

The background of the book cover features a close-up photograph of several red poppies. Some are in full bloom, while others are still in the seed pod stage. The lighting is warm, creating a soft, golden glow. In the upper portion of the image, a green silhouette of a house with a chimney is visible against a lighter sky.

TALES FROM THE
THERAPY ROOM

Shrink-Wrapped

PHIL LAPWORTH



Tales from the Therapy Room

Praise for the book

These engaging, moving, informative, warm and surprising stories convey the key points in counselling and psychotherapy practice. Overall, a beautifully written book that should be a real asset to the counselling and psychotherapy literature.

Mick Cooper,
Professor of Counselling, University of Strathclyde

I've read each of these stories through several times, simply because to do so was a sheer delight. They are written with warmth and humour, and give a valuable insight into the world of therapy. Therapists regularly find themselves confronted with dilemmas and this book helps alert the reader to the importance – and everyday nature – of reflecting on these sorts of issues.

Mike Simmons,
University of Wales, Newport

The topics reflect aspects of our studies and give an insight into how these might be identified in real life. Anyone on a counselling course will be looking for a book such as this, to lighten up the heavy load of academic reading. It makes you think, as well as backing up your learning.

HNC Counselling & Psychotherapy student,
Anniesland College

As a student on a counselling course, I honestly thought this was the best book I have come across relating to therapy. The skills demonstrated by the counsellor were shown in short captivating stories that kept my attention throughout, meaning that I picked up more than I had in course handouts or from the reading list textbooks.

HNC Counselling & Psychotherapy student,
Anniesland College

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Shrink-Wrapped

Phil Lapworth



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

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To Leo and Laurie

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Introduction

Tales from the Therapy Room is a collection of 10 fictional short stories exploring aspects of the process of therapeutic work and the client–therapist relationship from the viewpoint of the therapist. The reader is invited into the therapist’s experience and ways of working and given a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ view of the therapeutic endeavour. These tales aim both to entertain and to provide a door into the often-hidden perspective of what a therapist might think and feel within (and without) the therapy sessions.

This is not intended as a guidebook on how to do therapy. The stories depict one therapist’s integrative way of working with a variety of clients, the experience he has, the thinking he does and the decisions he makes in his attempt to facilitate his clients’ desire to understand themselves and bring about change through this unusual and unique relationship. I do not want to suggest a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ approach to therapy but rather provide a starting point to explore a range of possibilities by presenting entertaining, vivid and thought-provoking descriptions of the vicissitudes of the therapeutic journey. Issues such as contracting, boundaries, confrontation, self-disclosure on the part of the therapist, dream interpretation, the influence of the consulting-room environment and conflicting belief systems are explored and challenged, providing the reader with a rich resource for their own thinking and discussion. In the light of today’s political climate surrounding

regulation of the psychological therapies, perhaps the stories might serve to illustrate the inappropriateness (and impossibility) of a one-size-fits-all, tick-box approach to working with people in distress.

I hope these stories will have particular interest for students nearing the end of their training and wishing to engage with the realities and the potential experiences of practising counselling and psychotherapy. To this end the stories may be used as course material to provide a springboard for reflection, critical thinking and discussion.

I hope also that they will appeal to experienced practitioners, who may recognize and resonate with the issues and dilemmas faced by the therapist (and perhaps be reassured by them). The stories also present the practitioner with the challenge of therapeutic conundrums outside their experience with which to engage critically. As material for the therapy reading groups that are currently proliferating (as part of Continuing Professional Development), I trust these stories will provide a wide range of themes and issues for discussion and debate. Equally, the stories may be read simply for pleasure and enjoyment, whether the reader is involved in the field of counselling and psychotherapy or not. The language does not discriminate against the layperson's understanding and enjoyment of the stories simply as stories.

