

101 Healing Stories for Kids and Teens

101 Healing Stories for Kids and Teens

Using Metaphors in Therapy

George W. Burns



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*This one is dedicated to kids,
kids of all ages, all cultures, all religions, everywhere,
especially to Tom and Ella,
and one who is yet to be.*



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Children have and do enrich my life greatly—my own children, my grandchildren, the children I see as clients—for they are ready to offer an unconditional smile, accept you into their world, and share tales of their experience. When my children were young I thought it my responsibility as a father to teach them what they needed for life. With my grandchildren I am discovering I have a lot to learn from what they can teach me. As William Wordsworth said to his own five-year-old boy in “An Anecdote for Fathers:”

Could I but teach the hundredth part
Of what from thee I learn.



Introduction

T*ell me a story.* How many times have you been asked to do this? If you are a parent, teacher, grandparent, uncle, aunt, babysitter, child-care worker, or anyone who has contact with children in some way, I am sure you have not escaped this frequent childhood request. But have you ever wondered what kids want when they make the request? Are they just seeking entertainment? Are they wanting to journey into a world of fantasy? Do they want the intimacy of the special relationship that exists between storyteller and listener? Do they seek to identify with a character that may model what they would like to be? Are they requesting examples of how they should behave, relate, or cope in life?

There is a general principle here: Kids love stories—for many reasons. If we need proof, just listen to them asking, “Tell me a story, please.” Look at the rows and rows of books of children’s stories that fill our bookstores and libraries. Look at the stories that come to life in popular children’s movies, or the tales of conflict, struggle, and victory that tend to be the theme of so many video games. Such is our hunger for stories that we never stop asking to hear them, even though the nature of the questions may change a little—“Can I get a new book?” or “Can we rent a DVD?” Given this desire to learn, to be informed, to acquire problem-solving skills through stories, the prime question addressed by this book is this: If we are constantly sharing stories of learning, health, healing, and wellness with our young clients, how can we do that in a way that is most effective and helpful?

WHAT THIS BOOK OFFERS

Just as artists need two prime ingredients if their work is to have an impact, so the metaphor practitioner also needs those same ingredients: skill and art. *Skill* for the painter is knowledge and use of

the laws of perspective, color, and tone. For the teller of metaphors, it is in the principles of constructing a therapeutic tale that will engage the child, facilitate the child's identification with the problem, and have the child joining in a search for the solution.

Art goes beyond the skilled application of principles. It is what makes a painting stand out from the crowd, or gives a story its personal, relevant impact for an individual listener. The art is in crafting the tale specifically for the child and the child's needs, and communicating it in a way that offers both involvement and meaning.

In this book, I want to cover as comprehensively as possible both the skills and the art that will enable and empower you to work confidently and effectively with healing stories for your child and adolescent students or clients. I want to answer questions I often hear in the workshops I run on metaphors, like "How do you come up with story ideas?" "How do I engage a child in listening?" "Where do you find the materials or sources to create appropriate stories?" "How do I tell a healing story effectively?" Fortunately, there are practical, learnable steps for answering these questions, and my aim is to offer them as clearly as I can in the following chapters which will show you how to tell stories effectively, how to make them metaphoric, and where to find sources for therapeutic tales. There are guidelines for communicating stories and using the storyteller's voice so as to most effectively engage the client and commence the journey of healing. The book gently guides the reader through these pragmatic processes, and on to methods for creating metaphoric stories from your own experiences and other sources.

If you want to work with stories, I recommend you start collecting them right away. Look for them in bookshops, videos, or the computer games children play. Keep a note of the meaningful, significant, and humorous interactions you have with a child that may benefit another child. I *love* to collect stories, for they have long intrigued me with their powerful, yet subtle ability to teach and heal. Look for cultural and children's stories when you travel, scan the bookshelves of friends with children, and look at what children are writing themselves. Listening to the many tragic and triumphant tales children relate to you in your office can teach you about children's strengths, resilience, and capacity for coping. Humbly, we can learn from these youthful experiences of life if we take the time to listen to the creative and imaginative tales of our clients or other children. Often they have known none of the restrictions and structures imposed by adults on what should be told (and what should not) or how it should be told. If you have the opportunity to sit with storytellers, join a storytellers' guild, or attend a storytellers' congress, you will be able to observe their art and absorb their message. Stories with salient metaphor content can be discovered in anthologies, folktales, children's books, and in the jokes or tales that circulate on your e-mail. As with any kind of collecting, there is an acquired skill and art to learning which to discard and which to adopt and nurture for their intrinsic merit—a process that I encourage you to follow, not only with the stories you read here but with any you encounter in the future.

