

SOME SFBT LANGUAGE-GAMES

Steve de Shazer

BFTC

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Wittgenstein (first in the “Blue and Brown Books”) uses the term “language game” to talk about, among other things, the home base of words. It is the language game that, as the home base of words, provides the meanings of words as they are used. By using the term “game” he emphasizes the fact that language is like a game and that, like many games, there are rules involved and often multiple players. Looked at in this way, words are defined by how two or more people, in a particular context, use them. Language is an activity within specific contexts, not something captured in dictionaries and grammar books. For example: The verb “to steal.” The meaning of the word “stealing” as used in baseball is entirely different from what stealing means when it is cars that we are talking about. We can only tell what stealing means by the context in which we use it. Two different language games stand out in SFBT: scaling questions and the miracle question.

A SCALING LANGUAGE GAME

Near the start of my practice, my clients taught me the usefulness of scaling. (This was at the time of “The Perfect Ten.”) In the first session the client who had talked about being depressed for some time, told me in the second session that he was feeling “much

better.” Of course this is good news, so I asked him “how much better?” He struggled a while with this, comparing his better feeling with how he felt at some points in the past. He concluded that he was at that time feeling much better than he had in 6 years but “not a perfect 10.” I asked him how close he was to “10” and after a moment’s thought said “8.5.”

In this particular scaling language game, “10” is defined, perhaps, as “perfect” although we never talked about this definition. Regardless of how we might have defined “10” he felt better than how he had felt in years and “8.5” is defined as “not a perfect 10.” Nonetheless it is clear that “8.5” is “better” because it is closer to “10.” This is automatic on any scale when “10” stands for something desirable: “8.5” is better than “8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0” and, of course, not as much better as “9 or 9.5” would be. Perhaps surprisingly, most of the numbers on the scale are undefined and yet “8.5” is clearly an improvement that is significant and that still leaves room for further improvements. Thus the vagueness of both terms “depressed” and “better” is at least diminished and progress is more concrete. The client and I now have established a language game in which both “better” and “worse” are easily referred to simply with a single digit.

THE MIRACLE QUESTION LANGUAGE GAME

Another useful language game developed over 20 years ago when my colleagues and I picked up the idea of using the concept of miracles from our clients. One day a client was asked: “How will you know that this problem is gone?” She responded, “That would take a miracle!” The therapist, Insoo Kim Berg, then said, “Well, suppose that a miracle did happen. What would be different?” From there the client and therapist were

able to develop a picture of how the client's life would be different if a miracle were to happen.

Despite the term's religious origins, very few clients situate their response to the miracle question within that framework since the concept is also commonly used when talking about unpredicted and unpredictable events that simply happen; effects, so to speak, without known or knowable causes. That the miracle question happens within the context of a SFBT session helps to explain what might be an unexpected lack of "religious" responses. The term "miracle," in this context of a therapy session, is given a different home base that is (usually) not religious. Of course this idea of a sudden, unexplained change has immediate appeal; people prefer changes to just happen without having to make extraordinary efforts. In fact, most changes in life simply appear to happen spontaneously and only afterwards do we recognize that something is different and only subsequently do we sometimes bother to attempt an explanation. This sort of everyday, spontaneous change fits well within the "miracle" language game. This is confirmed in most cases when clients are able to describe the day after the miracle which involves what seems to an observer to be relatively minor details of the changes in their daily lives.

The way we ask the miracle question has evolved a relatively standard structure and wording. Usually I ask it in this way:

"I have a strange, perhaps unusual question that takes some imagination ...

Suppose ... after we finish here, you go home tonight, eat dinner, do your usual chores, watch some TV, etc., and then you go to bed and go to sleep ... and, while

you are sleeping, a miracle happens ... and the problems that brought you here are solved, just like that! ... but, this happens while you are sleeping, so you cannot know that it has happened ... Once you wake up in the morning, how will you go about discovering that this miracle has happened to you?"

