

PRACTICE NOTES  
Specific Cases, Techniques and Approaches

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# How Can You Tell when a Goldfish Cries? Finding the Words in Therapeutic Stories with Children

Jim Wilson\*

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*Stories provide one way to say the unspeakable. Drawing on systemic, constructionist and narrative ideas, this paper offers a commentary upon the development of a therapeutic story for a seven year old child and her mother.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Along with some other therapists in recent years (see, for example, Zilbach 1986; White and Epston 1995; Lerner 1996; Wachtel 1996; Cattanaach 1997; Selekman 1997), this paper attends to the voice and experience of children in therapy. The common concern of these practitioners is the wish to make the child's encounter with a therapist attentive to the child's age and stage of development. To do this effectively means that the therapist is constantly on the lookout for opportunities to make a useful connection with the child's perspective (Stith, Rosens, McCollum, Coleman, and Herman 1996; Wilson, 1998).

I describe the development of a story which grew out of the exchanges between myself and members of Billie's family. I then offer a commentary on the development of systemically informed therapeutic stories, in an attempt to show how concepts come to mind. The approach avoids too much intentionality by the therapist. Instead I suggest an approach focused on attentive listening with a systemic 'ear' and an ability to notice the ideas which come alive to us in our meetings with children in therapy.

## Storytelling in Therapy with Children

Practitioners have amply documented the use of written and spoken stories using metaphor and symbolism as effective ways of engaging children in therapy (Combs

and Freedman 1990 and 1996; Dwivedi, 1997, Bowen & Robinson, 1999). Stories are ubiquitous in children's lives, whether through fairytales and/or television programs, or through talk in the school playground. Stories are culturally bound constructions and can be useful in bringing new meaning, new thinking and new expressions of experience to the predicaments of children (as well as adults). But how do these stories come to us? If therapy is a co-constructed enterprise then the therapist must first pay attention to the story told by the other. The ability to listen attentively is fundamentally important since from this listening come the improvisations that lead to the creation of a story peculiar to the client's situation.

## Early Meetings With Billie And Jenny

Billie is a seven year old girl who is brought to see me by Jenny, her mother. Jenny is blind in one eye following a terrible assault by her partner nine months earlier. Billie was present when her mother was beaten and 'cleared up the blood to make it better'. Jenny's partner, Bill, is now in prison but will be released in a year's time. The mother wants help for Billie, who is fearful and bossy and sometimes a very real challenge to her mother's tolerance.

Jenny has been trying to move house since the most recent (and final) assault, which led to her partner's imprisonment. She wants to escape. She has begun to make plans for a new future with her daughter in a different area. She receives support from a women's refuge volunteer and a trauma counsellor.

During the initial, nervous consultation Billie plays very quietly and the mother talks rapidly about her

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\*Jim Wilson is a Family Therapist and Training Director at The Family Institute, Cardiff which is part of Barnardos' work in Wales, UK. Address: 105 Cathedral Road, Cardiff, Wales, CF1 9PH; familyinstitute@compuserve.com

situation and her worries for her daughter. Jenny wants me to help her daughter to get over Billie's witnessing of her father's violence. Slowly, over the first few meetings with the mother and daughter I begin to form a picture of the history of abuse suffered by Jenny. In Billie's exchanges with me she begins to settle more and to talk of her friends, but she does not talk of her father's violence towards her mother.

The following story comes to mind as a way of connecting with Billie about this inexpressible and perhaps unthinkable event. The themes which emerge in the following story of the two goldfish are based both on Jenny's play and on my talking with Jenny and Billie together. The story is an offering, an invention based on my understanding of the experiences of both mother and daughter. Billie has two pet goldfish. The story was offered to Billie before Christmas 1998 for the mother to read to her as and when she judged the time right. When I gave her the story she accepted it as a gift in return for her giving me a toy bear for Christmas.