For experienced therapists, this volume will hopefully introduce a variety of new story ideas on which to construct meaningful therapeutic metaphors. It will provide techniques for honing skills, enhancing communication, and making the effectiveness of what we do more empowering and more enjoyable.

For novice metaphor therapists, who are just discovering the potency of therapeutic metaphors, this book offers step-by-step procedures, case examples, and a rich source of therapeutic stories that will enable you to apply them immediately in your work no matter what your theoretical back-

ground. As well as learning about the methods of applying metaphors, you will be able to cultivate competence in the art of therapeutic communication, processes of change, and the rewards of facilitating outcome.

A WORD OR TWO ABOUT WORDS

By *metaphor*, I refer to one form of communication (along with stories, tales, and anecdotes) in the story genre in which an expression is taken from one field of experience and used to say something about another field of experience. To describe a bully as being as angry as a bear with a sore paw does not mean the bully and bear are literally alike but that the description, phrase, or story about the bear and its demeanor communicates an imaginative image of the bully and his or her behavior. It is this symbolic association that gives metaphors their literary and therapeutic potency.

Metaphors in therapy and teaching are designed as a form of indirect, imaginative, and implied communication with clients, about experiences, processes, or outcomes that may help solve the child's literal problem and offer new means of coping. The therapist may talk about what a person needs to do to protect himself from a bear with a sore paw as a means for managing the circumstantial or emotional issues the listening child is encountering with a bully. Such metaphors may include stories, tales, anecdotes, jokes, proverbs, analogies, or other communications. Some of these different tools and techniques for communicating in metaphors with children are expanded in Chapter 3. What distinguishes therapeutic metaphors from other tales, stories, or anecdotes is the combination of (a) a purposefully designed, symbolic communication and (b) a specific healing or therapeutic intention.

It is not my objective in this book to be too pedantic about the differential characteristics of stories, tales, and anecdotes. In fact, most times I will use the terms synonymously. Where I employ the words *metaphor*, *healing story*, or *therapeutic tale*, it is with the purpose of emphasizing that this is neither just a casual, anecdotal account nor an inconsequential tale such as we may relate at a party. By *metaphor* or *healing story* I refer to a deliberately crafted story that has a clear, rational, and ethical therapeutic goal. It is, in other words, a tale that is based on our long human history of storytelling, grounded in the science of effective communication, demonstrating specific therapeutic relevance to the needs of the client, and told with the art of a good storyteller.

ORAL VERSUS WRITTEN STORIES

While I have long been told stories by my parents and in turn told them to my children, grandchildren, and clients, both young and old, I have found that *storytelling* and *story writing* are two different processes. In fact, it feels strange to be communicating with you about storytelling in a written format. Once stories are written, in black and white, they tend to take on an immutable quality as though that is the way they always have been and always should be told. The reality is that stories are dynamic. They evolve, they change, and they adapt from teller to teller as well as from listener to listener. Hopefully, you will discover that you never tell a similar story idea exactly the same way twice, for the power of the story is often in its flexibility and adaptability to the needs of the listener and the listener's circumstances.

