

Joel Badaines

PHOTODRAMA:

Two parts psychodrama, several photographs, with a bit of creativity tossed in as needed.

The two questions which (still !) I greet with a momentary freeze reaction are: "What do you do?" and "What is dramatherapy/psychodrama/creative therapy?" I do many different things, spend a significant amount of time as an individual and group therapist, with a particular interest and skill in psychodrama. The second question I shall leave for another time. In between the doing of many things (photography among them), I struggled for an idea about this article on creative therapy. While perusing a few books, I came across a question regarding the use of media as creative stimuli which will elicit responses which can then be further explored through verbal and/or other approaches. That sentence provoked a memory of a few sessions which would illustrate a creative approach to a particular problem. (end of struggle!)

Tim who was 29 had been in individual therapy with me for about a year, mainly working on enriching his relationships with people, more intimacy with women, and deeper friendships with men. During the first year, issues around trust, intimacy, fear of closeness, loneliness, and control were experienced. Progress slowly occurred in many of these areas to the extent that for the first time in his adult life he has a girlfriend and, though still few, friendships with men are developing.

In one session, Tim said he was feeling bereft of childhood memories, and especially wanted to re-experience some of the warmth and joy from his childhood years within his family. My first try was through fantasy and imagination, by going back to his childhood home. I invited him to imagine his room in specific (guided) detail; his favourite object, and from there to go through the other rooms, eventually arriving at the kitchen table at supper time. He was to picture each family member and to listen to the table conversation. It was his choice to use the age of eight as his reference point. This did produce some memories, but it became obvious that this was not entirely satisfactory

for him. With sadness in his voice, Tim verbalized that there were probably relatively few moments of genuine warmth during his childhood. As he spoke those words, a photograph of my family on a picnic flashed in my mind, and I experienced a flow of warmth within me. I described what had just happened to Tim, and asked him if he had some family photos available.

To the next session he brought a large box, containing about forty photos from his babyhood through adolescence. Together, we went through all of them, and he commented briefly on each, selecting ten which had evoked the strongest feeling. Of these, some tapped hurt, anger, isolation, others insecurity, and some brought tears to Tim's face and he melted. This one was of himself and his father in a small boat, Tim proudly holding a large fish, and his mother on the dock, admiring his catch. Tim realised he'd blocked the memory completely. Another revealed Tim, aged 17 and his first girlfriend of the same age, whom he remembered as a very supportive person. A third photo was of a farm house: when he gazed at it his eyes moistened, and in a soft, child-like voice quietly and yet with almost a reverence said "This was my grandparents' home. They really loved me". And then softly cried.

I invited him to close his eyes and imagine them standing in front of the house, as if he were just arriving for his annual visit. Tim smiled, and his face glowed and I asked if he wanted to say or do anything. He picked up a large cushion and held it tightly to himself. This vignette continued with his "telling" his grandparents how important they were to him, and how they had been "the source of the warmth and love in his early life".

The last of the "photo sessions" involved his parents in what initially was not a "joyful" scene. He produced an eight-by-ten framed family photo. His parents were seated formally on two wooden chairs, and Tim, about seven years old was standing directly between them. No one was touching; it looked to me like three strangers thrust into a photograph. When I fed that impression back to Tim, he agreed that that was exactly how he often felt. I then arranged two wooden chairs in a manner which duplicated the photograph such that Tim was standing between them. I suggested he close his eyes and let the photo come "alive", placing himself and the others in the sitting room of his childhood home where the original photo had been taken. He described the room and mentioned the sterility of the feelings and communication. "Tell them" I said, and Tim began to, but soon spoke of his needs for warmth and love, tears beginning to trickle down his cheeks. Soon he became angry, but it was a cold, measured

anger, and I suggested he add a little "heat" to the situation. Now this young man was stomping, shaking his fist, and shouting at them for being so "cool" and measured, and for their lack of responsiveness to his needs, especially for love and play from them. His anger gradually gave way to calmness.

He had remained standing between "them", but now was softly resting his hands on the back of the chairs, as if he were touching their backs.

"Make it like you wished it to be". Tim moved the chairs together, sat on both, and said, "I'm sitting between my parents, but they are holding hands, **and** they are holding me. We are in touch with each other, and they are freely expressing warmth and love for me and each other. As soon as this photo is taken, we'll all go to grandma's, and my dad and mum will take walks with me in the woods, and we'll have a lot of fun together". I suggested he have one more picture taken where his parents are giving him a cuddle; and (with his permission) gently touched his shoulder. (As I wrote that sentence, a tear came to my eyes, and I wonder, am I responding to memories of Tim's "photo", or my own, or both?)

Following sessions dealt with how those childhood experiences moulded his current approach to people. Tim talked about his fears of closeness (reframed as perhaps also unfamiliarity, and therefore discomfort with closeness) and his similarities to his father. He also utilized the warmth of his grandparents and the "new photo" which enabled him to see himself as lovable. In both his sessions with me, and in the real world he slowly moved towards openness, especially in receiving and sometimes even asking for warmth and support, where previously he would have cut himself off from these possibilities.

So there you have it, but I have left out a few major ingredients. Tim's trust in me, and his own courage to journey into the unknown, especially when some aspects were painful.

There is some deliberate distortion of the material described to protect the identity of the client, but this does not detract from the 'essence' of the sessions.
