

Visionary Words

A Reflexive Discussion about Counselling Work with a Young Pasifika Woman Who Has Experienced Post-death Visions

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the counselling work I did as a palagi school counsellor with a young Pasifika woman who had recently lost her father. The counselling involved re-membering practices and poetry writing. After briefly presenting the client's story, I reflect critically on three dimensions of the counselling process: how I worked with her spirituality; how I chose to use poetry in counselling, and how I made sense of power and privilege in the room. The purpose of this article is to contribute to discussion about how best to support clients' spiritual experiences when they are disclosed in counselling, particularly around the afterlife, and about how to gauge the ways in which power and privilege are operating in a session, particularly when there are cross-cultural dimensions.

Stories of loss

I saw Casey¹ for a total of six counselling sessions over the course of a year. In the first session, I explained the limits and boundaries of counselling and invited her to set the agenda for our talk. Casey disclosed that her father had recently died and she had been having dreams about him. In the dreams, her father was asking her to help look after her mother, and not to give up on school or church. Casey described how her father had recently appeared to her family: one family member had seen Dad walking around the community; her brother spoke of how their father had visited him in hospital, and other family members came home after a night out and saw the house lights flicker on and off, even though there was no-one home.

When Casey spoke warmly about her relationship with her father, I was attuned to the therapeutic possibilities of the presence of her deceased father. Using remembering questions,² I researched with Casey some of the meanings for her of her father's ongoing presence in the family. I invited her to tell me about the kind of person he was, and the contributions he had made to her life. I also invited her to talk about the times and places when she felt most connected to her father's presence. I asked her what her father might appreciate about her now and what hopes he might have for her future. She spoke about what she valued in her relationship with her father and how she remembered their closeness.

In the next session, Casey spoke about wider issues with family and friends. Her story of the family's visions stayed with me, and I wrote my experience of her story in poetry. During the third session, I gave Casey a copy of what I had written. She was surprised and pleased, commenting that she recognised some of the words. Later, she said she had given a copy of the poem to her mother, who laminated it and stuck it on the fridge. With Casey's permission, I sent the poem off to a poetry magazine. I heard later that it was accepted for publication. Once it was printed, I showed Casey a copy of the poem and she was delighted.

In a later session, Casey talked about how she knew her father was *with* her sometimes and felt a sense of his presence. She also talked about how she felt she had to "move on" in her grieving. For Casey, this meant not crying so much and knowing that her father was in a happier place. Over the course of six sessions, we talked about a variety of other concerns at home and school, and at one point she brought with her a friend who had troubles of her own. As my time in that particular school was drawing to a close, Casey and I talked about ending counselling and who else she might talk to in future. I contacted her a year later to ask for her permission to write up our counselling together as a story for other counsellors, and she agreed.

Working with a client's spirituality

When Casey disclosed the family's visions, I had clear choices therapeutically about validating or invalidating these experiences. I chose to explore with the client the meaning for her of some of the visions, without "reading" meaning into them. In this way I sought to strengthen the client's sense of continuing bonds with her father (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996).

When it comes to grieving, Hedtke (1999) has suggested that professionals can act as "gate keepers of knowledge" who may consciously or otherwise impose on clients

outmoded ideas about the stages of grief, or about the “right” way to grieve, thereby undermining a family’s own wisdom. Counsellors may feel uncomfortable when extraordinary or spiritual experiences come up in counselling. Although there is evidence that post-death visions of the deceased by surviving family members are relatively common, in our mechanistic worldview these encounters are often explained away (Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009). In fact, there is evidence that an active continuing bond may be a lifelong phenomenon (Klugman, 2006). Margaret Bowater (2003), a New Zealand dreamwork therapist, has collected dozens of examples of “spirit visits,” when the deceased has appeared to family members. She believes it is important for counsellors to validate these visions for families, especially when they help people accept death more calmly.

In looking at the Pasifika world, though little has been written academically, there is evidence that post-death visions of the deceased are not uncommon (Dernbach, 2005; Mageo, 1996). Mageo has described the role of spirits in Samoan culture, while Dernbach’s study highlighted a community in Micronesia where the people expect recently deceased family members to appear as “spirit visitors” who might want to deliver important messages to them. Death is understood as a journey marked by social ritual. They believe the spirits of the dead occupy a liminal space between this world and the afterlife, and it is part of the role of the community to help facilitate the process of “becoming dead.”

