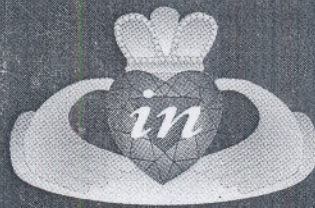


HAND



HAND

**BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS,
IFCO EUROPEAN FOSTER CARE
CONFERENCE, IRELAND**



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"FOSTERING HEALTHY TRANSITIONS: HONOURING THE HEALING POWER OF STORIES."

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Irish welcome

I would like to begin by saying how happy I am to be speaking with you today at this very special gathering. I feel as though I can offer you all a very special welcome to Cork and to this college as I live in Cork and work in this college. In Ireland we have been known for our welcome, "Céad Míle Fáilte." One hundred thousand welcomes, however recently Ireland has been going through a time of significant cultural change and for the first time in our long history, we now have many more people coming to live in Ireland rather than just visit for a holiday. The trends of emigration which have been part of this country since the time of the Irish Famine has now been replaced by numbers of people from around the world wishing to migrate into this country.

Our generosity with welcomes at times seems to run thin. Some social commentators have suggested that one reason why we find it difficult to welcome others is that we have never fully learned to care for ourselves, or the children of this country.

In offering to you a most sincere welcome today it strikes me that the name and symbol of this international conference, "Hand in Hand," is a very appropriate metaphor for the journey we are taking together. A journey through some of our stories of foster care, that involves points of welcome, of greeting, of holding and caring, for not only the children but each other and ourselves as well.

A ritual of multicultural welcomes.

To honour each of us, and where we come from, I would now invite you to share in what I call "A ritual of Multicultural Welcomes." What I invite each of you to do is welcome the person beside you in a way that your home culture would offer a welcome.

Introduction.

Today's workshop, "Fostering Healthy Transitions, Honouring the Healing Power of Stories," is centrally concerned with finding ways in which we can honour the stories children bring with them when they come into care or to live with us in our families. There are two aspects to this paper. Firstly I will use the telling of the Irish mythological story of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, one of the earliest stories of foster care in Ireland, to invite the audience into the sharing of some of the many and still current issues involved in foster care. Secondly, I would like to offer an overview of the healing and holding possibilities of storytelling at times in our lives when we are upset or suffer experiences of loss, separation and change.

To begin I would like to recognise the significance of storytelling in the Irish culture.

Storytelling in Ireland

"It is not the literal past, the facts of history that shape us but images of the past embodied in language."

(Brian Friel)

The Irish tradition and value of storytelling is renowned worldwide. Visiting storyteller, Michael Mead and narrative therapist, Michael White, both began recent workshops in Dublin talking of 'coming home to the heart of stories.' In truth Ireland is the home of the travelling storyteller, the *seanacháí*, a person who journeyed telling and collecting stories that were important to and for people. The *seanacháí* had the power and privilege to tell a dangerous story in the form of a curse in response to a poor welcome, - and so the "two sides to every story" are said to have been born in Ireland.

This understanding of living our lives out of the stories we tell is a well-respected Irish appreciation. Gaelic salutations begin with "An bhfuil aon scéal agat?" (Have you any story?) The response "Daobháil scéal mura bhfuil aon scéal agat féin" (Devil a story if you have not got a story of your own). Immediately the greeting is an invitation to share in stories that create the selves we know. (Hogan, 1998)

This Gaelic storied salutation has been translated into a number of regional colloquialisms. I grew up in Co. Louth, the smallest county, and like our geography, our conversation is sometimes 'small'. This style of shortened conversation may also have something to do with being a border county, where people are conscious of the political and safety issues involved with acts of speaking. The Irish Poet and Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney captures this way of talking when he says,

"What ever you say, say nothing at all."

In Co. Louth our greeting is as short and sweet as 'Well?' It's spoken as an invite to tell. It's both short for 'Well any news about yourself?' and it is a phonetic connection with the traditional Irish 'An bhfuil' which in Co. Louth is also pronounced 'well'.

In the capital Dublin the greeting and invitation to tell our story, and in doing to say something of ourselves, is regularly heard in 'what's the story?' a simple and honest invitation to conversation and we begin to entertain our company.

Many Irish people are given to the belief, 'why tell a true story when you can tell a good story', and so, at times, we have been known to tell a 'tall story' or two. Heroic and macho in detail, the size of the fish that got away, the skill of the goal, the beauty of the date; at least the story goes...

