

Tikkun Olam  
as a  
Personal  
Obligation





# Voices:

The art and science of psychotherapy



Reprinted from Spring 1997 issue

The editor of *Voices*, The Journal of the American Academy of Psychotherapists, invited me to write an article on the subject "Telling and Retelling the Tale: Stories in Psychotherapy." Among other things the invitation said:

Certainly storytelling has been around as long as people have come together. We are a species that relies on our ability to tell stories to express who we are, where we come from, what our hopes and fears are, and what ails us. The stories we tell about ourselves become who we are. Never mind if this or that story is really true or really happened, what seems to be important is what we believe ourselves to be through the stories we tell.

For this issue we invite you to reflect on the nature of the story that patients report about themselves. Who are the most important characters? How do these characters influence the teller of the tale? His/her self-esteem? How is he/she represented in the story? What are the personal meanings of the symbols he/she uses? Can we assume a universality or do we need to ask? What story do you tell yourself about yourself and your work? What are the myths we and our patients use to explain ourselves to ourselves and to others?

Through telling and retelling the story, we can enlarge it, leave it, change the way we think. We put new meaning on familiar events.

The following is what I prepared in response, and it was published in the Spring 1997 issue. The mission of VOICES is to explore the art and science of psychotherapy while leaving the therapist as a person in full view, which is unusual. Thus, this also is a story about myself, and I offer it as a way to introduce, or to reintroduce, myself to you.

R. Paul Levin, M.D.

This land is not our inheritance, only a loan -  
from those who lived before us  
To enjoy as a precious trust -  
for those who come after us.

Translation of a mountain-trail sign  
in the Austrian alps.

(An improved version of "Don't Litter")

Joe's tale was chilling in its horror. He remembers suddenly waking up to a piercing shriek full of pain and terror, and then hearing other loud human noises of shouting, crying and yelling. Running into his parents' bedroom he discovered a sight that he will never forget, the likes of which causes even opera-house audiences to shudder and to freeze in their seats, barely breathing. Here was his sister, empty-eyed with a kitchen-knife in hand, wearing a long white nightgown streaked with red blood, and their dying mother lying, face up, on the nearby bed. Lady Macbeth in the flesh!

I was a young therapist then and knew that such things did happen, but this encounter with insanity and violence was too close. The immediacy of the reporting and the graphic details were shocking. I was terrified and had trouble maintaining my therapeutic demeanor which used to be somewhat cool and detached. The horrible inci-

dent had happened not long before Joe had told it to me, and his memories were fresh. Not only was he sobbing and choking up again and again as he was telling the story but his eyes were also wide with fear, as if he was still actually seeing the ghostly sights of that terrible night.

I also knew that I was scared. Was I safe with a patient who comes from a family where such brutal violence can happen? And beyond all this, what do I do to help this suffering human being in acute agony? Since I had no good answer I just sat there and hardly said anything. But I gently urged Joe to keep his eyes open and reminded him to breathe more deeply in order to maintain contact with reality, even as he was reliving the horror. This apparently was the right thing to do, for he slowly calmed down. It was the beginning of a long and complex relationship, lasting till now.

Obviously, his sister was paranoid and psychotically confused. Mercifully, without ever fully coming out of her psychosis, she ended up in a facility for the criminally insane. Who was the victim and who the victimizer?

During the many years we spent together, Joe repeatedly tried to purge himself of these images from the past that etched themselves so deeply into his memory. For a long time, they robbed him of sleep almost every night. Again and again he brought up the story of the events of that night, but the various versions were not one and

the same. Each was at least a little bit different from all the others. Remember the movie "Rashomon"? Agreement existed only about the bare basic facts. The central characters of this love-murder drama each had a totally different tale to tell. The hidden motives, the trigger points, the emotional hurricanes at the center of every person — these made all others appear to wear one face in one version and a completely different one in the next.

