Macabre Metaphors

James Lawley and Keith Fail

"And what would you like to have happen now?"

"I want to go back down the hole and pick up the dead bodies there."

Bob's affect was at once intense and sounded deeply sorrowful.

Stop for a moment and consider: If you were facilitating Bob in a change-work session, what would you do next?

This article describes a way of working with clients whose behaviour and language can unsettle even experienced therapists and coaches. It includes an examination of a client transcript to illustrate the process in practice.

Bob has a big physical presence and a huge range of affect – one minute yawning, the next loud and angry, the next deeply sorrowful. He had long suffered with trauma-induced habits of unproductive thoughts and behaviour. The macabre nature of his metaphors overwhelmed and confused several of the participants at the first training of Symbolic Modelling and Clean Language in Austin, Texas taught by Penny Tompkins and James Lawley.

The above quote is how Bob started when I (Keith) was his facilitator on that training. In other circumstances I probably would have asked Bob to consider the different "parts" of himself that were being expressed in his frequent changes of physiology (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000). This use of a parts model might have led to an integration, but I have my doubts since Bob is trained in NLP and has had many hours of coaching and therapeutic work that have not been successful at integrating those parts.

Clean Language

Clean Language is one of the enduring contributions of David Grove, a New Zealand psychotherapist known for his creativity and effectiveness when working with clients who have suffered severe trauma. Grove devised a method that took Milton Erickson's injunction against imposing the therapist's theories on the client even further than

Erickson did (Grove & Panzer, 1989). To do this he developed a small set of questions that featured the client's exact content. These questions facilitate clients' abilities to consider the interior landscape of their personal metaphors in a concentrated way. These clean questions reveal the deep structure of each client's idiosyncratic model of the world and help the client to self reflect on previously subconscious patterns that repeat in undesired ways.

Symbolic Modelling

In the mid 1990s Penny Tompkins and James Lawley used NLP modelling processes to study Grove's therapeutic method. They called their meta-model of the way he questioned his clients Symbolic Modelling (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000). With the guidance of a coach or therapist, clients self-model their interior metaphoric landscape with minimal imposition of content from the facilitator. This encourages a self-reflexive process that leads to self-correcting insights and changes. Instead of using a facilitator-led change technique, the direction of a Symbolic Modelling session emerges from the logic of the client's metaphors. Facilitators aim not to change anything. Rather they encourage conditions whereby spontaneous changes occur, and then they follow the effects of those changes. Sometimes these lead to cul-de-sacs revealing what does not work, at other times a contagion of effects leads to a transformative experience.

When a client's troubled experiences interrupt their natural drive to express themselves it is common for them to rebel against change-work and any imposition from the outside of how they 'ought' to respond – even while they despise the behaviors that they themselves have been expressing. Their troubled experiences have successfully protected them up until this point and while they desperately want to improve their lives, they don't want to risk changing. They are caught in a "better the devil you know" trap. While from the outside this kind of behavior can seem like "resistance" or "self sabotage", a modeller regards it as just another example of the person's patterns revealing themselves in that moment.

Symbolic Modelling is tailor-made for these tough cases since it leaves all the responsibility for introspection, insight, discovery and change in the client's hands. The facilitator stays out of the center of the client's awareness so that the client can focus attention on self and how he or she relates to his or her idiosyncratic model of the world.

What is a macabre metaphor?

Something is macabre when it is "disturbing and horrifying because of involvement with or depiction of death and injury". The same definition sometimes holds for coaching or therapy clients' metaphors – but who is being disturbed or horrified? While it can be the client or an aspect of their psyche, often clients are less disturbed by their metaphors than is the facilitator. Clients have often had many years to get used to their own troubling symbolic images, sounds, feelings and accompanying reactions – whereas for the facilitator it is the shock of the new.

David Grove said that "clean" facilitators should be "equal information employers". By this he meant that facilitators should not favour one kind of information, nor side with one metaphor over another. Clean facilitators take care not to give minimal cues that encourage apparently "positive" metaphors to overcome apparently "negative" ones. On the other hand, they do take note of whether the client regards a particular symbol or metaphor as problematic or resourceful (Tompkins & Lawley, 2012).