The Irish pub is one of the well-known spaces where stories create potential. A space where the traditional Irish céili (a friendly call or visit) is continually storied; a space where people are le céile (together) for the craic (fun/chat).

In many ways, in modern times, we have lost touch or connection with this power and influence of stories. The influence of stories to shape and guide our lives, stories to protect and rescue us, and stories that give us direction. We are born into stories as much as we are born into language. The stories of our parents and families as well as the stories our families tell to us. As we think of ourselves and the stories we tell, it can be an interesting exercise to try to remember the first stories we were told. As a child I remember waking at night frightened by nightmares. My parents would comfort me with stories. My mother had a special way of telling stories, a co-constructive, imaginative way, in which my teddies and toys became part of the story. The landscape was our garden and the shops we had visited during the day. Most often I too could join in the story. At the same time I relaxed and went wild with the possibilities of imagination. I continue to this day to turn to loved ones at times of pain and hurt to ask them, 'tell me a story'. The comfort of stories for me is something with deep, deep roots.

Fairytales, myths and legends, are often linked with the term childhood, with the idea that we should outgrow fairytales and myths, but these stories carry an influence, a moral, a tale which is as important to adults as any child.

It might be interesting to silently remember the role of storytelling in your own childhood. Who told you stories as a child in your childhood? What were the stories about? Where, When and Why were these stories told to you? In your family who had the power to tell stories? Whose stories were listened to- children, women, men, elders?

Was a story ever told that put a curse on you? Were you ever misrepresented in a story? What did that feel like? How did you reclaim your good name? Who supported you? How did they show or give support to you?

When have you felt most listened to? What is it that makes you feel as though you have been listened to? When did you listen well to someone else? What helped you listen? When do you find it difficult to listen?

Mythological storytelling

"Where stories are, struggles have been lived through, fates have been lived out, triumphs have danced with failures, and human destinies have left their imprints and their souls and their stories on the land, in the air, and even on the waters. Strangers to these lands can feel the vibrations of the people's forgotten histories and fates in the air."

(Ben Okri, *A way of being free*, p.118)

Fairytales and a mythological understanding of stories would say,

"Stories are communally important, that stories go before us in order to tell us something that is important."

(Hogan, 1998, p.21.) The singer, Jackie Leven tells us,

"In preChristian times, fairytales were told communally, and were of the greatest importance to all those who listened. How you responded, how you felt about the things that happened in the tales, and the images that arose for you, more often than not illustrated the dilemmas and difficulties that were currently in or coming into your life. ... Few things are as potent as the power of the tale and the telling."

(Leven, 1997).

In this mythopoetic model of storytelling a story is told in the presence of a collective audience. The story is offered with the intention of making connections between the listeners and the stories of their lives. The notion is that each listener will hear a detail in the story that is currently important to him or her alone. The listener will choose to connect with that part of the

story that holds meaning or interest. The listener is then invited to tell his/her story from that point of contact; the listener becomes the teller and the story evolves. Writing on this subject, the men's group facilitator and storyteller, Michael Meade considers,

"Unraveling the threads of fairytales and myths causes people to reveal hidden pieces of their personal stories and experience the emotions of living through them again."

(Meade, 1993, p.9)

Mythological stories are described as originating in five places - the north where you can often find trouble; the south where you can sometimes find a friend; the east where all things begin; the west where all that began also ends, and the fifth space, the centre within. This description of the origins of stories is said to be an ancient, world story. Like all global stories it is said to have an equivalent local story. (Meade, 1993)

Today I would like to tell one such Irish story. The story of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, one of the oldest stories of Fostering in Ireland. The story is told with an invitation to you the audience to join in the story at any point where that story takes hold of you, your self, memory or imagination. As Winnie the Pooh says,

"Poetry and Hums aren't things which you get, they're things which get you. And all you can do is to go where they can find you."

Stories are told communally in order to connect people. To connect the storyteller to the audience, to connect the audience with each other and to connect the individual listener within themselves to their own emotional responses and resonance with the story. Each time a story is told it changes. Each time a storyteller tells the story it is told differently as stories are not memorised and retold word for word. Stories are made of two parts first memory and the second imagination. The first real, the second magic. The Irish American storyteller Michael Meade says,

"The two aspects of memory and making go on together, like two streams rushing into the tongue, each carrying words that become one river as they go over the cliff of the lip."

