

The Music Box - meditations on brain-mind relationship

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Let me tell you a story. Let me tell you a story about the most complex journey ever, about the meeting point between two people, who were once separate and now connect. A journey where two people meet – and magic happens. Like any story, I would need you to suspend your criticism, your doubts, and your scepticism. I would like you to join me in the make belief of a child, and to allow yourself, once more, to be benignly curious. Just like me, you know nothing; just like you – I would like to find out more; just like us, the story begins with a question.

Where can our mind be found? How do we affect mind and consciousness in psychotherapy? What is the relationship between brain and mind, between neurotransmitters and emotions, between biochemistry and thought processes? Are our emotions localised on the right-brain and our cognitive understanding on the left-brain? Is our consciousness bound to be physically located? And if not, is it to forever remain in the realms of the spirit, never to be reached by science?

My story is about myself, and therefore about you too. It is about this nagging question of words and matter, of mythology and truth, and I hope that by the end of the story I would understand much less, but be more curious. I pray to endure uncertainty – not crumbling into my own demon of dogma and knowledge.

This story is neither a merely theoretical meditation nor solely clinical; I hope it is more than either. This story is also an expression of Neuro-Linguistic-Psychotherapy (NLPT), and may give psychotherapists from other modalities a glimpse into the processes, presuppositions and clinical application of NLPT (also see Rolef Ben-Shahar 2001c; 2003).

So I want to tell you about the brain and the mind; I want to ask about the relationship between the two, and the importance of this relationship for our clinical work as psychotherapists or counsellors; but even more so – as human beings.

If I asked a scientist to tell me the story of my mind, what would she say? The medical model, along with most of its derivatives, relies on a mechanistic understanding of the body. The brain (or body) is the residence of our mind, of our consciousness, she would probably explain. But even many of the new theoretic and clinical healing modalities still adhere to this story (see Pert, 1997; Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2001a & 2001b). One of my colleagues told me lately: ‘We are now practicing what would in a few years time be proved through medicine and scientific research – psychotherapy works by altering neural paths in the brain; we are effecting the mind and alter brain chemistry by means of communication.’ Cutting-edge research in the fields of neurology, brain-sciences and psychoneuroimmunology all endeavour to finally pin down this illusive relationship between mind and body; between the flesh and the spirit. I recognise their story, it is easy to follow – it has years of written research and accumulated knowledge to lean against.

It reminds me of my father. How I loved to ask my father questions, to sit by his side and hear his wisdom, his certainty, his self-assuredness! It soothed my need to be told the truth without having to question it; to be shown something that is so beyond doubt. But is it really possible? Is it really needed? Is it how we want to think and operate as clinicians?

We have struggled with this need for a long time, with the belief that ‘the ghost in the machine’ could be found. In this paper I would like to raise a question about the possibility of such a quest, or even more so – of the utility and functionality of such an effort.

My wife Tom, a molecular-biology scientist, accepted my request for a metaphor and presented me with the central theme of this paper, the music box.

The Music Box

There’s a music-box; what an amazing thing it is indeed. Full with secret blotches and springs, fissures and clockworks. The mechanics of this music box is a work of art, elegant and economic. When appropriately attended, the music box is capable of playing a beautiful enchanting music, which captures your heart and reminds you of

things important. Now we ask this question – **could we say that the music is in the box?**

We could indeed look at the music as if it is solely in the mechanic of the music-box. When a blotch is not working, then, the music no longer exists. When we wish to make it work more smoothly, all we have to do is attend the springs, the wheels. It is a comfortable explanation, and music boxes could then come with manuals.

But to claim that the music is in the box is to miss an opportunity for noting a larger context. The music that is in the box is a result of an intention (you may call the intention soul, god, evolution, whatever). The music was thought of, it developed – someone hummed it or sang it or thought it. There is an undeniable connection between the music and the music box, but it is not a causal connection. The music is not the cause for the music-box; the music-box is not the cause for the music. The music-box uses the music to manifest its mechanical glamour, its beauty and complexity. The music uses the music box to manifest its harmony, its emotion, and its soul.

