

Liberation from Conforming Social Patterns: *The Possibilities of Narrative Therapy to Aid the Exploration of Christian Spiritualities*

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Abstract

This article explains how Christian notions of being liberated from the conforming patterns and powers of the social world can be aided by the use of Narrative Therapy. The founder of Christianity is described in terms of his own confrontation and resistance of dominant social patterns and powers, and his alternatives for spiritual awareness and engagement are considered. A case study illustrates how these ideas can be useful in the practice of counselling.

A cruel, murderous persecutor of religious fanatics quite unexpectedly had a spiritual encounter that changed his personal knowledge of spiritual life and ultimately the name by which he was known. Saul, later known as Paul of Tarsus, wrote to the people of his home town urging them, “Don’t be conformed into the patterns of this world, but instead be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may find out what the good, acceptable and complete will of God is.” (Barker, 1978). A more recent translation renders this saying as: “Don’t become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.” (Petersen, 2000). This changed man had had first-hand experience of being conformed into the religious mould of the Jewish Pharisee sect to the extent that he was utterly convinced it was the only permissible version of spirituality and that “aberrant” versions needed to be eradicated. A strict code of behaviour and thought had been passed on to him in minute detail and he was intent on conforming those around him to the same code. Once he literally “saw the light”, he could see how he had been squeezed and conformed to an oppressive set of knowledges, and as a result of this insight he devoted his life as a Christ-follower to promoting resistance to that code of religious law and to the preservation and extension of people’s personal liberation and their spiritual connectedness with the founder of this resistance – the revolutionary Jesus of Nazareth.

Liberation in Christian theology relates to three main aspects of life. The first is spiritual. Spiritual liberation is described as a kind of birth process out of the domination of self-centredness (the sin concept), spiritual independence and malevolent spiritual forces and into a new realm – the Kingdom (or domain) of God where connection with the transcendent and eternal is discovered (Barker, 1978: Christian scriptures: John 3:1–8; Colossians 1:13; Romans 6–8). This leads to the second aspect, which is personal liberation – the gradual transformation of the disciple (learner) from the inside out as life-limiting patterns learned in social and familial contexts are gradually resisted and replaced by alternative ideas and practices (Barker, 1978: Christian scriptures: Matthew 23: 26; Romans 12: 2; 2nd Corinthians 3: 16–18). Thirdly, liberation relates to engaging with injustice, inequality, oppression and cruelty in the social world. It is about struggling for social change and includes standing alongside those who resist these practices. It is about seeking to construct alternative communities and ways of being guided by ideas about justice, equality, kindness, respect and freedom that have circulated in Jewish and Christian communities (Barker, 1978: Hebrew scriptures: Deuteronomy 15: 4; Proverbs 21: 13; Isaiah 58).

Liberation is also a theme in Narrative Therapy. Michel Foucault, whose writing was one of the inspirations for the development of Narrative ideas (Monk et al., 1997, p. 8; White, 1991), speaks of repression as the development of social rules (discourses) that delimit what is acceptable in speech and action (Foucault, 1990). He writes of how ideas about sexuality, for example, are negotiated in the social arena and how these discourses have become defining of the experience and practices of sexuality in Western society over the last 200 years (Foucault, 1994).

Foucault's process of analysis has influenced the Narrative idea of deconstructing the discourses related to whatever distress prompts a client to come to therapy. Deconstruction is the exploration of the ideas and rules embedded in social interactions that delimit acceptable thought, experience and behaviour in a particular context (Freedman & Combs, 1996; Monk et al., 1997; White, 1991). The purpose of this teasing out of discourses is to help make visible the repression and oppression that is occurring, since "dominant narratives tend to blind us to the possibility that other narratives might offer us" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 39). Liberation in Narrative Therapy, then, has to do with the gradual resistance of these prescriptive ideas (Stacey, 1997, 2001) and the gradual noticing of micro-moments of time where alternative ideas are influencing the preferred thoughts and actions (practices) of those moments.

As Freedman and Combs (1996) show, there are fields of experience that Foucault did not discuss in depth (p. 39) – and religion and spirituality is one of them. Following Foucault, we can say that social ideas and prescriptions are constructing the

experience and practices of religion and spirituality just as they construct the experience and practices of sexuality (Foucault, 1985) or illness (Foucault, 1975). Therefore, the exploration of oppressive prescriptions circulating in the language of Christian institutions such as family, church and Christian literature has the possibility of leading to glimpses of personal and social liberation by the adoption of alternative ideas and practices whose effects are life-enhancing.

Furthermore, this activity has a powerful precedent in the personage of Jesus himself. The Christian scriptures record evidence of Jesus confronting and resisting the prevailing narrative or story of religion, that God's acceptance was dependent on keeping up an outer appearance of goodness through myriad prescriptions for living. Such oppressive discourses were being circulated by the then ruling religious sect – the Pharisees. The radical Jesus protested and resisted these dominating strictures on the experience and expression of spirituality and articulated alternative ideas and practices of freedom, connectedness, equality, respect and genuineness. As such, he was mounting what Foucault called an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1980, pp. 80–84) and proposing a “return of knowledge” – in Jesus' case, of a personal, liberating, compassionate, accepting and initiating God.