Perhaps the most important reason to be an equal information employer is because you never know when a dark and horrifying symbol will become or contain just the resource the client needs – and neither does the client. In David Grove's video, Tapestry (1989), the client reports an "achy pain that I have in my ankle and foot that spreads up into my leg [for] fifteen or twenty years". During the session a "sharp, dark needle" appears that "could hurt. It could do a lot of damage". David follows the intention of the needle that likes to "tear flesh on the outside and the inside" until it wants to stop. Having enacted its intention by tearing the flesh on the client's metaphorical arm, the needle transforms into a sewing needle that creates a "multicolored tapestry" that is wrapped around the painful ankle like an "orthopedic stocking".

In a follow-up four months later the client revealed that she no longer felt ashamed of the scar on her left foot – which had been caused by scalding water while she was overdosing on heroin: "I no longer hate the differences between my feet". Since her left foot is now "more interesting" and she is "just kind of accepting what it is, and even enjoying it" she doesn't need to cover up the scar and has bought sandals which "really show my foot". A macabre flesh-tearing needle becomes a redemptive metaphor. How? Nobody – not even the client – knows, but in her own words, the process "allowed the needle to heal that part of myself".

Maintaining a neutral perspective

To maintain a neutral perspective when working with 'bizarre' metaphors is hard enough, but when a metaphor appears abusive or destructive and the facilitator feels his or her stomach turn, it can be especially challenging. When the facilitator experiences a strong visceral reaction the tendency to avoid the macabre aspects of a client's psyche or worse, to treat them with disdain, is understandable. However, clean facilitators need to acknowledge and temporarily set aside their personal reactions and continue to attend to what is happening for the client. The structure and simplicity of Clean Language is helpful in this regard since it requires a high degree of outward attention and little cognitive effort is required to ask a clean question. We are not advocating facilitators ignore their own responses; rather we maintain that the ability to set them aside is a useful skill, especially at those moments when a client's metaphors become psychoactive for the facilitator! (Lawley, 2006)

Clean Language helps facilitators stay neutral on the outside even when they are struggling with their own reactions on the inside. While novice facilitators may encounter these challenges more frequently, even those with extensive experience are not immune. After more than 20 years of working with some of the most heart- and gut-wrenching client material, David Grove still occasionally had what he called his "white knuckle moments".

I (James) have had my own white knuckle moments. I recall a client who in the middle of a session sat bolt upright on the edge of his chair, looked deep into my eyes and said in a powerful voice "I feel like a samurai warrior". He raised his hands above his head as if holding a sword and brought them down in a scything motion over my head, saying "And I'd like to cut you in half." I'm sure I gulped as I was catapulted back to a real-life memory of when I had a gun pulled on me. My insides turned to ice. However, I managed to stay with the process and respond, "And when you cut me in half [pause] then ... what ... happens?" To my relief the client went straight back into his previous metaphor landscape and carried on as if nothing untoward had happened. I regained my composure and the session continued. Later the samurai warrior played a key role in the client's transformation.

Transcript of Bob's session

The following took place on the third day of a training in Symbolic Modelling Lite and the Clean Language of David Grove (Lawley & Tompkins, 2011). In a previous 20-minute

session Bob (B) the participant-client had described a number of macabre and disturbing metaphors. The participant-facilitator of that session did well to stay with the process but by the end was visibly shaken. Keith stepped in to the facilitator role (K) for the second 30-minute session. He had not observed the first session.

As part of the learning format Keith was being supervised by James and coached-in-the-moment (Tompkins & Lawley, 2007). James provided immediate feedback and supported Keith to keep the client's attention on the most salient aspects of his metaphor landscape. The transcript contains the exact words of the client. To make it easier to follow we have removed James' in-the-moment coaching comments to Keith, some repetitive exchanges, and tidied up a few of the questions. All facilitator-introduced words have been italicized to highlight the syntax and form of clean questions. The comments interspersed among the transcript are James Lawley's subsequent explication of the facilitation process.