Here too it was hard to know who mother really was. Sometimes she appeared to merely have been overprotective and intrusive without end, at other times she was paranoid and confused, flying into unprovoked tirades of rage. No one within reach was safe. Not only the kids but father too was said to have cowered during such fits, hiding from the menacing danger if he was not lucky enough to have run out of the house before the eruption. The growing children sometimes appeared to have had barely enough room to exercise any preference at all, almost requiring a license to take a breath, but on other occasions they apparently were left to their own devices, unattended and suffering from gross neglect. But mother was also remembered as lovingly dotting and playful, as if she herself were still a little child. Indeed, I asked myself repeatedly, who was the victim and who the victimizer?

Only years later did it become clear how much Joe benefitted from the many hours spent on telling and retelling his story. It was all very useful. In the process he slowly found a safe haven with me. Here was one person and one place where he did not have to hide. It was not important, in fact, to establish who the victim was and who the victimizer. Each of the two main characters was both, and everyone else in that household was also crippled by always having to exist with the imminent possibility of violence.

Joe's many versions of the story were all true and all untrue, since each reflected only a fragment of reality, a moment in time. But they were all helpful in desensitizing him to that which at first was almost too much to bear within the bounds of sanity. Time alone does not heal all wounds, even though it does dull the sharpness of pain. Scar tissue is relatively poor in sensory receptors, which is a blessing. The rawness of wounds is reduced by it, and feeling less pain helps us survive before we are healed.

It soon became obvious that Joe's fear, rage, pain and enormous shame, as well as his deep sense of resignation and hopelessness — these existed long before that night. They were not the result of this event, horrible as the experience was. It precipitated his emotional illness but was not its cause. From the start, Joe was never safe in his mother's arms. These arms were them-

selves filled with the disquietude of chronic disappointment and tense with rage that was not always containable. Mother's muscles must also have trembled much of the time, an overflow of the oceans of fear that remained from her own early beginnings. Subjectively these arms were not a solid place to feel safe in, and at times they were also not safe objectively. Physiologically speaking, Joe was most probably never "at peace". But since all this happened long before he emerged out of his normal autism, before any consciousness, rudimentary memory or a sense of time existed — he obviously knew nothing of any of this. Only his body remembered.

Whatever we tell others is only that which we consciously know. It's important for me to always remember that this also holds true for whatever my patients tell me. And quite naturally, we all fill the empty spaces in our memory with various tapestries of embroidered fantasies. Even the storyteller cannot always differentiate one from the other. Obviously, no amount of questioning is ever enough to elicit details of a story that cannot be remembered because it happened before memory existed.

Joe may well have had occasional glimpses of his fear, shame and rage before that night, but unwelcome as such feelings always are he, like everyone else, tended to ignore and to overlook them when he could. Normal suffering and pain

lack dramatic significance, and thus they do not stand out from the grayness of time and daily experience. It is easily understandable why Joe focused on the events of that night, and not on the lesser horrors that preceded it.

So how can we know that which is unknowable by one's own experience? Direct observation of infants, like Mahler's pioneering work<sup>6</sup>, is of only limited value. But we can shed light on everyone's distant, uncharted and dim past and see its broad outlines because we now understand what everyone's earliest beginnings must have been. Only the most powerful reactions of a newborn are observable, and they have to be interpreted by observers (like Mahler) who surely cannot always be totally reliable or objective. Their conclusions, therefore, are also not always correct. Every observation of anything is influenced to some degree by the observer's blind spots and angle of viewing.

But what we do know for sure is that at birth we suddenly lose the benign, assuring and embracing presence of our mother's body, and it is no more. Somehow we survive or don't survive in a totally new environment. "After many months of living in a relatively constant and finely regulated setting, we abruptly find ourselves under radically new conditions, without any time for transition. Our physiology must suddenly adjust to a gaseous

environment, totally different from the liquid one in which we existed before."<sup>1</sup> We adjust or we perish. The only thing that sustains us at such a perilous time is mother's presence as we experience it physically. This is why our earliest experiences with the mothering person have such a profound and central impact on our physiologic character.

