

“When to call a windmill a windmill”

In this paper I will be referring to the story of Nikolas, a young man of 42 with Down syndrome; his maturation, his artistic endeavours, his love for Eleni, his planned wedding, including his passion for his best man, how he dealt with bereavement and finally his recognition of his sexuality and his ability to talk about it.

To what extent should one indulge a dream that can never be realised? How important is it for an individual to be made aware of reality? Nikolas believed that he was going to marry Eleni; he had chosen the church, made the wedding list, decided where the bachelor party was to be held and many other details. He lived this dream for at least four years. Most people went along with it, encouraging him to build his castles in the air. His sisters, on the other hand, did not encourage his fantasies because they believed that he needed to remain in touch with reality. I felt that somehow a compromise could be achieved. Given that the date of the fulfilment of his desires was never defined, his fantasy was on-going, a permanent dream, which only others knew could never become a reality.

Through Nikolas' life and his participation in a theatrical group for people with learning difficulties, I will discuss the extent to which a therapist should encourage or discourage the fantasies of a client. To what extent is a therapist in a position to judge whether a fantasy is realisable and does he or she have the right to shatter a fantasy which keeps a client buoyant?

The theatre group named “High Jinx at no. 8 Daphne Street “

The music and theatre group “High Jinx at no. 8 Daphne Street”, which has been running since 1993, is made up of people with developmental difficulties and some volunteers. The volunteers are usually students, who take part both as helpers and as actors, singers or musicians. The group meets one afternoon a week for two hours and puts on one theatrical production a year. The members are from 18 to around 48 years of age.

Nikolas was one of the original members and has been part of the group for the last 28 years. This group runs under the auspices of Artogether

(formerly VSA Hellas), whose aim is to make all forms of art accessible to people with disabilities. As a founder member, I have been running the theatre and music group on a voluntary basis, along with a professional musician, since its inception.

Peter Slade (1995) was the first to use the term Dramatherapy in his application of drama and role play for remedial purposes in special education, as far back as 1964. As a dramatherapist and teacher in special education, I saw the potential for using drama and role play to create an environment in which young people with disabilities can function in a natural and creative way.

Nikolas

Nikolas was born in Germany to parents who already had two daughters. They returned to Greece when Nikolas was about 6 years old. In Greece, he went to a day centre where he learned to read and write and attended various workshops. When VSA Hellas was set up, he auditioned for the theatre group and became one of our first members. He loved it from the outset and it became the highlight of his week. His speech was not very clear but he had a natural ability to act and dance.

Nikolas has always liked acting female parts and once he took on the role of a mermaid, which displeased his family very much. From then on, we tried not to offend them and were careful not to give him female roles. He was always very fond of our male volunteers, a young volunteer called Thanasis in particular. However, he had been told by his sisters that he should love girls and that is the reason, I believe, he decided to marry Eleni and have Thanasis as his best man.

Our conversations

The theatre group takes place every Wednesday at 17.00 pm. I always like to get there at least half an hour early in order to prepare for the group. Nikolas comes on his own, often early. Whenever he has something on his mind, he asks to speak with me privately. Therefore, I will not be describing therapeutic sessions with Nikolas, only our conversations before the group, as well as others that may have taken place during his participation in the theatre group.

- **His marriage, his favourite topic of conversation.**

Nikolas believed that he was in love with Eleni, another member of the theatre group, who also believed that she was in love with him. Eleni had learning difficulties and had bouts of epilepsy that could not be regulated by medication, with the result that her mother was over-protective. They had told everyone that they were a couple and that they would be married when Eleni grew up (Eleni was 26 years of age at the time). At first, the couple would also meet outside the group, along with Eleni's mother and one of Nikolas' sisters. However, after a couple of years Eleni's mother felt the relationship was getting too intense and stopped them seeing each other outside the group. In the group, Eleni was upset when Nikolas chose to sit next to Thanasis. She was aware that he preferred Thanasis to her but was unable to express her feelings about it. Her mother believed that her frequent dizzy spells and epileptic fits were in some way related to her dysfunctional relationship with Nikolas. The result was that Eleni's mother took Eleni away from the group. Nikolas was upset but he did not believe that their marriage would not take place.

The conversation that took place between us

Nikolas: Mrs. Katerina, as you know, Thanasis is going to be my best man. Panagiotis (our musician) will take the van with all our wedding gifts and you will get us an open-top car to leave the church in. The bachelor party will take place the night before and I will make the list for the guests.

Katerina: Nikolas, you cannot be sure the wedding will take place if Eleni's mother is opposed to it.