My intention in writing these tales was to delve into to the heart of the therapeutic encounter – the meeting of two people in a room to form a relationship with the endeavour of experiencing and understanding what it is to be human and, in so doing, bringing about change, specifically in the client, but inevitably also in the therapist. Though the stories must have their thematic origins somewhere in my actual experience as a therapist, any similarity to real clients is entirely unintentional. I have deliberately chosen to keep all the stories and the characters who inhabit them fictional. This has allowed me the poetic licence to take the stories where I thought they should go – though, in some instances, they seemed to take themselves (often to places I would have preferred they hadn't) – to explore specific themes and to consider various issues in the restricted, and therefore concentrated, space of the short

story. Interestingly, despite writing in the first person, by the time I had written three or four of these stories I realized that the person of the therapist is partly fictitious too. I began to see him in my mind's eye as a few years older, more formally dressed and somewhat stouter than me (though I am gaining on him in this latter respect). I suddenly found him wearing a suit (which I wear only for weddings and funerals). I can only imagine that this separation of the writer from the character occurred outside my awareness to allow me a freer rein with the therapist too.

In the final chapter, following the 10 stories, I consider some of the themes and issues raised by them – in particular, drawing attention to the key challenges and providing some theoretical considerations. Under each story title, I invite the reader, whether student or practitioner, to consider from their own theoretical perspective what their particular approach to these issues might be. I provide questions to assist these considerations and discussions. Where appropriate, I suggest further reading to explore these issues in more detail and refer to textbooks on specific theoretical and technical aspects in which the reader may be interested. These discussion points and questions will hopefully allow the 'lay' reader also a glimpse into the theoretical thinking of a therapist.

I hope you enjoy the stories simply as stories that focus on the overall experience of the nature and culture of counselling and psychotherapy. At the same time, I hope you find them useful as starting points for considering your own theoretical perspective and practice. So, as you read through each of them, I encourage you to identify how you as the therapist might have responded to these clients and their issues, how you might have conceptualized the work and what you would have done differently – and why.

The Carving

Like most psychotherapists, I work in a room intentionally neutral in its décor and furnishings to allow my clients and their therapeutic relationship with me to be as unencumbered by extraneous intrusion or distraction as is possible. Family photographs and personal memorabilia have no place here, but to distinguish the room from a prison cell or a medical clinic, it does have bookshelves (admittedly housing only psychotherapy books), comfortable sofas, low tables, even a bowl of dried gourds – all of which must give away something of my stylistic tastes and preferences and say something about me, though limited to the confines of the consulting room. Equally, my choice of clothes, shoes, even the boxes of tissues I provide or my appointments diary must evoke some associations for my clients that might usefully be explored at some point in our work. Unlike more classical, psychoanalytic therapists, I'm not attempting to be a 'blank screen' or a 'non person' but to provide a fairly neutral and mutual exploratory space, the room as background to our relationship and our work together.

Recently, however, a wood-carver friend of mine gave me one of his carvings that I had coveted for some time but couldn't afford to buy. He entitled this generous gift, 'Tree in Wood from Tree'. It's an old, elm chair-seat through which have been carved three circles, two side by side above a larger one. Inside of these, the trunk and branches of a miniature tree have been 'exposed'. I use this word purposely as the carver's skill and artistry lies in the fact that the

wood is all of a piece and the delicate, intricate branches within the holes have all been painstakingly created solely by carving from the chair seat – no insertions, no glue, just the removal of wood. I fell in love with it on first viewing and immediately made an association to the process of therapy – the painstaking uncovering, the exploration, the clearing away – to rediscover the unadulterated self hidden in the life-adapted person we all become. The young tree exposed in the old wood symbolized, for me, the potential of that original, unspoilt self still to be found (and reclaimed) within the ageing, and also to be treasured, adult through the process of psychotherapy. Its place in my therapy room was inevitable. There was even a wall, shared by the ends of the adjacent sofas but peripheral to my and my clients' view, that had a space just waiting to be filled.

For several weeks after hanging, the wooden carving appeared to have only singular influence. As clients arrived for their sessions, *I* was acutely aware of the brown square on the wall, like a vague shadow on the periphery of my vision, but none of my clients seemed to notice it, let alone remark on it as I had assumed they might. Quite rightly, of course, they were involved with themselves, with their own issues. They were drawn into their inner life, their past and present and projected worlds. A piece of wood on a wall was not their focus. I tried not to make it mine but I must admit it took some weeks before I got accustomed to its presence and could lessen its visual distraction.