How can I know so much about the arms of Joe's mother? By seeing so clearly the results of her holding. Though we have not been there to see it happen, we know for sure why the trees on the windward side of an island are all bent over so badly. They must have been subjected repeatedly to powerful winds from the sea as they grew up. The same with people. "We are what we were free to become. By observing the present we can reconstruct the past with a high degree of accuracy, [and] we can test the validity of our reconstructions directly by [checking the patient's physical reactions]."<sup>2</sup> Finally we are able to objectify and measure our assumptions in the same way they do in chemistry: by carefully titrating our interventions till we notice a physical change.

Nothing is lost in the universe. Neither Joe nor his sister could have had conscious memories of their beginnings, but the body always remembers. The terror that Joe experienced in that bedroom was something that he must have experienced many times before, though not consciously. The roots of physiologic reaction patterns sprout

in the first few hours and days of life. Joe and I tried to cancel their powerful grip during the tedious process known as working-through. Its aim was to reshape his reactions so that they would not continue to determine, or at least to color, all his future life experiences.

Slowly I was becoming the best mother Joe had ever had because our ongoing relationship was based on candor, sensitivity, truth and mutual respect. Our tight non-acting-out contract ensured my safety even in the midst of his most vicious outbursts of rage. In fact, it was only because of this contract that such necessary outbursts came into the open. Our relationship was the lap in which his body slowly began to settle down and feel a little safer. My "arms" were steadier than the ones he had been used to long ago.

Indeed, Joe had been what he was free to become, as always. His physical reactions to my interventions served me well as the reliable guide I needed to lead him out of his internal darkness. I kept noting the color and muscle-tone changes in his face, the tearing or non-tearing of his eyes, the deepening or non-deepening of his breathing and his ability or inability to maintain eye contact. Above all, I always noted how well he was able to concentrate, how clear his thinking was and whether he was able to keep his mind from wandering. It was a very long trip.

In a very real sense we humans are all born prematurely, even if we are born full-term. Our maturing cortex becomes functional only a year or two after we are already able to breathe, ingest and excrete, see, hear, smell, crawl and scream. During this year we are completely under the control of our subcortical brain centers. This "visceral brain" is our master before we know that we exist and before we can make choices, think or remember. This explains why it is so difficult to really change in or out of psychotherapy: the powers that have been in charge of our bodily reactions from the very beginning do not listen to the cortex, that smart youngster who has just arrived on the scene and immediately wants to tell them what to do. Thinking is no match for feelings before they are calibrated by good psychotherapy, though we commonly rationalize to the contrary.

So, very early in life each of us has had thousands of experiences that we could not understand, since we had no understanding yet. And babies often interpret such experiences wrongly, as if they were life-endangering. How could we have known that it was not so? A sharp pain from hunger, a loud and sudden noise or a bright light shining into our eyes — each can be experienced as an assault. Besides, with the best of intentions no mother can anticipate any and all of her newborn's needs, or supply them at exactly the

right moment and exactly in a way that would immediately satisfy the little organism. Frustration, hurt, anger and above all fear are everyone's earliest experience. In a sense we have all been abused as children, though most of the time there has been no abuser.

This is why I did not care to know every one of the many details of Beth's story about having been sexually abused when she was three. She came to see me at age 55 and was totally preoccupied with her tale of woe. She had been to many therapists and had left several husbands, always because she felt them as abusing her in one way or another. Tired and almost burned out, she came to see me against her better judgement. This was to be one last attempt to help her remain involved in a relationship with a man who insisted that they both do something to make a go of it. Bitter, deeply distrustful, suspicious, and very angry under a transparently pleasing demeanor, Beth almost refused to return for her second appointment since I did not seem interested enough in the details of her alleged sexual abuse. This, she said, was the central theme of the work with the last two therapists. What was wrong with me, she wanted to know.

And why did I not ask for the details? Because I knew from the way she was and from what I have since learned about people that, like everyone else, she must indeed have been "abused",

whether sex was involved or not. She needed to roar with rage for all her perceived injustices and to foam at the mouth till she was physiologically able to let go of her searing shame of powerlessness. She needed to cry a million tears of hurt for not being seen and heard and welcomed enough, all the reactions that she did not have enough of when she was small. And, she obviously had a desperate need for someone to gently make room for her tenderness and loving. The real abuse in her past was the shortage in good mothering and fathering, half a century before.

