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Stories that Heal: How Storytelling Aided Child Trauma Recovery in The Space Between Before and After

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the plot of children's novel, The Space Between Before and After, to examine how storytelling and the use of metaphor enabled the 10-year-old protagonist, Thomas, to heal from the traumatic experience of losing his mother to depression. Before encountering storytelling, Thomas is lost in a narrative of victimhood and lacks hope, imagination, and agency. When his neighbour, Mrs. Sharp, introduces storytelling to him to cope with his anxiety, he begins to process his trauma through metaphor and develops an intimate relationship with the elderly lady. Using Bradley and Mendoza's (2021) model of storytelling as a framework, I interpret Thomas's recovery journey as a process in which his feelings were first voiced through metaphor and imagination, which were then able to be processed and bridged to reality as he gained confidence and control. Furthermore, I recognise the importance of Mrs. Sharp as a secure attachment figure throughout, especially when Thomas's father, Mr. Moran, disapproves of his storytelling, causing tension in the father-son relationship and hardship in Thomas's healing process. Nevertheless, by the end, Mr. Moran comes to be supportive of the storytelling and asks Thomas to share his story at Helen's memorial, symbolising community healing. The exchange between father and son after the fact reveals that agency, hope, imagination, and collective healing have come to replace the initial narrative of victimhood and hopelessness. I conclude this article with an analysis of the butterfly motif presented throughout the novel to recapitulate on the power of metaphor for children's healing from trauma.

KEYWORDS

Storytelling, child psychic trauma, trauma recovery, agency, children's fiction

Note

This article is not written in a conventional style. In reading *The Space Between Before and After* (Stauffacher, 2019), the traumatic experience of a child losing a mother, delivered in a most poetic way, deeply resonated with me. Hence, an article written in a more 'traditional' format and formal register did not feel the most appropriate means to discuss this topic.

Therapists who work with children must often return to their *child within* to understand the child's world and perspectives and build rapport (Mills & Crowley, 2014). It is by drawing on resources from both their knowledge and experience as adults *and* their inner child that allows them to connect with the child and help make a positive difference in their lives (Mills & Crowley, 2014). Specifically, when "trauma is an experience beyond words", therapists have found engaging in children's storytelling and use of metaphors to be powerful for understanding and speaking to the traumatised child beyond literal language (Miller & Boe, 1990, p. 248). Similarly, in *The Space Between Before and After,* the reader is encouraged to connect with their own inner child and Thomas as the latter creates a fantasy narrative to help him cope with the disappearance of his chronically depressed mother. Thus, I would like to stay in this story – engaged as a therapist would – to

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understand and discuss how Thomas's story helped him and his family and friends heal from this trauma.

The Before

The story starts with Thomas and Helen, Thomas's mother, in the kitchen one morning, when Helen initiates a conversation with Thomas. She tells him about a dream she had where she went travelling and even contemplates going on a trip for real, a thought she had never voiced before. Thomas, who had come downstairs to make himself breakfast, stops in his tracks at Helen's behaviour, indicating the unusual and unexpectedness of the encounter.

This beginning already reveals a lot about Thomas and the unique reality of his family. When Thomas mentions Helen's "blue mood" (Stauffacher, 2019, p. 2), it becomes clear that Helen has been battling with depression, and – from Thomas's shock at her talking of a trip – has been disengaged from her family and the outside reality for a very long time now. The spark of hope Thomas feels at hearing his mother speak may function as a protective factor, as hope is associated with a greater ability to overcome adversity and psychological trauma (Munoz et al., 2020). However, his response is largely overpowered by timidness, illustrated by imagery of a thin thread holding the conversation together, and suggests his lack of perceived control over the situation.

The thread disappears immediately after Thomas's father, Mr. Moran, calls up to tell Thomas that he better be ready for the school bus. The first chapter ends as Thomas looks at a breadboard on top of the microwave, imagining the dust on it is flour or powdered sugar.

Consider the word 'imagine' here: as traumatised children are rarely, if ever, put in charge of themselves or anything else, imaginative play is especially useful in allowing them to regain some control (Miller & Boe, 1990). While imagination allows subjects to detach from their immediate reality (De Souza & Arinelli, 2022), Thomas's thoughts about the dust on the breadboard remains grounded in practical reality as he acknowledges the possibility of his imagination being correct. This lack of imagination and control demonstrates his identity as nestled deep in victimhood, lacking hope and agency (Yuen, 2007) – the spark of hope extinguished as quickly as it came. This is the before.

The Beginning

That morning was the last time that Thomas saw his mother.

