

## **Therapeutic IFS Stories** *Jan Mullen*

At the heart of IFS is a narrative therapy process. Wounded parts are brought back from their exile and are finally able to tell their stories to the compassionate Self. It is in the telling and the witnessing of these stories that healing takes place. The narratives of our lives form the cohesive experience of our identity. There is another use of narrative for healing, and that is the therapeutic story. These stories may be culled from our lives or the reality of the world around us. Or they may be fiction—myths, classic tales, or stories written specifically to heal a particular issue. A landmark book in this category is Nancy Davis' *Therapeutic Stories to Heal Abused Children*. The value of therapeutic stories is undeniable. The story form helps manager parts to listen more openly to an idea, a truth, a solution without the usual skepticism and guardedness. These stories are meant to be told. Other stories are written to be read, but storytelling is the art and process of the spoken word. If, as Steve de Shazer writes, words were originally magic, the magic here is not just in the words but the energetic connection that flows between the teller and the receiver. If told or read to a child, an adult or a family by their therapist, a story can feel soothing and nurturing as well as challenging.

Sometimes clients may be invited to become part of the story by helping to embellish or create the ending they want to hear, evoking their creative energy. Here are some examples of very short stories told from everyday life, which I use to help parts deal with specific issues.

When a client encounters a part which is afraid to allow change, because it won't know what to do if it gives up its old role, I offer an analogy such as this: I had a bag of flower bulbs in my garage. Before I got around to planting them, they began to sprout. Because they were in the bag, with little light, the sprouts grew all twisted, without direction. When they were planted in a nice pot of rich earth, they began to unfold and reach for the light. They became straight, tall and full, a deep rich green, and were beautiful. They naturally knew what to do. This is the way it is with parts. When we give them the chance to come out of where they were stuck, like that dark dry old bag, and put them in the light, they just know what they were naturally meant to be.

When a client has a part which is blending with the Self and needs reassurance that it is ok to trust the Self, I might share the following analogy. Lifeguards are taught a special way to save a drowning person, and this is why: when a person is drowning, they are feeling panic and not able to think clearly. When they see the lifeguard coming, they just want to hang on for life. Unfortunately, if they do this, they will hamper the lifeguard and they may both go down. So, the lifeguard is taught a special hold, keeping the person being rescued on their back, so that they can't grip onto the lifeguard and disable them. They tell the person to trust them, and not to hang on. Then, they are able to swim and also hold onto the person, bringing them to safety. Well, it's the same thing with this part. It wants desperately to be helped, and doesn't realize that by hanging on to you so tightly, it is actually preventing you from helping it. Can you ask the part if it could relax just enough to let you help?

When a client has a firefighter part that keeps the Self away from painful reality by fantasizing, I sometimes share this story, “The Horse Story,” which was told to me by the mother of a young client: “Sherry” was a 10 year old adopted child; she had a difficult early childhood in which she had learned to escape through fantasy. She kept telling her (adoptive) parents that she loved horses, so one day they asked her if she would like riding lessons. She eagerly said she would. The day of the first lesson came, in which the children would be introduced to caring for the horses. Her parents dropped her off for the lesson, and when they returned to pick her up they were told by the instructor that she had spent the entire time cowering in a corner and wouldn’t go near the horses. The parents, alarmed, asked Sherry what was wrong. Sherry said, “In my mind, I was already able to ride well, I could see myself riding bareback, like the wind. But when I saw the real horse, I realized it wasn’t really true, I can’t really ride at all.” The sad part of this story is, because Sherry couldn’t accept that she didn’t know how to ride, she refused to try, even though she loved horses. So, I want this part of you that uses fantasy to know that it isn’t really helping you to learn what you need to be truly happy.

The messages stories carry can send healing to the depths of our inmost being and hope to our exiles. Because of their potential power, stories must be chosen carefully. The following story has been adapted to incorporate IFS theory. It is powerful “medicine”—administer with care.

**THE GOOD FAIRY** (*Adapted by Jan Mullen from a report by Tara Brach of a client, “Rosalie” encountering a guide in session*)

From the corners where the silence remains, there came the urgency to go to a mountain top and scream out the whole truth. I sent out a prayer to God, to the universe—“It’s too painful, I can’t take it!”—and she came to me, the power of my mind, the energy of the universe, an angel of God in blue, like the Good Fairy in the Wizard of Oz, waving a wand. I sat cross-legged on the floor of my bedroom, looking up, about 8 years old. She said, “Sweetheart, here’s the deal. There’s too much going on here and I don’t have the power to make it be gone, to make it be okay, or even to help you cope with it in a way that’s not going to cause you some pain. What I can do, Sweetheart, is help you get through this time now, help you get through it as it is going on. It will come back, but it will come back to you only at a later time, when you’re able to handle it and there will be someone to help you.” So I said, “Okay, because I can’t take it anymore.”