By repeatedly focusing on the story of her sexual abuse she was merely ruminating in old hate, rather than freeing herself from it. After all, those who raised her did whatever they were capable of doing, even if it was grossly inadequate. Their own behavior was also overdetermined by whatever had shaped them. Beth was 55 years old. It was high time to let go, if that were possible, so she might dedicate her energy and her efforts to building a better future for herself, rather than remaining stuck in settling the accounts of the past. I knew the real story of her abuse, the one she did not know. This is what I had to help her with, if she were to really change.

And here is that story: Beth too must have "wished", long before she knew what wishing was, to regain the sense of security that was hers

before she suddenly was thrust into the cold world. She wished for this all her life and was angry at everyone for not supplying it. But such hopes and yearnings for perfect caring from the outside are an impossible dream. They must have been repeatedly dashed, giving rise to repeated episodes of deep disappointment and panic. At such times she must have felt as if she were falling into an endless emptiness, freezing cold, all alone.

Was Beth's mother too young when she gave birth to her? Was she herself emotionally a child, unready for motherhood? An alcoholic, on drugs? Did she have too many children, too little support, too few resources? Was she poor, a death-camp survivor perhaps? Was the baby born in a prison or at a time of war? The details hardly matter. In one way or another the mothering person was unable to be with the baby often enough and long enough in a way that would calm and settle it physiologically. Mother must have held Beth too tightly or too loosely, for too long or not long enough. Perhaps she fed her too much or too little, she may have been overprotective or not protective enough. Something must have gone wrong and no one may ever know exactly what it was. Whether historically true or not, the story of sexual abuse essentially served as a distraction from even worse and more painful experiences.

Whatever it was that happened to her, for Beth the result was one and the same: An un-

steadiness in the midst of her being, an ever-present sense of dread and a deep conviction that nobody can be trusted, nobody is dependable. Beth lived with a deep sense of having been cheated and always expected to be cheated. Her jealousy and her bitterness, the tight lips and the short fuse for anger — all were reasonable and expected outcomes from a life such as hers. She too was exactly what she was free to become. All that mattered now was that she change. She could not have come up with an explanation such as mine and had another story. But I knew her real trouble. It was obvious. I did not have to ask.

Experiences such as these are my daily bread. I live with a heavy sense of responsibility. Again and again I notice that with the new understanding of the hidden forces that shape individuals and societies as outlined in *Thinking in the Shadow of Feelings*<sup>3</sup> I'm easily able to make contact with the desperate and lonely child within the adult. Often I can almost visualize how the child looked before it became the adult I see. This always fills me with compassion. How can it be otherwise? Having given up Freud's strange notions about infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex as causes of anxiety<sup>5</sup>, I'm now stuck in a real I-thou involvement ala Buber<sup>4</sup> with those who come to seek my help.

But I'm almost 70 years old and reasonably well off, so why don't I quit? What's wrong with me? Stranger yet, I still look forward to conducting seven 28-hour group psychotherapy marathons every year and 20 group sessions every week. True, I have many good and dependable associates who help me carry this heavy burden, but even so, why don't I have enough sense to know that I've carried it long enough?

Here's my story and it starts with another story:

A young, left-leaning, non-Zionist Reform rabbi in a small midwestern city picked himself up one day in the 60's and went to Israel for a sabbatical. Returning to his congregation, he somberly explained his totally unexpected decision to resign and to settle in the young state. He was much too "sophisticated" to be grabbed by any ideas of Jewish nationalism. His explanation was simpler: There, in Israel, he had joined with others in establishing a new village in the Negev. "We came to the desert and started by clearing the many stones that covered the barren fields, thus freeing soil in which to plant our trees. With very little water we started to bring life to a valley of death." For the first time in his life, he said, "I had a sense that I could be truly creative, a partner with God." This was a chance he could not pass up. This, he said, was good enough a reason to start life afresh. It was admirable and sort of crazy, many thought, but to him it was an obvious choice.

I am not so fortunate, nor am I grandiose enough to think of myself as God's partner. But ever since I was a child I saw myself as one of God's many assistants. Even as a boy I used to think of God's terrible loneliness. He is one, without a peer. How all alone He must be in the universe that he created. Worse yet, he must be in constant pain at its, and our, many imperfections.