(Meade. 1993. P. 114)

Stories change on each occasion for the listener too. Stories are designed to provoke emotional reactions in the listener, which awaken images and memories in the listener, which demands their response, from the place in their life where the story finds them. People go into the scene of the story, which interests them most and the story becomes embodied. The audience joins in the telling of the story; they speak it back mixing it with their own emotions and memories. And so the story lives on and grows.

The story of Fionn Mac Cumhaill is told in four parts, with breaks in the telling to invite the audience to join the story with their thoughts, feelings and memories.

The Story of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, an Irish story of fostering

Chapter one: In the care of maidens.

Once upon a time, in a time before time a time within all time and a time within each of us there lived a boy child whose name was Fionn Mac Cumhaill. Fionn was one of the greatest Irish men ever to live, he was stronger and faster and wiser and fairer than almost any other man of his time or since. His two maiden aunts raised Fionn, and some would ask why his own mother did not raise him and the answer to that question is where this story begins.

Fionn was the son of Uail the chief of the Fianna of Ireland, one of the greatest and most feared armies on the land of Ireland at the time. His mother was the beautiful Muirne. Who named her son Deimne but she did not raise her son herself because she is said to have lived in fear of his safety. The story tells that a short time before Deimne was born, the rogues of the Clann-Morna killed his father in battle. It was one of the most savage killings ever seen or heard of in Ireland and when Muirne gave birth to a son of Uail's she gave him into the care of Uail's sisters, Bovmall and Lia Luachra. She asked that they would raise Fionn in the safety of the forest. Many say she gave her son over to their care with many more warnings and notices of how they should care for him in her absence. Others say Muirne gave her son to the care of others not because she loved him and feared for his life but because she had fallen in love with the king of Kerry.

Deimne's aunts raised him well, some would say they loved him. When he fell they lifted him and when he bruised his leg they would rub it for him. They taught him to swim, some would say cruelly by dropping him into the deepest well in the woods and walking away leaving him to find his own way out. They taught him to run, some would say with abuse, by chasing him around an oak tree holding a hazel switch in their hands and when they caught him he felt the sting of the switch. They taught him speed and agility by making him herd hares in fields with no hedges. By a young age Deimne could run as fast as any hare and swim as swiftly as the fish in the ponds.

One night at the age of six when Deimne was sleeping, his mother visited him. Some would say that Deimne slept like all six-year-olds do with one eye open and the other ear afraid to close. Some say only children who are afraid or

searching sleep like this. But with one eye open and an ear to hear, Deimne saw his mother and knew her face and he listened to her sing to him and tell him stories of his father and just before he awoke she whispered his destiny into his ear. When he did wake his mother had gone. Deimne's aunts told him stories of his father too, of his courage and strength and how he had been the chief of the Fianna of Ireland; and that even though Deimne was a great boy he would never be the match of his father.

Deimne grew stronger in the care of his aunts. They worried about him growing up and forbid him to climb trees, and warned him about the stings of nettles. But every six-year-old knows that nettle stings wear off and that even the highest tree is no fun once it has been climbed twice. Each day he would travel deeper and deeper into the woods. He would spend more and more time away from home each day and as time passed his aunts even stopped calling him home for his tea trusting that he would turn up when he got hungry. One day Deimne did come home and just from looking at him his aunts knew that something had happened to Deimne in the woods which had changed him forever. Something which would mean that Deimne would have to leave their care before very long.

Audience reflections:

On Saturday this workshop was presented twice to an audience of about fifty people each time. The following are a collection of the points, which were raised by both of these groups on the day. At this point in the story the audience recognised and commented on the issues of:

- Abandonment of the young child by his mother and also, through death, by his father
- The absence of Love in the story and the emphasis of a "skills based" way of rearing Fionn
- The role of women in the care of children, both within private family child care, formal foster care and relative or kinship foster care, and in informal care arrangements
- The role of violence in the death of Fionn's father and also in the raising of Fionn?
- The issue of fear of what might have happened to Fionn in the forest that changed him. One social worker that works in the field of child protection recognised how she has become attuned to stories that warn of the dangers of men and she predicted that the something that had happened had something to do with a man
- An interesting reference at this point is Steve Biddulph and Australian family therapist, who has written a number of accessible and useful books

including "Manhood," (1998) and "Raising Boys," (1997.) He makes an important contribution to the debate on childcare and the importance of men and fathers in the development of children. Biddulph maintains that boys between the general ages of birth to six are most interested in their mothers. From the age of six to fourteen boys are most interested in their friends and peer group and after fourteen years of age boys need their fathers or positive male role models and mentors. He makes the point throughout his books that, women alone can not do the entire work of raising the next generation. An Australian woman in the audience reminded us that Steve Biddulph's work is centrally concerned with challenging and supporting men in the positive role as fathers to their children and the next generation.

