

La metafora: the power of metaphors and creative resources in working systemically with families and children with autism—*a conversation with Carmine Saccu*

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Abstract

Metaphors are valuable tools of expression, which give meaning to situations and allow the spontaneous processing of feelings and emotions. As therapists, we can support clients to develop and create their individual metaphor to explain their own meaning of experiences or communicate their perception of problems. Creativity provides us with a rich landscape to explore, expand, and enrich ourselves as therapists and consequently our clients. As systemic therapists, we are responsible for the co-creation of a human process, which has at its core safety in allowing expression, connection, and movement. Through a respectful and curious approach, we can develop pathways to tap organically into our 'creative selves' while reaching into our clients' creativity and selves as catalysts for connection and positive change. Creative resources and therapies have been successfully used in psychotherapy to enhance the mental and emotional well-being of children, particularly children with autism who have limited verbal capacity or who are non-verbal. These children also wish to be understood in expressing their thoughts and feelings; however, they use other methods of communication – sometimes obvious, sometimes not. Therefore, it is important that a therapist can access diverse ways to support the child through this process. The creative use of animals in therapy neutralises spaces, eliciting calm, safety, and healing. This is particularly the case when working with this group of children. This paper is derived from my conversation with an elder statesman of the family therapy profession, Professor Carmine Saccu. He is a jovial master

The video version of the interview will be available on the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* website with a link to the journal's YouTube channel.

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storyteller who craftfully communicates via metaphors. Through creative means, play, and humour, he has developed a remarkably unique way of working with children, especially non-verbal children with autism. He uses his canine, co-therapist Mafalda, as a powerful resource and intervention strategy to safely elicit engagement and connection in the therapeutic space.

KEYWORDS

animal therapy, childhood autism, creative resources, family therapy, metaphors

Key points

- Metaphors have powerful utility in the therapeutic space, assisting clients explain situations, giving meaning to experiences, and naming and processing feelings.
- Metaphors assist therapists to explore the ideas and forces and powers that lie beneath the overt; when integrated into storytelling, they can bring lightness, humour, fantasy, and mystery, sometimes subtle, other times powerful.
- What non-verbal children with autism do always carries meaning. They communicate, however, in different ways. Systemic therapists and clinicians working with these children must search for what is not obvious, overt, or visible, tapping into relational messages, capturing the hidden and meta messages, to reveal the essential meaning that is expressed by the child.
- This requires the safe and skilful use of internal and external creative resources in supporting the child in accessing information, facilitating communication, and enhancing connection.
- The use of animals in the therapeutic space is an effective resource when working with children with autism; they contain the capacity to neutralise spaces, eliciting calmness, safety, and healing.

INTRODUCTION BY DEISY AMORIN-WOODS

The power of metaphors in making sense of life

I recall, even as a young child living in Peru, how my mother, a respected school educator, articulate orator, and engaging storyteller who (in her free time) immersed herself in writing and poetry, would communicate through metaphors. She used them as a way of explaining life circumstances and expressing herself and to help us express ourselves as well as to connect us to family and history and culture. I recall her using metaphors such as 'a mal tiempo buena cara' (literal translation: 'during bad times, pleasant face'), to explain the importance of maintaining positivity despite life struggles; when she used the expression 'cerrando con broche de oro' ('closing off with a golden brooch'), we knew that the end of a discussion or conversation was near and we needed to be aware of ending it clearly and articulately, yet gently and respectfully as what was said last would linger. As a child, I found these metaphors made sense of things, put things into perspective, and created understanding and safety.

Listening to Carmine Saccu communicating through metaphors took me to a familiar place, that of my childhood waiting eagerly for my mama to return from work to communicate with me through a warm and nurturing serve of metaphors. Saccu skilfully integrates the use of metaphors, creatively weaving storytelling and even the use of his beloved Mafalda into the therapeutic space.

Metaphors assist therapists to explore the ideas and forces and powers that lie beneath the overt. When integrated into storytelling, they can bring lightness, humour, fantasy, and

mystery, sometimes subtle, other times powerful. Nonetheless, they can engage and connect the person to the present, yet also transport one into a different context and time (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001).

