

Healing Stories

The Use Of Narrative In
Counseling and Psychotherapy

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The Use of Narrative in Counseling and Psychotherapy

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Action Stories

Ilene Ava Serlin

Growing attention is being paid to the use of narratives for healing (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988; May, 1989, Sarbin, 1986). However, these narratives are usually verbal, and the stories they tell come from the oral tradition.

The predominance of verbal narratives reflects a culture in which the word and the eye take precedence over the body and intuitive ways of knowing. The postmodern information explosion has increasingly reduced human interactions to bits of information, to cognitive processes that parallel those of the computer. The image of the computer as a symbol for this postmodern situation tells us that it is information which is of top value. The information age brings a loss of the tactile dimension of life, a replacement of behavior by cognition, action is devalued. Psyche, understood as an interior event of habitual and somewhat changeable thought patterns, is no longer in our worlds, in the landscape, in social action. Psyche is not understood as speaking through action.

Yet narratives may be non-verbal as well as verbal. Actions tell stories; in the old days, we were told to judge people by their actions, or that actions spoke louder than words. We were taught that integrity meant a congruence between individuals' thinking, feeling, and action, or, as the Buddhists say, between body, speech, and mind. We also knew how easily words could cover devious intentions or behavior, and judged others' words by their "goodness of fit" with their behavior, how they "walked their talk." Finally, we may remember the early stories told to us by our mothers, not so much in the words or the storyline, but in the tone of voice, the cool hand laid on a brow, her silent presence. The psychological meaning was embedded in these tactile moments, much as Proust's memory was embedded in a madeleine cookie. The meaning of stories lies not just in their verbal content or storyline, but in the whole gestalt of context, atmosphere, and timing.

Yet most of us are not trained in the art of non-verbal storytelling. As children, we may have learned to mime, to mimic each other or our teachers. We may have learned the agility of acrobatics, to sense the communication in the teamwork of sports, to know which limbs can be trusted when climbing a tree. Children in other cultures, however, learn a great deal more about nonverbal

behavior. For example, in Bali, children are taught specific dance forms at an early age, in which their parents use their own bodies to mirror and to shape the limbs of their children. Through these dances, and in the dances of other cultures, children learn important lessons about cultural symbols, values, and traditions.

Beyond the early experiences of play, and the often-dreaded gym class, most Westerners do not learn how to articulate their bodies with any of the sophistication with which they learn to articulate words. Yet the ability to be nonverbally articulate and communicative is teachable, and potentially available for everyone. For example, in my therapeutic work with cancer patients, with seniors in nursing homes, and with psychotherapy clients, I draw extensively from their behaviors to weave nonverbal narratives which are healing. Through movement, they express grief and loss, disconnection and blockage, but then the movement may also turn into joy, reconnection, and a renewed life flow. The stories of death and rebirth, descent into sadness and ascent into joy, and disconnection and reconnection, expressed through movement, are ancient and common to all humankind.

How can we describe these nonverbal narratives? As a dance therapist who was trained in movement notation, I have learned to recognize patterns of time, weight, space, and flow in a movement process. Like a good story, a good or healing movement pattern will have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Like good music, healing movement will have an inner logic, a flow of events which changes organically without being contrived. Good or healthy movement has the characteristics described by the Hungarian psychoanalyst Susan Deri (1988) as a good Gestalt, in which the parts fit together in a coherent and meaningful whole. This good Gestalt also describes a good life as set forth by Mary Catherine Bateson (1989) who uses the metaphor of jazz improvisation to show that the composition of a good life has harmony as well as some dissonance, balance as well as some asymmetry, and a beginning, middle, and end.

Continuing the metaphor of jazz improvisation, we can see that the compositional aspects of any art form, whether it be painting, music or dance, can be used to diagnose and also to help construct and reconstruct a healthy life. How would this process be described verbally?

Although movement speaks eloquently about a person's story, or about a group process, little of this communication shows up in the literature. Besides the usual pathologically-oriented phrases of the intake interview ("patient appeared dishevelled, twitched nervously," and so on), notes usually are not made of the nonverbal behaviors. In my breast cancer research group, for example, one woman began the group with shoulders rotated in, a sunken torso, arms close to her side, standing back away from the circle, and using a very limited amount of personal space (that is, her kinesphere). By the end of the group, she was standing straighter, had an expanded range of motion and interactive gesture, and was initiating movements. Group process observations might pick up the fact that

she had worked through some of her initial anger and withholding, had begun to experience more trust, and was emerging as one of the group leaders. The research results might show that her anxiety and depression had decreased; neither report would note the story told in her action.

