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Celebrating story and the simple art of 'being with'

By Jilly Rowland

Today one of my clients gave me a story to read, a story she had written and had drawn out at a previous session to further explore its meaning to her. My client had been coming to me for about nine months before she shared with me that she had always had a dream to be a writer. This dream had been submerged over the years by the many situations in her life and she still felt now that she had no space or energy to write whilst she was so burdened. I offered to her that maybe her writing could be the very thing to help in her situation and from that conversation, a short story was birthed.

And so, what makes me want to share this story? Well, I began my working life as a nurse and then became a midwife, and worked as one for 14 years. Think 'Call the Midwife' or more currently, 'The Red Tent' or, if you are a mother, recall for a moment your labour and birth experiences. Who was the person who helped you through, who stayed with you through that toil and pain? The name midwife or doula originates right back to biblical times and meant 'being with woman'. The midwife is a crucial figure, the one who stays with and quietly



facilitates or helps or intervenes. I loved the privilege of that role and the bond of being with a woman in labour and being with her through her travail to the excitement (and sometimes trauma) of the birth and of a new life. What an honour and an experience that was.

When I became a counsellor, I was struck by the likenesses between midwifery and counselling. I pondered how the labour and birth were often long, sometimes difficult, bloody and nearly always painful. But, at the journey's end, birth gives way to new life. Is that not often similar to the counselling journey? I have been practising counselling now for 15 years and since 2008 have built up a private practice where I see many clients who come with a whole variety of issues and problems and, like many of us in this work, I increasingly encounter more tragic trauma stories and share with courageous souls as they battle through their issues to ultimately birth a calmer place within themselves, and a new life.

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So, why the story? I think I was so taken with the simple truth of this story, speaking something of the role of the counsellor when they just comes alongside, like the mid-wife, and 'travels with'. They join the client week by week as they journey through their struggle, their pain and their trauma. They choose to face with them the uncertainties, the not knowing, the hopelessness, the exhaustion, etc..... But over and above all they 'stay with'. As we continue to learn as counsellors and fill our heads with the right ways to deal with complex trauma or the latest counselling model, appropriately attending study days, learning more theory to enhance and inform our practice, this beautiful story struck me with the simple reminder that often the biggest thing we do or give to our clients is to 'be with' them as they journey. I share below a shortened version with permission from my client for your enjoyment and for your encouragement, as we work on, learning and growing, developing our skills and knowledge, but essentially and fundamentally, at the end of the day, just 'being with' our clients. Enjoy!

The Little Pink Tortoise

How did Little Pink Tortoise come to be in a deep dark forest with snow falling around her? She did not belong here. She was made for blue skies, for sun and sand, gentle breezes and luxuriant flowers and foliage. Here were only towering pine trees, dark trunks and branches masking what was, at best, a watery sun and at other times a continually glowering sky. She longed for light and to feel warmth on her shell and her sturdy legs. The only benefit of the trees was that they prevented the snow falling too deeply around her, though there were times when it was very hard going, and the cold entered her shell and made her long to withdraw her limbs and neck and just stay where she was.

Little Pink Tortoise knew that would not do! She didn't want to stay here, lost in the wood, frozen in her own body. She was made for a different place. She didn't know where it was, or how to get there but she was certain that she did not want to stay here in the darkness of looming trees and their shadows. So, she would continue on this path, just discernible from her low height, and put one foot in front of the other, until she came to the forest's edge, because it could not last forever, this cold dark place. It had to end. And then there would be change – sun, warmth and light...

The journey continued along the weary path... until...

The path began a steady gradient upward. Occasionally the sun burst through and she heard birds singing or saw the tail of a squirrel disappear around a tree trunk. She sensed rather than saw other creatures in the woods, larger than herself. Was that a branch moving in the wind or the antler of a deer? It was hard to tell being so low on the ground. Clambering over a particularly stony stretch of path she found herself walking through a glade where a bird sat on a fallen tree trunk, where a hole made a perfect hideaway. Putting her head on one side the bird looked at Little Pink Tortoise kindly and said, 'And how are you?' Before she realised it, Little Pink Tortoise was telling Bird all about finding herself in

the dark forest, wanting to get out but not being sure if that was possible. It seemed the forest was endless. She told her she hoped to be able to find a place high up where she could see above the trees and find a way out, a way to a warmer, sunnier place where she would be at home. Little Pink Tortoise said, 'This isn't home. I come from a place of sun and brightness, I think...' Suddenly she found herself wondering, 'Do I? Is this really true? Perhaps I was misled or mistaken. Perhaps this is where I belong.' Bird looked at her and chirruped, 'There are definitely ways out of this forest, and you have done really well to get here. Why don't you rest a while before heading on your way?' Little Pink Tortoise was glad to accept her invitation and continued to tell Bird about her journey and her fears. It was a sheltered glade, protected from wind and harsh weather, and after an hour Little Pink Tortoise felt ready to continue with her journey. 'I'll see you again!' said Bird. 'Look out for me from time to time' and Little Pink Tortoise moved out of the glade and clambered along the path between the trees with new energy. It was good to think about meeting Bird again but as the day continued and the forest grew darker her fears and doubts began to settle on her like heavy weights. Bird had told her there were ways out of the trees – but how would she find one?

Her journey continued...

One day Little Pink Tortoise came to a cave by the path. It showed signs of occupation – but it looked more like a workplace than a home. There was a bench with tools on it, an overall hung on a makeshift hook and there were boxes at the back, wooden boxes all labelled appearing to contain equipment. As she looked, she saw a low stone beneath the bench and on the top of it was something that caught her interest. As she moved nearer, Little Pink Tortoise could see that there was a clock – a clock with a kind face – and a scroll of paper. Her heart thumped as she reached the stone. She knew, she just knew, that this was for her. How, she could not put into words, but she was certain that the keeper of the cave had left it just for her. Carefully she unrolled the scroll and saw that it contained a map. But as she looked at it, she realised that it showed only where she was now and a small area around the cave. There was no long-term guidance here, only encouragement that she was on the right path and that the keeper of the cave knew where she was.

As she mused on this a friendly chirrup nearby caught her attention. Bird! Bird was at home around the cave and glad to see Little Pink Tortoise, who began to show her the map. Bird's bright eyes gleamed. 'And what about the clock?' she said. Little Pink Tortoise looked hard at it. From the height of the sun she could see that the time it told was correct. The hands moved smoothly and somehow reassuringly. 'I think the clock is telling me that I have time,' she said. 'In fact, I have all the time I need for this journey...' Bird nodded and chirruped reassuringly.

And much later...

The Little Pink Tortoise did move on. The clock and the map stayed where they were but the memory of them travelled with her, along the track, onward and upward and into whatever came next. Refreshed and encouraged at making slow but consistent progress, she one day said goodbye to Bird and continued the final part of her journey alone.

THE END.

Jilly Rowland

Following 20 years of working in the NHS as a Nurse then Midwife, I trained as a Counsellor. 16 years down the line, I am now a Counsellor & Supervisor with my own Private Practice working full-time in the lovely area of Bournemouth, Dorset. The article attached was inspired by a client I was working with who was wanting to return to creative writing after some years absence. Her lovely story came out of our work together and led to my reflecting on my experiences across both my career paths.