The importance of metaphors cannot be underestimated. They take on a particular meaning in systemic and family psychotherapy. Metaphors are valuable tools of expression that assist in understanding information, giving meaning to situations and processing feelings and emotions. As therapists, we can support clients to develop and create their individual metaphor to explain their own meaning of experiences that assists in communicating their perception of problems. Metaphors (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001) are useful in generating solutions that consider a continuum of options which reflect the complexity and depth of many clients' 'problem-saturated' stories. The evolution of family therapy from a cybernetic metaphor to a narrative metaphor has led to thinking differently about therapy, about clients, and about oneself as a therapist (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994).

The use of creative means in family therapy

Creativity in systemic practice provides us with a rich terrain, while allowing us to explore, expand, and enrich ourselves as therapists. As we engage in this process, it elicits our clients' ability to engage in the same (Amorin-Woods & Larner, 2022). As family and systemic therapists, we are responsible for the co-creation of a human process which has at its core safety in order to allow expression and movement. We, therefore, need to apply a respectful, curious, and creative approach in developing pathways to reach self and the other while tapping organically into our creative resources as catalysts for connection and positive change. The use of creativity and creative means in the therapeutic space allows us to tap into areas that we would not normally do and facilitates our ability to help our clients draw into areas they may not have thought about, which facilitates the therapeutic process (Amorin-Woods & Larner, 2022).

Working with non-verbal children with autism

Creative resources or therapies have been successfully used in psychotherapy to enhance the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of individuals across all age groups, particularly children. Through the art of creativity, therapists can help enhance a child's imagination, increase learning skills, and develop their ability to communicate. This approach is particularly beneficial among children with autism (NIDCD, 2020). Some children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are non-verbal. This does not mean that they cannot or do not have a desire to communicate. They still want to be understood and wish to express their thoughts and feelings as others would; however, they use other methods of communication – sometimes obvious, sometimes not. Therefore, it is important that a therapist be able to facilitate this process (Spain et al., 2017).

The use of animals in working with children with autism

The mere presence of an animal as a pet may stimulate the body to release serotonin, prolactin, and oxytocin. These hormones generate a relaxation and stress-reducing response, enhancing mood and reducing anxiety (UCLAHealth, 2023). Animals used as resources in therapy may neutralise spaces by eliciting calmness, safety, and healing. This is particularly the case when working with children with behavioural and affective issues and non-verbal children. This is the reason therapeutic services are increasingly making use of animals, particularly dogs, as co-therapists in facilitating their clinical work (Berry et al., 2012).



BACKGROUND TO THE INTERVIEW

This paper arose from the third of three conversations and interviews I conducted around the time of the European Association of Family Therapy (EFTA) conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in late 2022. My overall aim in conducting these conversations was to immerse myself more fully in the legacy of the Italian pioneers of family therapy, including the Milan approach, starting with the famous ‘Milan Four’ – Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin, and Prata. Through my curiosity as a stance, dialogue as a medium, and the exchange of rich stories as a process, my wish was to generate deeper knowledge and understanding about that pivotal time. My previous conversations with Matteo Selvini (Amorin-Woods & Selvini, 2023), and Andrea Mosconi (Amorin-Woods & Mosconi, 2023), allowed me to learn about and gain a deeper understanding of these influential figures in family therapy through the recollections, reflections, and experiences from people who were trained during that seminal time.

While at the EFTA conference, I took the opportunity to have a conversation with Professor Carmine Saccu, one of the remaining ‘elder statespersons’ of family therapy from those early days and a revered figure in our profession as academic, author, and clinician.

ABOUT PROFESSOR CARMINE SACCU

Carmine Saccu is a child neuropsychiatrist, family therapist, and former Professor of the faculty of Child Neuropsychiatry at the Sapienza University in Rome. He has carried out clinical activities for many years as head of the family therapy service. He also carried out didactic analysis at the Roman Institute of Psychoanalysis. Since 1975, he has been active in the teaching, training, and supervision of family therapists.

Carmine is a family therapy pioneer who started his work at the beginning of the 1970s in Rome when he founded the Center for the Study of Systems Communication. He is a founding member of the Institute of Family Therapy (ITF), The Italian Society of Family Therapy (SITF), The Italian Society of Psychology and Relational Psychotherapy (SIPPR), The Italian Federation of Psychotherapy Associations (FIAP), the Institute for Systemic Mediation Onlus (IsMeS), The European Family Therapy Association (EFTA), and founder and current director of the Roman School of Family Psychotherapy.