Cabrini Makasiale, a psychotherapist of Tongan ancestry, suggests that in Pacific Island belief systems, physical death is not the end, but only a transition into life with or without God (Makasiale, 2007). For Pacific Island people, the spirit may keep in touch after death to be a guide. Death marks the ending of the physical self, but the spirit remains. For the grieving family, the manifestation of the deceased’s spirit after death contains an element of hope, because the family member is gone, yet not gone (Makasiale, personal communication, 2008).

As counsellors, we need to respond sensitively to these spiritual experiences when they are reported in counselling. Winslade and Hedtke (2004) argue that if we are not careful, the bereaved person’s sensory experiences of the deceased risk being banished to the margins of “...the psychotic or paranormal, rather than including them as ordinary aspects” of grief-related experiences (p. 51). In fact, post-death encounters may have a healing and therapeutic effect when a person feels reconnected to their loved one (Nowatzki & Kalischuk, 2009). By providing an understanding atmosphere, a counsellor can facilitate the client’s sense of validation in the face of loss.

Griffith and Griffith (2002) have suggested that “an attitude of wonder” is an important quality in a therapist. We join with our clients in wondering about the significance and meaning of spiritual experiences which appear in their lives. As therapists, we are privileged to be witnesses for our clients’ spiritual stories, and because of the power imbalance between counsellors and clients, it is important that we listen primarily to what meaning our *clients* make of their stories.

Poetry in counselling

Turning to look at the use of poetry in counselling, one of the purposes of poetry may be to try to put words to the spiritual. “Poetry at its best calls forth our deep Being” (Housden, 2003, p.2). Peta Palalagi, a Niuean group facilitator, writes that “Poetry unlocks parts of myself that I never knew before” (Palalagi, 2007, p. 161). In this way, poetry comes from within the individual poet, springing from an expression of his or her soul. Poetry can also be a means of communicating between people, “a window that hangs between two or more human beings who otherwise live in darkened rooms” (Dobyns, 1997, p. 17).

Poetry can be used in a variety of ways in therapy. First, clients can express their experiences through writing poems. Perie Longo (2009) runs poetry therapy groups where, each week, participants’ poems are typed up and bound in a notebook. Poetry can also be co-written between counsellor and client. Behan (2003), a narrative therapist, often takes notes of clients’ expressions and co-authors poems with them. He offers poems to clients and invites them to circulate the poems to their family and friends. He argues that “poetry has ‘space between’ to describe multiplicity, tentativeness and ambiguity and is perhaps better suited to render visible these subtle stories from therapy conversations” (Behan, 2003, p. 1). He also suggests that co-writing poems with clients has enhanced the quality of his listening in counselling.

Narrative therapist and academic Jane Speedy writes up poetic documents after a session, using her clients’ own words. She is very careful to distinguish between “poetic accounts,” which are co-written with clients in counselling, and “poetic re-memberings,” which are written by the therapist (Speedy, 2005). Her preference is for “taking notes from the language of people who consult us, not our own words” (Speedy, 2005, p. 295). She finds poetic documents helpful in capturing stories from therapeutic conversations and enabling clients to be aware of how their stories change over time.

Poems can also be written *for* clients. Two Danish researchers developed poetic

forms of representation of participants' stories for their doctoral theses. They produced what one referred to as "poetic condensations," and the other as "poetic accounts." One researcher listened for "rhythm, recognition and feelings in the words in the text" (Hølge-Hazelton & Krøjer, 2008, p. 21). When they presented their work to participants, they responded that the poems had given them a feeling of recognition, that they had been understood.

Power in counselling

In working with Casey, there were many invitations to take up a powerful position. As a reflexive practitioner I seek to be accountable for the ways in which I use power in a session.

A poststructuralist analysis of power suggests that the counselling relationship will always be a relationship of power. However, the exercise of power is constantly fluctuating in response to discourses (Monk, Winslade, & Sinclair, 2008). While counsellors may be vehicles of power, they are able to choose, within professional and cultural requirements, how power is deployed in a session (Guilfoyle, 2005). A counsellor cannot create a "power-free zone," but she can facilitate a relationship where the flow of power is mutual, as opposed to unidirectional. How counsellors approach the exercise of power in their practice is in fact an ethical question. Monk et al. (2008, p. 185) ask:

- Does a counsellor stand on her own expert knowledge or make room for the client's knowledge?
- Does the counsellor decide the topics of conversation or grant the client some decision making authority in the counselling process?
- Does the counsellor name the problem (diagnosis) and decide on the "treatment"...or does she share this authority with the client?

