

# The Use of Parables and Fables in Adlerian Psychotherapy

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The purpose of this paper is to record some parables and fables and discuss their implication and application to various problems encountered in psychotherapy. The use of a parable to illustrate one concept does not necessarily exempt or limit it from being used to illustrate other concepts the psychotherapist may wish to convey to the patient. The therapist will also observe that patients may interpret and retain parts of the story according to their bias and lifestyle goals, over and above the point intended by the therapist.

A parable is a simple story that sets the familiar in an unfamiliar context, where the meaning is found only within the story itself (Morris, 1969). Because the stories are always about people in relationship to their world, they help to keep our beliefs and philosophies more “down to earth” and, therefore, are easier to understand and apply in everyday life. Our philosophy and theology can become more believable, less abstract, and more applicable to the here and now (Heffner, 1974).

The parable, unlike the fable, does not directly teach a lesson. A fable must have a moral teaching, either explicit or implicit (Noel, 1975). As the secure, familiar everydayness of a parable unfolds, it suddenly catches the listener offbalance; and the “mundaneness” is transformed into a different logic. The listener, then, may glimpse the possibility and begin to understand that there might be another way of believing, living, and thinking.

With the use of the parable and fable in psychotherapy, no new world is created. Rather, the old way of looking at things is transformed, the old information is changed and challenged by new insight, and one’s individual ways of viewing life may be broadened. Parables do not have a message; they are a message! Fables give a message that the individual can apply to his or her situation.

In psychotherapy, patients find it easier to grasp concepts, rules for living, and new ways of looking at life through the medium of stories. Stories are

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easier to remember and less threatening than direct confrontation and can be shelved and later reexamined as the patients deal with all aspects of their therapy.

A feeling and sense of equality can be established as the therapist shares a story with the patient. In exploring a truth or concept together, the therapist can be partially removed from the "authority-with-all-the-answers" role; and mutual respect and rapport can be developed.

Humor is a vital ingredient of successful psychotherapy. It is important to "lighten" patients' self-imposed burdens. Parables and fables allow the touch of humor, transforming what appears to be a tremendous burden into something less weighty. Humor also redirects patients' focus off themselves and toward the characters in the story. In seeing the characters' situations as humorous, having a way out, or having a variety of solutions, patients may be able to relax and view their "burdens" with some humor and lightness. As some of the intensity decreases, it may be easier to problem-solve and gain objectivity.

Parables and fables offer therapists an opportunity to present insightful interpretations and a way of viewing things on a "silver platter" (Mosak & Shulman, 1974). They are an indirect way to present a message or psychological point in more acceptable, less accusatory form, thus reducing patients' tendencies to be defensive.

The use of stories to illustrate a point or capsulize a concept is not new to modern psychotherapy. Much of the teaching of Jesus is set forth in parable form, and his rules for living a happy, successful life are delineated throughout the Scriptures (Smith, 1948). His parables dealt with the familiar, and the characters and scenes were taken from ordinary life experience. Similarly, as in modern psychotherapy, some of his parables were understood; some had several meanings; and some were not understood because the listener was not ready to hear. The fact that the stories were handed down by the spoken word, later recorded, and continue to have tremendous impact on modern man and society illustrates their value as teaching devices.

### *The Stubborn Mule*

There is an old parable about a man who wanted to move his very obdurate, defiant mule. The more he pulled and tugged, the deeper the hooves of the mule dug into the dirt road. A traveler came ambling along this road, saw the old man's predicament, and offered to help. He picked up a huge log and clobbered the stubborn mule between the eyes. The old man became very angry with the traveler and demanded to know the reason for such action. Replied the traveler, "Before I can get him to move, I have to get his attention!"

Before patients decide to “move” in therapy, therapists have to get their attention. A parable or fable can do just that. In seeing others on their life journeys, patients can begin to identify and believe in themselves and glimpse another way of looking at things.

### **Social Isolation**

One of our basic goals, according to Individual Psychology, is our need for people and the development of our place and sense of belonging (Adler, 1967). One of the common reasons that prompts a person to seek psychotherapy is an inability to get along and cooperate with people. Various coping devices are used to solve these conflicts: from complete withdrawal and noninvolvement to aggressively being on the alert and defensive. It becomes the task of the therapist to encourage and guide the patient into reforming and establishing meaningful, cooperative relationships.