Bob recapped his first session and in response to being asked what he would like to have happen *now*, he yawned deeply and said:

B: I want to go back down the hole and pick up the dead bodies there.

K: *And* you want to go back down the hole and pick up the dead bodies there. *And when you* go down the hole and pick up the dead bodies there, *what kind of* down *is that* down?

B: All the way down. [Several deep yawns]

K: *And is there anything else about* all the way down?

B: Ummm, Ummm, Ummm, all the way down is [deep yawn], maybe has something to do with sleeping or yawning.

K: *And where is* the hole?

B: It might be in my heart, a big hole in my heart.

K: *And* it might be a big hole in your heart. *And when that* hole in your heart, *what kind of* hole *is that* hole in your heart?

B: Ummm, Ummm, Ummm, deep, deep, deep, it hurts. Dark, there's too many dead bodies down there.

Keith works entirely within the client's symbolic world. He honors the client's metaphors by using the client's exact words and a few very simple clean questions. Keith adopts a

neutral yet curious tonality, accepting whatever the client describes. In so doing he is facilitating Bob to portray, elaborate and embody a perception of his (Bob's) current metaphorical reality.

Keith follows the client's logic until the "too" of "too many dead bodies down there" suggests Bob's original desired Outcome has run into a Problem. Keith is using the Problem-Remedy-Outcome (PRO) model (Tompkins & Lawley, 2006) to distinguish between these three categories. He therefore applies the PRO algorithm to acknowledge the client's Problem and invite the client's attention to shift to a desired Outcome:

K: *And when* too many dead bodies are down in the hole, *what would you like to have happen*?

B: [Sigh] I'd like to make them be alive again. They made me kill all those things [sobs]. They made me kill all those things [more sobbing]. They made me kill all those little things.

K: *And* they made you kill all those things. *And when* you'd like them to be alive again, *what kind of* alive *is that* alive?

B: Good question. [Sigh] I guess the kind of alive where they were never dead before. The kind of alive where I didn't have to meet them to kill them.

K: The kind of alive where they were never dead before where you didn't have to meet them to kill them. *And is there anything else about that* alive?

B: [Growls] Maybe happy, maybe ... I don't know.

Bob's second desired Outcome "to make them be alive again" is immediately followed by a new Problem, "They made me kill all those little things". Keith acknowledges the Problem but he is not seduced by it. Instead he directs Bob's attention to his latest desired Outcome.

Keith followed the client's line of reasoning until it indicated that this desired Outcome may not be workable either. Bob is suggesting that if he hadn't met "all those little things", he wouldn't have killed them and they wouldn't be dead. This makes sense, except Bob has stated that they are dead because he killed them. How can they become alive again? Keith gives Bob the opportunity to find out by asking:

K: *And when* you want them to be alive again, *can* they be alive again?

B: No, no, no.

K: *And when* they can't be alive again, *what would you like to have happen now*?

B: [Laughs] I want to kill the people that made me kill them.

K: *And can* you kill the people that made you kill them?

B: No, they're dead already.

K: *And when* you want to kill the people that made you kill them, *and you can't because* they're dead already, *what would you like to have happen*?

The client's proposed Remedy, "to kill the people that made me kill them" also bites the dust. Keith sticks with the process by acknowledging the reality of every Problem and every unworkable Remedy, while continually inviting the client to attend to a desired Outcome. The meta-message is: OK, these are your problems, and these are your solutions, which by your own logic cannot work, and given that's how it is, how would you like it to be?

And low and behold, the first shoots of a new desired Outcome begin to show through the deep, dark undergrowth of the client's psyche:

B: [Said softly] Maybe say I'm sorry to all those souls. All those little spirits. Those dead people.

K: *And* say you're sorry to all those little spirits. *And what kind of* say you're sorry *is that* say you're sorry?

B: I'm not sure. Maybe sincere, truthful.