The Roman School of Family Psychotherapy was founded in 1992, following the closure of the ITF in Rome which he cofounded in 1975. The School provides clinical services, carries out clinical training, and conducts research.

The School follows a systemic–relational–symbolic–experiential model that enhances the individual in their interpersonal systems of reference. In training, the lines of systemic and dynamic epistemology converge in a theoretical and clinical space that explores the therapist's person and the evolutionary relationship with the family. It is a constructionist approach that borrows from the second-order cybernetics the idea of the therapist being included in the system, highlighting the conception of the use of the therapist's ‘self’ as the main clinical resource which considers the family a conceptual apex for observation and intervention.

The Roman School proposes an approach: systemic, referring to systems theory; relational, because it identifies relationships as the basic unit of human relationships; symbolic, as it includes the dimension of the unconscious in the understanding of human summit; and experiential, emphasising the ability to learn through experience. Carmine is particularly competent in working with children, adolescents, and their families in situations of separation and with children presenting with antisocial behaviours, ASD, child psychosis, learning difficulties, hyperkinetic behaviour syndrome, and attention deficits and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders. Through creative means, play, and humour, Professor Saccu has developed a unique way of working with children in therapy. He is exceptionally skilled in activating the resources of the therapist's imagination. In the elaboration of these areas of resonance, he helps therapists to discover creative and endless potential, including activation of the therapist's connection with fantasy while enhancing their ability to create new spaces for relationships.



Carmine is a wise, genial, jovial, and deeply engaging and entertaining storyteller. With dialogue-containing stories, filled with metaphors and symbols, he and I engage in a lively conversation communicated mainly in Italian. Below is an extract based on this conversation.

THE CONVERSATION

Deisy Amorin-Woods: So, we find ourselves at the Ljubljana University as part of the European Family Therapy Association conference. I've just concluded the last of my two presentations in this very room. And now, I have the pleasure of speaking with Professor Carmine Saccu. We caught up last, pre-pandemic, in Naples at the last European Family Therapy Association Conference in September 2019.

It is a great pleasure seeing you again Carmine. I am grateful for the opportunity to have this impromptu chat with you.

I would like to get a picture of you and your work. If it's okay with you, would you mind telling us some key aspects of your background ... how you came to be in our field, your influencers, and perhaps those whom you have influenced.

Carmine Saccu: I was born in Sardinia, in 1939, the year World War 2 broke out and Freud died, so I was left with this wish to become a psychiatrist. When I finished medicine, I entered the program of child neuropsychiatry of the University of Rome, and there I met Mara Selvini. Also there, I met Maurizio Andolfi, and we became friends. Then in 1972 Maurizio went to America for two years to undertake his systemic and family therapy training where he was trained by and worked under important systemic practitioners such as Minuchin, Ackerman, and Whitaker. He returned in 1974. I had been working with Luigi Cancrini, while training in family therapy. I didn't want to travel abroad, I wanted to stay in Rome. All the residents gathered around me given we were the only ones at that time focusing on systems thinking and systemic training. Our "Bible" became *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (Watzlawick et al., 1967) and research. Then with this group, we rented an apartment while our professor supported us by providing us with a meeting place within the faculty. When Maurizio returned to Italy, he helped with the teaching of our group. We worked within the clinic and outside the clinic. Then Maurizio and I, alongside two other colleagues, developed the Institute of Family Therapy (Istituto di Terapia Familiare) which became very famous in Rome, and in Europe, because it contained a "provocative" lens ... the family provokes ... and we create the "counter provocation" ... just like with Selvini Palazzoli and the paradox, where they created a counter paradox (Selvini Palazzoli, 1978). These concepts were very important just like transference and countertransference with Maturana and von Foerster (Maturana, 1970; Maturana Romesín, 2005; von Foerster, 1970). The paradigm changes where two unconscious minds meet that don't know each other, then a new narrative is born which changes the system. Hence, the therapist no longer controls the relationship because there is no more up and down, there is instead co-construction.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Thank you, Carmine, for sharing the historical background of your beginnings as a neuropsychiatrist and your initiation into family therapy and the powerful influence of systems thinking and systemic models of psychotherapy through your connection with Selvini-Palazzoli and Andolfi, and the application of important concepts such as paradox and counter-paradox. Given you are speaking in Italian, I will be trying my best to interpret and communicate it in English as we go along (for the benefit of those listening/watching), however given the challenges in following through, I will do a proper translation of our conversation when I write an article about this later.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: The first thing I wish to ask you is, who is this?