### The Context of the Story and the Reading

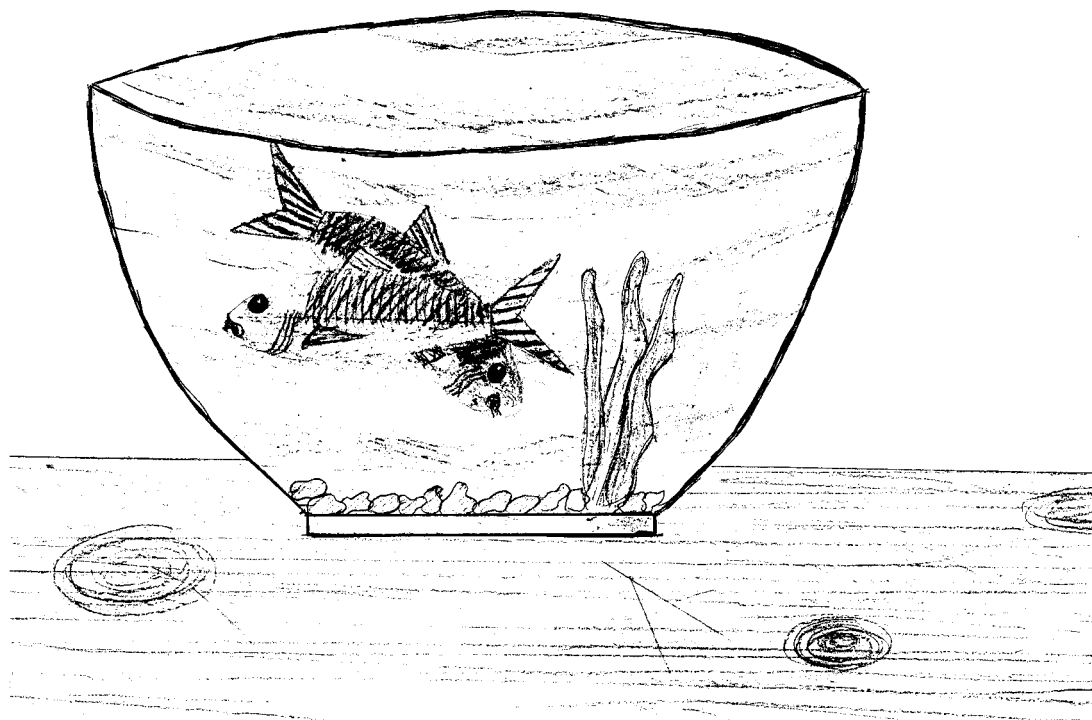
In giving this story to Billie and her mother, timing was crucial. The point of the exchange at Christmas-time seemed to bring Billie and me together in mutual acceptance and new trust. Billie's play had been so fragmented and her mother's worries so preoccupying and frantic that at times I felt it was difficult to catch my breath before

hearing more stories of the pain and the panic that they had experienced.

Jenny and I discussed how best to arrange to read the story to her daughter; I emphasised that Jenny would be the best judge of the timing of this: she should not feel obliged to read the story to Billie unless she felt it was safe enough to do so. This sort of instruction places the parent in a position of active involvement and responsibility for the telling and hearing of the story. As Penn and Frankfurt (1994) illustrate, this form of reading can lead to the mother's re-understanding of her own position, through hearing herself tell the story in this metaphoric form. It speaks to her predicament as well as her daughter's.

After Christmas, Jenny and Billie returned and I found that Jenny had decided to read the story in short instalments. It provoked more reflection and discussion between mother and daughter in the next session. The story of the goldfish became a safe focus; the metaphorical parallels with the family's experience were close enough, without being too threatening to either of them. As with other less direct approaches, it was important for me not to 'overwork' the meanings of the story. It is more useful to leave these open, avoiding the possibility of imposing one's own biases through the interpretations one makes.

After nine months, my work with Jenny and Billie is coming to an end. When I last met with them in their new home, Billie played 'house moves' with me as a 'neighbour'. After a short while her friends called to go



Picture by Yasmin, Aged 12

**MELISSA THE GOLDFISH:  
A STORY FOR BILLIE**

Melissa was a very pretty young fish indeed. She was a goldfish. She swam around in her goldfish bowl quite happily, in and out of the pretend seaweed, playing with her mother, Samantha. Samantha was a proud and beautiful goldfish. She and Melissa would enjoy swimming around each other, looking at the world outside from their goldfish bowl. (*Have you ever imagined what a goldfish sees when she looks out from a goldfish bowl? She probably sees funny shapes of people and television sets and wonders what everyone outside is doing.*)

One day Melissa and her mother were having a bite to eat (ants eggs seemed to drop in from the sky as if by magic). All of a sudden there was an almighty splash! A very handsome new goldfish appeared. He had a black line down his back and silvery fins. After being surprised Samantha and Melissa got on very well with this new, handsome Silvery Prince (*as they decided to call him*). They began to like him; he made them laugh and life inside the goldfish bowl was good ...