Nikolas: When the bride and the groom wish it (to get married), let the mother-in-law go blind. (a phrase from a well know Greek song)

Katerina: You know that Eleni needs her mother to look after her.

Nikolas: She can come and live with us as well.

Katerina: How will you cover your living expenses?

Nikolas: I will get a job at our local café. They have told me that as soon as they have a position they will let me know.

Katerina: But you are attending a day centre at the moment.

Nikolas: When Eleni grows up, I will get the job.

While we were sharing our news at the beginning of the group session, Nikolas announced his intentions and everyone told him that they were delighted. He had even announced the date of their wedding, the 27th of May, without specifying the year.

It is not advisable to lie to children or people with learning difficulties and that was my endeavour during our conversation. However, people often do not wish to destroy someone's dreams even if they know they are unrealisable, which is what happened in the group with Nikolas's announcement. The conflicting response he got from me, on the one hand, and the group, on the other, may have been confusing for him, but I suspect Nikolas adopted the response that most suited him.

It is interesting to observe the difference between adults and children or people with learning difficulties when it comes to telling the truth. Adults are often quick to hide things, especially if they seem unfavourable or hurtful. Children, on the other hand, are typically honest (sometimes to the embarrassment of their parents) and speak frankly about their feelings and opinions. What's interesting, then, is the practice of shielding children from the truth. Not only is it a recipe for distrust, but also problematical on several levels. With the same reasoning in mind, Nikolas' sisters, both of them teachers, did not want to allow him to entertain false hopes for fear it would lead to disillusionment.

Another reason for telling Nikolas the truth about his situation was that he was no longer a child and therefore I strongly believed that he should be treated as an adult. He was mature in his thinking and understood his situation quite well.

Some years previously when we were doing a performance at a theatre, he had requested that I arrange for him to have his own changing room, as he had the lead role. I explained to him that, as we didn't have much

money, we needed to perform in state theatres, where we were not charged a rent and did not have the luxury of separate changing rooms for our actors. His answer at the time was *You know, Mrs. Katerina, if I were not mentally deficient, I would have become a professional actor.* It had been his life's dream to become an actor and, although aware that his demand to have his own changing room was 'unreasonable', it would have fulfilled his dream.

Nikolas was able to cope with the concept of being mentally deficient and not being able to become a professional actor because no one had fostered the idea in his mind that he could be intellectually normal or that he could have a career as an actor. However, he was unable to understand that he could not marry Eleni because he had been led to believe that it was possible, as a result of people's response to his announcements about the wedding. Does this suggest then that it was wrong of the members of the group to go along with Nikolas' desire to marry Eleni?

Nikolas had also told me that he had chosen his wedding suit from a shop in his neighbourhood. He said that he had had several fittings and that his suit was ready. This may have been a lie, although he did go out on his own every Saturday morning and it was possible that the people in the shop had humoured him and shown him a suit that he could buy for his wedding day. If this were true, it would make his dream even more feasible.

So, to what extent should one stick to the truth for truth's sake and to what extent should we allow people like Nikolas build castles in the air? Winnicot observes:

'It is creative appreciation more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognised but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation.'

Winnicot (1971, 65)

What Winnicot is saying is that creative appreciation more than anything else makes the individual feel that life is worth living. He implies that this

may require being creative with reality and adjusting it to suit our vision of how we would like it to be.

In one of the theatre group sessions, I decided that if we acted out the wedding ceremony for Nikolas, it might become less of an obsession with him. Tormasulo, D. and A. Szucs (2015) suggest that the use of metaphor in role-play is the core of aesthetic distance and therapeutic transformation.

So, as a group, we decided that Nikolas would choose the main actors for his wedding and the rest of the group would be the guests. He appointed me as the priest and he chose a volunteer to take on the role of Eleni. Thanasis was of course the best man and our musician played music both for the ceremony and for the dancing afterwards. Nikolas of course played himself. We dressed up accordingly and acted out a Greek wedding followed by the celebrations with the married couple leading the first dance.

We all enjoyed the event and at the end we went through a rigorous de-roling process. According to Jones (1996), de-roling consists of two phases. The first involves specific exercises designed to help those who participated to extract themselves from the roles they played. The second phase involves both those engaged in enactment and audience members, who gather to reflect and absorb what has happened. My hope had been to help Nikolas understand the reality of his situation and acquire some distance from the idea of marrying Eleni.