Carmine Saccu: This? This is Mafalda (a pug dog). She is 3 years and 8 months. She is the second. The first one Lola, who I had with me from 2002 to 2013, was a “psychotherapist” who always worked with me and with families, and she also worked with me while providing training and education. She (Lola), like this one, (Mafalda) was great, she would go everywhere with me.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: I believe Lola sadly passed away a few years ago ...?

Carmine Saccu: Yes, Lola died in 2013. I had her for over a decade and she (Mafalda) from 2019 until now.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: So, you had Lola for 11 years and Mafalda so far for 3 years and during that time you have used them as “collateral resources” they are part of the “team,” as they are also “family therapists” ...

Carmine Saccu: Yes, they are part of the process, they have been known by the families, they are part of and used in different situations. Let me tell you a story ... one time, during one of the sessions, Mafalda greeted the father, the mother, the adolescent, and the pre-adolescent (the IP) who still slept with their parents. Then Mafalda proceeded to lay on the floor and pooped in front of all of them, so I wondered, what does this mean? What is she (Mafalda) trying to communicate? Finally, it dawned on me, and so I said, “Now I understand. She's saying that you are making a living out of shit!” and they (the family) smiling replied, “Yes, yes!” After some time, the family came with a new dog of their own.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Amusing and interesting. Mafalda, as was Lola, are instrumental elements of the therapeutic process. Continuing the tradition, Mafalda is present and involved, creating opportunities and acting as a resource with the family just like the example you shared when working with this family and the pre-adolescent who as the “identified patient” comes along presenting with “problems.”

Carmine Saccu: Do you know why it's important? Mafalda doesn't speak, and the autistic child also doesn't speak. Then we must learn the proto-mental concept, like “Bion” says (Bleandonu, 1994; Lombardi, 2009; Sanders, 1984). Thus with the “proto-mental” concept, we must think about what has not yet been spoken. This is a good exercise that we must consider, so we can work with children who present with childhood autism or psychosis.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Mafalda, then, acts as a sensor measuring these elements and as a medium of communication. You are comparing her to an autistic child who doesn't talk, or a psychotic child who doesn't want to talk, and so through Mafalda's intervention they are able to communicate these other messages that have perhaps not been communicated in a “palpable” manner. What an amazing tool using Mafalda in this way as part of the process of therapy. That's astounding. Would you like to share another story about your style of work and what has influenced this work?

Carmine Saccu: The way I work is based on my training, which is something like the Amazon River. There is a river that comes from Venezuela and a river that comes from Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador (Amazon). That water is yellow, dense, and warm, the other that comes from Venezuela is limpid and clear and then they meet in Manaus. You can see that they flow side by side, one black and the other blonde. Then they mix. I have done this with systemic and psychodynamic epistemology and training. I initially completed an analytical training for four years, then I also conducted years of systemic training, so the blending of both guides my work. My training took place during a period where Basaglia (Basaglia, 1964, 1987; Foot, 2014), introduced social psychiatry. That is why all the residents gathered around me and Maurizio. He had just returned from the USA where he conducted his systemic training and practice and so he was like Jesus with the 12 apostles! We were offering something new and unique. We did so much and worked together for 18 years setting up many important conferences. There was a lot of training and professional development on offer where people came from all parts of Italy.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: I find the way you use symbolisms, metaphors, and metaphoric comparisons to express and heighten meaning very interesting. I appreciate the way you explain integration between psychodynamic and systemic approaches by bringing in the blending of the South American rivers, to form the Amazon River, starting with the river (Maranon) coming from Peru



and the river from Venezuela (Rio Negro) each with their own distinctive characteristics and qualities coming along separately finally meeting up in Manaus, blending into the Amazon River, integrating into a richer whole.

Carmine Saccu: Yes, integrating them, not creating battles between each other, not fighting, but blending and integrating. They “walk” alongside each other. They reveal themselves and then together, they create the Amazon River. I love recounting stories through metaphors. I am someone who “sings” the stories when telling stories!