K: *And* sincere, truthful saying you're sorry. *And when* sincere, *where is* sincere?

B: [Several heavy breaths] Here [touches chest].

K: *And when* sincere is there [gestures to client's chest], *is there anything else about* sincere there?

B: Yeah, they wouldn't let me cry because they killed them.

K: *And* they wouldn't let you cry because they killed them.

B: Because I killed them. They wouldn't let me have any grieving.

K: Because you killed them. *And* they wouldn't let you cry *or* have any grieving, *and when* you say you're sorry for all of those spirits, *and* truthful, sincere, *where is* truthful?

B: I'm not very certain because I don't know if I have any truthfulness in me. I'm a liar.

K: You aren't certain you have any truthfulness in you. *And* you're a liar. *And when* you want to say you're sorry to all the spirits, *and* you don't know if you have truthful in you, *what would you like to have happen*?

B: [Sobbing] I want to be dead.

Through the skillful use of clean questions an incipient desired Outcome is developing within the client's metaphor landscape, "say I'm sorry to all those souls". However, as often happens with macabre metaphors, the client's attention, like a magnet, is repeatedly drawn back to the problematic. In response Keith continues to tread the thin line between acknowledging and honoring the client's painful inner world, and offering him the opportunity to live in a 'how I would like it to be' world for a little while.

When the client proposes another Remedy – "I want to be dead" – Keith does not flinch. Is "I want to be dead" literal or metaphorical, or both? We don't know but given the client is deep within his metaphoric world we can assume that a large facet is symbolic. This is one of those Grovian "white-knuckle moments". Grove demonstrated with many clients that at these pivotal times the least productive thing the facilitator can do is to bail out. That would likely send a meta-message to the client that their words were too much for the facilitator to handle. This would mean the metaphors were controlling both the facilitator and the process. Much better to stay with wherever the client is, to trust the process, and to ride the roller coaster.

Which is exactly what Keith does. He follows the client's logic and applies the PRO model (which, in this case, utilises the presupposition that time doesn't stop just because you are dead):

K: You want to be dead. *And when* you're dead, *what happens next*?

B: Good question. I think I'll feel better [laughs].

K: *And what kind of* better *is that* better *that* you will feel *when* you're dead?

B: Relaxed. Relaxed. I don't have to be hiding and guarding all the time and carrying this weight - this fucking weight. Oh Jesus, this weight. And these little lives.

K: *And* you don't have to be hiding and guarding all the time, and carrying this fucking weight. *And when* relaxed, *is there anything else about that* relaxed?

B: Lose the weight, drop the weight, the burden of these once upon alive things - the guilty responsibility of their demise.

K: *And when* lose the weight, *then what happens*?

B: I'll be thinner.

K: You'll be thinner. *And is there anything else about* lose the weight?

B: I won't have anybody else to feed.

K: *And* you won't have anybody else to feed. *And then what happens*?

B: I'm not sure, but I want to find out [said with some gusto].

K: *And where is that* want to find out?

B: Hiding in a closet behind a door.

K: In a closet behind a door. *And what kind of* closet *is that* closet?

B: A bad man's closet.

K: A bad man's closet. *And what kind of* door *is that* door?

B: A protective door, a hiding door.

K: Protective *and* hiding. *And when* door, *is there anything else about that* protective door?

B: I get discovered behind it. It's not very protective.

K: *And when you* get discovered behind a not very protective door, *what happens to* sincere, *and* truthful, *when* you want to find out?

B: Fucking right I want to find out [said with even more gusto].

K: *So when* you find out, *what happens to those* spirits *that* you wanted to say sorry to?

[Bell sounds the end of the training activity]

B: Maybe I can let them know why that happened to them. Because I didn't know. They were wondering: Why them? Why was I doing that? What did they do wrong? They could know and they might be sort of alive but dead in me. I'm tired of carrying them around. I don't know if I'll ever find an answer for them. Maybe I don't know the answer. Maybe I don't know why they died. There's no why ... [big sigh].