She waved her wand and said: “I am going to send things that are happening into different parts of your body, and your body will hold them for you like a treasure chest, like a time capsule. Your heart, your heart is broken and I’m going to have to let your rib cage close in around your heart and let your heart constrict so that you don’t feel the pain of your heart breaking. And I’m going to really tighten up your neck and let it be a fortress with very thick round walls, so that what you are feeling doesn’t get up to your mouth, and you can’t speak the words. You can’t cry out for help and can’t scream out in rage. And you can’t breathe too deeply to feel what’s going on in your body. And that fortress will keep the knowledge of what’s happening in your body from connecting with

your head, so that you will not be fully conscious of what's going on. And I will tie up your ears, so that you hear but don't take too much in."

"And this is what I will do with your mind. It will store the truth in a deep place, sealed away behind steel doors of fear. But it will, for now, help you to live with, accept and believe the lies you are told, that you deserve this and that this is the way your life has to be."

"I want you to be fairly still as a child and rather shy, so we don't interrupt what we're going to put very carefully in place. And it will stay this way. You will have trouble feeling and being close to people, but it will be your way of surviving. And you, my darling, will be a very functional human being in spite of all this pain, because you have a strong spirit and can hold all this in. And I will be helping you." "You will not forget everything. You will be visited by vague discontents, questions, or flashes of images that will lead you, like markers on a path, to explore what happened. And I will leave a voice inside of you, like a spark of light, that will urge you to reconnect with your whole self, to find this person you are now, who is calling out for help and whose heart is utterly breaking. It may not be clear, this voice! It will manifest as an urge inside of you but it will be your lost self speaking as it can through your aching body to come back and find yourself."

"When the time is right, you will begin to open up. It will be a very long process. It may take as long to heal as you've been in pain and in the frozen place. Finally, your body will no longer be able to hold all this in. Your muscles will begin to give way, you will feel an urgency to do physical healing, and that will begin the process of really unwinding your body and releasing what it will have been holding all these years. There will be physical as well as emotional pain in the process. But by then you will be strong enough, safe enough and old enough to bear the truth and you will have a special friend, who will be the grownup you, who will hold you as no one else can, as you find yourself again."

"As all this begins to unwind, you will struggle to release your mind from the falsehoods it had learned so you could survive, and the doors of fear barring it from the truth. The mind may at first believe that only the person who gave you this pain has the power to take it away, and there will need to be a period of building trust that this is not true. You will struggle to release the flow between the mind and body and come back together wholly. But you will do it, because you are a capable person with a heart yearning to love. I don't know exactly how it will unfold, but the universe will move you through it. You will have to be very patient, very brave, very courageous, but it will be your training, your fire walk, your healing. And when you are through it, you will be a whole person: new but still the same."

"Now I want you to go to bed. I will wave my wand and you will go to sleep, and when you wake up, you will forget I was here. You will forget you asked for help and you will not feel your daily pain. This is the only way I know to get you through this. You are a beautiful child. I don't know the reasons this terrible burden came to you but I love you

and God loves you. You will have to love yourself enough to heal, so that the rest of your life will be lived to its fullest, full of light. The memory of pain will still be there, but it will be in perspective. One day you will be whole again. Until then and for always, I love you.”

### **SOME RESOURCES ON STORYTELLING AND GUIDED IMAGERY**

These resources, primarily aimed at chronological children, are also good for adults and child parts. Bruchac, Joseph. (1977) *Tell Me a Tale*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company. Davis, Nancy. *Therapeutic Stories to Heal Abused Children*. Estes, Clarissa Pinkola (1992) *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. New York: Ballantine Books. *The Best of Self to Self, Volume 2* 35 Garth, Maureen. (1991) *Starbright: Meditations for Children*. San Francisco: Harper. Johnston, Anita (1996) *Eating in the Light of the Moon*. Carlsbad, CA: Gurze Books. Healing stories for women with disordered eating. Kindig, Eileen Silva.(1997) *Remember the Time? The Power and Promise of Family Storytelling*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. Moore, Robin. *Creating a Family Storytelling Tradition: Awakening the Hidden Storyteller*. Nichols, Melissa, Lacher, Denise and May, Joanne. *Parenting with Stories*. Pappas, Michael G. (1982) *Sweet Dreams for Little Ones: Bedtime Fantasies to Build Self-Esteem*. San Francisco: Harper. Seeger, Pete & Jacobs, Paul DuBois. (2000) *Pete Seeger's Storytelling Book*. New York: Harcourt, Inc

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