

## **THE LANGUAGE OF FANTASY. CREATING A NEW CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATION.**

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This work focuses on the communication between therapist and client. Our goal is the emergence of a communicational context in which creative fantasy dominates.

Creative fantasy, as a unique activity for adults, was rejected by the scientific world during the Age of Enlightenment, because it was thought to be improper for the mind of the adult, who is capable of dealing with reality through the development of rational skills. Thus the rational view of reality didn't allow any room for its existence and dislocated creative fantasy to the uncertain area of the artists' land.

As systemic therapists we give emphasis to the Context. Our proposition focuses to the possibility we have of creating a context of communication with our clients, having as a basic element the unique activity of creative fantasy and leaving aside the rational adult coherences. In this context the language of fantasy dominates as much as it can, while the language of the adults' rationality exists as little as it is possible. For this reason we named this context "Creative Communication Context".

I should indeed point out that the use of the language of fantasy constitutes only a part and not the whole of the therapeutic process. In other words, it doesn't come to replace the language of the adult's rationality, but it alternates with it at the right time, giving the possibility for new and original meanings to occur.

People like being together, doing things together and communicating. Through this procedure they become authors of stories. These stories are the lenses through which people view their life and their relationships with others and come to realize themselves as human beings.

People give meaning to their life by setting up some key events in stories and then by incorporating them into a broader narration of life. These narratives are social constructs that arise through the interaction with others in a specific historical and social context. Thus, we could say that they arise from our experience but they also create our experience. They are at the same time our creations and our creators.

So people can narrate "happy" stories and "painful" stories. It is evident that those who narrate painful stories end up to the therapist. Painful stories usually have certain key elements. Let's see some of them.

The first one is time. Time seems to have catalytic importance in human relations. Harmonic development requires the co-ordination of internal and external time, of individual time with the time of others and with social time. However loss of this co-ordination can often arise from a myth, rooted in the historical past of the family, to which some members adapt while others follow society's time. Indeed, during therapy we frequently meet adults who are in fact emotionally children and who cognitively try to play the role of the adult. We also meet children with premature emotional adulthood who talk, behave and take up adult responsibilities.

Some events with particular importance, such as death, may be given a total meaning. As a consequence, despite the time passing, this meaning can color people's

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stories and such a coloring can conquer the present and the future. In people's rational thinking the past, the present and the future are being connected in a linear determinative route. That means that people connect events and meanings of their past to explain their present situation in a linear – casual deterministic manner, which tends to limit their future perspective. Under these circumstances, under rational thinking, any other route is impossible.

Whitaker very accurately notes: "We partially live. We are thinking, suffering and worrying about miseries that have passed or about others that may come. In fact we are not living the present, but we are thinking of how we've lived or of how we are going to live. We should free ourselves from the past and the future and we should develop our capability of just being.

The second key element in painful stories is the "role" that imprisons people. Most people tend to use the verb "to be". We usually hear our clients saying: "I am an outsider", "Daddy is absent and unavailable", "Mother is overprotected", "My wife is powerful and bossy" etc. In all these stories everybody has a specific role, a specific mission, from which he cannot escape. He is tied by his mission. This is how labels are created, in which we put – or to put it better – we imprison others. Labels condemn people to have a single role and not to be able to escape and to experience themselves and others from a different view, from a different role. So they come to perceive themselves and others partially and not to experience their existence holistically. Inevitably, the stories that are created by imprisoned persons are rigid and lead to deterministic meanings.

In connection with the above, the third element is "feeling invisible". Someone exists because other persons can see him. The child screams and cries and says "Look at me". If nobody sees the baby, it will die. So we need the others to look at us and tell us we exist, we are alive. The first system by which someone is recognized is his family. However to be recognized by others is complicated. Some people choose to be recognized only by a specific person, a specific family member. And this can be dangerous, as in the case of the anorectic adolescent, who pays attention only to her mother's attention. Another dangerous example: a middle aged man says "My wife doesn't recognize me anymore. I will suicide". Things would be easier if this man could say "My wife doesn't recognize me anymore, but I have found another woman who does. I will stay with her."

The fourth is "guilt". When something unpleasant happens, everybody is searching for the one who did it. Every painful story has a guilty person or otherwise is looking for one. The guilty one can be a person, an event or a situation. An unpleasant event in a family's life produces insecurity and uncertainty, which often can not be tolerated by family members, who lose their stability and experience intense stress. Thus they need a fast explanation in order to use it as a protective factor for the future. They have the illusion that if they find the cause of what happened, it will never happen again.

These key elements that were previously mentioned are often connected to problems of identification, separation and attainment of a well defined identity.

