Notes on Moral Character and Wonderfulness

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What you see below is a series of quotes and notes that I have taken over the years on the topic of moral character. I hope that you will use these as a starting point for your own interest and curiosity on the topic of moral character in your work as a narrative therapist. For ease in reading, the quotes are in regular text and my subsequent comments are italicized.

For some time, how narrative therapists commonly came to know those who sought their help called upon notions of 'character'(or 'moral character',) a word that is so commonly used as perhaps to have lost its provenance and significance. It was obvious to me that writers of fiction were adepts at this and I might do well to research their considerations on such matters. For some years now, I canvassed the literature section of my local libraries and read widely. And as I did, I would write down anything relevant that assisted me to think to myself and speak aloud in workshops, training and apprenticeships. By agreement with Tom, I have edited them down to be as succinct as I might. I hope reading and re-reading below will assist you to undertake what I have referred elsewhere as 'characterising' another rather than 'pathologizing' them; something I believe has been one of Narrative Therapy's most critical departure from most other psychotherapeutic traditions.

For that reason, I have chosen to provide you with some of my references to indicate its relevance to me in my thinking and practice. And hopefully it will have the same relevance for you.

First from *Aristotle's Poetics*:

> Thought must be distinguished from character. 'Character' is what reveals a person's habit of moral choice - whatever he tends to choose or reject when the choice is not obvious…. And this element is, therefore, absent from speeches in which there is absolutely no choosing or rejecting anything by the speaker. 'Thought', on the other hand, is present when

> speakers are engaged in proving something is so or not so, or when they are making some general pronouncement. (Aristotle, 330/1982)

Now, from Stephen Most*:*

> A key concept that comes directly from tragic drama is character. The concept of character asserts that there are no ordinary people. What everyone has in common is uniqueness. “Character” has to be clearly defined. It is neither the totality of a person’s life nor what we call a personality, even though the word “person” comes from persona, the mask an actor wore to represent his character in a theatrical performance. Character has consequences. It appears when people remove the personal masks that help them fit in and instead reveal who they uniquely are.
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> Character is an abstraction similar to the designations of people in the judicial system as witnesses, defendants, and plaintiffs or in the medical system as doctors, nurses, and patients. People bring to the courtroom or to the hospital neither their whole selves nor their general experience; their roles are relevant to the case in question. For the theatre or screen, a writer selects as characters people who have a part to play in relation to the story and represents them in terms of the actions through which the story unfolds. Character is the quality of a person’s will. It is revealed through action. (Most, 2017, p. 68)

From Hannah Arendt:

> I have always believed that no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments appear, there are incidents and stories behind them which, at least for ourselves, contain, as in a nutshell, the full meaning of what we have to say. (Arendt, 1960, p. 1)

From Richard Sennett:

> “We know a person has character when we are moved by them”. (2003)

From Sven Brinkmann:

> According to Ricoeur, to achieve self-constancy, we must reflect on our lives as a whole, and the best way to do this is to look at it as a narrative. In a sense, our lives consist of stories that we must interpret and endow our experience with meaning…in contemporary psychology, we refer to this as 'narrative identity' but this is often just a modern way of expressing the older concept of character. Ricoeur's point, then, is that people are only moral, in the sick sense, when they relate to their lives as a whole or as a unit that extends backward in time and is best as a coherent narrative. Can this form the basis of an ethical life?". (2019)

From Henry James:

> "What is character but the illumination of incident, and what is incident but the illumination of character?"

A few words from Orhan Pamuk:

> Like many people, I believe Shakespeare is responsible for our conception of the modern fictional character, developed initially in a broad range of literary writings and later in the 19th c. novel. The character evolved from its centuries-old definition- the embodiment of a single basic attribute, a one-dimensional role, historical or symbolic in nature….and transformed it into a complex entity shaped by conflicting impulses and conditions. (pp. 62-3)
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> This has been influenced by scientific and psychological discoveries about the laws of nature, and later by the philosophy of positivism. 19th c. novelists began to investigate the secret souls of modern individuals, creating a splendid array of heroes and consistent characters, 'types' that represented various facets of society...spread around the world through novels/film…..excessive and disproportionate interest shown in the traits and quirks of novelistic heroes….

