

THINKING ABOUT THE MIRACLE QUESTION

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The “miracle question” is not a simple question with a ready answer like: “What time is it?” “10:15.” When it is mistakenly seen as a simple question, then therapists seem to get the idea that clients should answer in a certain way (an ideal answer, perhaps) and when they do not – which is most of the time – then they, the therapists, say that the MQ did not work. This idea or expectation handicaps both therapist and client. Of course a client cannot give “the” answer, he or she can only give “an” answer. The MQ is not delivered with the intent of eliciting a specific answer; this sort of “question” is meant to be heard as but one element in a longer statement, the longer one being the move to which the speaker intends his clients to address their responses. That is, I see the MQ as a frame-setting device, a way to initiate a language game that determines and defines what it is that the client and therapist are to talk about next. What the MQ asks is for the client to talk about their wishes for their life-after-the-problem-is-gone. And usually clients will do this. They say things like: “I’ll feel like pounds have been lifted from my shoulders.” “I’ll jump out of bed.” “I’ll go to work much the same as usual except that I will want to go to work.” As is frequently the case, the client begins by talking about how they will “feel better” immediately.

Don’t I look into myself and say: “What is the right word for this feeling, this mood?” – And is it clear that my mood isn’t intensified, for instance, by this looking? (Wittgenstein, 1982, p. 78e).

Indeed, exploring the “better feelings” involved in this initial response, by looking at more details and the surrounding context seems to intensify the feelings. This is brings something else to mind Wittgenstein says about feelings that seems to apply in this situation.

“‘How long have you been happy?’ A peculiar question. But it might make sense. The answer might be: ‘Whenever I think about it.’”(Wittgenstein, 1982, p. 2e.)

Certainly one of the therapeutic challenges is how to help clients maintain this kind of “feeling better,” or to help the client figure out how to keep “feeling better” in mind so that he/she does not forget that he/she feels better. Since “better” feelings tend to be fleeting – particularly in this beginning of constructing a solution – the therapist will first wait a bit to see if the client continues with more in the same vein. If not, he will ask a question related to what the client has said: “Pounds lifted – hmm, so what will you do as a result?” “After jumping out of bed, what will you do next?” “How will things be different once you get to work?” In each case, the therapist’s response is designed to help the client develop more details and to begin to place the clients’ descriptions in a larger, social context – since, as Wittgenstein points out: When it comes to emotions and feelings, the main question is: “In what sort of context does it occur?”(Wittgenstein, 1982, p. 3e). When the client imagines “feeling better” in a wider range of situations involving various other people then he or she can begin to make the switch from “I am able to imagine that I feel better” to “I am able to imagine that I am better” which probably would not happen if the description remained only about his or her feelings since these are too difficult to keep in mind. Of course this sort of talk is not

normal; we would never actually say “I am able to imagine ...” We might say simply “I imagine ...” but this seems to evolve, gradually or swiftly into the more common phrase “I feel better” which is a perfectly normal way to talk. It is common, in fact, for clients to shift out of the conditional (“I would ...”) into the simple present tense. Use of a future tense in describing the day after the miracle is quite uncommon.

Many clients find responding to the question about how other people would know that the miracle has happened much easier than they do when the question is asked about themselves. Perhaps this is because the question situates the better feelings within a context where they make sense: after all, any “‘inner process’ stands in need of outward criteria” (Wittgenstein, 1968, # 580) and “feeling better” is no exception. It seems reasonable in this situation, that the client must ask himself/herself a question like this in this situation: “How will other people react to my feeling better (after the miracle)?” That is, in order to make a description, the client has to imagine feeling better and, as a result, behaving differently and, perhaps, thinking differently. A rather complicated task but one many people seem to do quite readily.

Thus, the miracle question does not really function like a question at all. Rather it is the opening move in this language game and, when the client responds, the therapist will ask a question to help the client clarify and expand his initial response. In this way, the unit of analysis becomes 1) Client statement – >2) therapist question. (We have a saying at BFTC: The answer you get tells you what question you asked.) Clearly, this is not a situation in which the client has all the answer’s deep inside and therapist pulls them out. Rather it is a situation in which they are together constructing the concept “better” and designing an approach to reaching this more desirable situation.

Another, related idea also handicaps therapists and clients. Sometimes when working with couples or family or groups, many therapists behave as if they think each person must get equal time to talk. Thus, each person is given the opportunity to describe their individual wishes around the results of the miracle. This of course would be reasonable if the answers were already somewhere inside each person. However, the response to the miracle question is actually constructed between the participants and nobody knows ahead of time what this picture will look like. (Therapists sometimes behave as if they forgot that listening is a normal part of any conversation.)