One of the most basic goals of psychotherapy is the deconstruction of the elements with which painful stories were built and the discovery of new elements to be used for the construction of a different story.

During the process of "CONVENTIONAL" psychotherapy we had many times reached a point where no progress was made, perhaps because those key elements were very deeply rooted in our clients' logical thinking. So we faced the urgent need

to create a different communication context, in order to get our clients out of conventionality and to bring them into a different space and time.

When we use the term “Conventional Psychotherapy”, we are referring to the exclusive use of the Adult Language. Words that we use in the Adult Communication transmit a message and also the context in which this message is being decoded. For example, the sentence ‘I have to see you at six o’clock’ can either be a wish or an order, depending on the tone of voice.

Words also have a special power of concentration and classify the complex human relationships into categories. So by using words people construct maps to use them in their life trips, because it is difficult to travel without a map. However, instead of helping people some times these maps become traps that force them to turn all around the same place. The same thing can happen during the therapeutic process, forcing therapist and clients to go around in circles.

At this point the substitution of the Adult Words with the Language of Fantasy can be a useful tool of disengagement. It comes to complete the puzzle of the therapeutic process. It is important to clarify that first of all the therapist himself has to discover the value of the language of fantasy, in order to propose it to his clients as an instrument of relating.

The use of Language of Fantasy favours the emersion of a communicational context, in which communication occurs through playing, fairytale, dancing or in general through action and kinaesthetic experiences.

According to Winnicott, only playing turns reality into a substantial chapter of human existence. Those who cannot play can not use reality either, so they stay trapped in this horrific place, where psychopathological symptoms occur.

Psychotherapy takes place in the interaction of the two areas of playing, the one of the therapist and the other of the client. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing. If playing is not possible, then the therapist’s duty focuses on bringing the client from a situation where he cannot play, into a situation where he becomes able to play. If the therapist cannot play, then he is not suitable for this job.

For Winnicott, playing in the psychoanalysis of adults appears mostly in terms of verbal communication. For example, it appears in the selection of words, the modification of the voice or the sense of humor.

However, in the communicational context of Language of fantasy playing takes the form of actual playing, an active creative activity even for adults. The individual has at his disposal objects and toys such as dolls, puppets, kings, crowns, swords, magic keys e.t.c. He moves freely and without limits in space and time. He occasionally becomes an actor, a writer, a director or a mythical hero.

The importance lies not in the object that is being used, but in the use of the object. The therapist is interested in the preoccupation that characterizes the playing and not so much in the content of playing. He is interested in the state that almost seems like a retraction from the conventional reality.

Playing and creative action are very exciting and stimulating. They are stimulating not only because instincts take part, but mainly because uncertainty is their basic element. The uncertain element of playing derives from the fact that playing always exists at the hypothetical line between the objective and the actually perceivable. In other words playing is an opportunity for formless experience, for creative impulses, kinetic and sensory. The person’s experiential existence is built on the basis of playing and creating.

The most significant moment of playing, of the Language of fantasy, is when the person surprises himself. The time of a brilliant explanation or intervention is not a significant moment. When the person is not capable of playing, every intervention is just useless and it causes confusion. Intervention can favor the therapeutic process only when mutual playing exists. In order for the therapeutic process to exist, playing must be spontaneous and not compliant.

According to Winnicott there is no human being that is free from the hard effort to connect internal with external reality. Relief from this exhaustion is offered in an intermediate area of experience, where not only internal reality but also external life contributes.

Using the Language of Fantasy gives us the opportunity to meet our clients in an Intermediate area, on a Third Planet. Beings living on this planet perceive their internal and external reality in a different way.

They live in a timeless world, without past, present or future and they present a characteristic argument: "Past, present and future. How can they exist, since the past does not exist anymore, the future has not yet come and the present faints every moment at the past?" So they live free from the ghosts of the past, that run after us in the present and the future.

Besides there are no prisons on this planet and even if there were some, the keys are on the prison doors. So these beings are not trapped into singular roles and singular missions of life.

They are not looking for a guilty person, when they face difficult situations. They view them as opportunities to discover something different.

They don't feel invisible, because they have the chance to perceive themselves through many views. Not only through the perception of persons with whom they interact at the present, but also the perception of people they have left behind and they meet them again or of people that they are going to newly meet.

This Third Planet is a planet of surprise. Adults can become children. They can come in touch with this part of their soul that contains impulses, desires, fears and fantasies, which are separable from logical thinking. Movement within time – forwards and back - is allowed, facilitating the redefinition of the self. It is permitted to experience not only one role but others also. It becomes possible for individuals to separate themselves from the problem, to get it out of them and put it in front of them in order to stop the problem from being their identity.

