

The Helping Conversation

I am going to propose that there is a code in our lives, something we recognise when we encounter it in the outside world, something personal, but possibly primeval too... I am referring to story, something we encounter in childhood and live with all our lives. Without the ability to tell or live prescribed stories we lose the ability to make sense of our lives.

~ Margaret Mahy

Often I'm approached by people asking for advice about a life circumstance. This may be personal (including family and relationship issues), or professional. Sometimes it's about a major crossroads in biography, often with undertones of unresolved, maybe unrestrained, anger and grief. In my experience every dilemma involves *letting go* and *letting come*. People often know what is needed, but may need to discover this through a process of dialogue, to see the situation more clearly, and to recognise the trip-wires and trigger-points for their reactions. They then may arrive at a clear presencing place in which they can forge new attitudes, shape new patterns, develop new skills, and so get on and do it.

Sometimes this takes some coaching. We all revert to a primitive Self when we're stressed or anxious. Guilt and feelings of failure are debilitating patterns in this experience — it is a real challenge to shift from guilt and its consequences, to responsibility and responsiveness ('response-ability').

In the background of my approach are the guiding principles of Rudolf Steiner's spiritual science (anthroposophy). For me this is not a doctrine but a practice of creative presence. We do not need to refer to this in a Helping Conversation. The essential thing is to connect, and together to look for the future that wants to emerge.

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The Helping Conversation as I have developed it draws some of its essential principles from Narrative Therapy. At its core is recognition of the individual person standing amidst the challenges of life; in this regard it is thoroughly existential. These challenges often present as problems with which the client has tended to identify, and thus *being* a problem rather than *having* a problem. The aim is to treat the problem as a *situation* that can be examined and responded to...

A sense for an unfolding and developing story is the foundation of this practice. I want to hear the story, to listen to it with 'willing suspension of disbelief.' All stories are true in the process of their telling, and they exert extraordinary power. I can give an example from my own life: as a youth I joined the Air Scouts, and at the age of 14 was enrolled in a holiday course in glider flying. For years afterwards I told about the wonderful experience of drifting silently in the sky, high above the world. It became an important part of my biography. Yet in reality I never flew in a glider; at the last minute I refused to go on the flying camp, unable any longer to face the prospect of the sexualised bullying that took place amongst my peers. My shame was the 'cop-out'; my 'cover-up' was the accomplished glider flight.

Both versions of this story are significant. The departure from 'The Truth' is evidence of my conflicted state of mind at that time and subsequently through until my late twenties. My ability to 're-tell' the story eventually into an approximation to what actually happened was a sign of acquired resilience and healthier self-regard. Of course, that first tale was a 'lie', but I would say it was a necessary one. It protected me. Looking back, the most interesting thing is that I myself believed it.

'Without the ability to tell or live prescribed stories we lose the ability to make sense of our lives.' Margaret Mahy is an acclaimed children's author, and her statement that we need to be able to tell stories, or at least live out stories we know, is the sort of thing a writer *would* say. But I am convinced she is right. The great stories tell our story, and for that reason we consider them archetypal. They articulate the human condition, and the human journey. We identify with the central character, even adopting phrases and gestures. Thus, we acquire a language for our own purposes and meaning. We interpret ourselves to our Selves.

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In the Helping Conversation I want to hear your story. I'll ask where you want to begin — 'once upon a time' or quite specifically. I listen without inner or outer comment (apart maybe from an occasional affirmation murmur signifying attention). If a critical experience comes up, it could be appropriate to empathise with your feelings, but I really want the flow of the story to continue without pause, respecting the way a succession of events and images can have a life of their own.

At this initial stage there is little commentary to be made. We let the story stand. Each client however needs a specific response. We all need to feel our story is real. My experience is that you will feel relieved to have told the story, to have been heard and affirmed. To have been witnessed. We may or may not talk about this. Throughout the session, I want you to be in charge of the content of the story, and to a great extent, of the process itself. You are the author of your own life, you are the authority who says how it is. My task is to accompany you on your journey.

The further steps on this path involve a process of investigation and reflection that enables you to confirm the features of the story, and to recognise any patterns and the underlying attitudes and values that give the narrative its distinctive character. At some point you will identify some element in the story that you want to change, and that you can change. This apparent weakness or challenge becomes the generative point for the transformed story.

Ultimately, I want to help you find an attitude to your experiences that enables you to live your story creatively. Dag Hammarskjöld, the remarkable Secretary-General of the United Nations who died in a plane crash in the Congo in 1961, expressed it in his posthumously-published journal, 'Markings':

To say Yes to life is at one and the same time to say Yes to oneself... Yes — even to that element in oneself which is most unwilling to let itself be transformed from a temptation to a strength.