The following parable illustrates how all humans engage in social behavior, even those who are isolates, and shows all behavior as having social implications. It can be used in individual as well as in group therapy to demonstrate our need for people.

#### *The Hermit*

Once long ago there lived outside a village in a cave an old man, the Hermit. One day the village and its inhabitants were totally destroyed by an erupting volcano. Sadly, the Hermit tied his belongings on his back and set out to find another cave outside another village.

As in the hermit story, one cannot even be a hermit without people!

### **Excessive Pleasing**

While some people avoid contact with other people or deny their need for them, others train themselves early in life to depend too heavily on other people and their actions. The latter are the “people pleasers” who spend their energy and “spin their wheels” trying to please all of the people all of the time. While it is important to learn cooperation and develop social interest, the “people pleaser” has an overdriven need to keep anger and conflict at a minimum. In concentrating to such an extent on other people’s needs, feelings, and opinions, pleasers sooner or later end up denying and not knowing, or not experiencing, their own identity, values, self-worth, and opinions (Dreikurs, 1967, p. 113). In trying to constantly please, they end up not pleasing all the people all the time and destroy something of value within themselves.

Carolyn, age 18, a “people pleaser,” was brought into therapy by her

mother. She complained of depression, suicidal thoughts, and academic difficulty. As the sessions progressed, it was apparent that she was trying to please all those around her. This resulted in her following of some peer group activities which she later had difficulty accepting. She felt unable to confront her friends or break away from their influence. The following fable was told to her to illustrate how her desire to please and follow others' ideas and suggestions could easily result in the denial of her own values and ideals. It helped her reevaluate and reassess her goals and direction.

### *The Miller, His Son, and Their Ass*

A father, his son, and a donkey were walking along a road enroute to the fair. Some people came by and said: "Look at those fools, walking when they could be riding." The old man asked his son to ride the donkey.

Some others passed by and said: "Look at that young man riding while his old father is walking. Isn't that terrible?" The father asked his son to get off, and he rode now.

Later, some more people came by and said: "Isn't that awful! The man rides and has his little boy walk. How selfish!" The father then asked his son to get on the donkey, and the two of them rode.

Then, they passed some more people, and this group said: "Two people riding a little donkey! They should be carrying him instead." The father and the son got off, tied the donkey's legs together, put a stick between them, lifted the donkey off the ground, and began to carry him. As they crossed the bridge, the donkey got scared, struggled, fell off the bridge, and drowned.

*Moral:* You can't please everyone, so don't try; or, if you try to please everyone, you'll lose your ass!

### **Discouragement in a Difficult Life Situation**

The presenting symptoms and problems of patients may seem so burdensome and terrifying that pessimism and discouragement become intense and overwhelming. It is important for patients to see at least a little humor or worth in their wretched situations, in order to realize that any experience is not entirely good or entirely bad. Out of their mistaken ideas and faulty decisions about life can come some positive, growth-producing changes. As the positive aspects are embraced and realized, the problem may not seem as weighty or detrimental.

Adlerians believe that we all have a choice and control over our feelings

and emotions; we manufacture them for a purpose and to get a job done (Dreikurs, 1967). We have the option and freedom to choose between optimism or pessimism.

One of the most important ingredients of successful psychotherapy is the therapist's ability to encourage (Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963) and help each patient see some positive aspects of his or her problem.

To help a patient facing a crisis situation such as a loss of job, the following story can be told. It can be helpful in illustrating that what looks bad may turn out well. Initially, the unemployment may be seen as devastating, totally unfair, and humiliating, but later the experience can be used as an opportunity to develop and grow in other areas.

Did you hear that Rosie's getting married?

That's good.

He's an old man.

That's bad.

He's very rich.

That's good.

But, he's very stingy.

That's bad.

But, he's very sick.

That's good.

But, he's been sick for years and years.

That's bad.

But, the doctors say he can't last long.

That's good.

He's left his money to charity.

That's bad.

But, he may change his will.

That's good.

But, his lawyer advises against it.

That's bad.

But, the old man pays no attention to anyone.

That's good.

*Moral:* Who knows what's good or bad?