Therefore, I cannot guarantee the stories in this book are as I originally heard them or initially developed them. Nor can I guarantee that the way you read them is the way I told them to my last client, or will tell them to the next. May I suggest you see in the stories I have written their themes, ideas or meaning rather than the exact words with which they have been expressed in this format. Look for the therapeutic message in each story rather than trying to memorize or relate it to a child verbatim. These stories were not designed to be told and retold as an actor may faithfully memorize and reiterate the words of a playwright. I hope you will allow the tales to evolve and, along with them, your own stories and storytelling skills. Stories emerge from within us, they communicate about our own experiences and, in turn, help define us as individuals. In stories it is possible for us, and our young clients, to find happiness and well-being, as well as the means for creating and maintaining positive emotional states.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The book is divided into four parts to allow ready referencing of the sections you may want to revisit for story ideas when working with a particular child in therapy. Part One, “Effective Storytelling for Kids and Teens,” examines the magic of metaphor to inform, educate, teach values, discipline, build experience, facilitate problem solving, change, and heal. There are guidelines for effectively telling stories and using the storyteller’s voice. The last chapter of this section discusses useful tools, techniques, and vehicles for communicating therapeutic messages metaphorically. How do you use books, drama, videos, puppets, toys, play, humor, collaborative tales, and other media in metaphor therapy?

Part Two, “Healing Stories, Teaching Stories,” is divided into ten chapters, each containing ten stories (except for Chap. 4, which contains 9) relevant to the therapeutic–outcome theme of that chapter. Each chapter is prefaced with a brief description of the nature of the outcome theme and concludes with an exercise to record and develop your own story ideas for that particular outcome goal.

The topics around which the stories of each chapter are woven represent a common therapeutic goal. These topics are not meant to be all-inclusive or totally definitive of pediatric therapeutic goals. They are derived from experience in my own clinical practice, from discussions with other clinical, educational, pediatric, and developmental psychologists, and from the results of an unpublished study I conducted of congress attendants in which they were asked to list what they saw as the ten most common therapeutic goals. The outcome goals I have used just happen to be a convenient framework for me to structure my healing stories. I hope they will provide a guide on which you can develop metaphor ideas of your own—but I want to offer the caution that they are not the *only* therapeutic outcomes and may not be relevant for you or your young clients. If they are helpful, please feel free to use them but, if not, do not limit your stories—or therapy—to what happens to be a convenient structure for someone else.

The stories in Chapter 13 are an exception to the general format of this section, as they are stories *by* children rather than stories *by* an adult *for* children. They mainly come from a project with a school in which children were asked to write their own healing stories.

Part Three, “Creating Your Own Healing Stories for Kids,” guides you through the processes

for developing your own outcome-oriented stories. It discusses some of the pitfalls to avoid in structuring metaphors, and some of the pathways that may be helpful to follow. You will be introduced to various sources from which you can build metaphors, and offered simple, how-to-do-it procedures for creating, structuring, and presenting effective therapeutic metaphors. The final chapter is devoted to how to teach parents to use metaphors as a way of enhancing the efficacy of these therapeutic interventions for their children.

The emphasis of this book is on the pragmatics of how to tell stories, how to find metaphor ideas, and how to structure your own therapeutic tales, rather than on the reiteration of the research underlying metaphor therapy. As both the art *and* science of metaphor therapy are important, I have provided a detailed resources section at the end of the book that will enable interested readers to further explore the nature of metaphors as a language form, the research into their efficacy, and the variety of their therapeutic applications. It will also help you to find further therapeutic story material in a variety of sources, from children's books and traditional folktales to Internet Web sites.

An additional reference feature of the book is that the major sections have shaded tabs on the pages' leading edges to enable rapid accessing of the outcome-oriented chapters and other information you may wish to revisit. By structuring the book in this way, I hope it will provide a source of readily available ideas for working with the child sitting in your office with you at any given time. Writing it and structuring it in this way has also posed me with a dilemma. I have wanted *101 Healing Stories for Kids and Teens* to be clear, practical, and accessible without being, or even seeming to be, too prescriptive. I hope to communicate that for a metaphor to be relevant it needs to be personal, it is best developed collaboratively with the individual child, and it needs to take into account that child's character, problem, resources, and desired outcome. I hope you enjoy your journey into children's metaphors as much as I have enjoyed writing about them.

STORY I



A Story of the Story

Let me introduce you to a character you will encounter several times in stories and discussions throughout this book. His name is Fred Mouse, and he lives in a hole in the wall in the corner of the house as he always has done since he first joined our family two generations ago. He came along one night when my daughter wanted a bedtime story but was not interested in the tired old storybooks she had heard time and time again. He came from nowhere in particular, a necessity of the situation, and told a simple tale that replicated her activities of the day. The next night, despite a fresh supply of colorful storybooks from the library, my daughter wanted Fred Mouse . . . and he stayed, entertaining and informing my daughter, my son, and my grandson, and is just entering the life of my little granddaughter.