But if the music is not in the box, then where is it?

We could say, then that the music is not in the box. We could tell a story of a musician, and say that the music-box is a vessel, through which the musician expresses himself or herself; that the music exists regardless of the box. That instead of thinking of clockworks and springs, we should occupy our minds with creations, harmony and tune. It would be a beautiful story.

But to deny the relationship between the music-box and the music seems futile, for what power do we have to intervene, or even understand the music if not through the immediacy of the music-box? How could we learn, change, observe or develop if we are not relating to the box? And how could we explain away all these amazing achievements that have been found through the art and science of music-box mechanics? To tell the story of the music and disregard the music-box leaves us with a dream, forever out of reach; divine – yes, yet categorically untouched.

But if the music is not not-in-the box, then where is it?

So I ask you to tell me another story, a story of magic and matter. Can you tell me a story that would make sense and be interesting? It doesn't have to be true, just make it useful. Could it be that the music is neither in the box nor not-in-the box? Could it be that the music is both in the box and not-in-the box?

To simply argue that the music is in the box or that the music is not-in-the box ignores a wider context. The context is about functionality, intentionality and scope. If both options are different stories, then the wider context is literature, and it is also about the listeners and about narrators – it is about me and about you.

The music and music box exist in a context of composition and mechanism, of a musician and mechanic, and of the listener. A musician is more inclined to believe the music is not in the box; a mechanic – that it is. For a music-box builder, the music was first not-in-the box, and later in-the-box. As a listener, who hummed the music all day long, the music was first in-the-box and later not-in-the-box. When something in the clockwork is wrong, my question would be how could I bring the music back into the box? When my intention is to evoke a memory, my question would be how could I bring the music out of the box?

Are you confused? I certainly am. Don't confuse me, dad, just tell me how it really is. Tell me how it really is and I shall do my best to believe you.

Therapeutic orchestra

Why is it important to me? Why should it matter to you whether the music is in the box or not-in-the-box; whether the mind is in the body/brain or not in the body/brain?

It matters to me because, as a therapist, my task is to meet another person and let our story unfold. What am I encouraging if I always know the ending? What am I promoting if I know the tune by heart and it is always the same tune. It matters to me because when I ask you to tell me a story, or sing me a song, I want you to share the

not know with me. It matters to me because, as a therapist, my task is to keep moving, to maintain a dialogue, a dialectic and recursive creation of stories, of tunes. When I am rigid, when I cannot but hum one tune or another – when I cannot hold the both/and perspectives, but have to resort, out of my own fears and distress, into either/or logic, then I deny myself – and my clients - of the richness of possibilities and opportunities. Then I deny them of making their own stories, composing their own music.

By accepting the medical model as the ultimate truth we reduce other realities and modalities into mechanistic understanding. By rejecting the medical model as ultimately false (and making another story true), we deny ourselves the richness and fullness of accumulated human knowledge. Can we have both by letting go of the notion of truth?

I propose a categorical shift in our relationship to specific theories. Instead of looking at them as truths (or part truths) we can observe them as mythologies. A mythology is a complete context, within which the entire drama of ‘what-is’ can unfold in a coherent manner, and the world of the mythological-context can make sense. A mythology belongs to the human needs to tell stories and make sense, and each has a place because each mythology is beautiful and useful at times. Each mythology has its own rightful place because, throughout the years – people enjoyed sitting by the fire and sing these tunes with love, with hope.

We could have a beautiful piano concerto, playing complete and honest, and a moment later listen to R&B. The mechanistic-mythology could include western medicine (including psychoneuroimmunology), genetics and modern research under Newtonian paradigm. The storytellers of these myths would heal our wounds with potions and surgery, with food and drink.

We may let our clan-leader tell us an unfathomable story of great gods and lost spirits, and listen to the drummers as they entrance us. The spiritual-mythology could include religion, healing arts and perhaps some schools of psychotherapy. The storyteller of these myths would heal us with prayers, with energies, with music.

