



## The Future for Solution-Focused Therapy – a parable

### Bill O'Connell

Once upon a time there lived a band of wandering tribes people who enjoyed telling short stories. They visited other communities and shared with them tales of ordinary but heroic people who overcame great odds in their lives. Those who heard the stories were called customers, because it was the custom to listen to stories! Their stories were about how people could create their own futures. They were about peoples' resources, competencies and solutions. They told their customers that "there was nothing wrong with them that what's right with them can't fix." These stories sounded like miracles because the characters in them felt empowered in their lives. By the end of a good evening's story telling, the listeners noticed how they felt better, happier, calmer and more positive. One of the strange things about the stories was that everyone heard them as if they were their own stories.

After hearing them, many people changed their lives and lived by the new story they had heard about themselves. The storytellers became much sought after by people all over the country and abroad.

In another part of the country were tribes who had ancient traditions of telling long stories about the mysteries of life and human behaviour. Their stories illuminated the secret corners in peoples' lives and helped them to understand why they had the lives they had. These story-tellers saw themselves as experts. Their particular expertise lay in telling stories that explained *who* failed, *why* they failed and *how* they failed in life. Many people found these myths helpful, but others decided that the short stories were more satisfying and deserted to the short story tellers.

The long story tellers were understandably unhappy about this. They had trained in the secrets of their art for many years and now they saw their knowledge and status being undermined. They dismissed the short story tellers as "fast story drive thru merchants". Some however tried to introduce short stories into their repertoire, but others stayed faithful to the old stories.

Some of the more enthusiastic short story tellers got carried away and told their audiences that their stories were the *only* stories. They thought they were much better than the long story tellers whom they felt were out of touch with people. Some of the less wise among them would not speak to the long storytellers and only met together with other short story tellers, where they reminded each other that they were the best.

After a time someone thought it would be a good idea to write down the best stories in a wise book so that people in other countries could read them. They began to argue among themselves about which stories to include. Some of them

wanted to make the short stories even shorter. This group became known as One Feathers. After a while their stories became so short that only they understood what they meant. Some people did not join the One Feathers. They kept telling the old stories because they found that more people understood them. They were known as No Feathers.

In order to sort out this disagreement the two groups turned to one of the people who had started to tell the very first stories. He was known as Two Feathers and was much revered, though not greatly loved. When Two Feathers was pressed about which stories were the best, he said he was happy for people to tell any stories they found helpful. But he was very clear what were his stories and what were other peoples'. This made some of the One Feathers and the No Feathers angry and they broke away. The No Feathers became friends with the Long Story tribe and eventually began to tell short and long stories. The One Feathers joined up with a group of Minimalists who mimed stories instead of telling them.

Eventually some people came to realise that it didn't matter very much which story people told as long as it was helpful to the listeners. They said it was like the story of the Wizard of Oz. There was no wise wizard at the end of the yellow brick road, only the message that we could find our own wisdom, our own courage, our own hearts. We could find the grace and strength and wisdom to live our lives in peace and harmony.

Like all good parables I will not kill it by trying to explain it!

### **Does the Solution Focused Approach have a future?**

I believe that the model will still be popular ten, twenty years from now because its values and principles are enduringly human. They resonate in peoples' lives. The core values of respect, choice, collaboration, equality and dignity fit the demands of a multi-cultural, multi-racial society in which difference is celebrated. Acting upon a deep respect for the client's expertise is the antidote to the medicalisation and therapisation of life's problems. Solution focused ideas have swept all before them because they affirm the humanity of both the helper and the helped. They instil hope instead of cynicism and despair; they stimulate change where there was rigidity and inertia; they liberate the best in people.

The growth of the solution-focused philosophy is not restricted to the world of therapy. It has already proved its usefulness as a bridge across professional boundaries. It helps practitioners to transcend territorial disputes by realigning the focus of care to the needs of the person or family. Across the disciplines there is a discernible convergence of values. In education, social work and mental health for example, we find an increasing emphasis on the expertness of the pupil, client and patient. There is a discourse about genuine partnership with service users, although there is much to be done before the talk is walked.

In Psychology we are witnessing the emergence of Positive Psychology which escapes from a preoccupation with pathology and recognises clients as resourceful problem-solvers. It acknowledges that most people cope with what life throws at them, without seeking professional help. Linley and Joseph claim (2002) that between 30 and 90 per cent of survivors of traumatic incidents report at least some positive changes in their lives consequent to the trauma.