And certainly on the Third Planet all the above can exist without constituting a paradox. A new balance between the inner and the external world is retrieved and finally people manage to enrich their identity.

As we have mentioned before the Language of Fantasy can turn out to be a useful instrument, if at some point the therapeutic process stops evolving and so therapist and clients go round in circles. This could be the right time to introduce the Language of Fantasy.

At this point we should define the preconditions for this introduction:

- **Trustfulness.** This is probably the most significant precondition, not only for the client but for the therapist as well. Before introducing this different way of communicating, mutual trustfulness has to be ensured in the therapeutic system. The therapist himself needs to feel quite comfortable, prepared and sure of what he is going to propose. On the other side, it is important that the client has already reached a point where he can obtain safety and confidence from the

therapeutic process. Bring in mind the picture of a client who is prepared to have a conventionally talk with his therapist and all of a sudden he is called to play with him. Playing presupposes conditions of trust anyway.

- **Motivation.** All therapists agree on the importance of the clients' motivation. Therapists at the Mental Research Institute distinguish between "customers" and "window-shoppers". It is not possible to conduct therapy with a window-shopper. Furthermore when it comes to creative fantasy and playing, procedures that demand active participation and spontaneous ness.

- **Curiosity.** It concerns the therapist and the client as well. The therapist must be curious about this client's history, so as to involve his client in a process of curiosity and discovery. So curiosity becomes "contagious".

- **Active listening.** It refers to the ability of the therapist to adopt a listening stance more active than passive, with respect to the therapeutic relationship and the relationship with the client and the client's reference system. Active listening is essential in the language of fantasy. Otherwise paradox elements that appear through creation and playing (such as the movement in time) cannot be accepted and developed.

- **Therapist's properties.** In order to benefit from this recommended communicational process the therapist should be free from his prejudices and theories. He should be flexible, creative and able to play himself. At the same time he has to maintain a degree of autonomy and distance from his client, so that he will be able to express his own creativity. In other words, the therapist must leave space to the ability of the client to play and to be creative. A client's creativity can very easily be stolen by a very creative therapist. Furthermore the therapist needs to be aware of the limitations of his role as a therapist. His job is to propose instruments. The client is the one who decides whether and which of these instruments he is going to use. The therapist does not give solutions, does not give interpretations. He participates in the creation of alternative possibilities.

Let's now see how we came to use the Language of Fantasy. The occasion was given by an old, leather suitcase that we had put in our office for decoration. We noticed that our clients showed intense interest for this suitcase and curiosity about its contents.

So we had the idea of filling it with some objects. We put toys, kings, princess, magic sticks, and other things without a deterministic symbolical meaning, such as flowers, photos, animals, boxes etc. We placed the suitcase in a more attractive place, in order to excite our clients' interest more. Every time our clients were referring to the suitcase, we encouraged the conversation about it. □ significant part of the session was often spent on this conversation. It was a conversation through which therapist and clients were discovering wishes, fears, memories and dreams about real or fantastic trips. Under these circumstances the suitcase was becoming the Intermediate area of Meeting between therapist and client, between their internal and external experience. It was becoming the Third Planet. It was the right time for the suitcase to reveal its contents and raise the Language of Fantasy. A new Communicational Context had emerged.

Many times our clients were coming to the session bringing with them their own significant objects or proposing their own creative process of playing, which they entered into this communicational context. For example, there was a patient who

brought to our office videotapes directed by him and he introduced into the therapeutic system a new communicational pattern, in which he was the film director and we were his audience.

These incidences were our feedback from our clients. We realized that we had to limit our active role in this creative process and favor their creative action and spontaneity by encouraging them to bring things of their own choice and not just select objects from those we had already choose and put in the suitcase. We noticed that this was more useful and creative, because it increased the therapist's surprise, which is the crucial element in the whole process. Surprise is an indicator that shows that the therapeutic system leaves the conventional and the predictable and some new grows up.

Another sign of feedback for us was the relation that our clients formed with the objects and with the whole process. It seemed that their occupation with the objects and their participation at the creative activities was not limited within the session. Our clients seemed to invest on them and to be deeper involved. They selected the items cautiously, they expressed on them intense emotions (love, hate, anger) and they were unwilling to separate them. Very often they asked us to take specific objects from the suitcase with them or they commended us the items that they had brought themselves. Little by little they seemed to disengage from them. They lose their interest in them, because through their use they had learned how to enter in their lives creative processes and new and alternatives ways of perceiving reality.

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