

Wizardry: a recognition of meaning-infused, person-centered psychotherapy

Blake Griffin Edwards, Child & Family Counseling, Children's Home Society of Washington, Wenatchee, Washington, USA

It was a coincidence that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was published in 1900, the same year as *The Interpretation of Dreams*. While Sigmund Freud analyzed drives that propel us to meet primal needs and fulfill unconscious wishes, Frank Baum spun Dorothy Gale into a Technicolor dream to help new friends find the brains, heart, and courage they thought they were missing and to find her own way home.

The Scarecrow cleverly deciphered riddles along the way, the Tin Woodman expressed profound empathy toward the creatures they encountered, and the Cowardly Lion overcame his fears time and again over the course of their journey. Anxieties were retooled, revealing strength rather than pathology, and experience as a crucible for sanctification rather than fulfillment of dread.

When they came to the wizard, they were certain he could help them, yet Dorothy's little dog Toto reveals the wizard's magic was a scam. These companions were not the first or the last to journey along hoping somehow to encounter someone or something that can offer the heart, brains, courage, or grounding found lacking. Just like the wizard's activities in Oz, psychotherapy runs the risk of mere illusion, yet with authentic encounter and a bit of leadership on the part of the therapist, constructive and meaningful work can be ultimately accomplished.

A Dialectic of Meaning

Problems from evil witches to fields of poppies antagonize or lull. Facing them requires vision (brains), hope (heart), and persistence (courage). The journey to Oz, a search for help, for home, and for self, is inherently integrative. We are aimed at becoming ourselves, but we are also uniquely adept at standing in our own way. Skilled saboteurs, we aid and abet our worst enemies and must face the reality we are one of them.

As a psychotherapist, I have had opportunities to encounter those whose journeys have led to my door. Far more than problems and solutions, I have had opportunity to help clients discover something larger—hidden worth, unrealized meanings, unseen hope. Effective psychotherapists redirect from cynicism to expectancy. The task of intervention is primarily the task of collaborative, intentional, and active therapeutic leadership, not positivity but meaning-making, and not merely meaning-making but helping another become him- or herself, stirring the *person* in the human.

In Baum's story, the Wonderful Wizard places an amalgam of bran, pins, and needles in the Scarecrow's head to inspire his intellect, gives a silk heart to the Tin Woodman to inspire love, and provides a strong drink to the Cowardly Lion to inspire bravery. The film version spins it a bit differently, with the wizard giving the Scarecrow a

diploma, the Tin Woodman a ticking heart-shaped clock, and the Cowardly Lion a medal.

When we signify, we promote significance. Symbol is a language whose Rorschach allows space for meaning-making. The story of Oz underscores the influence of meaning conveyed. The wizard's clients, so to speak, demonstrated respect for his power in spite of discovering he wasn't powerful. Despite his confession, they wanted his help nonetheless. By the time they had gotten it in the unfolding of an awkward, confrontive session, they had in a matter of moments released themselves of prior expectations and found a help fraught with mystery but not inconsequentiality.

Becoming a Learner

Abounding theories with particular biases and terminologies cast this proverbial human journey as a series of crises and victories, challenges that test and shape brain, heart, courage, and a sense of self. We are influenced by meanings encoded in memory and find ourselves differentiating and integrating in the course of living, a dynamic referred to by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as 'complexity'. (You may have heard of his more famous concept, 'flow.')

Csikszentmihalyi wrote, 'Following a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex than it had been before. It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow (p. 41).'

Carl Whitaker (1989) wrote, 'The effort to solve living as a problem is impossible... The process of facing the dialectic life...is endless, irresolvable, and poorly understood.' Whitaker once described maturity as getting to a point where you can be a patient to anybody or anything, not learned but a *learner*. We fail to solve life's problems when we start with life's *problems*. Who are *we*? The question haunts, and thrills. Voices, meanings, and feelings from our past converge and overflow. We are rules and rituals, convictions and hopes, memory and becoming.

We are the culmination of innate potentials in the present moment, the sacred space of destiny in process, with the introjected reverberations of

family past, culture, society, and relationships. We are also freedom, choice, initiative, will. We are *being* but also *becoming*—believers, looking beyond and drawing unto. We are a story being written, and we are its coauthors. In the words of Ernest Becker (1973), we are 'homo poeta, meaning makers.' On that journey, we disentangle the symbolic (*memory and meaning*) within the crucible of experience (*attention and learning*).

Integration without differentiation leads to deadening conformity; differentiation without integration leads to chaos. This sort of 'complexity' is a fundamental aspect of not only development but resilience and, consequently, what you might call 'well-being' a la Martin Seligman (the father of positive psychology) but what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has, ironically then in my mind, called, 'happiness'—

Happiness is not something that happens. It is not the result of good fortune or random chance. It is not something that money can buy or power command. It does not depend on outside events, but, rather, on how we interpret them. (p. 2)

The Role of Play

Good therapy is a dance of perspective and interpretation, meaning and integration. There is something in it of play, necessarily. It is dance lessons: sometimes we waltz, sometimes we salsa, and sometimes we sit awkwardly in a corner waiting for someone else to make the first move. Whatever metamorphoze you like, clients' ways of being in the world must metamorphosize into something greater than either what has remained meaningful to them or than their particular way of experiencing the world, and the therapy itself always holds the potential for becoming itself an internalized metaphor clients will draw on as they leap from the precipice.

Further, my former colleague and friend, Blanche Douglas (2015) instructed,

The most difficult problem in treating a client unwilling to try on attributing various possibilities of meaning is getting her or him to let go of a rigid way of viewing the world and begin to play. It requires the capacity to suspend one's defenses and regress... The dialectical play between

client and therapist expands therapeutic space and fore-structures a story of meaning, weaving old and new, constituting a creative act in which the client can discover him or herself to be put to better use as a person needing to find meaning in existence. And while the therapeutic space needs to be safe enough within which to play and, therefore, for accidents to occur, it must remain at the same time a space that can be destroyed, for the therapeutic space is not a conquest but a way of being. (p. 25–26)

Winnicott (1971) refers to psychotherapy as playing together in the creation of symbols, as meaning making. In his own words–

Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. (p. 44)
It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self. (p. 63)

It is never merely perspective or skill that holds power to change people's lives. It is an expanded capacity for creating. It is the integration of character. It is a wellspring of courage fed of a source previously unknown. There is integrity, beauty, and in some cases, even justice, in the fluid, organic, and risky enterprise of *care*. Integration leads to the intricate and inextricable weaving of insight (brain), compassion (heart), and will (courage), much of which came with us from back home (surely you noticed that Dorothy's three friends in Oz resembled the farmhands who worked for her aunt and uncle back in Kansas, just as the wizard himself resembled Professor Marvel, the phony fortune teller who convinced Dorothy to return home when she'd run away).

Dorothy faced her journey with courage, heart, and brains. She found her way home and became more of herself as she helped others along their way. As we help, we are helped. In seeking help, we may find that Oz, the city and the man, is an illusion–'Pay no attention to that little man behind the curtain!' And yet, the journey itself, combined with a bit of warmly facilitated meaning-making along it, may offer the alchemy–and its encounters the serendipity–necessary for metamorphosis. 🍷



Blake Griffin Edwards is a licensed marriage and family therapist, clinical programme manager, and clinical fellow in the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

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