Chapter Two: Running with his peers

Deimne's aunts did know that something had happened to him but they did not know what had happened. But like all young boys Deimne was very willing to tell them and so he did. He had travelled into the deepest part of the forest and there he had met a very strange man indeed. This man had lay before Deimne and offered him anything his heart desired. Deimne had been filled with wonder and excitement and ran all the way home to tell his aunts immediately. His aunts now proclaimed that they feared for his safety now that he had been seen in the forest and they gave Deimne over to the care of a travelling band of bards which passed their way soon after. Some might think that Deimne's heart might have been broken but it was not as he was a young man now and his head was filled with the excitement of adventure. Also he was living out his destiny.

Deimne spent many an exciting time with this band of young men. They were a little older than Deimne and they had learned a little more than he had, yet it was not what they had learned that attracted Deimne but what they knew. This band of men was young and like all young men they travelled the countryside and made fun together wherever they went. The times were wild and filled with noise. They were known before they ever arrived and spoken about long after they had left. And so it was not long before the Clann-Morna heard of Deimne's travels and escapades. Some thought it was the Clann who came upon the band of merry makers when a travelling rogue confronted them and killed each and every one of them in the fiercest slaughter ever seen in the land. Yet when it came to Deimne's turn to be slain it was not his strength that saved him, although he was tall and broad and strong, nor was it his speed, for he could now run faster than even the deer in the forest could but he did not run away. Whether it was out of fear or instinct Deimne stood

tall as the killer approached him and proclaimed "I am Deimne son of Uail true Chieftain of the Fianna of Ireland." With these words the violent killer became a broken man and fell to his knees. He cried for seven days and Deimne stayed with him to care for him.

The story tells that this killer was indeed Deimne's uncle a brother of Uail's. When Uail was killed by the Clann-Morna his brother, had run away in fear and rage hiding himself in the deepest part of the forest turning his anger out, killing any and all who passed his way. It was not until he had been confronted with the name of his pain that he could face his hurt. Being two solitary souls, one a man and men love to teach, the other a boy and boys love to learn, it is said these two had much in common and enjoyed their time together. That is until Deimne's aunts found out and took him home again.

Audience reflections

The audiences shared their reflections, which included these points:

- The playfulness, strength and joy of children (and their peer group pressures)
- The violence of some men and the danger of sudden threats to children
- How special Fionn was amongst his peers in that he was not killed like the others
- How quickly Fionn forgot the violence of the man he came to care for and spend time with
- The issue of the women's fear and how the aunts took Fionn away from his uncle due to their fears
- The issue of instability and movement in Fionn's life which was based on the decisions of others who never thought to involve Fionn in the decisions
- The sense of a journey to find himself, of exploration, and home-coming, an image of families and circles, returning in order to move on
- The issue of inner strength being life enhancing and protective rather than violence or running away. Fionn survived death when he found inner strength and proclaimed his name in the face of violence. A useful and enjoyable reference in relation to the journey and search for inner strength are the adult and children's books by the American author, Dan Millman. In particular his children's books deal beautifully with issues of being bullied in school (1991) and a child's journey to find himself (1992)
- This section of Fionn's story raises the issue of what Robert Bly (1990) has termed "the father wound." We see the father wound, a searching for a blessing which can heal, not only in Fionn's quest but also in the story of

his uncle who he stumbles across in the deepest part of the forest. Fionn's uncle hid himself away at the time of his father's death in fear and anger, in the depths of his own psychic forest. Turning his inner pains into anger and rage, which he unleashed on any and all that crossed his path. This pain of hiding and searching at the same time can only be healed when it is faced with the very source of the wound itself. When Fionn faces the violent hurting man with his own family name and consequently the memory of the death of his brother, only then can his uncle stop his raging and begin the healing work

Chapter Three: In search of his mother and his stepfather

Deimne's return was much like many homecomings it was filled with celebration yet it would never be the same as before. Deimne had grown older as had his aunts. Now Deimne cared more for them than they did him, something that often happens in a family. He hunted in the forest, and drew water from the well; he did the house up and protected their interests. Yet things were uneasy and soon after his aunts told him to leave. Again they said it was due to their fear for his safety, having given his name aloud he could never again hide from the world or the Clann-Morna. Some say however that his aunts had given all they could to his care and now they too wanted to come out of hiding and face the world. And so Deimne left in search of company, friendship and love.