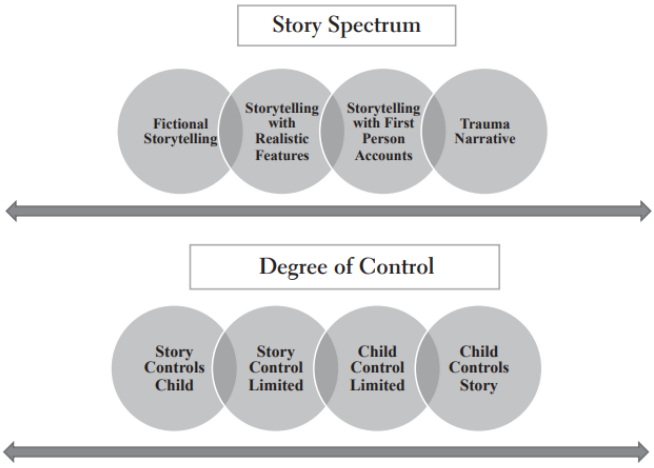
After Helen disappears, Thomas's house goes out of order. However, amidst the chaos of Mr. Moran, aunt Sadie, and officers moving in and out the house, Thomas is ordered to do his homework as usual and remains excluded from conversations about his mother. Fraught with anxiety, when he asks his elderly neighbour – Mrs. Sharp – one night if Helen is dead, she suggests they imagine a story for Helen, of where she went.

Here, Mrs. Sharp initiates the use of storytelling to help Thomas process his reality. Storytelling is helpful because children often do not know how to put their traumatic experiences and feelings into words (Miller & Boe, 1990). Even if able, they may be reluctant to speak about it out of caution for reliving it (Yuen, 2007). Storytelling uses metaphors, which "speaks out of the unconscious" (Miller & Boe, 1990, p. 248) and enables children to disentangle their traumatic experiences from "overpowering emotions" such as fear or helplessness (Anderson & Cook, 2015, p. 79). Storytelling thus proves a developmentally appropriate means by which children from that age and beyond can find and express their thoughts, experiences, and realities while still maintaining distance from the original trauma (Mendoza & Bradley, 2021).

With guidance from Mrs. Sharp, Thomas begins imagining a story for Helen. In his story, Helen meets a sad polar bear who gives her a warm jacket, boots, and a whistle (which she can blow for help, but only once), and sends her off on her lonesome journey. Thomas suggests that she is on her way to the astral plane, which he explains to Mrs. Sharp is what the lady suggested through his dad's phone – he had picked up the phone while his dad was in the shower that day. That night, Thomas sleeps soundly for the first time in days.

There are two ideas I would like to discuss here. First, it has been suggested that stories used for therapeutic purposes are more effective when they "parallel" a child's reality with less direct metaphors. This puts more distance between the child and their "problem area", and should thus trigger less response from the conscious mind and more from their unconscious to reveal psychodynamic meaning (Mills & Crowley, 2014, p. 33). In Thomas's case, however, while every other aspect was fantastical, Helen was in the story as Helen. Here, we must understand the components and process of healing through storytelling to appreciate why this was appropriate for Thomas. I will use Mendoza and Bradley's model of storytelling for counselling (2021) for this analysis, as it provides a lens through which we can identify the progression and trajectory of Thomas in his healing journey on two dimensions, emphasizing not only the creation of the narrative, but also the importance of control of the storyteller. Essentially, this model involves two spectrums: the story spectrum and the control spectrum. Success is regarded as the movement from left to right of the spectrum (Figure 1).

Figure 1
A Model for Storytelling (Mendoza & Bradley, 2021)



For the story spectrum, progress involves the transformation of children's stories from fictional stories and metaphors to their trauma narrative; and the control spectrum describes how the child gains control over the story and confidence (Mendoza & Bradley, 2021). For Thomas, because he had already told Mrs. Sharp the possibility that Helen might be dead, using a metaphor for his mother would only move him back on the story spectrum, further from reality and a true trauma narrative. If Mrs. Sharp *wanted* to represent Helen with a metaphor, she would have needed to take control away from Thomas, a regression on the control spectrum as well. Indeed, metaphor in storytelling not only gives voice to the unconscious, but also assigns control to its creator. In sum, Mendoza and Bradley's model (2021) argues that there are no strict rules for the features of a story as long as it aims towards the goal of giving children confidence and control in constructing their trauma narrative, and ultimately towards healing.

