

From *Heroic Clients, Heroic Agencies: Partners for Change*.
Barry Duncan and Jacqueline Sparks

Therapist as Novelist and/or Jazz Improviser

By Douglas Flemons

Every time we walk into the therapy room, our clients confront us with impossible situations and painful conundrums. No wonder, then, that so many of us retreat to the seeming safety of some form of recipe-focused therapy. Faced with the frightening uncertainty of not knowing in advance how to help, we grasp for the comfortable certainty of an algorithm—a step-by-step formula that tells you what you should do and when and how you should do it.

Trouble is, if you're following a pre-established course of action, you'll be more in tune with it than with your clients. To stay in relationship with *them*, you have to be prepared and willing to work moment by moment, responding to the unique unfolding particularities of each person and situation. If you commit to extemporaneous discovery, you'll decide where to go *next* based on how your clients are responding *now* to what you *just said*. Such a welcoming of uncertainty establishes the necessary conditions for you and your clients to experience the same kind of creative immediacy enjoyed by novelists and jazz musicians.

Ursula K. LeGuin (see Coventry, 1996) once described the process of writing fiction in terms that bear directly on the practice of therapy:

When I'm trying to control the story and make it do something, it doesn't work. When I quit trying, when I let the story tell me what it is, I get to a whole deeper level in my writing. Letting your work do itself this way requires, of course, an extremely intense, alert attitude. It's not passive; it's actively passive, passively active (p. 42).

You can similarly choose to adopt an intense, alert attitude and let your work with your clients unfold in an actively passive, passively active way, not trying to control the particulars of their experience, and not attempting to dictate in advance what will or should happen.

I'm not suggesting you should abandon or ignore a guiding set of therapeutic principles or practices. After all, as Le Guin or any jazz musician could tell you, freedom in the absence of form is nothing but chaos; spontaneous creativity involves the discovery of freedom *within* form. And besides, most of the best writers and jazz musicians are masters of both technique *and* theory. The trick is not letting your ideas or your approach get between you and your clients or between you and their problem.

Jazz, more than any other art form, invites and demands in-the-moment explorations of rule-bound freedom. Working within established musical parameters—modes, chord changes, melodic color tones, and time signatures—bonafide jazz musicians (not the perpetrators of the over-produced, synthesizer-enhanced, easy-listening syrup that is often marketed as “smooth jazz”) devote themselves to ongoing, challenging experimentation. But to pull it off, they need to stay in continual conversation with each other; only then can they achieve the high-wire exhilaration of improvisational interplay.

To work most effectively, we, too, must commit ourselves to collaborative spontaneity. I know of at least two hypnotherapists who tell their clients straight off to close their eyes, so they can read them a canned induction before moving on to one or more canned “therapeutic” metaphors or stories. And I know several brief therapists who ask the same set of canned questions in the same stereotyped way in the same order at about the same time in the session, regardless of who's sitting in front of them. How deadening!

Guided, but not restricted, by your model-specific parameters, you can discover on the fly where you and your clients are heading and how you and they are getting there. Instead of following a step-by-step recipe for achieving “positive results,” you follow *them*. This openness to not-quite-yet-knowing, this willingness and ability to continually adapt yourself to ever shifting contingencies and opportunities—this is the creative edge of novel-writing, jazz, *and* therapy.

Coventry M. (1996, Sept./Oct.). Quit pro quotes. *Utne Reader*, 42-44.