But, one day when they were all swimming around, the Silvery Prince said, 'This goldfish bowl is too small and you (pointing to Samantha and Melissa) are taking up too much room!'

Samantha and Melissa were shocked and frightened. Their goldfish eyes opened very wide and their mouths opened even wider.

Before Samantha could tell the Silvery Prince that this was her bowl and belonged to no one else he whacked her so hard with his tail that she flew against the side of the bowl and hurt her fins very badly. She lay there and couldn't get up. Melissa was very frightened. (*It was the kind of fright where you don't really know what to say or what to feel. You just know something wrong has happened and you don't like it.*)

Melissa wanted it to be all better again. She wanted the goldfish bowl to be a happy place once more. She wanted the Silvery Prince to be nice again, to be good to her and her mum. She wanted him to like her because deep down inside she liked him very much and he was good fun at times. But this was a bad thing he had done and she didn't understand it for one minute.

Slowly Samantha got up and began to swim again. It took a while and she was always frightened about what the Silvery Prince might do next. For a long time Samantha and Melissa said nothing to each other. They just kept themselves hidden behind the pretend seaweed. The Silvery Prince swam around like he was the King of the sea.

Melissa and her mum were very unhappy. They showed this by keeping very quiet or sometimes getting very very angry and flapping their tails around. But they didn't cry like human beings do (*maybe, because tears are made from water we can't tell when a goldfish cries*).

Anyway, one day there was another big splash. This time, when Melissa and Samantha opened their eyes the Silvery Prince was gone. At first Samantha and Melissa couldn't believe it. They breathed a big sigh of relief through their gills and began to gently and slowly swim out further and further from behind the pretend seaweed, until they began to feel a little bit more at home again. Samantha said, 'I wonder where he has gone?'

'I hope he has gone for good!' said Melissa. 'I never want to see him again. He was so bad to you. He should never have bashed you with his tail and hurt you so much. This is our bowl. It has always been *our* bowl. Why do you think he spoiled everything?'

Samantha couldn't find the words to explain to her daughter. She too had found the Silvery Prince someone she once liked very, very much. 'How is it possible?', she said to herself in goldfish language, 'How is it possible to like someone so very, very much and yet he should do such bad things? This is very confusing.' It made her swim round and round in frantic circles trying to make sense of this. Slowly, over the following goldfish-weeks and months, and even a goldfish year, Melissa and Samantha began to feel more safe again. But they always had one big worry. Do you know what this worry was? It was this: would there be a time, sometime in the future when there would be a big splash and the Silvery Prince might come back again? This was frightening for Samantha and for Melissa. (*Sometimes when people are frightened they think it is best not to talk about the frightening thing and I can understand that, because we all like to try to forget frightening things.*)

As Melissa swam around the goldfish bowl she said to herself, 'I wonder: if I had been nicer to that Silvery Prince would he have liked me better and liked my mum better? Maybe I made him do something to hurt my mum, but I can't think what that would have been. Maybe if I had shared my food a bit more or let him play a bit more behind the seaweed. Even though I am angry about what he did, sometimes, just sometimes, I would like to hear how he is, and if he is unhappy. I wonder if he is in another goldfish bowl on his own, or if he has a friend? I wonder what he looks like now? I wonder if he still has the silvery gills and that black line on his back? I wonder if I will ever see him again without feeling frightened?'

Melissa's mum sometimes felt sad about the things that had happened. She even thought, 'Maybe I have myself to blame. If only I had kept him away from us. If only I had spoken to him a bit more strongly. If only I had seen that he wanted to take over this goldfish bowl. Maybe Melissa wouldn't be so upset.' She wanted to tell Melissa how much she loved her and how much she was sorry that bad things had happened to her.

