

Letter from Lost Prairie –February 14, 2011

Lost and Found: a Voice

Everywhere I have been in the past couple of weeks people have been talking about a new movie – The King’s Speech – and telling me that I must go and see it. I thought perhaps this recommendation was based on a nod to my British heritage and a presumed interest in “the Royals” so didn’t rush to the movie theatre. In the end I was relieved that it has stayed long enough in Kalispell for me to get around to seeing it with John. And, of course, I have along with multitudes of others discovered that there is more to this movie even than superb acting and an interesting portrayal of a well-known moment in British royal history when one king resigns to marry the woman of his dreams and another steps up to take his place.

Perhaps I should already have known that King George VI had a bad stammer. I did not. And even if I had I would not have grasped the importance of this flaw. Who among us who has seen the movie will now ever be able to forget the anguish of the trembling lips and the pain in Colin Firth’s eyes as he endures the humiliation of his public exposure? This tour de force of acting brings us face to face with a particular form of torment which no amount of advice, cajoling, correcting or soothing can remove. And no amount of royal pampering or privilege can cover up.

As we exited the theatre John remarked to me that the Arts do a much better job of tuning in to understanding human suffering, its roots and sublimations, than any psychology textbook. Here Freud’s wisdom lives on while it has been rejected and discredited in the field which owes its inception to his ideas.

I found myself thinking over the next couple of days about the nature of the relationship between Lionel and Bertie, and how it sheds light on the “art,” rather than the science of therapy. Bertie is a classic, reluctant patient, dragged by his worried and persistent wife in search of a solution to an intractable and disabling problem. He “has it all” in terms of worldly rank and privilege, and yet he struggles with a deep narcissistic wound which he guards with flashes of anger and defiance. When Lionel Logue first meets him and tries to understand the source of his trauma Bertie immediately balks and defends himself with haughty rage. He has seen all the experts and they have not been able to fix the problem. There is no relationship, and until one develops, no work can take place. Lionel’s first seemingly insurmountable task is to create a relationship between equals while still being aware of the special role of his royal patient, who wants none of this. He has no professional diplomas and works in an unorthodox manner which focuses attention on tension in the body. He correctly insists that the work must take place on his own turf, but must give his patient some early sign that he might have a chance at being successful. Bertie glimpses this only in a moment of utter despair and begins to permit a relationship to grow and to allow Lionel to begin to probe the roots of the problem in a series of childhood traumatic experiences and clumsy adult mishandlings. He begins to express his frustration and pent up fury in a scene of great cathartic angry swearing. The

wound is opened, probed and cleansed, but this piece of the work is not, in and of itself, the cure. He still requires constant practice and must submit to the exercises that Lionel devises. He finally finds his voice in order to stand up for his coach and mentor when he can confront the Archbishop of Canterbury in the very premises of his coronation in Westminster Abbey. They are finally equals and yet the relationship is fragile and, when ruptured, is not easily repaired.

In the end it is the necessity of rising to a moment of great historical importance and of becoming a leader to the British people in time of war which puts Bertie's courage to the ultimate test of facing down his own fear publicly and moving beyond himself into his role as England's King George VI. He has worked valiantly for this, has been supported by his loyal and understanding wife, and has allowed himself to be helped by a commoner with an unorthodox approach whom he now calls friend. He is no longer a fraud and his personal majesty is evident to one and all. We can celebrate the fact that he has found his "voice."

What is it that we mean by this phrase to "find a voice?" I have for years been impressed by the work of Carol Gilligan, a professor both at Harvard and at Cambridge Universities in departments of education and gender studies, whose research with young women was conducted in the 1970s and is described in her book *In a Different Voice*. Here she details the ability of young girls of 10-12 to clearly articulate their thoughts and ideas and demonstrates how often they lose this capacity in their teenage years under pressure from society's norms for young women to act "nice," to get along and to present themselves in a way which would be pleasing to adults and young men. They are discouraged from saying things that are "inappropriate" or "unacceptable," for standing up for themselves and showing their anger and acting "selfish." I certainly can relate to such descriptions with their subsequent diminution of voice. My mother once criticized my raising of my young daughters for their "selfishness," when I felt strongly that I was teaching them to think for themselves and trust their own needs and wishes. I recognized that she had been taught, and done her best to teach me, to submit to wishes of others.

While the Feminist movement has done a great deal to provide new role models for young women and to begin to value the relational approach that women bring to all of their many societal roles, I also see that there are still significant struggles which manifest themselves in depression, disorders of body image and unrealistic aspirations for perfection. Such difficulties tend to melt away when young women succeed in finding their own "voices."

Carol Gilligan wrote again about this matter of "voice" 20 years after her original publication in a new forward to her book written in 1993. Here she writes, "by voice I mean something like what people mean when they speak of the core of the self... it is a litmus test of relationships and a measure of psychological health." She goes on to say, "To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard: it is an intensely relational act." She also notes that relationships depend not only on the capacity for empathy and the ability to listen to others and learn their language or take their point of view, but also on having a "voice" and a "language." It is these skills that we hope all our students will learn and internalize during their tenure at Montana Academy.

Our students come to us with deep wounds and a terrible sense of personal failure which experts and well meaning family members have failed to help them fix. Many of

them defend against their weaknesses and vulnerabilities with a shell of narcissism which makes it hard for them to allow the relationships which form the basis for healing. Yet, without a therapeutic relationship through which they begin to explore their own private world of pain, trauma and frustration, they cannot find their way forward. Parents and loved ones can lead them to a place where such healing might occur but they have to do the hard work. First comes the establishment of the relationship (earth clan); then the exploration of old wounds, festering anger, defenses (moon clan); next the reappraisal of relationships with family and friends and working out of a new understanding and practice of new ways of relating to those around them (sun clan); and only after this, when they have begun to find their own “voices” and to listen to those of others, can they then step up to positions of leadership in the community and be expected to say publicly what is on their minds as many of them demonstrated in last Friday’s community meeting. In all of this the relationship with the therapist is key. There is no way to medicate a way out of the problem or build and practice skills without the strong foundation of trust which allows for a shared humanity in which one person understands and guides another to be the best that they can be.

There has been a de-emphasis on the centrality of relationships in the field of psychology and psychiatry over the past two decades or more. Instead the focus has been on “skills training” and “manualized” therapy such as DBT and CBT where the human agent and relationship is relatively unimportant or the encounter with a psychiatrist is reduced to the prescription for a pill. Perhaps the tide is finally turning back towards psychodynamic therapy which has its roots in the insights of Freud’s legacy. A recent article in *The Scientific American Mind* journal (Nov/Dec 2010) reports the results of a meta-analysis looking at several studies, both randomized and controlled, comparing longer-term psychodynamic psychotherapy with CBT and found that the benefits of improvement from psychodynamic therapy were substantial and continued to grow even after therapy had ended. This does not surprise us. We know this intuitively, and all of us value the importance of relationships in our lives and understand their power to heal in the hands of skilled practitioners. The King’s Speech reminds us all how much this matters to each and everyone of us.

Warm regards,

Rosemary McKinnon