Book Review

The language of the soul in narrative therapy: Spirituality in clinical theory and practice.

By Laura Béres; with contributions from David Crawley, New York, Routledge, 2023, 204 pp., £31.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9780367684228

Laura Béres has produced yet another critical contribution to thinking and practice of narrative approaches to therapy. Conversations about spirituality may seem out of place in many secular contexts, particularly when mental health is examined within the realms of psychiatry, psychology, social work and counselling. These 'psy-professions', often dominated by scientific understandings based on modernist research approaches, can subjugate talk about faith and experience of the spiritual life, and can also tend to contribute to oppression of people's culture (Swann et al 2017). Béres' contribution to 'exploring the *language* of the soul' (pp. 29) is innovative, challenges narrative practitioners, and includes examples of therapy practice.

Béres' work is innovative. Together with David Crawley, she aims 'to broaden the theoretical base of narrative therapy to include discussion of the complex ways in which the soul can be understood' (pp. 14). The first part of the book outlines the context and approach of narrative therapy and spirituality. Béres concisely covers the historical and theoretical development of narrative therapy (Ch. 1) and then invites the reader to locate the place that critical reflection and contemplative practices hold within narrative therapy (Ch. 2). This is challenging, as she questions the understandings offered through social constructionism and an ethical commitment to social justice, and how therapists may produce this.

Part II then examines 'the language of the soul' through four chapters. Chapter 3 reviews the ways that the soul has been described from Plato to the current day, explaining that it is 'rich with complexity and we do well not to remain stuck at the point of Platonic dualism' (p. 73). The next chapters (4-6) each focus on a particular person (Teresa of Avila; Edith Stein; and Merleau-Ponty), whose writing has contributed to Béres' 'project of introducing the language of the soul to narrative therapy' (p. 76). I was surprised, but delighted with the care, detail, and explanation Béres gave to each person and their spiritual writings. These chapters make the works of these writers available to those who may have found approaching their work quite daunting. For example, of Teresa of Avila, Béres writes;

> the key points for a postmodern therapist would be: the soul is not static but can be nurtured, it can be thought of as layered, with faculties, as a way of connecting with the Divine, and is also drawn to socially just practices in the world rather than only interior mystical experiences (pp. 89).

Béres provides clear links to how her chosen writers contribute to postmodern therapies through their conceptions of the soul and their language. For example: Stein - 'the human being is not a closed system, nor is it as simple as taught in much of psychology' (pp. 109); and Merleau-Ponty – 'remembering the importance of the body-mind-world relationship' (pp. 124).

In Part III, David Crawley joins Béres to help integrate the language of the soul into postmodern practice. Crawley writes in Chapter 7 about spiritual direction 'including the ways in which the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin informs' his 'efforts to engage in "soul work" from a narrative stance' (pp. 129). Starting with an awareness of narrative approaches' 'discomfort with talk of the soul' (pp. 129), Crawley embarks on his story of how Bakhtin's dialogic theory has supported ways to think and talk about the soul while understanding 'the fluidity and plurality of the self' (pp. 129). In Chapter 8, Béres continues to describe applications of this integration of soul-languages into practices of narrative approaches. In the final chapter, Béres and Crawley together 'Dialogue on the language of the soul for narrative practices.' This was a beautiful, dialogic and conversational way to end the book.

Whenever we read a book, we do so through the eyes of our own lives and cultural context. The counselling profession in Aotearoa New Zealand has required counsellor education programmes to include learning about *whakaaro,* cultural knowledges of Māori, the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand. These knowledges include an understanding of *wairua* (spirit/spirituality) as an integral part of human life and experience. One contribution where *whakaaro Māori* and narrative therapy are interwoven is *Moemoeā: Māori counselling journeys* (Crocket et al 2017). It is through these contexts that my reading of Béres' book (including her references to Celtic spirituality), offered me new inquiry and exploration into my own teaching of narrative theory and practice.

This text will invitingly challenge narrative practitioners to re-imagine their theoretical understandings for counselling and therapy and explore new ways to give language to this work. It is a valuable text for all practitioners of narrative approaches to social practice, firstly, to support professional development in thinking through theory and how it is applied in practice, and secondly, to expand thinking and language in contexts of spirituality and 'the soul'. Further, this book is useful for spiritual directors in its examination of the language of the soul and how to explore therapeutic conversations that include spirituality.

References:

Crocket, Kathie, Eugene Davis, Elmarie Kotzé, Brent Swann, and Huia Swann, eds. 2017. *Moemoeā: Māori counselling journeys*. Auckland: Dunmore Publishing.

Swann, Brent, Huia Swann and Kathie Crocket. 2017. “Whakapapa narratives and whānau therapy”. In *Moemoeā: Māori counselling journeys* edited by Kathie Crocket, Eugene Davis, Elmarie Kotzé, Brent Swann and Huia Swann, 32-48. Auckland: Dunmore Publishing.

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