

‘The support of the group enabled him to wait out his habitual urge to run’



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An article titled ‘The reading cure’, written by the author Blake Morrison¹, revealed to me that my lifelong belief in the power of reading had magically aligned with my work as a counsellor, in the form of ‘shared reading’. I was subsequently given the opportunity to facilitate a group for male survivors of rape and childhood sexual abuse who were seeking further support following their individual therapy.

In a shared reading group, stories and poems are read aloud, with pauses for reflection or comment. The facilitator often does most of the reading, but as participants grow in confidence many take a turn, sometimes literally finding their own voice to take out into their life. Participants control their own involvement by reading, speaking or sharing personal experiences if they wish, or just quietly listening, enabling individuals of all abilities to be included. Hearing the texts read aloud gives the listener internal space to reflect on their own thoughts and feelings in relation to those in the text and other group members.

I chose John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* for its themes of powerlessness and exclusion, and the relationship between the two central characters, which is fraught with conflicting emotions amid scenes of violence, vulnerability and love. Through the story’s unexpected twists and turns, various human interactions and situations were experienced in fictional form by the group, sparking unexpressed thoughts and feelings, leading to self-reflection and personal insights, which might never surface within a talking therapy session.

I noted examples of when the literature spoke directly to someone’s personal experience, giving voice to that thought or feeling:

‘I have both Lennie and George [from *Of Mice and Men*] inside me – part of me feels like a child, but I can look after that part now.’

‘I’ve been feeling that old rage again, but now I know what it is, and I don’t need to pick a fight in the pub to express it anymore.’

‘I’ve been silenced for too long – my voice is worth listening to – I know that now [voiced in response to the Gillian Clarke poem ‘Miracle on St David’s Day’]. This client went on to reclaim that voice by writing a poem of his own

to address the devastating impact that 20 years of shame and silence had had on his life.

A violent scene involving a much-loved dog being killed led to deep discussion about profound relationships between group members and their dogs. Individuals spoke of only feeling able to trust their dog, not feeling safe enough to have eye contact with people, even ‘only still being here’ for their dog. ‘I used to go and lie down with my dog if I had a nightmare. I couldn’t go to my parents for comfort because I couldn’t tell them what had happened to me.’

When a group member became distressed in response to a scene in the story, we processed what he was re-experiencing in that moment – he was able to tolerate some distress and then reflect on how the support of the group had enabled him to wait out his habitual urge to run, which had brought him close to suicide on several occasions. This led to discussion of strategies for processing triggering images, in order to update trauma memories and ‘time tag’ them as having happened in the past.

One client had written himself off as ‘not very intelligent and rubbish at school’ – he hadn’t made the connection between his poor educational achievement and the fact that, following abuse in early childhood, he had attended 10 different schools as he moved from one care placement to another. His pride at reading aloud from Shakespeare or sharing his own experience of homelessness in response to the Tess Gallagher poem ‘The Hug’ were significant moments in his re-evaluation of himself as an intelligent, articulate person with great capacity for empathy.

Other participants talked about the healing power of the camaraderie they experienced through the group: ‘The trust and friendship shared through the adversity experienced in the book, in a safe environment, allowed me to talk about issues I normally wouldn’t be confident to share.’

‘The value of the other guys’ experiences and understanding moved me along my path of healing.’

Another client simply said: ‘When I leave here, I feel calm and I go on thinking about it all – I don’t feel pulled down, I feel good.’

To witness stories and poems bringing the group together in mutual support and enjoyment has been a very special privilege. ■



About the author

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