An example of this is found in the Christian scriptures in the account of Matthew, in chapter 23 and verses 4–12 of his writings:

They tie up heavy loads and put them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see ... they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them “Rabbi.” But you are not to be called “Rabbi,” for you have only one Master and you are all brothers and sisters. And do not call anyone on earth “father,” for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called “teacher,” for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Barker, 1978).

Here Jesus makes visible the power positioning (Monk et al., 1997) inherent in the dominant narrative: the religious “experts” holding the power to place emotional and spiritual prescriptions on people who, in order to be acceptable as “good Jews”, are forced to carry unjust and unrealistic requirements, without help from those whose role it is to serve them. Jesus protests the narrative of “the show” – the idea that being called “teacher” and taking the place of honour is fitting for their higher position and knowledge. Jesus calls his followers to resist these ideas and the associated practices

and to create an alternative community where equality, humility and service are the guiding ideas. In the alternative narrative it is not the power holders who are important; the esteemed are those who serve – an inverse power relationship.

As an associate of Jesus, Matthew records Jesus confronting the religious power-holders at another time, saying:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. (Barker, 1978: Matthew 23: 25)

Here Jesus protests the dominant narrative of image that specifies the recognition of outer things as the way to be confident of the grace of God. Like a Narrative exploration, Jesus identifies the mechanism of influence of this dominant narrative: the coercion of others to live prescribed lives with their inner life unchanged by a connection with the life of God. He declares an alternative narrative: the Jesus-initiated notion of repentance or “metanoia” – a change of knowing – happens when one’s inner life becomes connected to God and overflows in the fruit of a fully experienced and embodied life. As the ancient mystic Irenaeus later called it: the glory of God is a person fully alive! Similar to a Narrative process, Jesus advocates resistance of the dominant narrative and the adoption of an alternative narrative, one of genuineness and congruence, one that says, “attend to the inner place first and then the outer life will follow naturally”.

In another example we hear Jesus further deconstructing the narrative of obligation to external law-keeping:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice (fairness), mercy (compassion) and faithfulness (commitment). You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. (Barker, 1978: Matthew 23: 23–24)

Here we see the law being imposed to constrain the tiniest things – herb gardens. Jesus announces an alternative narrative: a way of being the people of Yahweh’s story – a people of justice, mercy and faithfulness. This was a story told about spirituality at some earlier times in the Jewish history before the Pharisee branch of Judaism rose to their powerful domination of the faith.

At least two things can be said from reading these accounts. Firstly, Jesus has set a

precedent for the deconstruction of life-limiting prescriptions in religious circles. As a result, Christians can allow themselves to use Narrative explorations because their founder used a similar approach of deconstruction. Secondly, the sense of obligation for Christian clients to join in modern-day law-keeping and other such prescriptive narratives circulating in faith communities can be explored, just as narratives of gender or illness or family or relationship might be explored, all in the collaborative search for liberation (Cook, 2000a).

It is pertinent that in our time in history there is a greater divergence of prescriptions, with pockets of resistance to prescription altogether and a marked and rising awareness of spirituality in its broadest terms. Recent New Zealand research such as Alan Webster's (2001) work shows the large number of people who have a meaningful belief in God (64%) but do not attend a Sunday institutional church. Alan Jamieson's (2000) work has shown the variety of spiritual journeys New Zealanders are on. This seems to suggest that a number have abandoned the institutional organisation and are seeking spiritual insights and connections in a plethora of personal narratives.

So how might we be involved in this process of liberation as counsellors who are Christ-followers or as counsellors working with Christian clients? We can use a Narrative approach to deconstruct dominant Christian leadership discourse such as "the Pastor knows" and "the Pastor is the pinnacle position". The effects of a hierarchy of importance can lead to a story of inadequacy of a person's own knowing and lead them into a "try-hard" approach to gaining recognition for outer behaviour. This can all be mapped out with clients during counselling. The influential prescriptions can be deconstructed and micro-moments where clients have other knowledges, of their acceptability to God and of their worth to God, for example, can be traced.

A restorying of Christian leadership as serving the needs of others and of being brothers and sisters on a journey (White, 2002) opens up the possibility of constructing new effects: a community of respect, a valuing of the knowing of each member and of the mutuality of care. Seeking out alternative versions of Christian spirituality can revolutionise the hierarchical structure by flattening it out, esteem the giftedness of each other and value the ways those gifts contribute to a community of reciprocal nurture.

