

# Using Stories, Art, and Play in Trauma-Informed Therapy

Montana Spiritual Care Association

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# Benefits of Stories, Art, and Play

- Trans-theoretical: may be used within nearly any theoretical orientation (TF-CBT, ACT, CBT, CPT, DBT, Psychodynamic, Narrative, Client Centered, etc.)
- Adverse childhood experiences (ACES), chronic stress, and trauma have neurobiological impact that may result in developmental delays, poor executive functioning (concentration & attention), mood reactivity, numbing, behavioral hyperactivity/agitation, sleep interruption, etc.
- Stories, art and play have neurobiological benefit. They facilitate access to feelings and sensory memories. Less threatening than direct discussion. Stories, art and play bridge clients to language to name and describe their experiences.

# The Wisdom of Milton Erickson

- “The language of play and metaphor are right-hemisphere dominant but integrated with the dominant language-based activity of the left hemisphere to create coherence, meaning and well-being” (David Crenshaw, in Mills & Crowley, 2014).
- Per Erickson, symptoms = blocked resources
- Utilization = making use of what the individual presents- symptoms, themes, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, emotional reactions, and so forth. Makes contextual shifts possible in relation to problems such that new action and/or meaning arises.
- Metaphors establish connections that do not require conscious mediation.
- Example: Friedman’s fables (Edwin H. Friedman)



# Erickson, continued...

- Ericksonian approaches:
  - indirect suggestion
  - paradox
  - metaphor
  - therapeutic double binds
  - symptom prescription
  - relabeling
  - redefining and reframing
  - the use of directives
  - focusing on the problem and introducing choice
  - encouragement rather than confrontation
  - utilization of resistance
  - humor and story telling



# Therapeutic Interaction (chaplaincy, mental health, spiritual caregiving)

- Is collaborative and strengths based
- Reduces learned helplessness and improves self-efficacy
- Alters perspective and context
- Allows previously unrealized connections and solutions to be accessible
- Allows the as-yet-unconnected to become connected
- Assumes “solutions” are within the individual and may be seeded by the therapist
- Helps clients access their own resources
- Utilizes a genuine, trusting, transparently open relationship for change
- Remains choice and solution focused

# Being Trauma-Informed

- Consider family/significant others, culture, and available resources
- Attachment and trauma are grounded in neurobiology
- Relational: Therapeutic Alliance creates sense of “being felt” out of resonance, attunement, empathy, and “good fit.”

# The Nature of Metaphor

- It is a form of symbolic communication, a *universal shorthand* or Morse code - it sends a complete message in very few *clicks*.
- It offers clues to client experience, self- and other-representation and concerns, some of which may be outside client conscious awareness (implicit memories with lack of connection between verbal/cognitive brain and emotion/attachment/sensory brain).
- Themes present in story, art and play are coherent metaphors in and of themselves (triumph/conquering, fearlessness/courage, disorganization/chaos, power/control, dependence/independence, abandonment/separation, safety/security/protection, fear/anxiety, chaos/instability, grief/loss/hopelessness, forgiveness/revenge, and mastery/competence).



# Purpose of Story Telling/Narrative

- Identification and self-representation
- Modeling
- History gathering
- Relational experience and expectations
- Trauma narrative
- Feeling-identification and expression
- Problem solving
- Coping skills

# Types of Story Telling

- Co-Created: the individual, with input, can tell a story or complete a drawing and talk about his/her drawing.
  - With children, this type of story may be in the form of a drawing, a sand tray “movie,” a puppet play, or a dramatic enactment.
  - With adults, this type of story may arise out of a Squiggles “game.” Adults also enjoy sand tray.
- Facilitator directed: the facilitator can select a story with a theme and purpose, then involve the individual in art, discussion, play. Story theme or characters relate to client issues: grief, trauma, loss, risk, choice, co-dependency, etc.

# Squiggles Practice (pick a partner, take turns)

- Facilitator closes eyes, puts marker on dry erase board, and draws a simple squiggle without lifting the marker from the board.
- Facilitator hands the marker to the individual and provides additional markers of different colors.
- Facilitator says, “This is a squiggle. Please think of something this looks like, something the squiggle reminds you of. Then use the squiggle to draw a picture. Add anything you want to, just don’t erase this squiggle.”
- After the person draws, the facilitator says, “OK, now tell me a story about your picture, with a beginning, middle and end. Once upon a time...”
- Therapist can guide the story, “What happens next” if person gets stuck
- After the story is “done,” therapist can ask open ended questions: “What might she/he do? What made him angry? I wonder how he/she will solve this problem?”
- Switch roles and model problem-solving, coping skills, acceptance, healthy interactions by changing some of the themes, actions or outcomes.



