Myth, Legend and Fairytale in Therapeutic Work with Lesbian and Gay Clients

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Stories have been used since the dawn of human society to make sense of the twin processes of Life and Death and what happens on each side of the boundaries they define. Stories are capable of carrying meaning on many levels. They break down that sense of isolation and separateness which we all experience in our lives and which leaves us feeling we are on the margins of the groups to which we may aspire to belong. Thus they help us to name our human condition.

Myth, legend and fairytale are vehicles for stories about Everyman as Hero. A useful example of such a figure is the Fool in the Tarot, who, carefree and insouciant, sets out on his journey through life. On the way he meets a number of figures who represent aspects of himself which he has to confront and come to terms with in order to be able to move on to the next part of his journey towards the Self and ultimate connection with the Divine. There are now a number of modern Tarot packs (in particular a fascinating one with accompanying book produced by Barbara Walker) which depict this journey from woman's perspective. These Tarot packs invariably take their inspiration from the growing desire of women to define themselves and their relationship with the Divine in a way which mirrors their experience.

Stories such as these are ways of transcending individual difference; they connect us to our past and our present selves and to each other as reflectors of ourselves. They enable us to perceive ourselves as part of that greater whole, which transcends differences of culture, class, ethnic origin or sexual identity.

How do Myth, Legend and Fairytale Differ?

One way of differentiating them is to say that myth works at the *transcendent* level using Petruska Clarkson's seven levels of epistemological universes of discourse (described in *The Therapeutic Relationship*) — levels one, four and seven, though with slightly differing definitions. This level is at the boundary between mortality and immortality, where individuals connect to that which is outside and beyond them in

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the realm of spirit, as for example in the story of Icarus, a mortal who challenged the gods by aspiring to become like them. He flew too near to the sun, only to have his wings fall apart as the wax holding the feathers in place melted, so that he fell back to earth and was killed. In this story the mortal is punished for wanting to become godlike. Thus myth expresses humankind's longing for connection with the Divine Other.

Legend works at the *normative* level, at the boundary between the individual and the group; it expresses humankind's desire for group identity, group history, for embeddedness in a culture having its roots in a particular place and time, with particular beliefs which can be used to justify the laws and rules governing status and precedence within that group. In the Arthurian legends Morgaine is depicted as a dangerous witch because of her role as priestess of the old religion, which continued to be a threat to Christian Britain long into the Christian era. As such she represented those elements in society which needed to be destroyed in order to ensure the security and survival of Christianity, the dominant belief system.

Fairytale works at the *instinctual* level, at the boundary between the individual and the collective. It expresses humankind's belief in natural justice and our desire for connection with the earth; with procreation, birth, death and rebirth, where continuity is a given, in the inevitable and inexorable cycle of the seasons. Its world is full of animal spirits and people who change into animals and back again. Fairytales are bearers of the folk wisdom of a people and connect each member of the group to every other member in a rich web of instinctual relationship.

This separation into three kinds of story, for the purpose of teasing out the possible differences between them, is of course an arbitrary one. Yet each of them speaks a truth about the human condition and each of them is enmeshed in the other ways of the meaning-making which is the task of story. Each is a fractal of the whole and thus carries messages from the whole. All three, myth, legend and fairytale, can be used in clinical work with clients to explain, elaborate and deepen their understanding of themselves as they attempt to live and enter into relationship with themselves and the life around them.

In order to illustrate how I use story in my work with clients I now want to describe the main elements of a tale which tells of one person's confrontation and eventual reconciliation with his Shadow. *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula Le Guin is a story of the Outsider. It contains many elements of the three types I have been discussing: at the level of myth it tells of the hero's encounter with the Divine; at the level of legend it is a story told at the fireside, generations after it happened, providing lessons for the hearers about their role in society; at the level of fairytale it is a children's tale about magic.

It begins in the outer reaches of Earthsea with the naming of a child called Ged, and ends when that child, now a grown person, meets and accepts his Shadow far out on the open sea.

