

STORIES MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Solution Focused practitioners do not enquire about 'the problem'. We don't need to know what has been bothering the client and has led them to us. So when I sat down with Maggie - (not her real name)- many years ago I did not ask her what had brought her to BRIEF. However Maggie wanted me to know, and she wanted me to hear her story before she was able, or perhaps prepared, to respond to my opening question 'so what are your best hopes from our talking together?'

And the story that she wanted me to hear was a sad and distressing and miserable one. Throughout the course of a long marriage she had suffered abuse, violent abuse, controlling, emotional, psychological – and violent. Over the course of those first 30 minutes she sketched out how her life had been, including the visits to A. & E., the contact with her GP. and with social workers and other professionals, support from her family, and all of them, all of these people with whom she came into contact had wanted her to leave her husband and yet she had not.

As she talked I listened, from time to time acknowledged the nightmare that she had lived through and when the opportunity arose asked how she had survived, how she had kept her self going. And then the pressure of words began to diminish. Some gaps began to appear in her story and I judged that perhaps I could ask a different sort of question. As I opened my mouth to speak I had still not quite decided what I was going to say but what emerged, after again acknowledging the terrible time that she had lived through was this, more a statement perhaps than a question 'given everything that you have described, and I am sure that there was much more than you have told me, you must have had a really good reason for staying all those years'. Maggie looked at me, surprised and paused. I thought that perhaps she had not understood what I had said so I repeated 'you must have had a really good reason for staying all these years through such tough times'.

Maggie began to cry, indeed to weep. And after having collected herself she confirmed that she had indeed had a really good reason for staying and explained exactly why she had. And in the circumstances that she laid out I think that few of us could have argued with her, few of us would have disagreed. And then she went on to say that of the many professionals who had spoken with her over the years, many of whom had been trying to persuade her to leave her husband, most had implied to her, indeed suggested openly, that she stayed because she lacked self-esteem, because she did not value herself, perhaps because she did not believe that she deserved better, because she lacked independence, even because she was, she said they said, 'co-dependent'. This was the first time she added that anyone had suggested to her that she might have had a 'good reason' for staying.

And from this beginning we went on to construct a new story together, a story of heroic self-sacrifice, during the course of which Maggie had showed remarkable strength, remarkable courage, amazing resilience and determination. What emerged from the discussion was an extraordinary woman, who, if and when she decided that the time was right to leave her husband,

could expect to more than merely manage life, indeed could expect to make an outstanding success of whatever she might choose to do.

The stories we invite people into make a difference – they can be foundational in shaping people’s futures. We must be wary of the stories that we construct with our clients – they have the capacity either to limit our clients or to open new possibilities – to make life harder for people or infinitely richer. Which version of self do we want our client to take out of the consulting room door?

With thanks to Insoo Kim Berg, in this the week of the 10th anniversary of her death, for the ‘good reason’ question. It was from her that I first heard it.

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