# Self-representation through stories, art and play

- Self can be portrayed by symbols, characters, emotions or story line
- Action and verbal material in play will reveal identification with characters
- The self-depiction may be conscious or pre-conscious
- Therapist learns about client's inner experience and his/her views of self, others and the world

# “Utilization”

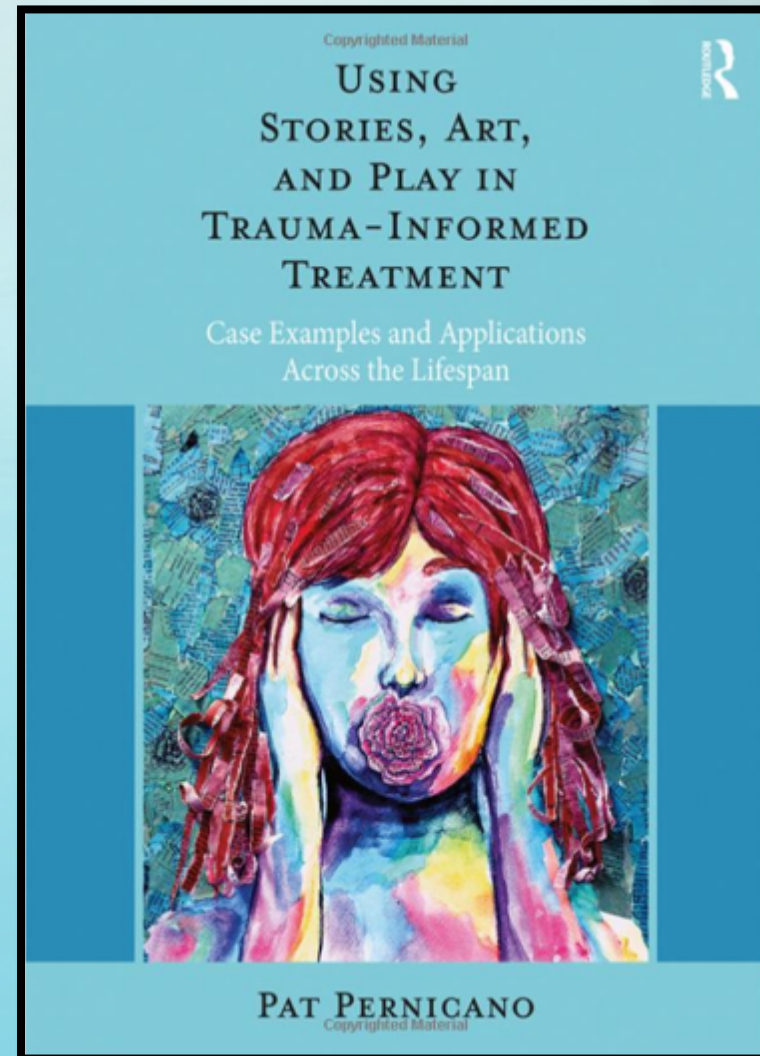
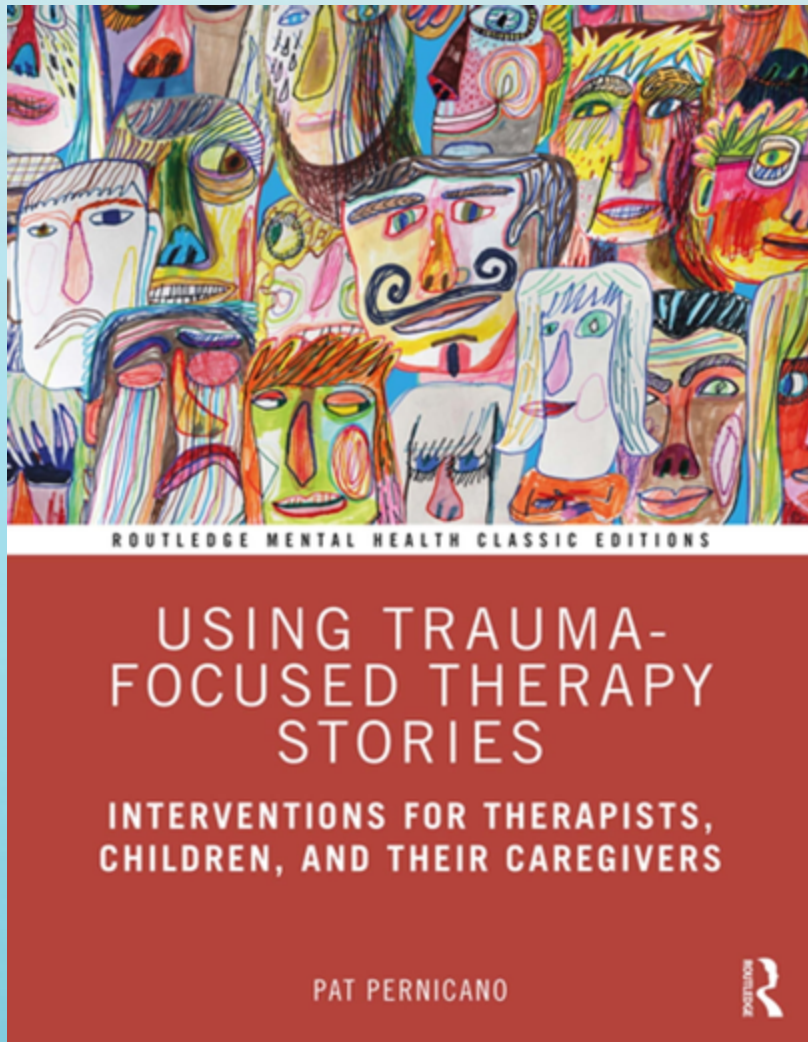
- Use what the client offers you
- Ask open-ended questions
- Don't assume something is or isn't meaningful: some things are avoidance, some are distractions, and some are clinically significant
- Don't assume something is “literally true,” as clients communicate through metaphors in stories and art activities