Having lived his life for so long in solitude Deimne found company hard to find, although he searched for it he found rejection at every turn. He came upon a band of men at play in the countryside and asked if he might join their company, but to do so he needed to prove himself. And so Deimne spent each hour for days and weeks on end proving himself to these men. One would challenge him to a race the next to a swim, the next to some other form of sport. But like all sports among men these soon turned to war. Yet after a time Deimne had proved he was faster and stronger than each and every one of the men in the group. No sooner had he proven himself than they turned him out of the group because no man wants to keep company with a man who is better than himself.

Deimne left them and travelled to the centre of Ireland to the "Hill of Tara," where the high king of Ireland is said to have sat in judgement and counsel. Legend has it that at the hill of Tara was the hidden 'Fifth Province,' of Ireland the centre where the other four provinces met, (Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connacht). When the high king met Deimne he said: "I have no doubt you are the son of Uail the true chieftain of the Fianna of Ireland. You are so true and fair you must be called Fionn." And so with this confidence Fionn left for the kingdom of Kerry in search of his mother and to confront his stepfather.

Yet when Fionn reached Kerry he found that he liked his stepfather and he liked him. Since Fionn's body was by now fine and strong his stepfather trained his mind, spending many nights teaching him the game of chess. Fionn had never played the game before yet he beat his stepfather, seven games in a row. Some would say because he was quick to learn others say it was because his mother was watching. It was soon after that his mother told him that she must leave. Again he was told the reason was her fear of his safety. But there was a saying in the land at that time that if a women falls in love with her second husband she often rejects all that is associated with the first. And so Deimne left home again, not for the first time but for the last.

Audience reflections

At this point in the story the audience commented on the following issues:

- The constant search for connection and love, a search for being accepted rather than being moved
- The confidence of finding out who he really was, being confirmed in his identity
- The point was raised that very often in order to reach our centre within, the fifth province, we need to go to the edge of where we are coming from, we need to go to our edge
- The constant struggle men seem to have in proving themselves to the community of men throughout their lives. A very good reference in this regard is the book "I don't want to talk about it, overcoming the secret legacy of male depression," (1997) by the American family therapist Terrance Real. In the book Real talks about how tired and depressed all men can become when we are worn down by the constant and unachievable effort of proving ourselves, as men in the company of each other. This book makes a very substantial contribution to efforts at helping men and boys open up to looking for and accepting help in the form of emotional and psychological support
- The ambiguous relationship with stepparents was raised noticing the negative images of stepmothers and stepfathers that litter myths and fairytales
- Comment was also made about the issue of the positive and loving potential within such relationships and the healthy role of mentors in our lives

Chapter Four: The salmon of knowledge

Fionn travelled north till he reached the river Boyne, the sight of many a long battle in Irish history. There he found Fineglas the wise old man he had been looking for. Fionn wished to fulfil the criteria for becoming the Chieftain of

the Fianna of Ireland. To do so a man needed to swim faster than the fish in the water and run faster than the hares of the field, be a cunning chess player and be a wise and true poet. Fionn wished to ask Fineglas to teach him in the ways of poetry and wisdom. Fionn asked "May I join you here to live and learn?" to which Fineglas replied a resounding "Yes". And so the teaching and learning began immediately. Fionn asked, "Why do you live by the river?" to which Fineglas replied, "It is by water that the best poems are found." And Fionn asked, "Have you caught many poems?", To which Fineglas wisely replied, "Only those I have been fit for."

Legend has it that Fineglas spent his time sitting by a pond in the river, which was surrounded by a copse wood of hazel trees. These trees grew nuts, which held within them all the wisdom of the world and as they fell from the tree into the pond they were eaten by the salmon of knowledge, "An Breadan Feassa." Any man who ate of the flesh of this fish, would possess all the knowledge of the world: knowledge of the past, present and the future. For seven years Fineglas had tried to catch the salmon of knowledge but to no avail, yet soon after Fionn arrived the fish was caught. Fineglas was delighted and tired from his efforts he asked Fionn to prepare and cook the fish for him while he rested. Fionn was delighted to assist his master, being a solitary man and having cared for his aunts Fionn was a good cook. As Fineglas left to rest he warned Fionn not to eat of the fish and Fionn being an honorable man made the promise.