Olive was the first to be affected by it – but only indirectly. She didn't seem to notice the carving at all. Instead, as she came into the room, she looked at the bookshelves and remarked, 'Oh, you've brought your books in here. It feels much more like a study now.' (This from someone who had sat in this room on a weekly basis for three years and had often stared at the bookshelves for long periods of time.) I can only surmise that the carving had made a visual, if indistinct, impression on her and that this had registered in her mind as 'there's something different in this room'. Quite why she thought it was the books was not immediately clear to

me but she sat down still looking at them in a rather perplexed and anxious way.

‘Does the room being more like a study have a particular meaning for you?’ I asked, remembering that her father had been a vicar and that she had spent her early childhood living in a large manse. She had not talked much about him in all the time we had worked together, despite my prompting. Her depressed and narcissistic mother had monopolized Olive’s focus in therapy as much as in life.

‘It reminds me ...,’ she began, but halted with trembling lips. Breathing deeply, she looked away from the books and into my eyes. ‘It reminds me of things ... things to do with my father. I feel your books have given me permission to talk about him now. He was a dear man but ...’

And so a new and important phase of our work began.

Jack, in his mid-seventies, my oldest client at that time, was the first to notice and remark upon the carving directly but his association was very unexpected.

‘We had those when I was a child,’ he remarked as he leant a little in the direction of the carving, squeezing his eyes to narrow slits the better to see.

‘Did you Jack?’ I asked, assuming he meant that the wooden seat was familiar to him from his childhood home. ‘Where was that?’

‘Oh, that would be in Leicester,’ he replied after a moment’s reflection. ‘We kept them under the stairs.’

‘Last week you referred to your mother’s proclivity for “keeping things for best”’ I said. ‘Was that why the chairs were under the stairs?’

Jack looked puzzled. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘The wooden chairs, like the seat on the wall?’

‘Seat on the ...’ He petered out, a look of bewilderment on his face.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I wonder if we’re talking at cross-purposes. I was assuming the wooden seat reminded you of chairs in your childhood home.’

‘Chairs?’ queried Jack. ‘Who said anything about chairs? I’m talking about gas masks, you know, during the war?’

‘I see,’ I dissembled, not seeing at all. I glanced to the side to see what I was missing but saw only the carving, the tree within the wooden seat. ‘Is that what the carving reminds you of?’

‘Isn’t that what it’s meant to be?’ he asked somewhat incredulously, an incredulity that was mutual in that moment (after all, why would I have a gas mask on the wall?). There was only one way to solve this puzzle.

‘Can I come and sit next to you?’ I asked on impulse, wanting to see what he was seeing. He readily agreed and I moved to sit at his side and looked directly at the carving. The winter sun was at such an angle that from Jack’s position the intricacies of the tree, its trunk and branches, were in shadow and unclear. The three holes gaped dark and starkly within the seat. I could see clearly the two round eyes of the goggles above the larger mouthpiece where the canister of charcoal would have been. Though obvious now, it would never have occurred to me to see a gas mask unprompted. It was now hard not to see it.

Jack gently reached across and patted my hand, ‘Before your time, young man,’ he chuckled.

‘Only just,’ I protested. ‘But it’s a very big “just” isn’t it? Your wartime childhood must have been very different from mine.’

‘I’ll tell you about it. You probably need to know,’ said Jack.

I couldn’t tell if he meant for my own benefit as a comparatively lucky post-war baby or for my professional knowledge in order to help him. Either way, I looked forward to hearing of his experiences, including what it must have been like in those threatening times to have gas masks hanging ready under the stairs. However, I realize now, I never did discover why he thought I might decorate my wall with a gas mask, carving or not.

As it happened, the mask theme continued when I was working with Deborah, a young and successful actor now training as a psychotherapist who came to therapy as part of her training. She was not, like some students I’ve worked with, simply clocking up the required hours. She was a dedicated client, keen to explore