# Stories for Different Purposes

- Coping
- Grief
- Trauma
- Loss
- Chronic Pain or Illness
- Divorce Adjustment
- Relationships
- Communication



# Resources for Storytelling



# Stories to Address High Stress, ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences) and Trauma

- Lucky the Junkyard Dog (any age)
  - The story allows children or adults to describe family history including living arrangements, roles, caregiving. Younger children might use puppets.
  - The story allows children or adults to identify story characters that remind them of someone in their life
  - The story “normalizes” symptoms of PTSD and the process of recovery
  - The story allows readers to “prescribe” helpful interventions for Lucky
- The Cracked Glass Bowl (older children through adults)
  - This story lends itself nicely to two-part administration and intervention
  - The first part of the story is about going through an adverse life experience and feeling broken, damaged or changed
  - The story illustrates ambivalence about speaking up or getting help
  - The story illustrates a decision-making process and the stages of change
  - The story presents treatment as collaborative



# Stories, continued

- The Burden Bag (any age)
  - The story allows children or adults to describe burdens they have been carrying
  - “Burden” encompasses a wide variety of issues: forgiveness, self-blame, anger, loss, grief, trauma
  - The story introduces the concept of choice and turning over burdens to a higher power
  - The story suggests that carrying burdens can be harmful to the self
  - The story introduces idea of gratitude and counting blessings
  - The story introduces ritual, such as the person make a burden/blessing bag
- The Self-Weaving Tapestry (any age)
  - List the dark threads
  - List the brighter threads
  - Draw them in a woven tapestry and see the whole
  - How are you stronger or better because of the whole?