As Fionn prepared the meal the fish roasted nicely on the spit over the fire and soon the feast was almost ready when Fionn noticed a blister had come up on the side of the fish with the heat of the fire. And so Fionn pushed his thumb into the blister to flatten the skin. With the heat of the fish oil Fionn burnt his hand and thrust his thumb into his mouth for comfort. When he presented the fish to Fineglas, Fineglas knew, for the second time in Fionn's life, that something had happened to change him. "Have you eaten of the fish?" he asked "No," Said Fionn "I burnt my thumb on the fish and soothed it in my mouth but I did not eat the fish." "What is your true name Fionn?" asked Fineglas. "My name is Deimne." "Ah, said Fineglas the prophecy has come to pass for it was foretold that Deimne would taste of the salmon of knowledge. You are the true chieftain of the Fianna of Ireland. You may eat the fish." And that for today and this telling of this tale is where this story ends.

Audience reflections:

At this the end point of the story the audience made both specific and general points:

- A sense of wisdom having its own time and place and of coming to those who are ready in the right time

- A sense of coming full circle of a natural rhythm of life with the old being replaced by the young
- The importance of a name
- The tension in life between destiny and self -development
- One person in the audience commented on how she took the offer by Fineglas to Fionn, "You may eat the fish," as a gesture, which symbolised the welcoming, and accepting of Fionn for the very first time in his life

Narrative and storytelling

"... a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were telling a story."

(Jean-Paul Sartre)

"There is only one thing worse than being talked about, that is not being talked about."

(Oscar Wilde)

Narrative is the storytelling metaphor, which now appears in much of the contemporary psychological, social work and family therapy literature and discourse. The application of narrative and storytelling in everyday life is the way we compose, or story, our lives.

"Narrative is a dynamic process that constitutes both the way that we organise the events and experiences of our lives to make sense of them and the way we participate in creating the things we make sense of, including ourselves." (Anderson, 1997, p.212.)

Therefore, we both constitute and are constrained by the words we use and the stories we tell of our lives. This ability to imagine the type of person we want to be and to create that self through a narrative process offers us the greatest possibility to become the person we most wish we could be. In the words of the Irish author, John O'Donohue,

"The imagination is the great friend of the unknown. Endlessly it invokes and releases the power of possibility."

(O'Donohue, 1997, p.15)

This type of storytelling might be considered as an ideal way of living our lives. It is therefore, important at this point to raise a number of warnings in relation to the use of storytelling as a pure model of living.

Firstly, some critiques warn that the use of a too pure storytelling metaphor allows for the speaker to loosen themselves from any social, relational bonds of

responsibility. Imelda McCarthy cautions against the use of social constructionist and narrative therapy where we allow the conversation to fall into an anything goes acceptance of relativist stories; to do so she warns would be like,

"being cast adrift on the rather precarious seas of moral relativism".
(McCarthy, 1997, vi)

However, narrative therapist Marie Keenan argues that all conversations,

"Require mutual respect and understanding, a willingness to listen and test one's opinions and prejudices, and a mutual seeking of the 'rightness' of what is said."

(Keenan, 1994, p.9)

Stories are not told in a vacuum or without reference to another context. We are constructed and constrained by the language and stories we tell of ourselves. We are simultaneously constructed and constrained by the stories others tell of themselves and us. Narrative therapy and storytelling is, therefore, both full of imaginative possibilities and is socially accountable. (Hogan, 1998, p.18).

The second critique or consideration which I believe is important to an accountable and liberating narrative and storied therapy is that raised by Jim Sheehan. Sheehan warns against too literal an analogy of narrative therapy and fictional narrative. He considers,

"An inherent bias towards closure and determinism within the narrative paradigm necessitates therapist attention to freedom and contingency within therapeutic narration. Safeguarding freedom within therapeutic dialogue requires a de-emphasis upon narrative as product in favour of narrative as process."

(Sheehan, 1997, p.1.)

Narrative therapy and storytelling, unlike fictional narrative does not begin with, or work towards an ideal, or fixed end point.

"As discursive practices, our narratives are in continuing evolution and change. Stories, thus, are not accomplished facts but are entities in the process of being made. Narrative becomes the way we imagine alternatives and create possibilities and the way we actualise these options." (Anderson, 1997, p.213.)