Both the members who had played a part, as well as those who had witnessed the scene, discussed the role play and made it clear that it was play acting and that it had not happened in reality. Nikolas was well aware of this, especially as Eleni had been acted by someone else. Landy (1997) maintains that a dramatherapist asks the client to play in a new reality, a playspace. The *as if* experience is a given, accepted tacitly by both clients and therapist as they move in and out of the playspace. The invitation to enter the playspace implies the knowledge that the dramatic reality is different from everyday reality and the person is different from the persona he will take on in the playspace. Landy (1986) also suggests that when the individual is at a point midway between the two extremes of overdistance and underdistance, he is at aesthetic distance, where catharsis can occur. This is the point that I hoped

Nikolas would reach and be able to see his marriage with Eleni more objectively. It was not clear at the time whether this goal was achieved.

Though Nikolas' plan to marry Eleni may have begun as a kind of game, in the manner of the method actor he had identified with it totally and through underdistance had blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction. My aim had been to find a balance between the two extremes of overdistance and underdistance, not destroying the dream totally, but at the same time creating an awareness that it was not a reality.

- **The conversation about death**

Nikolas had lost his mother three years previously, which had been a very difficult time for him. He had lost his father several years before but he had not felt the same grief. After her death, he remained in the flat where he had been living with her. His sisters lived in the flat above and below respectively. They took good care of him. The time came for his mother's bones to be removed from the grave and put into a small box, as is the custom in Greece. When Nikolas heard this, he was devastated.

Nikolas: Mrs. Katerina, my sisters told me that the time has come to dig my mother's bones out of her grave. This cannot happen. I cannot allow it. I am ashamed to tell you that when my father died I was upset but it was nothing compared to when I lost my mother. Only when you lose a mother do you become orphaned.

Katerina: Nikolas, I am very sorry for you at this distressing time but I am afraid there is not much you can do to stop this happening.

Nikolas: But if they dig her up, she will no longer be able to hold me in her arms. She told me that. She said that when she died and was in her grave she would always hold me in her arms. If they dig her up, I will lose her.

Katerina: Your mother will always hold you in her arms, as she said, because she will always be in your thoughts and your love for her will never end.

Death is a very difficult subject. However, it is now believed that children should always be told the truth, especially if it is connected to a person

they love. If the information is given later, or if a child is lied to about the death of a loved person, it will become much harder for the child to reach a closure acceptable to him or her. Bowlby (1979) maintained that it is necessary for a client to be able to express his/her feelings about death openly. As Shakespeare said, "Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break."

In the case of Nikolas, he had not been 'protected' from grief. He had gone to his mother's funeral and continued to live in the house where she had been. P.R. Silverman και S.L. Nickman maintain (1996) that a child needs to be helped to build a picture of their lost parent, which may include memories, feelings as well as objects. This was not denied to Nikolas. However, his mental image of her lying in her grave would be disturbed if her bones were gathered up and put into a box.

Silverman PR, Nickman SL (eds) (1996) argue that after a death bonds with the deceased do not necessarily have to be severed, and that there is a potentially healthy role for maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased. This idea represents recognition that death ends a life, not necessarily a relationship. Rather than 'saying goodbye' or seeking closure, there exists the possibility of the deceased being both present and absent.

The following week Nikolas came earlier to the group and told me that finally his sisters had managed to convince the people at the cemetery not to dig their mother up. He was very relieved; I suspected that they must have told him a lie so as not to upset him. Can one blame them for telling him this lie? Could someone convince him that his mother would still hold him in her arms, if she were not in her grave? Razza and Tomasulo (2005) maintain that the activator threshold for triggering a traumatic reaction is typically less for individuals with cognitive limitations and the traumatic response may often manifest differently.

Once again it brings us to the question of the legitimacy of telling someone an untruth so as not to shatter a shielding illusion. The thought that his mother could continue to hold him in her arms was a great comfort to him. If he had been told the absolute truth, there was no guarantee that this could be replaced by something equally comforting. Therefore, I cannot claim that telling the absolute truth should be a hard and fast rule, unless the 'illusion' is in some way damaging to the individual or, if uncovered, may lead to even greater disillusionment.

Obviously, as therapists we need to stay as close to the truth as possible, but I believe we should not deliberately shatter an illusion simply to comply with the maxim 'always tell the truth.' That day, I bent the truth to be kind, and I had no regret. Tormasulo, D. and A. Szucs (2015) maintain that variations in the triggering and display of trauma for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities demand broader and potentially less intrusive means of accessing therapeutic gain.

- **The conversation about his sexuality**

Nikolas: Mrs. Katerina, do you remember the volunteer we had who was called Alkis?

Katerina: I remember him well.

Nikolas: Mrs. Katerina, did you know that he was gay?

Katerina: Yes, I did. He told us.

Nikolas: Did you mind that he was gay?

Katerina: No, Nikolas, no one in the group minded.

Nikolas: Mrs. Katerina, I believe that I am also gay.