We need to remember too that solution-focused is not a static theory but a living, moving, breathing movement. What amazes founders of the approach is its penetration into many areas of public life– business; education; mental health; personal social services; work with offenders; with people with learning disabilities; advice and guidance work; psychology and psychotherapy to name only a few. Virtually any field that requires good interpersonal skills can benefit from the solution focused perspective. I personally have taught the skills to groups as diverse as: shop stewards; hospital managers; careers officers; drug workers; classroom assistants; mental health workers; residential social workers and marriage counsellors, with perhaps the most unusual being a group of clairvoyants! (They liked the future oriented aspects of SFBT!)

This rapid expansion has not been accompanied by an infrastructure to support it. In the United Kingdom it is something of a cottage industry with no central focus. As a result, there are many thousands of people who have been enthused by it, but who have been unable to develop their practice beyond short courses. Perhaps the time is right for a National Association for Solution Focused Therapists to become the public voice of SFBT; registering and accrediting therapists; supervisors; consultants and trainers. It would develop codes of ethics and practice and operate a transparent complaints system. It would take the lead in dialogue with the government and with other professionals in the field. It would promote the Solution Focused cause with public bodies that demand evidence of effectiveness and good practice before they will fund and support the work. I suspect however that the 'professionalisation' of SFT would not be wholly welcome among solution focused workers themselves. They tend to enjoy their freedom, although at times it makes them look unaccountable. Many like to think they occupy the radical fringe and do not want to be subject to the constraints imposed by the mainstream. While understanding the wish to retain the innovatory and creative dimensions of the work, it seems to me that there are dangers in allowing so many people to call themselves solution focused counsellors or trainers who have not undergone any substantial training, and who, in some instances, have no professional bodies to whom they are accountable. Such a position does not make it easy to weed out people who may be exploiting or abusing their clients. Whatever the situation in other countries, time is running out in the U.K. for Solution Focused workers to become organised and professional.

## Conclusion

Yvonne Dolan has an exercise she calls 'A letter from the Future.' (1998) In this exercise the client writes an imaginative letter from some time in the future – say five or ten years. This letter is to a friend and in it the writer describes what life is like for him or her now. I'd like you to imagine that the following is a letter from the future written by Solution Focused Therapy.

### **A Letter from the Future from Solution Focused Therapy**

May 21 2013

I am writing to you my old therapy friend to let you know what is happening in my life at the moment. I am not as young as I used to be. There was a time when I was the new kid on the block, shouting my mouth off about one thing or another. I was a thorn in the side of the therapy establishment. Maybe I was a bit arrogant then. I thought I had discovered the secret of the universe. When the research results came in it taught me a little humility. It was clear I was being helpful, but maybe some of my friends had exaggerated how helpful!

Time has treated me kindly since then. I still hold the ideals I had in my youth. I still feel intolerant of therapists who undermine clients, who lay burdens upon them, who fail to see the qualities and strengths of the people who come through their doors. I still rage at therapists who take over peoples' lives and set themselves up as experts.

But I have had some of my own rough edges knocked off me. I have learned the importance of always listening to the client. I have learned how important the relationship is and that techniques are never a substitute for human warmth and compassion. I have come to realise that we need to understand the way in which we construct language if I am to be allowed to help clients to make changes.

In my old age I have revisited my family roots and discovered a lot of relatives I did not fully appreciate. Alfred Adler for a start. He was really the man who gave me the miracle question.

I spend a lot of my time in strange places these days, far removed from the therapy room. I enjoy the company of a wide range of people who talk on the same wavelength. I meet teachers, nurses, shop stewards, careers officers, probation officers, classroom assistants, prison officers and others who seem to know me well. I am amazed at organisations which invite me in to change their problem focused culture. I like being a tool to help people keep on learning throughout their lives.

I stand in awe of the creative ways in which I am being used by practitioners working in very challenging situations.....in major traumatic incidents, with children who have been tortured and abused, with people in psychiatric hospitals and

prisons . I love the way in which workers skilfully adapt me to the needs of their clients.

I also meet some strange people who claim to be me.....but I hardly recognise them. I think there must be more than one way of being me! I am surprised when I hear people say how simple I am, as if I am only the sum of my rather elegant techniques. I overheard someone the other day saying that " Solution Focused Therapy could be written on the back of a teabag." I don't know why or how someone could write on the back of a teabag but in fact I am very complicated, particularly in the way I use language. I only wish people would take me seriously and understand the principles, values and philosophy that underpin me. My practice might be simple (although not always easy) but my thinking is very hard!

Anyway... I thought you would like to know that ten years on I am still alive and kicking!

## References

Dolan, Y., (1998) *One Small Step*. California: Papier-Mache Press

Linley, P.A. and Joseph, S. (2002) Post Traumatic Growth. *CPJ Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal*. Vol.13. No.1.pp 14-17

The above originally appeared as a chapter in *The Handbook of Solution-Focused Therapy* (2003) edited by Bill O'Connell and Stephen Palmer and published by Sage. Reproduced with permission.