Why is there is such a lack of attention to the nonverbal story? The history of literacy in the West has emphasized the written text, with its dialogue between writer and reader. The text, with its prototype in the Torah, Bible, and Koran, emphasizes the written word. Movement behavior, or action, is not understood as a text which is a dialogue between a mover and a witness. How might movement be understood as a text in a way which might provide the foundation to understand the language and stories of the body?

In this chapter, therefore, I work with the idea of text to understand and interpret the language of movement. Once this foundation is provided, it is hoped that the language of movement may become more accessible and useful to the therapist who does not utilize dance and/or movement as modalities.

Action Language

As a movement therapist, I read body movement as the text through which the patient's mode of being is made manifest. If his (or her) movements are meaningful, then how can he (or she) and I understand their meaning? Can we let the movement speak its own meaning, so that inappropriate metaphorical or symbolic structures are not imposed on it?



Figure 1

“closed” versus “open” position; another might notice the timing, weight shifts, and phrasing; a third might see a boy developmentally fixed at his mother’s knee” while a fourth might see prayers and rituals of transformation. Which one of these perspectives is real, or are they all contained in the movement? What criteria would guide a therapist’s choice of focus, and what level at what moment is salient for the therapeutic process?

Kinesthetic Imagining

The process by which movement becomes a text which has a narrative form, literal and symbolic content, and meaning is one which I call kinesthetic imagining. Kinesthetic refers to the kind of perception which originates in moving muscles. It is compounded from the Greek word “kinesis” which means

"perception." In the original root word, therefore, the combination of movement and perception was already present. Imagining is the process by which images are generated and formed. This understanding of imagining as an active process is based on Jean-Paul Sartre's (1968) definition of image as a "structure of imaginative consciousness" and on Edward Casey's (1976) description of imagination as a verb and a process rather than as a product or a thing. Put together, kinesthetic imagining is the process by which the perceptions arising from moving muscles generate and make explicit imaginative structures of consciousness.

As a narrative process, kinesthetic imagining gives form and articulation to events in time. Instead of beginning with the word, kinesthetic imagining begins with the concrete sensation of moving muscles. Moving muscles generate associated feelings, thoughts, and meanings which show up as embodied images. These embodied images flow into one another, creating a storyline or a dance. These dances speak about individual personality style and organization, about group dynamics, and about mythic patterns: they are nonverbal personal and collective mythologies (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988). As embodied narrative, kinesthetic imagining is a dynamic process by which people often compose themselves and form their lives.

The Lived Body

If Cartesian dualism has split cognition from body, then kinesthetic imagining must bring cognition and the body back together. The unity of cognition and body is what Merleau-Ponty (1962) called "incarnate perception" in which the self knows itself through actions experienced within a certain horizon. Perception is thus understood as a set of relations within the self, and between self and world. Perceptions viewed as patterns of relatedness are called "kinetic melodies." This description of image as patterned process contrasts with the traditional description of an image as a purely visual picture in the mind. An image is not a thing or an object, but a "visible of the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 164). An image is not a thing, but an active way of seeing, a paradoxical set of relations between the visible and the invisible which is rooted in the perceptions of a lived body. When reconnected to its ground in perception and body, an image is the embodied unity of vision and body.

If the moving group tells a story like an orchestra plays a melody, then the individual mover must be warmed up before he or she can make movement melodies, just as an instrument must be warmed up before it can play auditory melodies. A body warm-up is not a mechanical process, as is aerobic body conditioning, but it is intended to bring conscious perception to the body. Any one of a number of exercises might accomplish this, but all would bring awareness to the breath, to isolated body parts, and to the orchestration of body parts

working together. Some people find it helpful to begin with closed eyes, to turn away from images of the outer world and to focus on inner or proprioceptive sensations. Turning inward can turn perception into insight.

After warm-up exercises in one class, a student wrote in her journal:

I had no eyes, only senses. They were black eyes sometimes. Thankful to be a big moving mass; the burden of consciousness, too much relating to the world through the eyes.