Narrative Therapy can also be used to deconstruct Christian discourses around obligation to do good works and maintain externals as "good Christian performers", a narrative that often produces effects like anxiety, trying hard and a sense of failure. A new story can be pieced together of times of connectedness to God and the place of genuineness and congruence. Restorying can explore flashes of seeing matters

of greater significance and even of a beginning commitment to issues of justice, compassion, equity and mercy.

The examples that follow illustrate some of the possibilities of this process with clients who identify themselves as Christians.

Some examples in practice

A woman in her mid-thirties had been experiencing recurring panic attacks along with a sense of failure and dread of not measuring up. She described an extensive bookshelf of Christian self-help books and a general impression she held that she simply needed to try harder and be the person [her version of] God expected her to be. She had heard the same message in some Christian circles and had a dominating story of an acceptable Christian as friendly, frequently winning others over to a Christian commitment and needing to change herself successfully to be the many things that “an acceptable Christian” should be.

Counselling progressed over several months, identifying the version of a Christian she was trying to live and its inspirational discourses, such as, “a good Christian should be friendly to all ... should win many to a Christian commitment and should be able to beat anxiety or panic”. We mapped the effects, the history over two generations and the position of “the inadequate one” that the performance-training discourses (or messages) had presented to her. We saw, for example, how the discourse that “a good Christian doesn’t feel panic and should be able to beat anxiety” was itself stimulating anxiety about having anxiety. We listed out the many, many dictates of “a good Christian woman” she had internalised in her church and self-help book interactions and saw how these instilled a pervading sense of failure and of herself as falling short.

Gradually she identified glimpses of where an alternative version had become visible to her – where alternative interpretations were inspiring a new story – that perhaps messages of Christian performance were stories of Western society and not of her faith’s founder. For example, she spoke of moments of feeling she was allowed to “sit in the sun with Jesus”. These were moments where she caught glimpses of acceptability, and a change of knowing dawned. In her words recently, “I got a new understanding of grace.” These were initial steps in a gradual and on-going journey that still has many more conversations to thicken the plot of the alternative story (Morgan, 2000; White, 1995, 1997, 2000).

The second example involves a middle-aged couple whose experience had included pastoring several churches and raising several children. A range of messages about performance as a Christian family had persuaded them that “the children should all follow in the same path, be pure when they marry, stay married for life and come home for

happy family occasions”. When the marriage of one of the children ended, these parents were distraught. Our conversation centred on their distress – how the child did not fit what they described as an ideal Christian family picture. The picture had developed in a context where powerful messages positioned parents whose children **were** sexually abstinent until their wedding day, were still together and always **seeming** to be happy, as “successful” families. “Failing” families, then, were those where there was pregnancy before marriage, or separation or even the presence of conflict. As my own research suggested (Cook, 2000b), success and failure discourses can hold enormous power over family members and inspire anxiety rather than possibility dynamics.

This family likened their journey to the smashing of an “ideal Christian family” picture. The picture frame lay cracked and broken and could never be mended back to the original design. Our work was to question the shame and failure messages that had become attached to the ideal picture and to piece together an alternative version of “Christian family”. This entailed an alternative version of spirituality – leaving the “fitting the picture” pressure alongside the broken frame on the floor. They wove together fragments of a grace-based theology, a notion of the acceptance of God, of possibility, of God working things together for good, of the beauty of reality, of speaking personal truth and of weathering conflict and difference. They described a new picture emerging – one without poses, more of a “candid shot”, with some members talking over coffee, others in a disagreement in the next room, kids telling parents about their frustrations with them and parents prepared to hear it. Interestingly, they wanted no constraining picture frame and were inspired by a view of God as a parent longing for, but accepting the choices of, created children.

In summary, Jesus of Nazareth’s only recorded attacks were on the power-holders of the day who had enslaved the Jewish faith to become the opposite of its design (Douglas, 1987, p. 779). They were purveyors of discourses enslaving people to external expectations of goodness. Jesus deconstructed this discourse of externals, resisted and protested their power and made visible the positionings they imposed. He announced alternative narratives and offered alternative positionings that were revolutionary in the social world of his day. Christ-followers today often come to counselling weighed down by expectations to be a certain way at home, at church, in society and within themselves. The messages that keep these clients ensnared are imbued with a supernatural authority because they seem so closely aligned to “God” – the supreme authority figure. Revelation of the social nature of these conforming messages can lead to a gradual liberation into an alternative version of Jesus and of spirituality – one of connectedness to Love, a new knowing of acceptance and a collaboration with mercy.

Narrative Therapy is a possible way of approaching Christian spirituality because it can assist clients to identify social forces that are conforming them. It can aid the process of resisting these forces and coming to know personal and social liberation. That early follower Paul of Tarsus, who had had genuine “metanoia” – a change of knowing – wrote another letter calling followers in the ancient region of Galatia to “stand firm and not submit again to a yoke of slavery”. Followers of Christian spirituality often need to hear that today, and Narrative Therapy can assist.

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