# Pernicano Intervention: The Burden Bag

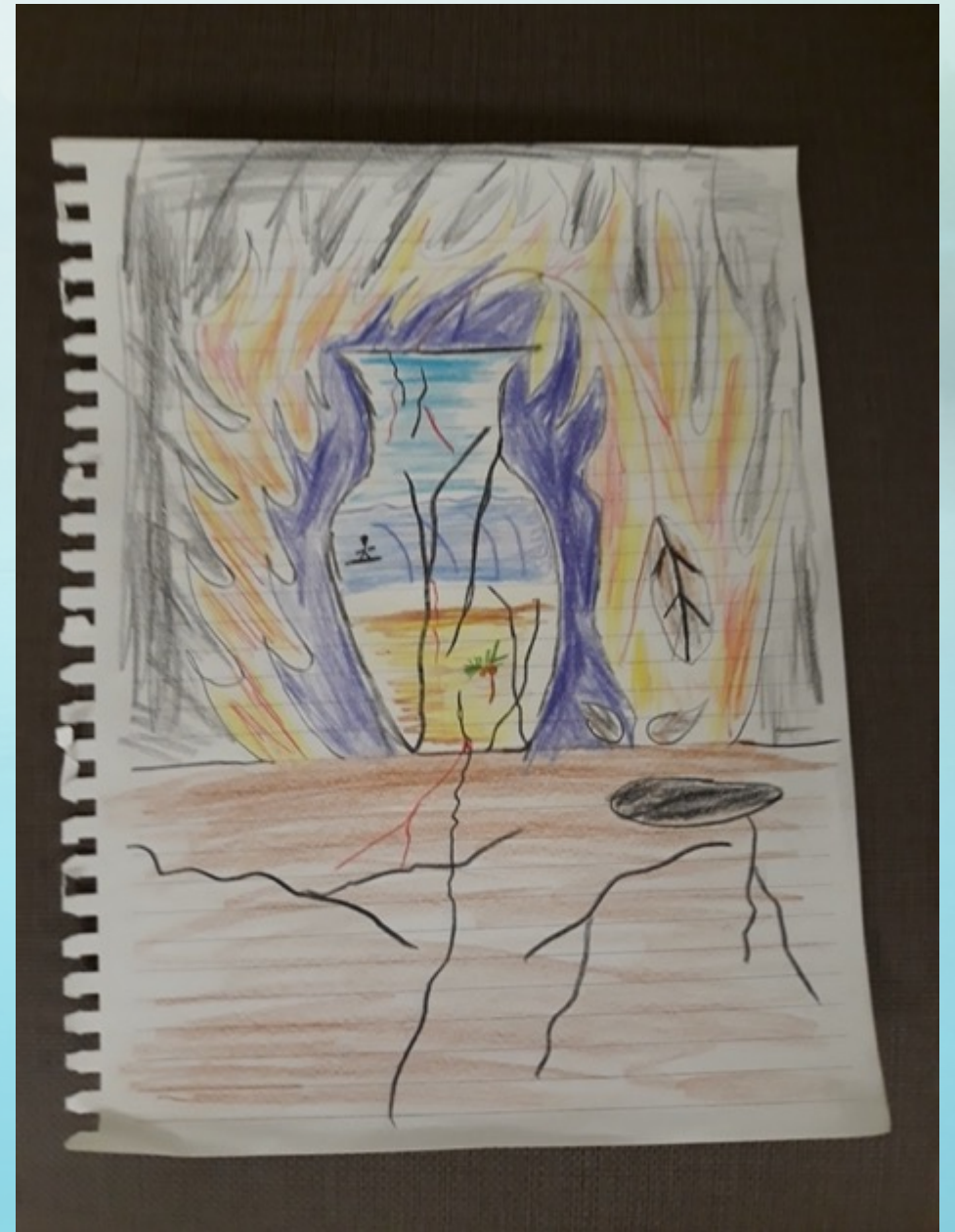
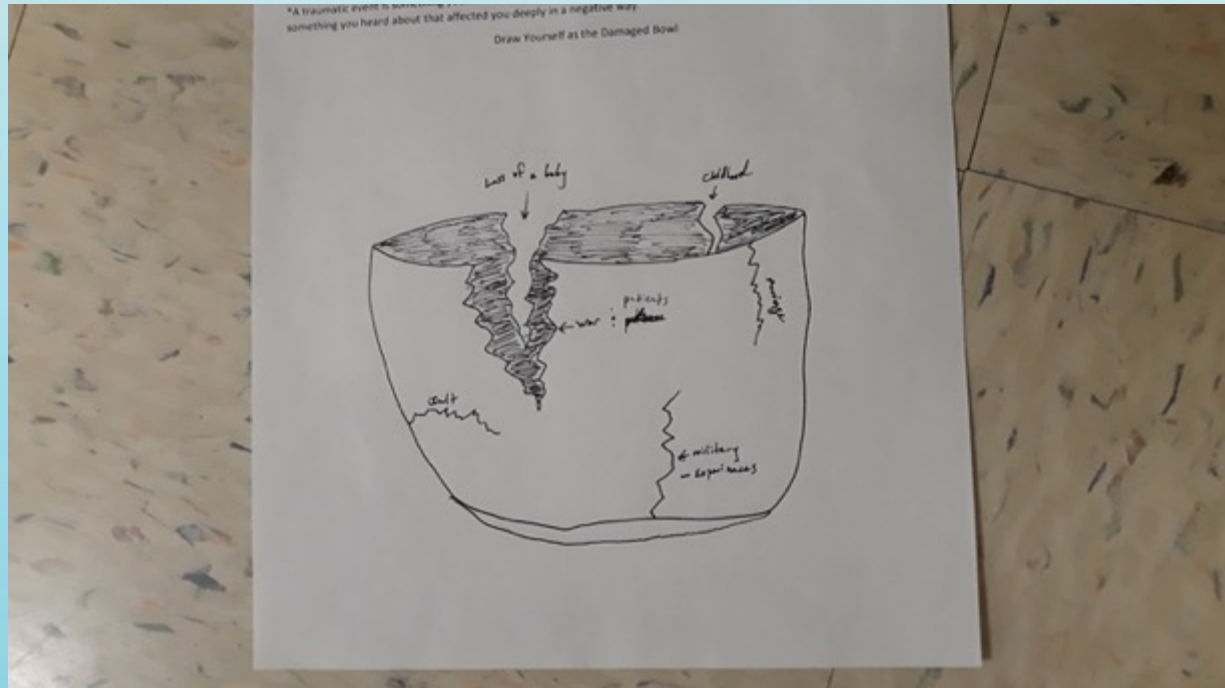
- What are you carrying?
- How long have you been carrying it?
- What is hard to let go of?
- How is carrying this burden hurting you?
- What might you choose to release or let go of? (remember that you don't lose the memories, rather, you lighten the emotional burden or heaviness of the load)
- What blessings can you add to the bag?