Michael White (2005) has written about therapeutic posture, where he advocates taking up a "decentred and influential" posture in conversations (p.9). Decentred means giving priority to the personal stories of people's lives, where people have "primary authorship." Influential means not imposing an agenda, but building a scaffold through questions and reflections to help people more richly describe their lives. A vivid example of such a process can be found in his earlier article, "Saying hullo again: The incorporation of the lost relationship in the resolution of grief" (White, 1988).

Power and counselling with Pasifika peoples

The particular dynamic of cross-cultural counselling can be an ethical minefield in relation to power. Speedy (2005) has noted the “myriad opportunities for therapists to engage in the imposition of meanings when their clients’ lives differ from their own or do not fit with the professional or political theories to which they hold” (p.285). Given the real possibilities for miscommunication and misinterpretation with differing worldviews in cross-cultural counselling, why do it?

The challenge is to use what David Augsburg (1986) terms “interpathy,” the ability to extend oneself to believe, see, and value what another person believes, thereby entering the assumptive world of another person. Karen Lupe (2007) suggests that meeting a client from another culture in his or her own world is *most* possible when the therapist is “conscious of the connection with his or her own heart and is willing to listen to those heart messages.” This is even more important in Pasifika culture, where “the heart is the primary centre of thinking” (Lupe, 2007, p. 133).

Cabrini Makasiale (2007) talks about the importance of therapists being aware of the power they hold in the relationship when they work with Pacific Island clients, and “how impactful the words of the therapist are because the images of God, parents, elders, and other authority figures are transferred to her or him” (p.112). She also describes the openness and vulnerability of Pacific Island clients, who generally trust that the counsellor will be caring and giving (Makasiale, 2007). For a palagi counsellor, there may be particular responsibilities in being careful of the Pasifika client’s “thinking heart.”

As well as power, it is also important to be aware of the social privileges that go with being palagi. Akamatsu (2002) has noted that being the dominant majority gives white people numerous unearned privileges that are so taken-for-granted that they are virtually invisible and unnoticed by those who enjoy them. Tuckwell (2006) argues that white counsellors hardly ever consider the impact of their skin colour on counselling relationships.

One way of *not* noticing my privilege as a white person is to assume that everyone uses language as I do. Bird (2004) talks of how she engages with the “specific and experiential language each person uses to represent the life they are immersed within” (p.160). By not taking language at face value, and by inviting clients to describe the world behind their words, we are using language with care. Language does not simply *describe* the world we live in, but actively shapes it (Culler, 1997). It is important therefore to be aware of how language uses both therapist and client, as well as the ways in which both therapist and client are using language.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a way of making meaning of my counselling work. It involves a process of “disciplined self-reflection” (Wilkinson, 1988) about the ways in which I shape my work through underlying assumptions, conversational moves, use of language, and a variety of other factors. Reflexivity requires thinking critically about my practice and the ideas which currently inform it (Paré, 1999), and about the effect of these knowledges on the client (Kuenzli, 2006). A “reflexive loop” occurs when I practise counselling, and then reflect on my work through conversations with colleagues and supervisors, reading and professional development, which I then integrate back into my practice.

There has been much to reflect upon in the work I did with Casey. I found that in the end, I was asking myself questions for which I did not have any answers. Initially, I was interested in the effect of my co-elaborating with Casey upon her stories of ongoing connection with her deceased father. She did not give me specific feedback about this, but did respond warmly to the questions which developed her sense of her father’s presence. I was left with questions about the effect of my bringing an “attitude of wonder” to her spiritual experiences, and how this might have supported Casey’s sense of hope.

In paying attention to power, there were many opportunities to “engage in the imposition of meaning” of my culture onto Casey. My choice when working in the territory of Casey’s spiritual beliefs was to hold back my own interpretations and meaning-making regarding her family’s visions. I chose to adopt a validating and supportive stance towards her spiritual experiences, avoiding pathologising them. I worked collaboratively with Casey, in that to every session she brought her agenda for what we would talk about. My stance was to be curious about her life, open to learning from her about her concerns and intentions, and the cultural world she lives in. There were indicators that counselling was working for her: she came back a number of times, and supported another student in coming for counselling.

It is more complex to think of how my privilege as a palagi affected the work. How do I gauge the impact of my skin colour on the counselling relationship? I found it difficult to notice how this affected our counselling work. At one point, I was aware of living in two worlds: the world of my work, where I listened to Casey talk about her life as a young Pasifika woman, and my own world, where I had access to many different freedoms, financial rewards, and social settings that may have been closed to her. This was particularly relevant when it came to having a poem published.