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Yes, indeed you do, I find you one of the most captivating, attention-capturing storytellers of our profession. You love telling a story, or rather as you say, “sing the story” to recount experiences, making it more interesting, memorable, and “transportive.” What comes to mind when I hear you call it “singing stories,” while you are not actually singing, the manner within which you tell it contains history and tradition, brought to present time through different tunes and diverse verses.

Carmine Saccu: Yes, I like very much to share my experiences with others, and I like to do it through story-telling and story-singing. Let me tell you a story where I had gone to Sinai, where I found the 11th commandment. Do you know what it is? ... well, the 11th commandment says: “Nobody likes the couple, not even God!” When there's a couple, God said I will always put someone in the middle of your way, so then comes along the mother-in-law who is always in the middle, and the children who also get in the way! So then, the couple become disconnected from each other.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: That's amusing ... Can you please repeat that metaphor?

Carmine Saccu: “Nobody likes the couple, not even God.” It is like when Adam and Eve got put together, God remained outside, and so it became an “isosceles triangle,” so when the child gets in the middle the parents become disconnected. When this happens, the boy, as per Oedipus, takes the mother, and the girl, as per Electra, takes the father, becoming an isosceles triangle. Dad with daughter, mother with son, and the other stays outside. In forming this triangle, dad with the daughter, mother with the son, it results in the third one staying outside the sphere which becomes a “rhombus.” We then have two triangles forming a rhombus if the first generation agrees with the last one. It does this, so the parents become more and more disconnected from each other, then the first generation comes this way, and the last generation goes that way so then the family, well the parents become distanced, so the couple disappears. In couples therapy you should not only see the two of them, but you must see the first generation and the third generation to form an alliance.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: So, in preventing the couple “disappearing,” couple therapy must neither be limiting focusing only on that one sub-system, nor exclusionary, but rather inclusionary of the sub-systems, the generation that came before and the generation that follows.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: I appreciate your metaphors. Incidentally, you recently wrote a book titled *Dentero, le Meteore e Dio* (2019) (Saccu, 2019).

Carmine Saccu: Yes, it is about a metaphor where children can help “raise” their parents in order to create changes.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: You mean the child helping to create growth in the parents ...?

Carmine Saccu: Adolescents can help because parents are pedagogic, but they must become psychological in order to understand, relate, and speak with teenagers.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: So, the book is about the varied creative ways whereby children can help parents understand each other and (in turn) them in establishing unity. This is important because parents tend to come from a place of authority, instructing, teaching, and so they are not tapping onto relational ways to connect with each other or with their children. I would like to say this is somewhat like the element of Mafalda and Lola creating and bringing to the fore a different way of understanding and thinking ... a novel way of working, and consequently improving relating and functioning.

Carmine Saccu: Yes, well I am currently writing another book which is about children with autism and children with psychosis. You have seen Mafalda when I go anywhere, she always comes with me. She always wants to be in relationship with me, and she is always happy to show that she is in relationship with me The autistic child is also in relationship but denies the relationship. You talk



to him, but he goes like this, or like that. So, one of his siblings, his brother might say this to him, or his sister might say that to him, but he never gets in relationship with them or with you. Yet, mum is in relationship with him, dad is in relationship with him, brother and sister are in relationship with him, teacher is in relationship with him, psychotherapist is in relationship with him, speech therapist is in relationship with him. He is at the centre. So, he has a principle which is that of “absolute relationality,” that is, he must always be in relationship, but denying the relationship, while, on the other hand, Mafalda stays happy and contented, so the point is ... do you know what Gruyere is? it is a cheese with many holes.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Oh yes, of course ...

Carmine Saccu: In the world everyone looks at the autistic child as if he is full of holes. Therefore, the speech therapist feels required to fill a hole, the neuropsychiatrist must feel another hole, the family psychotherapist fills another hole, mum and dad feel they must fill another hole.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: So ... the child is the main part of the Gruyere cheese.

Carmine Saccu: No, the child is “Parmesan.”

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Alright, so the child is Parmesan because he is a solid, firm block, hard to penetrate?

Carmine Saccu: Well, yes, because he remains strong and firm to never get distracted, he pays attention to always stay in relationship, but he doesn't enter the time.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Such an intriguing way of explaining it. So, the name of the book that you are currently writing about childhood autism is: *I sommi sacerdoti autismo e psicosi infantili (High priests: working with children with childhood autism and Psychosis)* (Saccu, 2022).