For a tiny—and sometimes timid—mouse, Fred has two special qualities that make him such a good storyteller. First, he listens with his heart, and second, he spins a story based on his observations. Once, for example, he told a tale of a special adventure with his very dear friend Thomas (my grandson) that began when Fred found a fragile, dusty old treasure map while exploring the hidden gaps in the walls of the house. Carefully, he and Thomas unrolled it on the floor and began to study it.

“Look!” said Thomas, “It is right here near Grandpa George’s house.”

“And it has a dotted trail leading to Mount Thomas,” added Fred.

“I know where that is,” exclaimed Thomas, “because I climbed it and Grandpa George named it after me.”

So Fred and Thomas followed the map to the summit from where they heard, way below, a heavy thump, thump, thump, and peered down to see a huge, mean-looking dinosaur stomping around squishing people under his bigger-than-elephant feet. The people called him *Tyrannosaurus Bad Rex*, and as they ran to escape him they were stomping on ants. What a disaster! The dinosaur

was squishing people, and the people were squishing ants, and none of them heard each other's cries for help.

The map pointed Fred Mouse and Thomas to a secret cave just below the summit that was easy to enter for a mouse of Fred's size, but a tight, wriggly squeeze for Thomas. Inside, they were in a different world, walking through swamps and jungles, along beaches and over islands until they found a big, old wooden treasure chest, right where the cross was marked on the map.

Can you imagine their excitement? And then their disappointment to discover the old wooden treasure chest was secured with a rusty old padlock for which they had no key. Thomas climbed down to Grandpa George's house to borrow a tool box, and with a lot pushing and tugging, pulling and shoving, banging and twisting, the padlock eventually popped open, allowing them to lift the stiff lid with a long, slow *creeeking* sound.

Imagine how much more disappointed they were to find the chest held no gold or precious jewels. Just as well, thought Fred, for gold and jewels could not help them save the people or the ants from Tyrannosaurus *Bad Rex*. Thomas had hoped for a mighty sword with which, heroically, he could slay the bad dinosaur, but the chest contained nothing more than a story. They were about to drop the lid shut when the Story spoke.

"Wait," it called, "I am a magic story bestowed with all the powers of every story that has ever been told or written. As you have discovered me, it is my duty to help you. Tell me what I can do?"

"Well," said Fred Mouse, "we have a *very* big problem," thinking of the size of Tyrannosaurus *Bad Rex* when viewed from the lowly height of a mouse, and he told how people, who were squishing ants, were being squished by a big bad Tyrannosaurus.

"Let us visit the ants," said the Story, so they followed a long, busy line of ants to their nest where ants chaotically scurried in every direction—for someone had stood on the nest, squishing their homes and many of their friends. As Fred Mouse and Thomas gently handed the Story to the queen ant, it began a tale in the ants' own language. Silence fell on the confusion as ants stopped scurrying and gathered to listen to a tale Fred and Thomas could not understand. Silence remained for a while after the story finished, then the ants spoke in hushed voices among themselves and with the Story. Fred and Thomas saw them nodding as if in agreement.

Eventually the Story said, "Let us go visit the people."

They, too, were running about in confusion. Tyrannosaurus *Bad Rex* had just stomped through their village, flattening cars, knocking down houses, destroying schools, and squishing people. Fred Mouse and Thomas listened to their distress and, not knowing how else to help, gave them the Story. Again the Story brought calm to the confusion as people stopped to listen, entranced, comforted, encouraged, guided, and hopeful.

"Now," said the Story, "It is time for us to find one Tyrannosaurus *Bad Rex*."