Secondly, Thomas notes that "it was easy for him to tell [Mrs. Sharp] about the phone call" (Stauffacher, 2019, p. 87) when, in contrast, he had felt scared about being caught by his father. Compared to Thomas's seemingly fearful attachment to his father, storytelling has facilitated a deep and trusting relationship between Thomas and Mrs. Sharp. Indeed, according to Searles (1965, p. 583, as cited in Miller & Boe, 1990), "the mutual sharing of such metaphorical experience would seem . . to be about as intimate a psychological contact as adult human beings can have with one another." Between adult and child, then, – the latter of whom is in a vulnerable stage of development where secure attachment to a consistent adult figure is critical for healthy adjustment (Ainsworth, 1991) – such sharing and intimacy is perhaps *more* powerful. For Thomas, the secure attachment he lacked from the main adult figures in his life (i.e., his dad, his aunt) throughout the traumatic experience of losing his mother were found in his relationship with Mrs. Sharp, who provided him with the supportive and safe environment needed to heal (López-Zerón & Blow, 2017). Thus, Thomas's special

relationship with Mrs. Sharp – and the metaphorical experience of storytelling through which it is facilitated – was crucial for enabling him to heal from trauma.

This marks the beginning of Thomas's journey towards healing.

The Middle: Encountering Hardship

Over the next few days, Thomas continues his story with the help of Mrs. Sharp and his same-aged neighbour, Giselle. One day, Thomas comes home from school to find Mr. Moran hiding in Helen's closet, crying. In a panic at the never-before-seen sight, Thomas blurts out that the story is not over yet, explaining the fur coat and Helen's quest. This is how Mr. Moran learns about the storytelling. He is strongly against it, and no longer allows Thomas to see Mrs. Sharp.

This is the first major hardship that Thomas encounters after beginning his storytelling journey. Mr. Moran is incredulous about what he calls "magical thinking" (Stauffacher, 2019, p. 12), seemingly trivializing the storytelling process and implying non-belief in its implications and significance to real life. He wants Thomas to accept reality, believing that the sooner he does so, the sooner he can get beyond what has happened. However, by taking this magical thinking away from Thomas, Mr. Moran attempts to push Thomas too far along the story spectrum too quickly (Mendoza & Bradley, 2021) . This can cause overwhelming anxiety as the child is exposed to the negative symptomology of their trauma before they have gained sufficient control over their trauma narrative. Indeed, the story and control spectrums must move in parallel (Mendoza & Bradley, 2021). Additionally, Yuen (2007) emphasises the importance of the development of a 'second story' in turning a child's story of victimhood into one of hope and empowerment. While the primary narrative focuses on how children were *affected* by their traumatic experiences, the 'second story' refers to alternate narratives which focus on their response to traumas, highlighting their skills, knowledge, and personal agency (Yuen, 2007). Mr. Moran's reaction to Thomas's story was thus also detrimental in that he neglected the latter's ability and agency to respond to a traumatic experience. This would later lead to an emotional barrier between them, including Thomas's statement: "Why listen to people who don't listen?" (Stauffacher, 2019, p. 144); and his refusal to speak to his father.

Although Mr. Moran stops Thomas and Mrs. Sharp from meeting, they continue to write the story secretly. At one point in the story, Helen endangers her life to save a pony, and Thomas (an owl under a spell in the story) blows the polar bear's whistle. The polar bear gives up his own fur to save Helen, but Helen becomes upset at Thomas for blowing the whistle and causing the innocent bear to sacrifice himself for her. Back in reality, Thomas is distressed and sneaks off to Mrs. Sharp's house for help to fix his story. When Mrs. Sharp asks whether he thinks Helen's unhappiness was all caused by him, he breaks down, recalling all the times he had upset Helen before she disappeared.

Themes of attachment, the story and control spectrum progression recur here as Thomas continues to encounter hardships. Specifically, Mrs. Sharp shows a deep level of understanding and empathy in the way she helps Thomas work through his feelings and calm down. Developmental research has found this kind of 'psychic intimacy' to be present in typical mother-child interactions through mothers' 'affect attunement' – the sharing of emotional experience by matching one's responses to the child's expressions of affect (Stern, 1998). Similarly, therapists use affect attunement to effectively enter their patient's world, build rapport and understanding, and increase attachment security (Håvås et al., 2015). Håvås et al. found that therapists' nonverbal attunement – listening without interruption, coordination of volume, tone, and pitch of voice, and engaged responses – predicted decreases in patients' avoidant and anxious attachment styles. Mrs. Sharp demonstrates nonverbal attunement when she lowers her voice to a whisper to match Thomas's sadness and silence, gives him space to let all his thoughts out, and responds by acknowledging his feelings and provoking further self-exploration. The secure attachment that this facilitates enables Thomas to overcome challenges in his recovery process. Indeed, through openness and vulnerability in interaction, Mrs. Sharp helps Thomas realise that Helen's discontent with Thomas in his story may be related to his self-assigned blame for his mother's sadness in real life. This indicates significant rightward movement on the story spectrum.

