

A Breath of Life

It's 7:30 Saturday morning. I am sitting at my computer. Tears are trickling down my face. I am welled up inside. I just finished reading a narrative from Megan, Tim's mother. A narrative is a story or an account of an event. The foundation for using narratives is found in the Bible. Jesus taught by telling parables to illustrate his moral attitudes and religious principles. In response to the disciples Jesus said "the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them." (Matthew 13:10). Matthew 13:34 tells us ". . . he (Jesus) did not say anything to them without using a parable." Christ is the only one who used parables in the New Testament. If I count correctly, Jesus told no less than 32 parables. For my money that makes narratives very credible. I use them in family regulatory therapy and find them very effective. The narrative helps re-create fragmented or suppressed pieces of a person's life. A narrative can re-create part of a person's life story that was preverbal. It can re-create an event that a child or adult remembers but could never put words to. The information in a narrative helps the left brain catch up with the right brain and the body. Traumatic events are stored in the right brain and the body. This creates an imbalance and leads to dysregulation until the left brain can help make sense of what is happened.

Megan's narrative tells Tim's story of his father's two year battle with cancer. The story ended with his father's death. Tim was 7 years old. The family then moved halfway across the country to be near relatives. Tim is now 9 ½. His mother brought him into therapy because he was having difficulty at school. At home he was demonstrating defiant behaviors. Tim's emotional trauma all started with a tumor at the bottom of his dad's esophagus. Tim's dad had difficulty eating because it was painful and he lost weight. It was hard for him to breathe. Due to his weakened immune system he came down with virus after virus. There were times when his dad had tubes running in and out of his body. There are many trips to the doctor for cancer treatments. There were also numerous stays in the hospital. Much of the time Tim and his little sister (1&1/2 years old when dad died) had to stay with relatives while Megan stayed at the hospital.

Megan's detail and lack of feelings in the narrative told me that she was avoiding her own pain. I suggested that she focus more on feelings and less on circumstances. I made notes and comments on her document to help guide her. I then sent the narrative back to Megan for revision. I had been aware of Megan's need to do more grief work for quite some time due to our interactions in family therapy. I was using the narrative not only to help Tim, but to help Megan. The family had been stuck in their grief process. I knew that Megan could not help Tim past the point of her own healing and grief resolution. The level at which you can help someone else emotionally is a function of the level that you've resolved your own issues. My job was to meet Megan and Tim at their point of need in order to help them move forward. Jesus demonstrated this during his ministry. Jesus met with people physically where they were. He met them in their homes, in the marketplace and workplace, and wherever they gathered. He also met them at their point of emotional pain and at the point where they needed healing. That is the power and beauty of God's grace. The Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:9 "but he said to me, 'My (God speaking to Paul) grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. ' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so

that Christ's power may rest on me." In other words, God met Paul at his point of need and carried him through.

Megan made the necessary revisions and there was more of a focus on the emotional part of the story. Two weeks later Megan and Tim arrived for a session. I told Tim that his mom had a story for him. Tim chose to sit on the arm of the chair and leaned into his mom while she read. I coached Megan to slow down her fast paced reading. She needed help getting into her emotional process because of the intensity of her grief. It was scary for her too. I had them breathe and co-regulate. Tim and his mother exchanged glances. When Megan paused, Tim told her to continue. Tim was drawn into his mom's emotional process. I moved my stool close to them. I wanted to focus on helping them co-regulate. Tim's body melted into his mother. Tim came out of their emotional process, briefly looked around, and then re-joined his mother. I limited my words during this process. Too many words shifted Tim to his left brain and took him out of process. I coached Tim to move even closer to his mother so they could hug. Tim snuggled. Megan wrapped her arms around him. Tim reached his limit of vulnerability. He pulled away from his mother. Tim then asked his mother to continue reading. I looked at Megan and held her hand. I told her to breathe and to continue when she was ready. She described the children telling their dad good bye as he drew his last breath. Tim sank into his emotional process. Megan wrapped her arms around him. She nurtured and comforted her son. Tim then popped up and asked "What's next?"

I thanked them for allowing me to be part of their journey today. I praised their courage and hard work. I told them that by honoring their trauma, they would begin to move on. Unless you honor where you're at, you'll never get where you're going. I asked Tim what he wanted to do next. He put his face real close to his mom's face. They exchanged a few words and he asked to go to Burger King. I expected this because it was their ritual after therapy. Tim went over to the couch and I talked to his mom about staying emotionally connected with him that evening. I suggested that Megan allow herself healing time. I told Megan that the more she could heal, the more she could help Tim heal. Tim went down the hallway and Megan followed him out to the car.