This was a scary suggestion for a tiny, timid mouse like Fred and even a boy as brave as Thomas, but it wasn't hard to follow the trail of a careless dinosaur whose huge feet punched imprints into farmers' paddocks, flattened bushes, and knocked over trees, finally leading to a tall tree under which Tyrannosaurus *Bad Rex* lay snoring peacefully. Thomas quietly crept past his long greenish tail, around his big strong legs, past his fat belly, and up his neck, and placed the Story gently by his ear. The Tyrannosaurus pricked up his ear, slowly opened an eye, and listened to a story in dinosaur language. A tear rolled from his eye and down his cheek, dropping to the ground near Fred Mouse and

Thomas, who had to duck quickly, for it was like someone throwing a bucket of water at them from an upstairs window.

“Come,” beckoned the Story, “Climb up on Rex’s head. We are going back to visit the people and the ants.”

Wow! How exciting! Fred and Thomas had never dreamed of riding on a dinosaur’s head. How carefully he placed his feet to avoid flattening farmers’ crops and people’s homes. Back in the village the Story broke down the barriers and bridged the gaps, translating among dinosaur, people, and ants in a way that all could understand.

“Let’s celebrate,” someone shouted, and they put on the weirdest party you could imagine. Rex blew up the balloons, for he had more puff than anyone else. The people supplied the food that they had cultivated and stored, while the ants offered to clean up the scraps after. And everyone felt happier than they had for a long time.

In a quiet moment, Fred Mouse and Thomas asked the Story, “How did you do it? What was the story you told?”

“It is easy to become so involved in our own story,” replied the Story, “that we don’t hear the stories of others. As our stories shape the ways we see things and the ways we respond to events, I simply told the ants the people’s story: how, like the ants, their homes and lives were being destroyed—so they were not deliberately squishing ants but, in looking up and watching out for the *Tyrannosaurus Bad Rex*, they were not looking down to see what they were doing to the ants. Then I told the people the ants’ story, and the dinosaur the people’s story, for he, wrapped in his own loneliness, had not realized what he was doing to the people.

Hearing the stories, the ants offered to help the people by cleaning up after them if the people took care where they stepped, and the people offered to befriend lonely Rex if he watched where *he* stepped, and Rex offered to tread carefully if the people and ants would be his friends.

“Stories,” continued the Story, “can make and stop wars, destroy and build friendships, confuse and inform our thinking, burden and enrich our world. Used as carefully as Rex has learned to walk, they have the power to solve our problems and shape our lives.”

If there was more to hear from the Story, Fred Mouse and Thomas didn’t hear it for in gratitude, everyone had begun to thump the table, calling, “Speech! speech!” to Fred. Rex was so enthusiastic that he almost smashed the table before reminding himself it was okay to be enthusiastic carefully. When Fred spoke he thanked everyone for listening to, and acting on, the stories. He announced that Rex should henceforth be known as *Tyrannosaurus Good Rex*, and that the Story should no longer be hidden in a dusty old chest but be available as a treasure for everyone.

PART ONE



Effective Storytelling for Kids and Teens

CHAPTER I



The Magic of Metaphor

WHY TELL HEALING AND TEACHING STORIES TO KIDS AND TEENS?

Do you remember what it was like as a young child to have a parent or grandparent sit on the side of your bed at night and read a story that gave you permission to journey into your own fantasies? How the magic of the story engaged you, entranced you, changed you into a different yet somehow familiar character, and took you into experiences you may not yet have encountered? How, in the process, you discovered something new about yourself, felt the emotion of reaching the tale's conclusion, and shared a special intimacy with the teller?

From time immemorial, stories, legends, and parables have been effective and preferred methods for communicating information, teaching values, and sharing the important lessons of life. Just hearing those often-expressed four words "*Once upon a time . . .*" is like an instant switch from reality to pretense or to an altered level of processing. They are like a hypnotic induction, an invitation to participate in a unique relationship with both the teller and the story's characters. They are words that invite the listener on a journey into a world of imagination where reality may be suspended, and learning can be potent. They are an invitation into a special realm of experience where listeners are entranced, attention is focused, and one can share the emotions of the fictional hero. They invite participation in a relationship in which teller and listener share an interactive bond.

Stories have many important characteristics of effective communication:

1. They are interactive.
2. They teach by attraction.
3. They bypass resistance.
4. They engage and nurture imagination.