A second student noted:

I wasn't there. All the parts of my body were involved into twisting, contracting, stretching to explore the outside world. My body was a huge We which could see everywhere — my body was skin which could sense all over, my body was all ear which could hear every sound. My tongue was my whole body and I tasted the whole world. No intellectual feeling existed. I was not happy, unhappy, I just was.

Improvising with basic sensations of weight, a third student moved into images of a deep underworld and the formlessness out of which all forms arise:

That may be why I chose to explore the Dark Goddess, who demanded the entire creative "eye" lurking in that vast, all encompassing darkness. I felt there was vision, but of a different order. The eye seemed to be part of the tissue of the stomach; the navel, at the center, was embedded within. It was recognizable only as impulse. ... a pulsing. It is a very deep wisdom ... untranslatable ... the dark source of all-there-is ... the dark material, formless, shapeless, from which everything is made.

Action Language

The descriptions above are all poetic, movement imagery, like verbal imagery, is a poesis, a "making." Most of our words used to describe movement experiences, however, are still dualistic, such as the static, objectified, noun form of the word "image." The task of finding an active embodied language has precedents in the psychoanalytic tradition. Roy Shafer (1976) claims:

I have good reason, therefore, to say that my project of devising an action language to serve as a new language for psychoanalysis falls within the great and arduous tradition of systematic and clinically-oriented psychoanalytic thinking. (p. x)

How can action be a language or a text? Language, according to linguistic philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1976), can be characterized in three ways. First, language is not comprised of the isolated units of word or gesture which are the

signs of semiotics, but is instead patterns of word or gesture with semantic referents and which are visible in the opening pictures. From these pictures, it can be seen that movement language is expressed as kinds of qualities, relations, and actions, that includes sense and form. Second, movement as language discourse occurs in interaction between mover and witness, and opens a shared world, an "ensemble of references opened up by every kind of text." A text mediates between writer and reader, speaker and listener, or mover and witness. Action language, which bridges inner sensation and outer form, into dialogue between mover and witness, is therefore a text. In traditional psychology, the spoken word is usually the text, action language adds another form of text in which images and meaning occur.

Just as a poem has metaphor and/or symbol, or levels of meaning, so a movement text has levels of meaning. And just as we have been taught in school how to analyze a poem, or just as clinicians are taught how to analyze levels of meaning in a dream, so we too can analyze levels of meaning in a movement text.

A text, according to Ricoeur (1976), is characterized by multiple levels of meaning, each of which corresponds to a kind of imagery. The first level is the teleological level. This level is characterized by movement which has a progressive forward direction, opening into consciousness and intentionality. Teleological movement is shown in Gestalt exercises, in which the person's intention is clear in the movement. There is a one-to-one correspondence between intention and action, in movements such as (I am) retreating, and (I am) advancing. The use of simile and irony often occurs in this level. For example, as one student moved with another, she discovered that the way they leaned into each other was like her relationship with her boyfriend. All of her issues about commitment, trust, and mutuality were evident in the movement, the movement was not her relationship with her boyfriend, but it was a simile for her relationship with her boyfriend.

The second level is the archeological level. Here, forward movement is contrasted by movements which stumble and fall, which forget and which pause. These are "depth" movements which move backward into time, and which speak of regression, death, desire, and unconsciousness. This kind of movement is shown in the following description of the mythological figure of Ereshkigal: "She is the root of all, where energy is inert and consciousness coiled asleep. She is the place where potential life lies motionless — but in the pangs of birth" (Perera, 1981, p. 32). Suzanne Langer (1953) calls the unity of force and meaning on the archeological level a symbol. This particular symbol is not a picture but is a "pattern of sentience" which is made up of feelings and emotions, shaped as complexes of tension, and formed as rhythm into streams of resolutions. Action, expressed in this way, does not "mean" or refer to something else, it is already symbolic. Jung (1953) also observed that a symbol is not merely a picture, but is

an act, an attitude; what distinguishes a symbol is the observing consciousness of the observer.

The third level of movement text is the eschatological. The patterns of correspondence between implicit and explicit forms are expressed as ritual and sacred story, not necessarily in the one-to-one correspondence between action and meaning exemplified by metaphoric movement. For example, in the opening pictures, the joined hands and symmetrical bodies make the patterns explicit, as do the formal content of circles, spirals, and mandalas which appear spontaneously in groups of moving people. Further, sacred movement is marked by a particular quality of energy. It is visible and palpable as numinosity, as "authentic movement" in which the transcendent function bridges moving and being moved. Sacred movement requires a surrender of power, of ego, and toward faith to be moved, therefore, it can be the most transformative kind of movement.