Katerina: I think I have known that for some time.

Nikolas: Really, it started a long time ago with Giannis. At the beginning, I liked Giannis, but now I don't. So, I don't want to be with him.

Katerina: That is your choice. You don't have to be with him but you need to accept him in the group.

Nikolas: Ok, but I don't want to have anything to do with him. The truth is that I am in love with Andreas at my day centre. He also loves me. If we both want to be together, that is OK, right? We try to meet in the WC and kiss but people are always watching us and telling us to go to the WC one at a time. What is your opinion about that?

Katerina: You are both adults so if you want to be together that is fine but you also need to respect the rules of your day centre.

Nikolas: If my sisters find out about this, there will be hell to pay.

Katerina: Maybe then you should keep your feelings to yourself.

Nikolas: Every Saturday Andreas and I arrange to go out for coffee at 12.00 pm. He goes out for coffee in Petralona and I go out for coffee in Kalogresa and then we talk on the phone when we get home, would you call that a date?

Katerina: I am not sure, maybe, if you are both thinking about each other.

Nikolas: You know, Mrs. Katerina, I heard on television that men can marry men. Is that true?

Katerina: Yes, a new law was passed allowing this to happen.

Nikolas: I want to be with Andreas but when my wedding with Eleni takes place I will have to see him secretly.

Katerina: If you want to be with Andreas, why would you marry Eleni?

Nikolas: Because that is what is done. Andreas will also marry one day.

Katerina: If you are gay, as you said, why would you want to marry a woman?

Nikolas: That is how things are!

In this conversation I again spoke to Nikolas as an adult and told him to withhold his feelings for Andreas from his sisters. Was this right? Had they heard our conversation they would have felt that I was leading him down an improper path. I say that Nikolas is an adult but to what extent can someone with learning difficulties be treated as an adult? This question is not easy to answer. On the one hand, they have the right to be treated as adults. On the other, there are occasions when they need to be protected emotionally and even physically. Therefore, it is up to the therapist or carer to decide in which cases he or she needs to be protected from the truth and in which cases they should be told the absolute truth. In this case, an admission of his sexual orientation, I chose to be truthful with him but at the same time advised him not to tell his sisters because I was aware that it might lead to their trying to brainwash him about his sexuality, which I felt could be stressful for him.

My aim in my conversations with Nikolas was to treat him as the mature person he was and allow him to express his feelings freely. On the one hand, he understood that I was open to his sexuality but on the other he could not go against what was acceptable to his loved ones. So, he carried on saying that he would marry Eleni, made wedding invitations and had everyone support him in this dream, which was another windmill. Laing suggests that

‘A man without a mask’ is indeed very rare. One even doubts the possibility of such a man. Everyone in some measure wears a mask, and there are many things we do not put ourselves into fully.’

Laing (1969 p.95)

Even though people with learning difficulties find it hard to wear a 'mask', I felt in this particular case I needed to advise him not to tell his sisters about his love for Andreas because I knew that they would be unable to accept it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to state my first question once again: To what extent should one indulge a dream that can never be realised? How important is it for an individual to be made aware of reality? Obviously these questions do not apply only to Nikolas. I have had clients without learning difficulties in the same situation. However, I believe that each person needs to be treated differently according to their individual needs and ability to accept the truth.

We cannot destroy a dream, however impossible it may seem, because often what seems like an impossible dream may in fact become a reality. Everything within the scope of our lives begins with a thought. Dreams are often depicted as unreasonable, illogical, and unattainable by our society. But these very dreams and thoughts are often the things that make life worth living. Our dreams can be interconnected with happiness. Not doing what we most desire in life, ultimately may lead to a sense of regret.

For this reason, I believe it is important to go along with any dream a client may have, at least at the beginning, and let it run its course. It may be that a person really needs to follow their dream so that their lives will be fulfilled. Or, on another level, a dream may be a way of avoiding an issue they are unable to face at the time. Bringing a dream to an abrupt end could have a detrimental effect on a client.

In the case of Nikolas, conceivably the most important part of his dream was having Thanasis as his best man while Eleni was secondary. Possibly in the end Nikolas was partially aware that his dream was a dream but he liked to hold on to the idea of a marriage so that he could continue to call Thanasis his best man. I am not suggesting that he was aware of this, only that in order to have a best man (a relationship which is very important in Greek society) there needs to be a marriage.

To finish my story, I will share what he told me recently. He said that he loved every one in the group very very much, Manolis and Alexis especially, but Thanasis was his weakness. When I asked him how he felt towards me he answered, 'You are my whole life!' Was he telling the truth? Or did he simply know how happy this would make me?

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