

Exploring Identity with Survivors of Abuse and Trauma

Absent but Implicit

or

Present but Obscured?

Presented by Richard Elms

Narrative Approaches to Trauma

Denborough, David (Ed) 2006. *Trauma. Narrative Responses to Traumatic Experience*. Dulwich Centre Publications. Adelaide. South Australia.

In particular, chapters by Michael White:

'Working with People who are Suffering the Consequences of Multiple Trauma: A Narrative Perspective.' *And* 'Children, Trauma and Subordinate Storyline Development.'

p28 'No one is a passive recipient of trauma. People always take steps in endeavouring to prevent the trauma they are subject to, and, when preventing the trauma is clearly impossible, they take steps to try to modify it in some way or to modify its affects on their lives.'

'People's responses to trauma are based on what they give value to, on what they hold precious in life.'

p 148 '...the negative consequences of trauma do not represent the whole story of children's lives...'

p149 'The accounts of what children hold precious, and of what they intend for their lives that are featured in subordinate story line development can be thought of as concepts about life and identity.'

p150 'Subordinate story line development provides a safe place for children to stand in the context of giving voice to the trauma they have been subject to, and to the consequences of this trauma.'

'Subordinate story line development also provides a foundation for action for children to proceed with their lives.'

'Subordinate story line development restores children's sense of personal agency.'

Identifying children's responses to trauma

see page 153:

Identifying the *absent* but *implicit*

Reflecting on problem solving activity and skills demonstrated.

Direct Observation of Spontaneous interaction.

P154 '....within these conversations people have the opportunity to experience being at one with a range of positive identity conclusions that displace many negative 'truths' of identity that they have been recruited into as an outcome of the traumas they have been subject to.'

Alternative or subordinate story lines – including stories of identity – have implications for action.

Biblical Perspectives

How do the stories that shape our lives and relationships fit with God's story?

To the extent that it is not acknowledged, understood or recognized, God's story might be seen as subordinate or as an alternative to the dominant story.

The dominant story could be shaped by our culture, family of origin, peer group, experiences of abuse or trauma, our sin etc.

Identity

How is it that most of us are appalled, horrified and saddened by abuse?

Why is it that most of us are attracted to justice and fairness? Why do we find kindness and friendship appealing?

We are created by God in His image – we are like him. Many of God's qualities or attributes are *present* in all of us to some extent. e.g. Romans 2:15 The requirements of the law are written on our hearts..... we have a conscience... our thoughts accuse or defend us...

Identity (continued)

How is it that most of us fail to live up to our ideals and values?

How is it that the qualities or attributes that you might expect to be visible in a creature made in God's image are often not evident?

That image is *obscured* – at its most basic, by sin.

e.g. Romans 7 When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.... making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

Some Biblical concepts related to identity :

Created by God in His image

In our natural state: sinners, separated from God. Helpless to restore the relationship.

Loved by God.

In our relationship with/trust in Jesus: declared righteous

Given gifts/talents to serve God and others

Particular interests, passions, commitments, values

Implications for Therapy

Render God's image more visible:

Invite people to attend to that within themselves that conforms to God's image....

Invite people to attend to particular gifts, talents, passions, personal missions.

Look for opportunities to invite people to attend to the stories of identity related to self and Himself that God has revealed.

Link to and develop relationship or community (which provides a significant context for the development of identity).

Some Characteristics of These Conversations

Not teaching such as you might receive in a sermon or lecture.

Not 'advice' or instruction or support.

Characterized more by curiosity about what is meaningful and significant to the person.

Interested in understanding the 'stories' that shape people's lives and relationships.

Co-operative exploration of subordinate story lines, and construction of alternative stories.... Hopefully stories that are more closely aligned with God's story.

Conclusion

White:

People's values, commitments and intentions for their lives are often *absent* from their accounts of their responses to trauma and abuse. However they are often *implicit* in their responses to these experiences.

A sense of personal agency and the development of positive identity conclusions can be facilitated by making these values, commitments and intentions explicit.

Biblical:

Because we are created in God's image, all people will have values, commitments, intentions and conscience that is consistent with this image.

However these values, commitments, intentions and conscience are often absent from the account people give of their responses to trauma and abuse. They are *present* but *obscured*.

Rendering a person's values, commitments, intentions and conscience explicit or visible can contribute to the development of personal agency and alternative identity conclusions – both of which have implications for action.