Tim said some very hard words today. Tim said the word hurt. This was the first time he put a word to his emotions. During my time in therapy with them Tim had never verbalized much at all about his dad's death. His response to any direct questions were either "I don't know or I forgot". To help his left brain make sense of the trauma I read several short stories and fairy tales on death and dying to Tim and his mother. Tim said that when he hurts, he has trouble breathing. He said that his dad died from cancer. Another first. Saying that his dad had been so scary for him up until now. Words bring the emotions into a different reality that can be overwhelming. I told him to breathe along with me now. He did. I told him that he was a good breather and that I knew his breathing really helped him. Tim said "Yeah, but not like my dad." I knew what he meant. His dad had trouble breathing because of his cancer. Tim was able to connect with his dad's suffering and pain. Another first. Tim had remained disconcerted from his emotions because they were too scary to talk about. Tim was finally able to use his left brain

to help integrate his emotional trauma into his life. Enough emotional safety was present to allow him to do this. Prior to today, words were either unknown and/or too scary to verbalize.

Tim and his mom came back two weeks later. Megan reported that she had been browsing through some of Tim's schoolwork from second grade. She noticed that Tim's handwriting now (fourth grade) was exactly like it was in second grade. She also indicated to me that immediately after our last session, Tim's handwriting significantly improved, but then regressed after about a week. I had been consulting with Tim's school throughout the family's time in therapy. Initially the school was labeling him a behavior disorder with a learning disability in written expression. Fortunately I was able to connect with his special education teacher. She had some understanding of Tim's emotional situation and I helped her provide an emotionally safe environment for him to learn in. She also did her best to ward off "consequences" from the system for incomplete or late school work. Tim had always told me that school was "hard". I certainly believed him because of the depression he was experiencing. School being "hard" took on a new meaning for me because of what his mom had reported. Tim's unresolved trauma kept him developmentally regressed to a second grade level. This was when his father died. No wonder school was hard. The expectation was for a fourth grader, who was regressed to a second grade developmental level, to do fourth grade work.

During this session I used the narrative in a different way. After we discussed the school situation, I asked them both to breathe and regulate together. When they were regulated I spoke to Tim's unconscious feelings. While he was in his mom's arms, I told him that I believed there were times that he missed his dad and didn't really understand what he was feeling. I explained to him that those were times of deep sadness and grief. I told him that those were the times when he felt weighted down and it was hard for him to move. I told him that those were times when it was hard for him to think and he didn't feel like doing anything. I told him that it must be extremely hard not having his dad and he didn't know how to say that. Tim and his mom sat there for a few minutes and processed this. Tim then jumped up, which is usual for him when he's done with his emotional work, and started playing with Legos. I talked with his mom about continuing to use the narrative and speaking to Tim's unconscious feelings when she had the opportunity to do so at home. I then asked Tim what he wanted to do next and suggested that he come back in two or three weeks. Tim stated that he couldn't wait that long and wanted to come back next week. When we give our children the opportunity, they can usually tell us what they need and what is best for them.

Tim and his mom came in the following week. Megan told me with excitement that Tim's handwriting had improved again after our last session and that there was no regression this time. I praised her efforts for continuing the narrative process in between sessions. I explained that the healing that took place helped Tim to not regress developmentally. They brought a DVD with them. It was a two-part photo show DVD. The first part was of Tim's early childhood. The second part was of his father's memorial service. As we watched this together, my heart ached as the tears streamed down both of their faces. I focused on my own emotional regulation in order for me to help them stay in their process. When the DVD was finished, I told them how

blessed I felt that they would share that with part of their life with me. Tim said that he remembered a lot of the pictures but didn't remember anything from the memorial service. I explained that this DVD will benefit him in putting together some of the missing pieces of his childhood. I then asked him what he wanted to do next and he stated he wanted to come back next week. And of course when I left here they would go to Burger King.

I received an e-mail next week. Megan had gotten really sick and needed to cancel. I didn't hear from them for quite some time. I was very curious as to how their process was going. Several weeks later I received an e-mail from Megan. She thanked me for some information she had downloaded off of my website. She told me things were going well. I was relieved because during the process of healing people can get scared because of the heavy emotional work. Sometimes this fear causes them to drop out of therapy and refuse to go back to their process. I am praying and trusting that this was not the case. I am believing that their time with me helped them understand their grief. That it taught them how to process and regulate more effectively as a family. Are they there yet? No, they are not there yet. Are they in process? Yes, they are in process.