# Pernicano Intervention: The Cracked Glass Bowl

- Therapist reads Part I of the story to the client and asks the client to “be” the bowl. After the story, explain that everyone goes through things that leave us feeling “broken, damaged or changed.”
- Therapist asks Client to draw self as the cracked glass bowl and to label the bowl’s damages as their adverse life experiences. These are things that left the client feeling damaged, broken or changed.
- Client shows the bowl to Therapist. Therapist asks questions to obtain detailed history, client feelings and reactions.
- In a later session, therapist reads Part II of the story and asks client to draw their “new creation” bowl with changes that represent hope, healing and restoration.

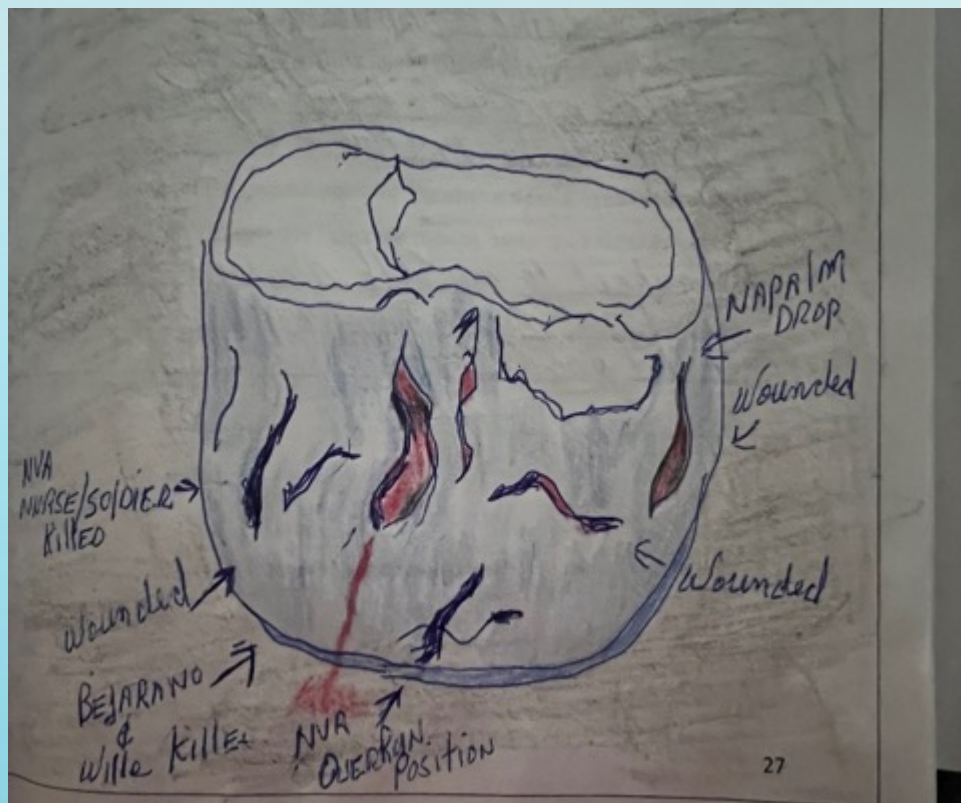


# Cracked Glass Bowl





# Vietnam Veteran Example of Cracked Glass Bowl



# Vietnam Veteran Example

This Veteran processed Vietnam trauma. He initially felt responsible for the deaths of his buddies. He lost a number of friends who, despite his warnings, rushed into the chaos of a firefight only to be taken down by the enemy. He carried the whole weight of their deaths on his shoulders all of his life.