Yet some good things began to happen too: the goldfish bowl was beginning to look smart again. The water was calm. They could breathe through their gills more easily. Samantha also made some special plans. She was becoming a stronger goldfish. Melissa liked that. She could see there was a quickness now in the way Samantha seemed to patrol the goldfish bowl and slowly, slowly at first, Melissa began to play again. She began to pick little pebbles up and play with them in the bowl. She began to dart in and out of the pretend seaweed like she used to do! She began to want to have some more friends again. She remembered that goldfish actually swim around in big groups called 'schools', and when she started to think of this she felt good. Her tail would flick a little bit and she would dart around the goldfish bowl. She could see slowly, slowly at first, that things over the last goldfish-year were beginning to feel safer.

This is the end of this part of the story of Melissa—there could be more adventures and things to say but this is Melissa's story so far. (What do you think could happen next I wonder? ...) THE END ... so far.

swimming and I was secretly pleased to be relegated once more to the adult world.

## Why Systemically Informed Stories?

Our professional theories, as well as our personal experiences, are wells of experience and resourcefulness which can be drawn upon for the benefit of the people we see in therapy. Systemic therapy, informed by narrative and social constructionist ideas, draws me towards an appreciation of how the internal experiences of children in therapy can be contextualised and given fuller expression. In so doing we may try to introduce more expanded, less blameworthy or confining meanings to prior experiences.

I assume that the child's trauma will be associated with central themes and internal responses to these: the loss of her parent through imprisonment and the fearfulness of what had been experienced sit alongside her wish to be in touch in some way with her father. These themes were only marginally alluded to in the prior sessions with Jenny and her daughter but alluded to enough for them to be included as central themes in the story. The notion of each story offered containing an inherent systemic logic (Cecchin, Lane and Ray, 1994) equips the writer with an orientation which helps introduce complexity into the client's account. In essence the story takes the shape of a systemic narrative offered to the child and her mother.

## Stance of the Writer

There are always options for parents to write their own stories and for children and therapists to embark on a joint writing expedition (Marner, 1995). If the story is written by the therapist, the key idea of applying systemic logic to a child's situation helps a therapist to avoid judging the various characters too harshly (for example, the father in this case). Characters are neither demonised or sanctified, since this speaks to only one dimension of the significant adults in the child's life. These stories do not have romantic or 'Hollywood' endings, in fact, one important element is that some unspeakable truth may find expression in the telling. The therapist keeps the client's way of talking and the quality of the therapeutic relationship uppermost in her/his mind in order to create a useful fit between the story, the listener and the teller.

If the story is too hopeful we risk being seen as naïve. If we become too engrossed in our enthusiasm we can lose sight of the client's scepticism. If we become too organised by instruction in the story, we risk becoming moralisers. The therapist has to be careful to sidestep such traps and at the same time, develop a relevant story that holds within it the capacity for new possibilities to be heard by the reader and the listener.

The stories use symbols and metaphors chosen to ignite the child's imagination. Central to all of this endeavour is the therapist's desire to try to see the world, as far as possible, through the eyes of the child. This form of systemic empathy helps shape the main themes in the

story. The general attitude is close to the attitude of practitioners involved in reflecting teams and processes (Andersen, 1987 and 1990). The orientation of the writer of the story is one of attempting to *appreciate* the child's situation rather than judging or offering definitive interpretations of her reality. Perhaps the orientation is best considered in the light of the following claim by the novelist Fernanda Everstadt:

... children are amnesiacs behind enemy lines ... Being a child is largely a flux of bold and furtive guesswork, fixed ideas continually dislodged by scrambling and tentative revision ... All our energy and cunning go into getting our bearings without letting on that we are ignorant and lost (in Moore, 1997).

## CONCLUSION

Creating stories with, and offering them to, children can enhance therapeutic potential by employing a child-friendly idiom. The active involvement of the therapist in devising, structuring and offering a tailor made story to a family may, in itself, enhance rapport and motivation within the therapeutic process. Crucial to the stimulation of one's imagination is attention to the imagination of children in our play and talk with them. This capacity, together with a sense of realistic optimism, are necessary for the emergence of improvised, case specific stories. The therapist should not feel the need to structure the story as an imposition. Listening to the expressions of children and being educated by their play is often more than enough to trigger story lines in the mind of the attentive practitioner.

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