years you have acquired a habit of thought, and mental habits are even harder to change than physical ones. But you are an extremely determined, conscientious person, and if anyone can do it, that person is you.

As I suggested, the way may be to practise by letting go of old grudges that concern fairly minor matters, or can be explained as being due to weakness or circumstances rather than malice. For example, his boss probably tried to fire Warren out of fear of losing business, because of Warren's public 'scandal'.

You don’t have to forget anything. Just do your best to forgive. And, as we agreed, if you can’t do this, try to act as if you forgave. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates said, 'Seem the man you wish to be', and this advice turned a coward into a hero.

So, change the habit of holding grudges by pretending not to. This way, almost against your own will, you’ll establish a new habit.

This has worked for me, and I have seen it work for others. It may not work for you, but there is only one way to find out. If it works, you become a happier person, and in turn this will make people want to be in your company. If it doesn’t work, we can try something else.

When you have tamed Ongoing Anger, you will still be the same person, but, once again, your family and friends will seek your company. (I guess lesser people are uncomfortable in the presence of those with intense feelings.) So, not only will you have shed the terrible load you’ve been carrying, but also you will be able to return to a happier existence.

All the best,

Bob Rich.
Appendix 2: Part of my 'starting kit' to new clients

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Narrative Therapy

The central idea of Narrative Therapy is:

The person never IS the problem. The PROBLEM is the problem.

A problem is something you have, not something you are. You don’t have to change your nature. You have to fight the influence of the problem on your life.

All of us need to select from the huge amount of information the world throws at us all the time. We need to organise what we see, hear, feel and remember into a meaningful ‘story’ or ‘picture’. This always introduces biases: we notice and remember things we find interesting, important, and in line with our beliefs, expectations and prejudices. We ignore, forget or play down things that are contrary to the way we see the world. So, things we notice and remember tend to confirm and strengthen our story about ourselves and our world.

This is fine for most people, because they live reasonably happily within their world. Problems arise when a person is stuck in a story that makes him/her, or others, unhappy. Examples are stories involving beliefs like:

- “I am a violent person, have a short fuse (and can’t help it)”.
- “I am no good, useless, have no worth, no-one could possibly love me.”
- “The world is a terribly dangerous place and I am helpless in the face of its threats.”

They all involve the belief that “there is something wrong with me”.

Narrative therapy is a search for events which prove these beliefs to be false. There are always exceptions: events that occurred, but didn’t fit the story, so were ignored, played down or forgotten. They can be used to “write a new story”, one that separates the problem from the way the person sees himself/herself. Once the problem is found and named, it can be fought. In the process, the person does not have to change. S/he discovers a past, an identity, that was always there, but hidden by the biases of the previous story. The new story liberates the person from the shackles of the problem.