It tells of someone who is a rebel, a stranger from the far corners of the known world, who aspires to become a great wizard. Believing that he is capable of controlling the powers that he has summoned he opens a crack in the world, out of which springs something terrifying and terrible. At first he runs in increasing terror from this thing, which meets up with

him in the guise of a stranger wherever he seeks to hide; finally beyond hope and despair he turns and seeks it out, journeying long and far before the final meeting.

Any client who enters our consulting rooms is likely to bring their own version of this story, since it is about the journey of the self towards the Self. It describes our longing for knowledge and for the power that knowledge brings. It is about being cast out as a vagabond into the wilderness. It is about abject terror and the despair that comes from being without hope. It is about the courage needed to turn and face oneself instead of continually running away into drink, work and bad relationships.

I want to explore this story of the Outsider in my clinical work with a specific client group — lesbians and gay men, who find their reality defined for them by those who are not homosexual. I have not worked sufficiently often with declared bisexual clients to be able with any degree of truth to make comments about work with them, but feel that what I am going to say here will probably apply to that group, since I will be writing from the perspective of the Outsider. In patriarchal cultures such as our own, those who are seen as 'one of us' are heterosexual. Those who do not conform to that norm are defined, *ipso facto*, as abnormal and, therefore, as outsiders. From the perspective of a society at large, outsiders are people who are different by reason of their origins, behaviour or beliefs and as such are often considered to be beyond redemption. They become easy targets for scapegoating, carrying all the unwanted and rejected aspects of that society. Homosexuals are still, in a very real sense, liable to be scapegoated, if only because their choice of sexual orientation appears so perverse to those who do not share their sexual preferences.

The story of Ged is that of someone who is an outsider, not only geographically but also in his perceived arrogance and dismissive attitude towards the norms and values of his society.

How do I use Ged's story?

Ged came to the school for Wizards full of expectations about what he was going to encounter. My clients too, like Ged, hope they have come to the place of wisdom, and they may well be expecting something pretty spectacular. How much will I disappoint them when I don't come up with the goods? What sort of expectations do they have, these people who have come to see me?

Do they see counselling as something esoteric, intrinsically alienating and exclusive? In which case do they feel intimidated by what they imagine about the power of the counsellor/therapist? Do they expect to be rejected on account of their perceived sexual difference? Is there a possibility that they will set themselves up to be rejected by the way they behave towards me?

Do they see themselves as needing to prove that they are more knowledgeable about being lesbian or gay, and therefore more competent at counselling than me? In which case will they expect me to fail them and will they then be both pleased and disappointed when I do? If this happens, how far is it to do with their need to compensate for their perceived difference?

What is their attitude towards their Shadow and where are they in relationship to it? Are they still at the stage of running away from it, or have they reached the point of exhaustion and despair, when all they can do is stop and turn

to face what they have been afraid of all their lives?

Ged's story also reminds me to pay attention to the quality of the relationship with my client, which begins from the moment of the first encounter. This may be by phone, if I am seeing someone privately, or in the consulting room, if I am working at London Friend, which offers counselling and support groups to lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, and to those who are unsure of their sexual identity. How do we meet? What is the quality of that meeting? How do I feel about this new journey that I am embarking on with this stranger? How do they feel about me?

What are they hoping to learn about themselves by coming to see me and how do I fit into their story?

We seek to find answers to these questions in the journey that we agree to take together. It is in the experience of the journeying that we learn what my client has been trying to discover all their life. On this journey I see myself as a kind of ship's mate, who has a fair idea about charts and wind direction and who knows that there are times when the best thing to do is just to sit tight; but who also manages, with impeccable timing, to lose her balance at crucial moments. Nevertheless with a bit of luck and good team work we should get to the right place at the right time. By the end of the voyage when we finish our work together we will have learned to trust the partnership to carry us through the storms that we inevitably encounter as we go further out on the subliminal sea.

It is this trust that heals both client and counsellor. Together they can piece together the story which brought them together. In the process the client learns to take back that story and to use it as a guide for the future. One could say that this recovery of their story is what counselling or therapy is really about.

Further Reading

Petruska Clarkson, *The Therapeutic Relationship*, Whurr, 1995

Ursula Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Puffin Books, 1971