Action language focuses, clarifies, differentiates, and describes the emerging kinesthetic imagery. Having students keep movement journals was part of their process as they learned to transcribe felt-images into words or drawing to move the images further. The stages of development include authentic movement, amplification, description, differentiation, and naming.

As one student moved, the following archetypal figure emerged:

The strongest, most singular image I encountered during this class was a dance I call my Goddess dance which tumbled out of my body the way a shell rolls out of the sea. You selected special music [and] all my joints softened. Without taking a step I could feel the weight of my body making a hundred little adjustments, a tiny current of energy flowing through every pathway, down to the earth, up to the crown, back and forth ... Grecian vases showing women in tunics and sandals, their hair bound in fluttering chignons, a Botticelli painting of a soft-boned lady covered with tiny flowers and some gauzy gown; the Star card from the Tarot deck which shows a nude woman with a long round shape, her face hidden in a shadow. These images floated before me as I swayed to the music. Slowly, I started to walk.

I was aware of the fleshiness of the bottom of my feet, how far I could "step into" them. Sometimes I was dancing with a veil, sometimes with a rope of flowers. I was with other women, one of several dancing. The dance took a serpentine shape, turning back and forth on a line with the feet barely leaving the ground, but the knees fluid. At certain points I knelt, but the motion was continuous. My arms would furl and unfurl, twine or curl, close to my body or reaching for a bud, or the hand of another to dance with me. After a while my face allowed the feeling of grace I felt to form a small smile ... all the regression this quarter was a molting to let this butterfly emerge. I was transported to another time

and place, where I can be connected to the numinous. I could wait there in rapture for a long time in contemplation of this image and how soothing it is for me. How like the tiny flower she held was the Woman I danced!

Action Hermeneutics

In traditional verbal psychotherapy, the meaning of an event comes through reflection, which necessitates a turning away from the world of action. Action is separated from meaning; in fact, action is often looked upon with suspicion as "acting out."

Action hermeneutics, on the other hand, understands action as a meaning-making activity. Movement, in other words, can help clarify being, intentions, and depth imagery. Exegesis is the theory of interpretation, hermeneutics is the art or methodology of interpretation. Exegesis tells us that a text has several meanings, that there is a surplus of meanings, and that these meanings overlap. Interpretation is "the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meanings in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning" (Reagen & Stewart, 1978, p. 98).

How are Levels of Meaning Revealed in Action?

In Figure 2, for example, there seems to be a middle point in the circle which is invisible and which unites the participants. The movement is spontaneous; no one has instructed them to form this configuration. Still, what does it mean? Analytically, we can speak about the height of the arms in relation to the shoulders, about the difference in levels among the movers, yet this does not tell us about their understanding of their experience. All the participants seem to be sensing their correspondence with each other, there is some sort of patterning visible. It is not that this pattern points to a meaning or a sign; it is the meaning. Action is meaning. Meaning does not lie behind the action, as in the Aristotelian sense of the meaning behind the plot.



Figure 2

This meaning is known in two ways. It is known indirectly, by observing and analyzing the patterns. It is also known directly, through the senses. I know the other and his or her patterning by feeling it in my own body, through empathy.

The two poles of discourse for a spoken text have been described by Ricoeur (1976) as event and meaning. What are the poles of discourse for a movement text? The two poles of discourse for a movement text can be understood as empathy and analysis. Empathy gives us the direct, connatural knowing, analysis gives us the observable. By maintaining the tension between the two, we can preserve the integrity of the text.

At the teleological level, the polarity of empathy and analysis becomes symbolic. Meaning, or the linguistic pole, is united with force, as instinct. Instinct is expressed symbolically through the body; *bios* and *logos* are brought together in symbol.

