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**Collaborative Creativity:
Ways in Which an Assessor Works with a Writer
to Craft Therapeutic Stories**

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How We Got Started

Diane Engelman

Our format for this presentation is a bit different. My co-presenter, JB Allyn, and I will alternate speaking and, at times, will use dialogue to illustrate our collaborative process for developing therapeutic stories.

Our discussion today is based on a two-person collaboration between assessor and writer. We recognize that some assessors write stories on their own, and we hope that some of our techniques are useful to them, as well.

My primary practice is in neuropsychological and personality assessment. Janet is a writer of both fiction and nonfiction, with background and education in English, drama, and business. You may well ask how we teamed up to create therapeutic stories for my assessment clients.

JB Allyn

Journal entry, January 2004: For the past five days I have tended my dear friend, Diane, who is convalescing from surgery. I, who contend daily with my own health challenges, am in the unaccustomed role of caregiver. Now, I lie exhausted on an amethyst pink couch in a small, lemon-colored room. A pink and green carved wool rug softens the floor. A furry pink flamingo winks at me from her perch on a glass table. I nod at her and say, "You're right – chocolate is always a good idea. And I'll bet Diane could use some, too."

Diane Engelman

On the last day that Janet took care of me after surgery, we had a conversation much like this:

DE: You know, some assessors use metaphorical stories as a part of their feedback and intervention. But by the time I'm done with an assessment, I'm done. I've sweat blood, and I've no energy left to convert the results into a story.

JB: (*hand in the air*) Hello? Your friend is a writer. Maybe we can do them together.

DE: You think?

JB: Yeah!

Diane Engelman

And so we spontaneously began to replicate, in a clinical setting, the organic collaboration between art and science taking place at many universities. Stanford, Yale, and Harvard are among those with programs that encourage this collaborative approach, in which art forms are used to expand, decipher, or simplify complex scientific information.

Both of us had read Rollo May's *The Courage to Create* years before, but we never thought of our collaboration as requiring what he describes as "creative courage." Our approach was simply one of meeting a need, solving a problem, with the skills jointly available to us. And as we worked together, we began to recognize the individual forms of creativity we each contributed.

JB Allyn

I am not certain that Diane felt creative in the way Dr. May described when he said, "Creativity must be seen in the work of the scientist as well as in that of the artist" (May, 1975, p. 38). But as she talked with me about her work - how she consolidates and integrates the results of testing and interviews and how she follows her intuition, as well, in selecting the mental health messages to include in our stories - I could see her creativity, as clearly as I see it in her glorious garden or her interactions with family and friends.

Diane Engelman

Janet's observations helped me to notice how my creative responses surfaced. In her case, I assumed that someone who worked in an artistic field like the theatre and who writes fiction would have a conscious sense of herself as being creative, but that wasn't so. I saw that, to her, it was less a description and more an action - a way of interacting with me and the material on which we base each story. Her creativity goes to work integrating fact with imagination, actively seeking ways in which to make a metaphorical construct believable in the client's experience.

How We Do What We Do

Diane Engelman

Through interview and inventories, I gather as much personal information as possible before testing. One questionnaire that Janet designed gives us insight into a client's interests - their

hobbies, favorite music, films, or books, and important people in their lives. Certain data, such as Rorschach percepts, combine with the inventories to help us write a story that speaks to the client's life and experience. For example, a percept of an angel with a torn wing provided a major image for one of our first stories. Finally, from the synthesis of all assessment findings, I extract specific mental health messages for the story.

JB Allyn

One of the ways that Diane's scientific creativity manifests is in deciding which two or three mental or cognitive health messages are most important to imbed in the story. We have found that loading-in too many messages overwhelms the reader and no single message has enough space to develop, so she must carefully select the ones we use.

Diane Engelman

In addition, like many of you, I believe it critical to give people hope, especially when wrestling with life-altering situations. Regardless how intense are the problem areas that show up in a person's assessment, I will also focus attention on his or her strengths when choosing the mental or cognitive health messages.

JB Allyn

While the main character in a story represents the client, he or she becomes fleshed out only through interaction with a mentor figure. The mentor plays the metaphorical role of the assessor or of the client's regular therapist, a source of wisdom and a sounding board for concerns. Together, we select a figure that the client respects and so will likely hear.