In reflecting further on my use of poetry with this client, I found I carried some discomfort around it. This was partly around the change of focus that the poem introduced into the counselling for part of a session, shifting from Casey's story to the poem, which was my creative response to her story.

I did not plan to write a poem, but Casey's story made a powerful impression on me. My own history involves experiencing bereavement when I was a teenager, but unlike Casey, I had no sense of the ongoing presence of the deceased person in my life or my family's life. For this reason, her experience was poignant for me. I did not disclose this to her. After the first session I was left with an almost visual "sense" of her story. In my mind, her words created a vision which I attempted to turn into words. This might have remained part of my own processing after a session, but I chose to give her a copy of it. In this, there was an aspect of mutuality, as I was affected and moved by her story.

Out of the three different approaches to using poetry in counselling (written by client, co-written by client and counsellor, written by counsellor), the most powerful approach may be where the counsellor writes a poem *for* the client. The danger here is that the counsellor positions herself as the special person, prized for her ability to craft words, and the client is a passive recipient. On the one hand, Casey was thrilled to read the poem; she took it home and showed it to family, and her mother responded positively to it. On the other hand, it is easy to imagine how my words might map over her world and offer a different interpretation.

Behan's (2003) collaborative approach of co-writing poems with clients and checking with them that they have been represented accurately would appear to offer a model which reflects a greater sense of choice and consent by clients. My preference, now that I have reflected more, would be to invite the client to write a poem if she wished, or to offer a poem based solely on her words (a "poetic account") or to co-write a poem together if she wished.

When considering the therapeutic impact of my choice, my hope was that the poem would give Casey the assurance that she had been listened to, that I had heard her story. Poetry, by its very nature, allows for reader response, where the reader actively participates in the creation of meaning (Hoover, 1994). Poetry can be "read" in different ways. This ambiguous quality allows for the co-elaboration of meaning between writer and reader. In offering her the poem, I did not give an interpretation of it. In this way, the power lay with Casey to interpret it as she wanted. Her perspective was that the poem was "cool."

I also held some discomfort about the poem being published. Although Casey was very pleased to see the poem published, I felt it would have been more congruent with my values about my use of power in our relationship if I had acknowledged her contribution. My hesitations were around the ethics of confidentiality in counselling, which clashes with the public acknowledgement of her in inspiring the poem. In hindsight, I regret not having discussed with Casey ways of acknowledging her contribution to the poem before sending it for publication.

Conclusion

In working with Casey, I chose to support and validate her experiences of post-death visions of her father. Through re-membering questions, I sought to strengthen and develop her ongoing sense of his presence in her life, believing that a continuing bond can be sustained throughout life. In counselling, I wondered together with Casey about the meaning of the family visions.

Throughout our time together, I was also aware of the operation of power in the room. In giving her a copy of a poem I wrote after hearing her story, I did take up a position which was more powerful than collaborative. But my hope was to offer to her a creative response to her story, one which demonstrated that I had listened to her and had valued what she had said. My creative response was in a form which allowed and invited her interpretation.

Finally, in my own reflection I like to think of the poem as capturing a moment in time, a recent visionary experience for the family. By the end of our counselling, Casey was talking about “moving on” in her thoughts about her father—living with a sense of his presence in a different way. My hope was that the poem would serve as a reminder of a time when the father occupied a liminal space in the family, when he came back after death just to say hello.

He was seen on the street

He was seen on the street wearing white;
blurry, softened, just out of range.
Home late, they saw house-lights flicker,
curtains blow, though there was no wind.

He appeared at his son’s bedside in
hospital scrubs, cheating at cards,
then visited his daughter’s dreams,
reminding her of her future.

Though they'd kissed his swollen body months
before, when the back door blew shut,
and the walls shook, they said, "That's just
Dad, coming back to say hello."

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Notes

1. Distinguishing details have been changed to protect the client.
2. In working with a client around grief, I have been influenced by contemporary understandings of loss that emphasise the importance of continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996), and of clients' being enabled to make meaning in an ongoing way of their loss (Neimeyer, 2001). I have also been influenced by Michael White's "Re-membering conversations" (White, 2005). These are conversations which reflect on the contribution of the significant (deceased) figure to the person's life, and the person's contribution to the figure's life. Through these kinds of questions, the person who has died is reincorporated into the life of the person still living. I have also attended a workshop by John Winslade which included a "Re-membering Conversations" exercise, with questions designed to facilitate the client's experience of ongoing connection with a lost loved one (Winslade & Hedtke, 2004).

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