Symbolic discourse moves further at the sacred level into a polarity of form and power. Power begins with the experience of awe, of being moved. Power is expressed not through linguistic forms, but through aesthetic ones of time, space, weight, and direction. Power has nonlinguistic meaning:

The preverbal character of such an experience is attested to by the very modulation of space and time as sacred space or sacred time which result and which are inscribed beneath language at the aesthetic level of experience, in the Kantian sense of this expression. (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 61)

What are these non-linguistic forms which inform power? These are aesthetic forms of timing, space and flow grouped into coherent phrases and lyrical lines of correspondence. At the sacred level, these patterns become "diverse epiphanies [which] communicate among themselves, while at the same time they also refer to the divine immanent in the hierophanies of life" (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 61). Made up of rhythms, pulsations, and phrases, these non-linguistic patterns have also been called "the music of the spheres." They are sacred not because they inform, but because they are informed by, an intelligible cosmos:

In the sacred universe the capacity to speak is founded upon the capacity of the cosmos to signify. The logic of meaning, therefore, follows from the very structure of the sacred universe. Its law is the law of correspondence. (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 62)

In Figure 3 we can see patterns of correspondence. The focus is not between two people, but it is among people in community and in active relationship to their world. The joined hands make the links explicit, but the implicit connection was already present. Another way of seeing the form here would be to see the circles, spirals, and mandala patterns



Figure 3

which groups of people seem spontaneously to form. Taking this body-in-action as a symbol for life-in-action, we might begin to perceive the changing shapes and correspondences around us. We might hear the phrasing of an ordinary conversation, see the compositional relationship between the way this car goes down the street and the way that cloud passes overhead. It is not the content that marks the sacred, but in the sense of wonder when patterns start becoming apparent everywhere, in daily life. It is not even so much a matter of what these patterns are, but *that* they are is the fundamental character of the sacred. Form and force come together, the universe is intelligible. The discourse of the cosmos is spoken both linguistically and non-linguistically (that is, aesthetically) as the poetics of action.

One student's images of the sacred in movement were:

I felt the movement as circular as though it were a cog driving a wheel. The wheel was our circle, the cog was the driving force of our collective energy, expressed in movement. I closed my eyes and had a sudden feeling, expressed as a vision ... I was seated in a circle of women, wearing only waist-cloths and primitive wraps, all moving together with that same rhythmic quality ... The work we were doing wasn't particularly clear, nor was it particularly important ... it could have been washing clothes or kneading bread. ... The beauty of the moment was in the deep feeling of community and the repetitive physical exertion made easier through the sharing of the rhythm. I wished that we all could pick up what I was singing and join in, for the other group — the one in my vision was singing or chanting or keeping the rhythm — it was somewhere in the time when music was born. In this moment is joined the height of both individual and collective, personal journey and collective.

What Happens When All The Images Overlap?

This brings us to the realm of story. Meaning is now located in the transitions of one gesture to another, in the shifting grouping of movements, in the ordering of a beginning, a middle, and an end. The action narrative has a plot, not recognizable in its content but recognizable in its dynamic structure. The human need for meaning translates, in the active mode, into a need for form, for creating patterns of coherence. Intelligibility is sensed not by rational logic, but by a kinesthetic imagination.

Because meaning at the sacred level requires first a radical surrender to being moved, and second to a faith that events are unfolding according to their own logic, accessibility at this level involves the most fundamental possibility of transformation. The aeschatological level of action is more encompassing than

is the archeological or the teleological. Language of intention or will has moved to language of revelation.

But the mixture of power and form is fragile. While we may see sacred inspiration here, we can also see the kind of pathologies which result when power is not matched by forming coherence. On this non-verbal level, patients may exhibit an inability to complete form, gestures may trail off without conclusion, action may be flat without "peaking" at the middle into a statement, or the person may leave at the wrong (that is, "inappropriate") time. The sense of time, space and phrasing is disturbed, or the person marches "to the beat of his or her own drummer." These patterns of pathology, expressed in action language, express themselves as styes which can be read as texts.

If the sacred makes itself manifest in certain patterns of myth or archetypal form, then ritual is the re-enactment of the story. Ritual moves us beyond the necessity of particular forms to a simpler sense of ritual action as discernable in daily life. This is action marked by power. This quality may not be recognizable in these pictures, for it is found in the quality or intensity of movement. A special intensity or efficacy marks these rituals, because they embody the interpenetration of force and meaning, inner and outer expression, and form and content. Here action is word, and discourse is act.

Conclusion

Thus ends our narrative about action stories. The way we move through the world tells a story about who and how we are. Making action narratives explicit, therefore, can have both diagnostic and treatment effects. It can help us clarify our intentions, mythologies, and patterns of relatedness, to perceive our coping as well as our defensive strategies. In addition, seeing the patterns in the process, weaving the parts together, and acting with integrity and congruence can bring the participants a sense of healing wholeness.

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