## Bowl 1

His first bowl represented perceived damage and pain. He said, ““This is my old cup when I came in, all kinds of scars all over my body, scars inside of me in my heart that hurt; full of scars, water coming out of it. I was going to take my life and got referred to this group. I didn’t really want to be here. The group’s been really helpful. I have a new outlook on life.”

## Bowl 2

As he shared his new cup, he said, “This is my new cup, a whole new transformation. I play the guitar and I was praying in Spanish while I sang to God. ‘You’re the clay-maker, I’m the clay, transform me into a new being.’ And God said, ‘I will make you right through fire. I want you to praise me, learn how to forgive, I want your smiles.’”



# Vietnam Veteran Case

## Closing Statement:

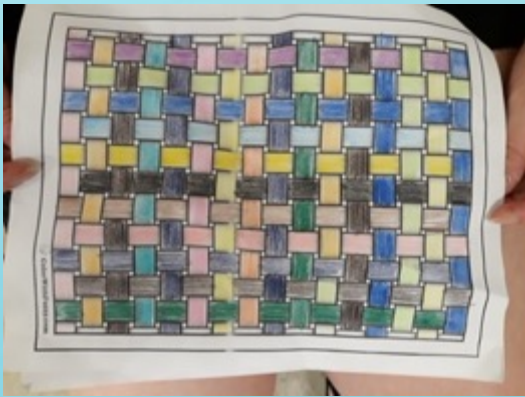
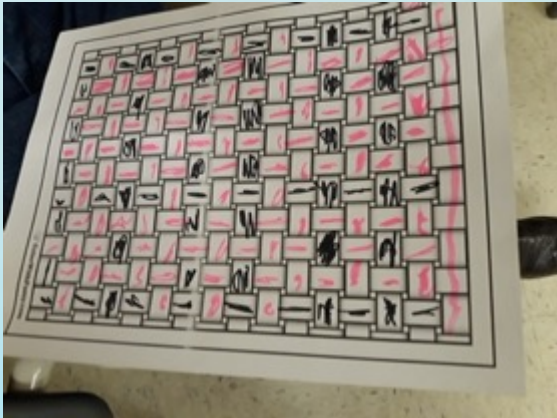
“Hope, faith, love. I learned that from you guys. I have hope now. I came so close to pulling the trigger. In the Marine Corps they said we never leave nobody behind. That ain’t true. We are human, we bleed, and we cry, not as tough as they say we have to be. I don’t want to take my life; for once I’m spending more time with my family, going to baseball games. I want to be with my grandchildren. My faith is back, I’m back with God. I’m a work in progress.”



# Pernicano Intervention: Lucky the Junkyard Dog

- Label the story characters: who would they be in your family or your past?
- Who do you identify with in the story?
- Why does Lucky have trouble trusting the new family?
- Describe a time when you felt bullied or mistreated.
- Who does the kind man remind you of in your life?
- Who do you trust? How do you know when you can trust someone?

# Self-Weaving Tapestry





# Summary

- Metaphor is a power means of communication (lament, forgiveness, connecting, healing/restoring)
- Stories can be co-created, created on the spot (Dive Deep Mermaid Story) or selected with purpose/theme in mind
- Children and adults are receptive to metaphor and story when they are offered
- Metaphor and story take people to a different part of the brain, and the understanding or “aha” is more emotional and sensory



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Dr. Pernicano, a graduate of the Baylor University Doctor of Psychology Program in 1985, taught as an adjunct faculty member in the psychology doctoral program at Spalding University for 19 years with emphases in Applied Developmental Psychology, Assessment Practicum, and Personality Assessment. She has worked in non-profit outpatient, residential, drug & alcohol, school, and Veteran Administration settings with focus on trauma-informed care, attachment, training/supervision, family reunification, and veteran moral injury. Dr. Pernicano has published and presented widely in the clinical use of metaphor, therapeutic stories, and play interventions for trauma informed care.