The Irish writer, Samuel Beckett has talked about the narrative of our lives. He considers that,

"Life is not a story but rather a collection of pieces waiting to be told as a story."

Shifting stories in foster families

"The fact of storytelling hints at a fundamental human unease, hints at human imperfection. Where there is perfection there is no story to tell."
(Ben Okri, *A way of being free*, p.112)

Stories and narrative as a process link events through time. (Aften, 1996. Sheehan, 1997). Narrative practices allow us to create and present ourselves through the stories we tell about ourselves with others. Within this way of living together we have both the power and the responsibility to give an account of, who am I as a person? The day to day challenges and experiences which life presents are to a large degree more or less easily incorporated by each of us into the story we tell about ourselves. Our life story which connects our past, present and future selves together into a more or less coherent self. We search for what John Byng Hall calls 'a coherent life story.' (Byng, Hall, 1995.) The events of our lives are spoken of in the form of a story which, I believe, people attempt to order in a meaningful sequence, which points towards the plot of their lives. (Allen and Laird, 1990.) In times of trouble or upset in people's lives the Dublin colloquialism is often spoken, "They have lost the plot!"

However the question, "Who am I?" can become a much more difficult question to address when our life story or 'Plot,' is interrupted by events such as death, separation or loss. The Irish family therapist Jim Sheehan terms such events as 'Rupture events,' (Sheehan, 1998). Families, people, children suffer rupture events at times such as death, separations, divorces or when statutory social services remove children to alternative forms of care, including foster care. All of us, I suggest, experience these times of change in our lives as a process of pain that we know, often for many years on either side of the date when we stopped living one life and began to live another.

This concept of a ruptured, interrupted or violated life story focuses our attention towards a type of dual life we carry with us at various times. Where, for example we can live our life with people in our new foster home and yet we can be distracted, reminded and dream of our past life or self. The trauma of rupture events can cause us to wonder to ourselves who we are and also to present often-mixed images of ourselves to those around us.

The challenge and possibility for real care in situations such as this is for us to find ways, time and space for the telling and listening to these conflicting stories. Containers if you will where stories of rupture are invited and honoured. Where the simple, yet healing power of stories is accessed in the telling and the retelling of the tale.

The healing power of stories

"When the bond between heaven and earth is broken even prayer is not enough; only a story can mend it."

(The Baal Shem-Tov)

All of our emotions are experienced and held within the stories we tell (Taylor, 1996). The struggle at painful and traumatic times in our lives is for us to possess our stories rather than these stories possessing us. The challenge is to take personal agency and give voice to our story, to become active narrators rather than passive puppets in the tales of life. To try to tell the story of the transition in our life in some way which begins once more to make some sort of meaningful sense to us.

The telling and listening to stories offers a connection between people at a very deep and meaningful level of their lives.

"Storytelling reconnects us to the great sea of human destiny, human suffering, and human transcendence."

(Okri, 1997, p.47)

How we help children tell their story of transition and rupture events in their lives will have a defining effect on the way they make sense of their lives, the past, present and the future.

The power to tell our story and have it count are central issues of social justice. Children in care should also be included in the collaborative process of writing their own case notes or reports. Social worker's case files should be replaced by collections of collaborative written notes, which may not be in agreement but which respect and give voice to the child's perspective (Hogan, Forthcoming). Another idea for children living in care is for them to present their social workers, child care workers and foster parents with an annual report card, something very similar to the child's own school report card. An interesting task might be to consider what types of categories children themselves should scrutinise foster parents and social workers under.

In modern times we are living in ever increasing isolation from our families of origin and communities of support. Many more children are living in merged families with step and foster parents. Therefore we need to remember and honour the healing power of stories and create time for the telling of stories which will hold all the people in the family in both their unique individuality and in their shared lived experience.

A Story That Could Be True
If you were exchanged in the cradle and
Your real mother died
Without ever telling the story
Then no one knows your name,
And somewhere in the world
Your father is lost and needs you
But you are far away.

He can never find
How true you are, how ready.
When the great wind comes
And the robbers of the rain
You stand in the corner shivering.
The people who go by –
You wonder at their calm.

They miss the whisper that runs
Any day in your mind,
"Who are you really, wanderer?" –
and the answer you have to give
no matter how dark and cold
the world around you is:
"Maybe I'm a king."
William Stafford

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