As curious children we may be restless, we may refuse to stay around one fire alone. We may be intrigued by one tune and dance to it, but later hum another, and another, and another. The effective therapist could dip in and out of mythologies, recognising their value and limitation (primarily in only holding one set of contextual references). The effective therapist could realise that sometimes it is easier to be when the music is in-the-box; at others when it isn't.

In discussing trance experiences, Stephen Gilligan (1987) emphasised the increase in 'both and' (systemic / recursive) logic during trance. The effortless by which ideas are translated into actions is a strong characteristic of trance. Both/and thinking involves transcending lineal processes of either/or into the ability to step in and out of frames, and 'hold paradoxes' together in the same system. Isn't it like being a child once more? Isn't it like believing with all my heart the truth of my father's conviction and then learning another story? If this is trance, then let us all be more in trance.

Moreover, when we can avoid our attachment to a particular mythology, we can encourage the client to do the same, and change their way of thinking, change their way of being – change their reality. By encouraging and continuously presenting paradoxes, we foster three orders of change:

First order change: achieving outcomes and changing within a mythology.

Second order change: alternating between mythologies.

Third order change: changing relationship between mythologies, and between us and these mythologies. Realising the context within which mythologies are born (Bateson, 1972; Eaton, 2001; Keeney, 1983).

In the first order of change a person can replace clockwork to make the music-box operate more smoothly. In the second, the person can shift into a mythology of the music is not-in-the-box. In the third, she can learn to see mythologies in their contexts, to cruise among them and create new ones appropriately – arranging herself differently in relation to these mythologies. One day she may become a storyteller herself; one day she may create a new music-box.

Conclusion

A few years ago I used to define my job as being an agent of change. Today I usually see myself as a psychotherapist being involved in creative and self-valuing relationships. I think that with the changing years and experience I've moved between several fireplaces. Every time I buy a new CD I tend to listen to it time and again, I become engrossed in it, I love the music and I tell its stories over and over. What beauty lie in it I absorb, until another tune presents itself to me. I wish to believe these tunes all live in me, that my story is comprised of the many I have heard. I wish to believe that I stand on the shoulders of giants, and that my stories are theirs too, that my tunes would have sounded familiar to them.

I realized that some lessons do not necessarily involve bringing about change in the same way I used to mean it before. Some people have different lessons to learn, different mythologies to develop. Sometimes it involves remedial work (like most medical mythologies), sometimes it involves tolerating pain, paradoxes or being rather than doing (like the mythology of Carl Rogers and Don Juan). Some people need to know, to gain insight and understand (Like psychodynamic mythologies).

It is good to know that some mythologies offer quick, lasting and genuine affects, both for remedial and generative issues. It is also good to remember that sometimes another story is waiting to be told.

For Milton Erickson, the eminent psychiatrist and hypnotherapist, human adjustability and flexibility were given presuppositions. We could all listen to different stories; we could all compose our music differently. Erickson saw change as a systemic, social and familial process. Not surprisingly, he was a master storyteller. Any one person could be seen from various angles, he believed, belonging to various systems (family, society, work). Change was therefore not only an individual adjustment but also a contextual shift, a change of constellation (see Haley, 1986). Erickson encouraged people to move between mythologies, often by pushing them outside the comfort zone of their own myth.

Here lays our music box before us. We can listen to its music, and we can put it in a box. It can be in a box, but it is not limited to it. We can learn mechanics, we can learn composition, and we can simply enjoy it. We could remember another story.

Psychotherapy could be a stove for crafting mythologies, and I'd like to believe that working with music-boxes, with minds and brains, with people is akin to working with the ocean. Its vastness is far greater than us yet we can influence it. To do so we need to respect it, honour it and understand that we can never fully comprehend it, that in the end of the day, the ocean is unfathomable.

Let me tell you a story. Let me tell you a story about a question that is ever to be asked but never to be fully answered. Let me tell you a story about a journey, of the meeting point between two people, who were once separated and are now connected. A journey where two people meet – and magic happens. You may not believe my story, and I shall not hold it against you – I don't know if I believe it myself. You may not believe the story, but it may grant a place in your heart; and this – this is all that I could wish for.

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