### **The Tyranny of the Shoulds**

One of the tasks confronted by patients in psychotherapy is discovering their unique patterns and methods of striving from a perceived minus to a felt plus. Many times patients have modeled and patterned their lives on imitation and acceptance of other people's—especially their parents'—goals, values, and ambitions. In modeling themselves after and accepting the values of their parents or other models, patients may enter therapy confused about what

they “ought to believe” and what their inner selves are directing them to believe. Patients may find themselves battling the “tyranny of the shoulds” (Horney, 1950), confused about what they feel others expect from them, and what their inner selves are trying to reveal. Patients enter psychotherapy to uncover and define their own uniqueness. Through the therapeutic use of interpreting each person’s lifestyle, patients’ patterns and ways of operating are illuminated and explored. They can then decide what to do with the self-imposed “shoulds,” and how these “shoulds” are beneficial or destructive to their own uniqueness.

Mr. W., a 32-year-old, perpetual college student, was seen in therapy after several psychotic episodes. In exploring his lifestyle, it was discovered that he had embraced the parental values of education and achievement, pursuing a professional life and status without conscious questioning. He was rebelling, however, by continually changing majors, being placed on academic probation, and having psychotic episodes. Through the confrontation by members of his therapy group, it was pointed out how his movement or actions seemed to be suggesting negative, backward movement in pursuing a professional life. The following story was told to aid him in facing his ambivalence and imitation of others’ values.

#### *The Rabbi’s Son*

When Rabbi Noah, Rabbi Mordecai’s son, took his father’s place as Zaddik, his followers soon saw he behaved differently from his father. They were troubled and came to ask him about this. “But, I do just as my father did,” he replied. “He did not imitate, and I do not imitate.” (Kopp, 1971)

This parable can also be used when a patient, who “window shops” for a therapist, makes the rounds of many therapists. He or she compares and contrasts their differing approaches and treatment plans and may, in fact, have read extensively in the field of psychology and psychiatry, quoting others in an attempt to discredit and defeat the current therapist. The therapist, in a humorous, friendly manner, can point out that he or she plans to follow his or her own style and not imitate others.

#### **Self-Defeating Behavior**

One of the goals in Adlerian psychotherapy is to encourage patients to modify or change their *modus operandi*, or way of operating, if it is causing difficulty in their life or not producing the desired results.

The fable of the “The Sun and the Wind” can be used in the therapeutic situation with patients who always exude hostility and anger in an attempt to get their own way. This fable can show that there are other options, producing

desirable results, rather than responding with anger. The following fable illustrates that anger does not always accomplish the hoped-for results; while a lighter, warmer method may.

### *The Sun and the Wind*

The sun and the wind began to argue about who was the stronger. They looked below and saw a man walking along a road with a cloak wrapped around him.

“Let’s see who is stronger and can make the man’s cloak come off!” the wind challenged.

“Okay,” the sun replied. “You first.”

The wind began to blow up a storm and blew until his cheeks cracked; but the more he blew, the more tightly the man wrapped his cloak around him. Finally, the wind gave up.

It was now the sun’s turn. He began to shine brightly. The weather got warm, and soon it became hot. The man loosened his cloak; and, after a while, took it off.

*Moral:* Sometimes warmth succeeds when anger does not.

### **The Patient Who Looks for the Magic Answer from the Wise Man**

Many people approach psychotherapy with the attitude and expectations of the man seeking out the Llama. They come to the therapist wanting answers and solutions to their problems. Their own pessimism and discouragement leads them to believe some “wise seer” will magically sooth the wounds and provide the answers.

One of the cornerstones of Adlerian psychology is the belief in social equality and democracy (Dreikurs, 1971). Adler wrote about mutual respect and felt that our striving for superiority caused many problems in our relationships and interactions with other people. He approached his patients as “students,” using the growth model rather than the medical model. In encouraging his students to learn and grow, he was leading them away from the inferior position that the seer (or the “Herr Doktor”) had all the right answers and would magically cut out or cure the evil disease within.

If people approach therapy searching for answers, they enter treatment assuming that the therapist has all the right answers to problems and holds the magical key to life. When asked what issue or areas they want to discuss, they reply, “You decide what I should talk about.”

The therapist's role is to introduce patients to new ways of problem-solving, looking at life, and confronting some of the lifestyle misapprehensions, but the therapist can't provide answers.

The following parable can be used to extricate the therapist from assuming the patient's responsibility of finding his or her own meaning to life.

### *The Search for the Llama*

A man was unhappy because he was searching for the meaning of life and could not find it. He went from one wise man to another but was never satisfied. He finally heard about a Llama who lived in the mountains of Tibet, and he undertook an expedition. For many months he traveled over mountains, across rivers, until finally he found the Llama and obtained an audience. He asked the wise man, "Please, tell me. What is the meaning of life?"