To me God was always sensible, never capricious. That's why I never understood the strange biblical story of the flood in which God allegedly was so angry at the people on earth that he decided to drown them all in heavy torrents of rain. Only Noah and his retinue were saved. How could he do it? How could a father destroy his own children so mercilessly? True, they fell way short of their potential, but even so, he was the one who created them in his image, with an ability to choose. I was so very relieved to discover later in Noah's story that God had made a solemn promise to never repeat such a seemingly impulsive act. Even now, as a grown man, I still smile with joy and some satisfaction when I see a beautiful rainbow in the sky, the sign of God's pact and an everlasting reminder of his promise.

Without any disrespect, I sadly realized long ago that my God was thus also stuck with the eternal and unchanging laws of nature, the one

that He caused to be. He may be able to destroy everything that is, but even he cannot just decide one day to stop the sun from rising or change its course. My God is not involved in micro-managing the universe or in any supernatural hocus pocus. And having given us humans the freedom to choose good from bad and right from wrong, he can only observe how poorly we're often doing. Whether he dwells in the heavens above or in everyone's heart, he too is powerless to affect these choices.

We humans would have been simple automations, brainless and preprogrammed beings, without the freedom to be impulsive, irresponsible and even evil. If we could do no wrong, doing right would also not have any moral valence or value.

As a child I did not know that even St. Augustine had struggled<sup>7</sup>, 1600 years ago, with this issue, as many, many other thinkers have done ever since. The little boy that was me always had plenty of compassion for his suffering God. This is why it was always obvious to me that I had a personal obligation to help Him repair and perfect his and our world. This is what Tikkun Olam means in Hebrew. We humans are His only hope.

This is how it happened that the difficult task of Tikkun Olam fell upon my fragile shoulders long ago, and it will remain mine till my last breath. Who else but we humans, each of us, can take on the hard and ongoing job of perfecting and repair-

ing the world? We are the ones who have made it imperfect from the beginning of time, and we are the ones who must fix it. I was 10 years old when I planted my first tree, and I've planted, and caused to be planted, many trees ever since. I want to leave the world a better place, or at least as good a place, as I found it. I'm not stingy, but I flinch, and sometimes speak up, every time a patient discards a tissue that was barely used. It was made from a tree!

I did not knowingly become a physician because of such deeply imbedded early convictions, but I have always regarded medicine as being more than just a good way to earn a living. To me it requires more than just technical skill and scientific understanding. An almost sacred responsibility, it demands integrity of character and a deep and true appreciation of life and the worth of every person, attributes that are often lost now in the frenzy of HMO corner-cutting. Every great physician throughout history was not merely a healer to patients, but also their counselor and confidant, concerned with bringing solace to the soul.

Moses Maimonides, who lived in the 12th century, has been such a model for me. His daily prayer bears repetition even today:

**A**lmighty God, you have created the human body with infinite wisdom. In your eternal providence you have chosen me to watch over the life and health of your creatures.

Preserve the strength of my body and soul that they may be ever ready to help rich and poor, good and bad, enemy as well as friend. In the sufferer let me see only the human being.

Enlighten my mind that it may recognize what presents itself and that it may comprehend what is absent or hidden. Let it not fail to see what is visible but do not permit it to arrogate to itself the power to see what cannot be seen.

**S**o in a sense I have no choice but to continue doing what I've always done, the best I'm capable of. I can limit the number of hours I devote to my work, but not the degree of my caring, or my compassion. We humans, like God, are also stuck with our limitations, abilities and obligations.

I derive true joy not only from music and other leisure activities but also from my ability to lessen the pain and suffering of people who come to me for help. On occasion I resent being stuck. But all in all, having accepted the perfection of the world as a personal obligation, it has added a

special dimension of meaning to the ordinariness of my life. Beyond the helter-skelter of my practice, I count my life as a psychotherapist as one of my greatest blessings.

Is all this true? Perhaps. At least this is my story. And like everyone else's, my story helps sustain me.

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