(Later, after the client's initial responses and some conversation.) "How will other people, your best friend, colleagues at work, your spouse, etc., discover that this miracle has happened to you – without your saying anything?"

Client: (After a long pause.) "I'd jump out of bed."

Therapist: "That would be different?"

C: "It sure would. I haven't done that in years. Usually, I have to drag myself out of bed."

T: "How would that change things?"

C: "Well, it would not change what I did, but it would change how I feel about what I do. I'd look forward to breakfast, to going to work."

T: "Hm. Would your colleagues notice a difference?"

C: "I think it would be obvious to them."

T: "How so?"

C: "For one thing, I wouldn't be the last one to get there and I'd probably smile more. I'd be dressed more carefully too."

After an initial silence, clients most frequently respond with some sort of exclamation, usually something involving feeling better even when much of what they talk about includes the same situations and behaviors that they described when talking about how things were prior to therapy when they were not feeling so good. Here, what has changed after the miracle is a matter of how they feel about these situations and behaviors that are part of their everyday life. As Wittgenstein points out "the world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy" (T, 6.43).

T: "Tomorrow is actually Saturday. Will you go to work?"

C: "No, no. (Long pause.) If this miracle had happened, I'd probably play the piano, which I have not done in months."

T: "What sort of thing might you play?"

C: "Chopin, I guess. Maybe a nocturne"

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T: "How would your best friend know, without you're saying anything?"

C: "I'd be playing the piano when she came by."

T: "Chopin?"

C: "Or Bach."

Surprisingly perhaps, clients frequently are able to describe times when things in their life have been sort of like this day after the miracle which confirms that the changes they are talking about will fit into their daily life. This, of course, makes changing far easier since it has already happened. The "miracle language game" and thus the concept of "miracle" has been situated within the therapy session and then extended to the context of everyday life.

T: "So, when was the most recent time that you remember when things were sort of like this day after the miracle, perhaps just minutes, not the whole day?"

C: "Funny you should ask that. I'd say it was three days ago. I'd actually started to play some Bach when the phone rang. I'd forgotten that."

THE MIRACLE QUESTION'S SCALE

T: "So, if '10' stands for how things are the day after the miracle and '0' stands for how things were at the time you made this appointment, where would you say things are at this point?"

C: "'3?' perhaps? No, '4'."

T: "Glad to hear that. And where was it three days ago, when you were playing the piano?"

C: "Perhaps '8.' It's hard to remember, except that it felt good to be playing."

T: "And, if your friend were to come over while you're playing, where do you think she'd say things were?"

C: "'10!' She's not heard me play in many months."

T: "So, if you're playing, she'd know you're feeling better?"

C: "She'd be shocked by the change. Wouldn't believe it."

Obviously, if the problems that brought the clients to therapy magically disappear, they will feel better. Since feeling better is an "inner process" that, Wittgenstein reminds us, "stands in need of outward criteria" (PI, #580) a description of what they will be doing when they feel better helps both client and therapist see how feeling better fits within their daily life. Wittgenstein suggests how come talking in detail about feeling better might be useful to the client:

"How long have you been happy?" A peculiar question. But it might make sense. The answer might be: "Whenever I think about it" (LWPP, p. 2e). That is, it seems that unless we focus on feeling better we are likely to distract ourselves with problems and/or the normal difficulties of everyday life and thus we easily forget that we feel better than we did at other times. Thus, between session experiments (such as in this case, "observe any and all signs, no matter how small, that you are getting closer to "5"), when given, can serve as a reminder. (Remember: "Feeling better" is not necessarily the same as "feeling good." "Feeling good" is from a different language game.)

Many clients, particularly adolescents, find talking about what their best friend might notice far easier than talking about how they themselves will know. Perhaps this is because the question situates the better feelings within a relationship and a context where they make sense. This question allows the client to look at himself or herself from another's perspective and thus talk about him/herself as a "she" or "he" which will enable the client to give descriptions of their different behaviors – within the framework of their best friend's outsider's perspective – and everyday social interaction.

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