The Llama answered, "Life is a fountain."

The man was puzzled and said, "Life is a fountain?"

The Llama shrugged his shoulders and said, "So, life isn't a fountain."

### **Selfishness**

Many people entering therapy are so wrapped up and enmeshed in their own problems that their world focuses almost entirely on themselves. They fail to consider others and refuse to become aware of the needs and situations of those around them. Their thoughts and actions do not focus on what they can do to help others; they see people in terms of what those people can give and do for them. Their minimal social interest and involvement with others increases their feelings of inferiority, loneliness, and isolation.

The following parable can be used in therapy to demonstrate that inferiority feelings are inversely proportional to social interest. (Dreikurs, 1953, p. 20). As patients' consideration and awareness of others' needs and situations develops, as they extend themselves to those around them, their feelings of loneliness will decrease and their connectiveness with the world will become positive.

### *The Two Brothers*

Outside of Jerusalem on a small plot of land tilled two brothers. Their living was difficult because the soil was rocky. However, they farmed and were able to seek out a living. Whatever they grew, they shared equally. One night one of the brothers could not sleep, and he tossed



and turned. It came to him that the arrangement with his brother was unjust. His brother had several children and a wife; yet, he received only one-half the crop. He thought, "My brother has all those mouths to fill, and he should have more than one-half. Tomorrow I will offer him two-thirds; this certainly would be more equitable."

That very same night, his brother tossed and turned, could not sleep, and he thought, "My brother receives one-half of what we earn. He has no children and family; in his old age he will have no one to look after him. Therefore, he deserves and needs more than one-half of what we earn. Tomorrow I will meet him and offer him two-thirds of what we grow."

The next day, they awoke and met on the Mount of Moriah and shared with the other their plans. A voice was heard saying, "This, indeed, is brotherly love!"

### **Disappointment in Love**

Many people come to a therapist following a broken relationship. Feeling devastated by the loss, they lack objectivity in evaluating and working through the crisis. They may feel that life has lost its meaning, having convinced themselves that this particular lover is the only one in the world. They may consider drastic responses such as an act of revenge or a suicidal gesture. The therapist can help these people explore other options and solutions.

There is a humorous fable which points out that one can live life, missing a piece of tail, but to lose one's head is fatal! What a person may consider important and vital in his or her life, may be relatively unimportant in the long run.

#### *The Fox and the Train*

A fox was out on a cold winter day foraging for food. Because he was so chilly, so hungry, and so preoccupied with his hunting, he forgot to look either way as he crossed the railroad tracks. A train bore down on him as he went across one set of tracks and amputated his tail. The fox jumped, turned around to look at what happened, and another train whizzed by and took off his head.

*Moral:* Don't lose your head over a piece of tail!

#### *The Robin*

There is a delightful story told about a robin living in New York who was having such a good time he failed to make preparations to fly south for

the winter. As the leaves fell and the winds of bitter cold began to blow, he took to the air and began a frantic flight towards a warmer climate. As he was flying over a barnyard, frost formed on his wings, and he fell to the ground. He knew he was going to die and chided himself for not leaving with the rest of the flock. A horse passed over him and dropped some manure. The warmth revived his cold, frozen body, and some wheat seeds in the manure provided a nice lunch. He was so delighted and happy with this good fortune that he burst forth into joyful song. A cat heard the chirping, came to investigate, and began to remove the blanket of manure. When he discovered the little bird, he gobbled him up!

Several morals emerge from this story: (1) not everyone who drops manure on you is your enemy; (2) not everyone who cleans the manure off you is your friend; and (3) if you are up to your ears in manure, it may be better to keep your mouth shut.

The story can be used to point out that all events must be understood in their broader context. Hasty conclusions are often mistaken and impetuous actions make things worse.

### Summary

The concepts of equality, encouragement, and the use of more effective *modi operandi* can be taught in the therapeutic encounter by use of non-threatening stories. Through the techniques of humor and story-telling, patients can understand their relationships with others and their movement toward their dominant goal.

The therapist must be aware of patients' movement and not push them beyond their own pace. Humorous anecdotes are easily filed away until patients are ready to confront their situation and apply the insight to themselves. Like the parable of the Llama, no one can really provide an answer to life and one's problems. We must seek and discover our own solutions within ourselves. Parables and fables can, however, provide a source for helping a person find his or her own meaning to life.

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