K: *And are you ok with us leaving this here?*

B: I apparently saw something through the crack in the door, between the hinges and the door jamb, and that must have freaked me out. OK, yeah, I wanted to do the right thing. OK, they didn't want me to tell, and they couldn't get away with killing me ... Alrighty then.

During the session, the client's attention switched rapidly from one aspect of his metaphor landscape to another all the while retaining a characteristic coherence. From:

- a deep, dark hole in the heart with too many dead bodies which he would like to make alive again
- to maybe saying a sincere truthful sorry to all those souls he had killed
- to wanting to be dead
- to wanting to lose the weight – the guilty responsibility of their demise
- to wanting to find out [what happens then]
- to hiding behind a not very protective door of a bad man's closet

and finishing with several realizations.

Is the client's description of seeing something through a crack in the door a memory? Maybe, maybe not. Since any childhood memory that is still evocative will have symbolic connotations in Symbolic Modeling we work with both 'real' memories and imagination in the much same way.

Follow up and conclusion

I (Keith) spoke with Bob about a month after this session. He said that he was feeling better about himself and felt like he was making progress in his life. It is interesting that the self-modelling of his personal metaphor-scape had continued to yield new insights and self-healing. At eleven months I followed up with Bob again. And he had the following comments.

- The work we did was so non-directive that it is kind of hard to pinpoint cause-effect stuff, but things definitely got better for me after our sessions. It is hard to measure exactly though.

- Our work was related to my identity and sense of myself. In many ways I'd always tended to short circuit myself. When I told somebody about something that is good that I've been doing, I had tended to mess it up. My father was an alcoholic and a pattern for me was that my father punished me by taking things away from me that I loved. He felt that I was baby-like and too vulnerable and too effeminate. My father destroyed anything that I loved. So before our work I seemed to destroy whatever was good that I was working on.

- After the symbolic modeling work I've opened up more. I'm behaving in ways I didn't in the past. I no longer worry about trying to look tough and butch and straight. So I am more relaxed about that. I've also dialed back on my intoxicants.

- I'm definitely behind symbolic modeling. It plainly puts the person in the driver's seat. Their unconscious mind tends to do the driving and inner tour guides reveal to you narratives from your unconscious. In other therapy I've done in the past I've never had a therapeutic system that started nowhere and ended up somewhere and felt like it left me cooking but also complete somehow. It is very satisfying. Not having to jump through any therapist's hoops. I feel that this is very organic and self-healing. I'm very much a proponent of this methodology.

After a year of using Clean Language in my (Keith's) coaching practice it is interesting to reflect back on these first sessions and the learning I gained working with Bob. Not many of my clients are as darkly disturbed and metaphorically morose as Bob was that day. But the session shows how Clean Language and Symbolic Modeling can work with troubled clients and their macabre metaphors. One of the insights that is much richer for me today is how genuinely respectful the Symbolic Modeling process is; giving people the room to take full responsibility for their own healing, changes, and recovery.

Biography

James Lawley is a supervising neurolinguistic psychotherapist – registered with the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy since 1993. He has provided consultancy to organisations as diverse as GlaxoSmithKline, Yale University Child Study Center, NASA Goddard Space Center and the Findhorn Spiritual Community. With Penny Tompkins he

co-authored Metaphors in Mind – the first comprehensive guide to Symbolic Modelling using the Clean Language of David Grove, and an annotated training DVD, A Strange and Strong Sensation, which shows them working in a live session. Their website cleanlanguage.co.uk contains over 200 articles.

Playing on his uncommon last name, **Keith Fail** exclaims, "The only 'fail' in this world is not to live with fierce tenderness." For over 25 years, Keith has delivered business solutions with authenticity using core NLP concepts. Team managers and executives choose Keith as coach, trainer, and change agent because his systemic skills connect "our hearts' passions" with superior intra-personal skills. This creates action and fervent results that impact bottom-line results. To reach Keith about consulting or NLP Practitioner Training, email: KeithFail@nlpResourcesAustin.com

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