Most often the mentor is represented by a single character, though, in some cases, the role is divided between an apprentice and an older, wiser person. At times, the mentor may be a younger or older version of the client character, and on occasion, we have relied on historical persons. For example, one client was a distant relative of Clara Barton, the founder of the Red Cross. We placed the story in a Civil War re-enactment camp and gave the client character a chance to hear mental health messages from this respected relative.

Diane Engelman

Janet then puts all this data on the mental back burner and allows it to simmer, while she metaphorically "takes a walk and kicks the leaves." She processes the story and characters, awake and in dreams, until they evolve into a play, a fantasy, a mystery, or a contemporary experience. As it takes shape, she does brief research to lend detail and realism to the story's context.

A young woman's valued Irish ancestry led in the direction of Celtic mythology. In this story, the detail reflected ancient stories of fairy mounds and a magical island off the coast of Ireland. A young man's interest in filmmaking provided a story-within-a-story, in which he edits a documentary, and its characters begin to enact his life's challenges and strengths.

JB Allyn

Our next step is a Working Plan with three key sections. First, a generalized story flow, beginning to end, that leaves room for creative insights as the story is written. Second, a list of images, taken from the personal interests questionnaire and testing percepts. These may include colors, geographical locations, activities, animals, or persons. The third component is the list of mental or cognitive health messages. Diane reviews the Work Plan to assess how the combination of ingredients might land with the client.

Diane Engelman

Janet has never met the client and so is, in essence, writing blind. Since I know the person, my corrective ideas sometimes clarify important areas. On the other hand, Janet has an objectivity that at times supersedes my take on things. We are careful to support each other in this process, since the story's therapeutic value depends on our finely-tuned duet.

JB Allyn

Although I look to the Work Plan for guidance when drafting the story, the writing process is an actively creative one. Sometimes it is much like trying to drive several high-spirited horses. Not a team harnessed together, but a group of them, with each on its own lead and wanting to run off in its own direction. It is my job to keep them in balance, reining in the ones that throw off the thrust of the story or the messages. At the same time, I must remain open to surprises that will improve the story and its impact.

Diane Engelman

In the first draft, Janet highlights in bolded, parenthetical notes the personal information, percepts, and mental health messages; these bolded notes give me a road map as I read the draft. Most changes come after the first draft, though at times we may go through three or four drafts, fine-tuning specifics.

JB Allyn

Every story version carries a draft number – 1, 2, 3 – but none ever says “final” draft. This reinforces with clients that their personal stories are ever growing and changing. Diane makes it clear that any time they want to make changes to the story we have written to better reflect their life experience, we will do so. When she is ready to share it with them, I formalize it. I remove the bolded notes indicating messages and percepts, double space it for ease of reading, and add a short list of references at the end.

Diane Engelman

I present the story in different ways, depending on the client: I may read it aloud and the client listens; the client and I may take turns reading, especially in sections of dialogue; or the client may read it silently, while I give them privacy to do so. We then discuss parallels between the story and the client's situation and how the story may help them deal with their issues or how we may change the story to better reflect their reality. Collaborating with the client's regular therapist at the intervention stage has proved particularly valuable. For example, some therapists use the story therapeutically over the course of several months.

When Things Don't Go Smoothly

JB Allyn

But how do we cope when things do not go smoothly? When we began working together, we agreed that we did not want to harm our friendship in the process of writing the stories. We were careful to respect each other's territory and skills and to keep lines of communication open. But at that time, we didn't have a clear understanding of each other's working style, and it took us awhile to even see this as a challenge.

Diane Engelman

Imagine a house cat, who circles and circles and finally pounces on its prey. Even if that prey is only a fallen leaf, the cat has circled it enough that she knows it is the very leaf she wants. That cat is Janet. Now imagine a squirrel, gathering nuts for the winter and stashing it in her nest. Even after the nest is full, she keeps gathering more nuts and creating more places to stash them. The squirrel is me.