Recognising that increased control must parallel this progression, Mrs. Sharp reminds Thomas that the story can be redirected, that it belonged to *him,* and that he would eventually come to the right ending. Her words help calm his worries, and eventually, Thomas feels better.

The End

The ending to Thomas's story is revealed at Helen's memorial service. This is requested by Mr. Moran, who has begun to move on from the tragedy himself and realise the importance of Thomas's story for Thomas's healing. The animals that Helen saved turned into Mr. Moran, Thomas's aunt Sadie, and Thomas's cat. Thomas kept his owl form, retaining the ability to find Helen in his stories whenever he pleased, and Helen transformed into a butterfly with two snowflakes for wings.

These transformations demonstrate the final step on the story spectrum towards the completion of Thomas's trauma narrative. The characters – representing Thomas's unconscious meanings – are revealed as metaphors for real-life beings, projecting Thomas's inner world and bridging it his outer world (Miller & Boe, 1990). Helen's transformation represents her departure from reality but not from her loved ones' minds. Thomas's ability to stay as an owl in his stories demonstrates his control over the narrative and metaphors has also reached sufficiency to move freely between reality and imagination.

Beyond the individual level, this ending also suggests *community* recovery from trauma, including his family, neighbours, and officers who attended the memorial and searches for Helen. Indeed, storytelling not only promotes individual recovery, but strengthens understanding, connectedness, and collective memory to promote community healing (Chioneso et al., 2020). Thus, Mr. Moran's acceptance of storytelling – as the symbol of resistance throughout the novel – and the collective's appreciation of the story signifies that not only Thomas, but the community has begun to heal.

The After

"'Can we just imagine for a minute?' Thomas asked.
'Of course. You imagine'" (Stauffacher, 2019, p. 265)

This brief dialogue between Thomas and Mr. Moran exemplifies the changes that have occurred in their journey of coping with the loss of a loved one. Mr. Moran, who once neglected to acknowledge Thomas's agency and competencies in responding to trauma, has now come to value his son's imagination for its contribution to the healing process. Further, Thomas himself is no longer living under the control of his mother's depression or his father's stoic directions but has gained confidence in himself for taking charge of his own narrative. This relates to the construction of what Yuen (2007, p. 11) calls "double-stoned memories", which not only highlight the harm created by trauma but also memories of resilience and comfort in times of hardship. It is in this "alternative territory of identity" (Yuen, 2007, p. 17) that one can feel empowered to overcome adversity and move beyond a life defined by their trauma. This is the after.

The Butterfly Motif

As I endeavoured to establish above, metaphors are inherent and crucial in storytelling for healing. In addition to metaphors within Thomas's storytelling, the power of metaphor for child psychic trauma recovery is demonstrated through a butterfly motif recurrent throughout the storytelling of the novel itself. I describe three instances below:

First, throughout the novel, Thomas refers to a butterfly in his stomach to explain his anxiety, describing when he would curl up his wings into a ball or attempt to fly up and out of his body. Second, Thomas's interest in butterflies is traced back to a time before Helen's depression, when he would go with her to her job as a daycare worker and she would keep him occupied with tasks of drawing butterflies. Thus, it may be inferred

that Thomas's obsession with butterflies during his period of greatest trauma is related to the fact that he connects their meanings to Helen. Finally, when Thomas was upset or needed to think, he would often hide away under his bed and cut butterflies out of any material within sight. In those instances, he could make the butterflies look however he wanted: blue or green, wings round or jagged, sparkly or not, etc.

Each instance, respectively, as well as the entirety of this article can be summarized to support the following claims:

(1) Storytelling and metaphors are powerful tools for giving a voice to feelings that cannot be put into words.
(2) Metaphors and the metaphorical experience of storytelling can facilitate psychological intimacy between people.
(3) Metaphors in storytelling engage the imagination and return control to those who have lacked it in discourses of victimhood.

As stories do not conclude with a summary, I contend to leave this article here without a definitive conclusion. However, the three claims above provide a rather good summary of the points I have covered. Through stories like *The Space Between Before and After,* I hope many can come to understand the powerful healing properties of storytelling for children who have experienced profound trauma.

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