



Writing stories with Aabira

Aabira, with **Susan Dale** as editor, uses narrative to explore her experience of living as a Muslim woman diagnosed with depression

Many of us from time to time will work with clients who come from different cultural and spiritual backgrounds to our own. Aabira was one such woman. I come from a background in Christianity, she was a Muslim. How, I wondered could we work together in ways that would enable her to explore her spirituality, without imposing my own interpretations of what her faith, or life events may have meant to her?

I hope over the next few issues of *Thresholds* that some of you will share your own practices and ways of working, such that we can learn from each other, and promote good practice within the field of spirituality. Within this issue, Aabira, a young Muslim woman, and myself, a middle aged Christian woman, thought you may be interested in our work together.

Narrative practices influence both my counselling and research activities. Aabira contacted me some months ago in the context of a narrative research project that I am currently involved with. As we talked and wrote together, it became evident that her life experiences, especially culturally and spiritually, were very different from my own and I was in danger of using my own, rather than her, interpretations of what events meant to her. After talking with Aabira and sharing my dilemma, she decided that, for her, the most helpful

thing would be to write her story, and for me to read and talk with her about what she had written. This we did over the course of several weeks. Writing her story Aabira felt would be a way that enabled her to define her experiences, and move forward from them without having to fit what she said into any theories I might have about her life. She was concerned that often, within the mental health system, she had been treated, 'as if my faith is totally immaterial to who I am, when it is in fact an integral part of my being; and if it is ignored, I am less than human'.

I was amazed at the writing that emerged and asked her whether she would be interested in sharing her stories with wider audiences. She felt strongly that this would be a way to give a voice to the often silenced views that many Muslim women have as they struggle through the mental health system, and would enable other therapists to think about the way in which they worked with people whose religion and culture was different from their own. This opportunity to have a voice was seen by her as, 'healing'. She told me: 'You will never know how much the honouring of my world means.'

As a narrative therapist and researcher, this kind of writing is common to my practice, and often enables people to 're-author'¹ their lives. Seeing the world, as I do, as being socially constructed through relationship and the stories

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people tell of their lives, means that the therapeutic or research task is not so much about defining the ‘problem’ and enabling the person to find within themselves inner resources to ‘grow and become’^{2,3}, but more about facilitating a telling of ‘rich descriptions’³ of the person’s life experience. Descriptions that they would prefer to be defined by.

Within this way of working, Aabira was free from my suppositions about her faith, spirituality or culture, and also any assumptions I might have about the nature of depression. I was able to listen to her interpretation of the meaning of events, rather than imposing my own prejudgments. At the beginning of our work together Aabira’s writing was full of what she described as ‘my despair at being trapped by depression within a system of non-belief’. She went on to write:

‘I have chosen the name Aabira for myself which means something like ethereal, fleeting. I feel that way. I am floating in the universe, touching gently against others, but making no impact on them. A pencil figure transposed on a multicolour world.’

My life is one of acceptance, Allah be praised, but it is not always the life I would choose.

*The lily dips its head
pulled into the water by a thousand droplets.
Rain melds the delicate petals
until a blurred sodden mass breaks free.*

*Down the river it rushes
hurtled against rocks
the teeth tearing away at the fabric of its being.
I see it as it passes,
a fleeting presence.*

*Battered, sinking it fights for life.
Stinking flotsam overtakes it
subsumed into oneness with the river.
Struggling, it cruises into an inlet
passed by, ignored.
Bedraggled, inconspicuous, it exists.’*

Aabira often used poetry and metaphor to describe her experiences. As she wrote she explained to me something of what this meant to her; she told me a little about her life and the reasons she sees herself as this ‘flotsam stuck in the inlet’ and about the ‘stuckness depression imposes’. Working with the metaphor enabled me to engage with her without passing any judgment on the ‘facts’, which might, she felt, ‘be culturally difficult for me to understand’. I asked if there was anything or any way that could help move or free the flotsam. She replied: ‘Perhaps I can write myself a better story’. We discussed how this might happen and she felt strongly that prayer and learning more about Allah was key. She wrote in her journal:

‘Engaging with someone from outside the faith, about Mohammed, may his name be praised, is helpful. It strengthens me. If I talked to another Muslim, I would assume they knew what I meant, whereas in fact my interpretation may be different, and I fear their judgment. Sue is very clear that she knows nothing, and that I am the teacher, but she is also open to spiritual practices. It is slow progress as I have to explain everything and

I am constantly rewriting what I have written. Curiously, as I rewrite, different parts become more relevant. Somehow I am writing myself into a different place. This is more a story of liberation, a story of hope. The doctors prescribed treatment for despair, but there is always hope, Allah be praised. It is within the words of poetry and prayer that I break free from this earthly life and become part of the universe, part of the divine, transformed beyond the pain’.

Aabira wanted to have her stories read by others, and we talked about how best this might happen. She shared some of them with her son, and friends. I also consulted my supervisor and other counsellors. The consensus was that the poetry and the way they described the transformation in her life were more important than the facts of her life, which could be misinterpreted. In the telling of these stories to others she found that the stories themselves had changed. She writes:

*‘The lily tilts its head to the moonlight,
ethereal beams of light
shine down.
It is washed now by the grace
of planets unknown;
connected through an umbilical of hope.*

*That same light
is a light from the heavens.
From the light come the Angels,
Angels so beautiful beyond humanity’s eye.
Their gaze caresses my soul.
They link my insubstantial life
to that of divine.
They forgive my weakness
and take away my fear
giving hope of a life beyond what is now.*

The doctors at the hospital tied a label onto me, ‘depression’, but it is not a language I understand. It comes from a different dimension where Allah, may his name be praised, does not exist, and family and cultural boundaries mean nothing. I cannot live within that label, any more. All things have a meaning and will be resolved.

Writing my story and having it honoured and respected by others means much; and having it told, in ways that empower me, strengthens my resolve. As I write, I

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understand more of what has been my life, and what is important. My life has grown into meaning, into more than any earthly pain endured. It is through my prayer and thought that I am enriched. My past has pain in it, but even this has given something to my life. Without it I would not be reliant on a life of prayer, and it is through this prayer that I am transformed.

I cannot change what has happened, but I can embrace the teachings of Mohammed, may his name be praised, and this embracing enables me to hold my head up high, and the depression flees. I change my name to Aarifa; a strong woman who knows Islam.

Having the freedom to write, and rewrite, and talk with someone, even though she came from a different faith, has helped me. Always having to live within mental health definitions is like living within the walls of a prison. I ask you, “is it therapeutic to shut out the divine?”

Narrative practices are only one way of working, and I am sure that there are a myriad of alternative ways in which I could have approached this work. Hopefully, however, it has proved to be a respectful way of enabling two women from different backgrounds to communicate at a spiritual level, which had meaning, and shares with others something of a therapeutic process. Although it set out to be a research conversation, Aabira found that it was in fact therapeutic, and as she stated, ‘an altogether transformational process’. There is not space within this article to explore the connections between narrative research and therapy, but interested readers can find more information in the works of Kim Etherington⁴ and Jane Speedy⁵.

Biography

Aabira has chosen to write under a pseudonym. She is currently living and studying for a degree in social sciences in Birmingham. I am grateful to Aabira for allowing her story to be published in *Thresholds*.

Susan Dale, editor of *Thresholds*, also works as a narrative researcher, counsellor, supervisor and writer, based in Machynlleth in mid Wales. Details of her work can be found on her website: www.susandale.counselling.co.uk

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