Janet circles a topic, gathers and assimilates the information she feels is relevant, and then, finally, sits down and writes a fairly complete draft. Changes come, of course, but the big work is done. I, on the other hand, employ the mode of attack, retreat, attack, retreat, and I can do that almost indefinitely. Potentially, this difference in styles could have sunk our partnership, but recognizing it and talking about it when it occurs has kept us moving along. A sense of humor helps, too, as reflected in this email from early in our partnership:

JB Allyn

Wait, wait, wait. You just gave me changes last night. This morning, I'm sitting down to integrate those changes and now you're giving me more changes? See, with both of us working on the same document, this will go smoothly only if I write something and give it to you; you make changes and send it back to me; I incorporate them, add my 2 cents, and return it to you. If you send me changes on top of changes, I'll get confused and panic and fall down in a heap. Don't you have something else you could be doing?

Diane Engelman

That last line has been said more than once over the years.

On occasion, we have collaborated with parents or therapists in the early draft stages of our stories, with mixed results. One difficulty with both has come from their inability, or unwillingness, to get back to us in a timely manner. In addition, some therapists have not seemed to recognize the therapeutic potential of working with the story.

Collaborating with parents brings another set of challenges born of the absolute conviction that they know their child inside and out. One mother felt strongly that the mentor in her adult child's story should be a Buddhist monk. Janet grounded our story in a myth in which a person admires a painting and suddenly finds himself in the scene. In our story, the client enters a painting, meets and receives mental health messages from the mentor, a monk, and comes back out of the painting. The client's reaction to the story was muted. When we talked about the mother having

suggested the mentor figure, the client said, “I don’t know why she’d suggest that. Our family is Catholic.”

JB Allyn

Then there were the parents who liked the idea of a story and told Diane that their young daughter responded enthusiastically to stories with strong heroines. When complete, they “loved” the story but wondered if we could make a *tiny* change to it.

DE: So, the parents feel that the scene where the heroine grabs the crow by the tail is too aggressive and could we do something else.

JB: Didn’t they say she likes “heroine saves the day” stories?

DE: They did.

JB: Well, when she grabs the crow’s tail, the crow has seized the fairy in his mouth and flown up into the tree. The little girl climbs the tree to save the fairy, and somehow she needs to take some action to get that crow to drop the fairy before he flies away with her. I’m not sure how she saves the day if she can’t grab his tail feathers.

DE: Maybe a butterfly net? Could she... wave it at the crow?

JB: He’d just fly away. I guess the crow might lose his balance and fall into the net - no, that’s too artificial. And in either case, he’d still have the fairy in his mouth and wind up having her for dinner!

DE: Are you OK? You sound angry.

JB: I’m not angry. I’m just trying to figure out how to get the stupid crow to drop the fairy.

Diane Engelman

And yet another type of challenge came with a teenage boy. His mother agreed that a story might speak to him and suggested that the story’s mentor be a real-life rock star, who had had drug and alcohol problems and then committed suicide. She said that her son would not hear the mental health messages if presented by a more “acceptable” messenger.

JB Allyn

We struggled with how to use a self-destructive individual as an avenue toward mental health. Finally, working very carefully, we did use the rock star as the mentor, never suggesting who it was until the end, and then not stating it absolutely. This unusual mentor figure framed the messages as things he wished he had done or not done with his life and then simply disappeared into the twilight.

Why We Write Therapeutic Stories

Diane Engelman

Why do we write these stories? Why do we go through this process for what is essentially an audience of one? The majority of the stories provide at least one piece of the intervention puzzle, and, at times, the parallels between a client's experience and aspects in the story resonate powerfully. A man, overwhelmed at the process of dealing with bipolar disorder, wept openly when he read his story. His mental health messages were delivered by his childhood athletic hero, a man long dead from cancer. A suicidal 81-year-old woman's story, in which she meets her 30-year-old self in meditation, opened up a deep dialogue about end-of-life issues and her own spirituality. And two stories, requested by non-assessment individuals, reflected their life struggles and hopes in ways that helped them feel both heard and seen.

But perhaps the best description of why we do what we do comes from Sue Monk Kidd's novel, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002):

JB Allyn

"You know, some things don't matter that much. Like the color of a house. How big is that in the overall scheme of life? But lifting a person's heart – now *that* matters.... 'I'll write this all down for you,' I said. 'I'll put it in a *story*.' I don't know if that's what he wanted to ask me, but it's something everybody wants – for someone to see the hurt done to them and set it down like it matters." (pp. 147 & 185)

References:

Kidd, S. M. (2002). *The Secret Life of Bees*. New York, NY: Viking Penguin

May, R. (1975). *The Courage to Create*. New York, NY: Bantam