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Ruth M. Bridges

Book review: Stories We've Heard, Stories We've Told: Life-changing Narratives in Therapy and Everyday Life, by Jeffrey A. Kottler, New York, NY, USA: Oxford University Press, 2015, 285 pp. £24.99 (Hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-932825-3

For those particularly drawn to the nature and form of storytelling within therapy, Kottler's 'Stories We've Heard, Stories We've Told' provides a very welcome consideration of the world of literature in its many guises. Part historical/anthropological exploration and part psychotherapeutic enquiry, incorporating extensive reference to the realms of sociology, neurophysiology and education, whatever our therapeutic modality, this is a work of considerable relevance.

Offering the opportunity for much reflection regarding our role 'not only' as 'storytellers' but also importantly as 'storyholders' (p. 12), this book lends itself as much to professional debate as personal reflection. Generally engaging and enlightening, I found myself frequently distancing from the narrative and pursuing my own internal process; surely the art of an effective story is to draw us more fully into our own. This is not a book about narrative therapy per se, but it creates a strong argument for such. Drawing from and introducing the reader to a considerable range of theorists and storytellers and interspersed with tales of both clients and counsellors (including many of his own), this, in places, is a deeply personal reflection and yet, it maintains a level of objectivity throughout.

Kottler variously explores the realms of 'Storytelling', 'The Power and Influence of Stories' and 'The Storied Brain'. He considers how, from our earliest days, we are hardwired to both recognise and create stories, and having witnessed the extraordinary creativity of young children to fashion the most marvellous tales out of the most mundane of artefacts, I wholeheartedly agree. His consideration of 'Cultural Visions and Variations...' includes a broad and interesting consideration of 'universal themes' leading into a consideration of 'stories of change in media, entertainment and everyday life', and the reader is strongly encouraged to see the stories held within the worlds of 'music, film, books, games, and technology' (p.79). Lists of 'influential books' are included, along with reference to key protagonists within both historical and contemporary literature. We are importantly reminded that 'the stories that are told are not necessarily the same ones that we hear' (p. 137).

Kottler clearly sets this book in context and allows himself to move freely between the storytelling of our ancestors and the way contemporary storytelling is evolving. I share the excitement he voices (p. 233) in his belief that our role as therapists, far from being redundant, stands on the threshold of a new era, as we find that the social media forums so prevalent within our culture/society do nothing more than touch the surface of our lives, rather than nurture the depth of encounter we crave.

As a firm believer in the deeply therapeutic potential of telling our story within an empathically sensitive environment, the second half of the book offers a more compelling argument. Here, Kottler compassionately considers 'Personal Narratives', the 'Disordered' story held within 'Trauma and Emotional Struggles' and the 'Therapeutic Value of Stories in Creating Change'. Whilst I am aware that such conversation cannot change the diagnosis or the prognosis for my clients within cancer care, I believe passionately in the cathartic and

therapeutic potential of ‘giving sorrow words’ (Das Gupta et al., [2009](#), p. 33). Through such words we may be offered respite, however fragile or fleeting, from the desperate aloneness that unavoidably accompanies significant illness and loss.

The only chapter offering a somewhat discordant perspective is that of ‘Between Truth and Lies in the Stories That People Share’ not least because, as the author himself concludes, ‘the truth and veracity of the narrative isn’t found in the details but rather in the themes that are both hidden and revealed’ (p. 196). I hold a strong sense that, as therapists, we should not be searching for discrepancy within the stories of our clients but, instead, remaining carefully alert to those moments within which we feel we no longer quite recognise the voice of the teller. One of the key (but considerably understated) themes of this book is that of the exquisite sensitivity (p. 132) required of us, as therapists, if we are to listen beyond the surface narrative and hear the true voices of our clients; another dimension entirely perhaps.

Kottler concludes with a consideration of how we might create ‘More Powerful Stories’ and an exploration of aspects of the ‘Beyond’ and yet, for me, this book ended rather too soon. Conceivably, it was Kottler's intention to begin the process and leave us to continue alone, but there was scope to take further the concept of ‘Beyond Stories’. Whilst, throughout the book, Kottler includes numerous references to religion/religious stories, more overt attention might have been afforded to aspects of the spiritual/existential/transpersonal within this concluding chapter. However, I am acutely aware that this would have demanded many further volumes and perhaps, as Kottler offers, ‘some stories are best left unfinished, or at least cloaked in ambiguity and obfuscation’ (p. 232).

Although unequivocally his strong desire, Kottler failed to persuade me ‘that there are few skills more important to our work [as therapists] than being able to offer a compelling, inspirational, and instructional story’ (p. 227). I did, however, emerge from this book feeling deeply determined to listen with heightened sensitivity to the ‘compelling, inspirational, and instructional’ stories I am already being told.