Carmine Saccu: Yes, high priests. it is like a pyramid. They (the priests) stand high ... in eternal time. If they enter the time, they become immortal ... in terms of the family, normally a parent and a child are in relationship with each other, and no matter what, they find ways to communicate and connect with each other while being nearby ...

Deisy Amorin-Woods: So, in discussing the case of a child with autism in relation to their parent, you are comparing them with Mafalda and you, where Mafalda is contented being in and staying in relationship with you, she feels securely attached to you, she knows where you are at and feels happy to come and go while still remaining connected to you ... I see her now showing signs of this connection coming close to you, looking up at you, wagging her tail. The autistic child, on the other hand, while he's nearby his parents, the child negates or appears to reject the relationship.

Carmine Saccu: Yes, he denies the relationship, but everyone is related to him. This is the principle of “absolute relationality” (Huggett et al., 2023), it is in eternal time because it is chronic, and by that, I mean that it does not move in time so we must let them enter in time.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Mafalda then is used as resource in this situation, she comes in to support the process, since she (Mafalda), like the child, also doesn't speak, she becomes a useful and rich resource and a communication medium for the child with autism to communicate with and via her.

Carmine Saccu: Yes, it is possible then for the child to understand her (Mafalda). The child is possibly sending the information, but he cannot say that he is sending it, so between Mafalda and him, the information goes to and from. Information is sent to the autistic child via Mafalda, and Mafalda receives information from the child. The autistic child always sends information; however, it is up to the therapist to understand. What the child is doing/saying always carries meaning. They are trying to communicate in different ways.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Indeed, so it is about searching for what is not obvious, overt, or visible, tapping onto relational messages going on, capturing the hidden and meta messages, to reveal the essential meaning that is expressed by the child ... so, given the child is unable to express through verbal means, Mafalda becomes a resource and communication medium for the non-verbal child entering a different realm of expression, understanding, and connection. Therefore, if the autistic child gets distracted through this medium and process, at that moment he is then able to enter the same time, where relating and connection lives. It makes sense.

Carmine Saccu: Let me tell you another story, a family comes along, two parents, a dad, and a mum. Then there's a very kind and approachable 20-year-old big sister and a 17-year-old sister, who presents as rude and hostile. The little girl (identified patient) is 4 years old and the school informs her parents that she is always alone ... she does not talk to anyone, she plays on her own all the time, and so just before session commences I see the little girl nearby playing with toys, her name is Loredana and so we enter the room and I start talking to Loredana ... who is actually not there.

I say "Hi Loredana, how are you? Well, come sit on my knee." This was a very interactive Loredana, and I begin to talk and sing to her "Loredana ... Loredana."

Deisy Amorin-Woods: So, you mean you are interacting with a "made-up" Loredana, one who doesn't exist?

Carmine Saccu: Yes, the Loredana I was talking with and singing to, was an invented one ... then the real Loredana goes like this (became alert) and so, in that moment, she "enters in time" because she is being distracted from absolute relationality.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: That's fascinating. So, at that point the real Loredana sort of "awakens?"

Carmine Saccu: Yes, and she starts coming towards me and then I continue. I say to the other Loredana (the invisible one) "Come" ... then the "real" Loredana becomes curious, and she follows me. Then at one point she stands in front of me and looks at my face, then starts touching my face, and my glasses, then she indicates for me to give her my glasses, and as I do, she takes them to her mother.

Now, the mother lives with many brothers of the husband, sisters, and there is the mother-in-law. The mother of the husband who is overpowering, controlling, and commands everyone, so there is not a good relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. Then the daughter-in-law says I can't come because I always must take care of the little girl, so the little girl stops time and spins mum around, and so, takes her away from the family.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: These are all such riveting stories. In the case of the last one, through using creativity and fantasy you facilitate the organic emergence of the child, the "real" Loredana. This gentle emergence into time then elicits her connection with you, then her interaction and connection with her mother, and in turn with the family. This helps to construct means of communication and interaction. You use various processes and resources to highlight and strengthen the connection and the interaction. Also, through accessing these various tools and strategies and as you are doing it, you are teaching the parents how to do it, the parents then are able to observe, and practice so they too can use these tools at home.