> So for a great many years, it was as if the entire community of world literature and critical thought forgot that what we call 'character' was especially in novels a figment of the human imagination, an artificial construct (p. 65)

> As a result of prevailing interest in psychology… a field that acquired a scientific aura in the first half of the 20th century, it quickly spread among writers like a contagious disease…
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> 'Character' is a historical construct, and that, just like our own psychological and emotional makeup, the character of literary figures is an artifice we choose to believe in (p. 67)

> Yet having a character…confers distinctiveness on a person; it sets that individual apart from others...how they fit in to the surrounding landscape, events, and milieu (p. 68)

> The c. of my novel's main protagonist is determined the same way a person's character is formed in life: by situations and events he lives through (pp. 68-9).

> The story or plot is a line that effectively connects the various circumstances I want to render in narrative (p.69).

From Todd May:

> In rough terms, narrative therapy says that who we are is largely a product of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. If our stories have themes of things never working out, we become people for whom things don't work out. If our stories have themes of fear, we become fearful. In other words, our narratives about ourselves don't merely reflect who we are: they help produce who we are.

This doesn't mean that there are no facts to which our stories respond. It is not a matter of making things up - or at least not mostly so. Our stories concern the way in which those facts fit together. They create a plot and the themes that we think our lives consist in. And in creating these, we become complicit in the creation of our lives. We come to live the stories we think we are living.

As narrative therapy recognizes, some of the stories people tell themselves are disempowering. They recount lives in a way that makes it difficult to see a way forward. The therapeutic practice, then, is to investigate with people who feel disempowered, different and more empowering stories that they might tell themselves. Like the more disempowering stories, these other narratives need to respond to the facts of a person's life. But they weave those facts together in a different way, revealing the other sides of people and allowing them to become engaged with their world in a more satisfying way. We might say that, in creating new narratives, people 'reproduce' themselves into what they would rather be.

The idea that we live narratively is not restricted to narrative therapy. Recently, the role of stories in the shaping of our lives has become the focus of a number of philosophical and psychological views of who we are. The prominent psychologist, Jerome Bruner, tells us "that it is through narrative that we create ourselves, that self is a product of our telling and not some essence to be delved for in the recesses of subjectivity".

Perhaps, then, if we seek to understand how our lives can be meaningful, we should look toward their narrative character. We should reflect on the stories that people tell themselves about their lives, to see whether we can glean something meaningful in those stories…We need not worry about whether we are discovering THE meaning of life. Our task is not one of isolating everything that might make a life meaningful. It is enough if we could find SOMETHING that offers meaningfulness. And for that, looking at the narrative character of human lives might provide a clue. (2015, pp. 65-66)

From Joan Didion:

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live."

From Isak Dinesen, the pen name of Karen Blixen:

> “To be a person is to have a story to tell.”

From Terry Eagleton:

> The word 'character' nowadays can mean a sign, letter, or symbol as well as a literary figure. It derives from an ancient Greek term meaning a stamping tool which makes a distinctive mark. From there, it came to mean a particular mark of an individual, rather like his signature. A character, like a character reference today, was a sign, portrait, or description of what a man or woman was like.
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> Then, after a while, it came to mean the man or woman as such. The sign that had stood for the individual became the individual herself.
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> The shift from character as the peculiar mark of an individual to character as the individual himself is bound up with a whole social history. It belongs, in a word, to the rise of modern individualism. Individuals are now defined by what is peculiar to them, such as their signature of indomitable personality. What distinguishes us from each other is more important than what we have in common.
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> Today, the term 'character' means the person's mental and moral qualities...The word, also, refers to figures in novels, plays, movies, and the like. (2013, pp. 48-49)

From William James:

> I have often thought that the best way to define a man’s(sic) character will be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt most deeply and immensely active and alive. At such moments, there is a voice inside which speaks and says: “This is the real me!” […] Now as well as I can describe it, this characteristic attitude in me always invokes an element of active tension, of holding my own, as it were, and trusting outward things to play and perform their part so as to make it a full harmony, but without any guarantee they will. (1920/2011, Sect. VIII)

Lastly, by Colum McCann:

We tend to think and analyze in broad sweeping characteristics(honesty, perception, integrity, etc.), but for the purposes of good storytelling you must know your character in the most exact detail. […] We have to make them so utterly real that the reader will never forget them. Writing a character into being is like meeting someone who you want to fall in love with. […] You should be able to close your eyes and dwell inside the character's body. […] Allow your characters to surprise you. […] In the end, if you don't know your character, sit down and write a letter to her. Your first line might be: *Why don't I know you?* You might be surprised by the reply. It is, after all, you writing back to yourself. (2017, pp. 24-29).

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