Carmine Saccu: Yes, certainly, we need to change. You have to change the way of thinking of all adults involved including the family, the professionals and others because the child's attention of 100% (in a given time) is not possible, thus the need to distract. If you help the child enter "in time," then they are no longer "Parmesan."

Think of the child in terms of having a mission. In this case the mission of the little girl was to protect mum, to keep mum away from the extended family, away from the unsafe family dynamics. We must find the way to distract the child, so it is up to us to find ways to do this, using various opportunities to construct, to create, if they distract in time then they can learn. These children were born for others, always for the benefit of others. They send messages that they are there, but it is about distilling the messages.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: So, in your work, you elicit engagement with the family through the child whether it is a teenager, or a younger child in working with the family and while using creative resources. You use Mafalda, an amazing resource to bring the relationship alive; to highlight certain features; to ascertain the functioning of the family. Thus, bringing deeper understanding and enhancing connection. These strategies and methods can then be taken into the home.

I have very much enjoyed your engaging, informative, and insightful stories and reflections on your work with families and children with autism. I have appreciated how through your "own use of self," accessibility to your own creative means and the application of creative resources, the use of fantasy,



and particularly, your work with Mafalda as a vital member of your team. She becomes a helpful and profound resource and a conduit in facilitating engagement, rapport, interaction, and connection. So, as we are coming to the end of our chat, I wonder if you would like to send a brief message to Australia, to the students in training, to psychotherapists and family psychotherapists, those just starting out and those more experienced?

Carmine Saccu: To take a piece of Gruyere and a piece of Parmesan in best understanding children with autism, particularly non-verbal. Then consider your role in working with them and reflect on your focus. If you take the Gruyere and only focus on filling the holes (solely addressing the deficits), connected to your specific profession and role, there will always be something that someone will need to do (many professionals involved) in treating the “deficit.” If you consider the metaphor of the child as Parmesan, you will then begin to consider that the autistic child is robust, firm in his mission, you must understand that the relationship with a parent, caregiver, is actually a very important aspect for them and consequently their inability to get distracted from this. You must be careful that the child does not get stuck in the principle of “absolute relationality” just like a “high priest” who remains frozen in eternal time, he or she remains still in time. You may find that the child may engage in things like feeding themselves, etc., but they still don't get distracted away from the relationship, as they don't enter time.

However, the reality is that life and situations change constantly, they don't always stay the same. So, if the child is unable to get distracted, he runs the risk of staying stuck in time stillness, preventing him from entering the relational time. So, capturing time is an extremely important aspect of therapy. As professionals working with these children and families, we have an important role to use our own creativity and access creative resources in communicating and connecting with them, in capturing their attention, in order for them to enter in time.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: It's been a real pleasure, Carmine, thank you very much for allowing me to have this conversation with you.

Carmine Saccu: Let me tell you one last story! In this case there was a young autistic girl that we observed always making this sound ... (puffing) and it was assumed that it was possibly a case of Tourette's Syndrome. As we started working, the parents expressed concern because she would continuously do like this ... (puffing) and she wouldn't stop, so during one of the sessions I thought to myself, who else makes this sound? A train makes this sound, if you think about it, even dogs do this. So, through the use of play therapy, I suggested to the parents “Start play acting as if you are dogs.” So, they started play acting and interacting like dogs and started making the sound that the daughter always makes (puffing). Suddenly the child launched herself in the middle of her parents, and so she “entered in time.”

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Very interesting, Carmine! This is yet another example highlighting your use of “self” in the therapeutic space, marrying your extensive knowledge and experience with your own curiosity and creativity, tapping into your internal resources, and for the previous examples bringing in external resources like the powerful use of Mafalda while eliciting a co-creation of family resources, empowering families, and increasing connection.

Heartfelt thanks Carmine. It has been a great pleasure for me seeing you again and a pleasure meeting magnificent Mafalda. Also, many thanks for your book. I look forward to reading it and look forward to seeing you in Australia.

Carmine Saccu: When my latest book comes out, I will send it to you in Australia.

Deisy Amorin-Woods: Wonderful, many thanks, Carmine. What a delight this encounter has been.

Good-bye for now.

Carmine Saccu: The same for me, thank you.

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