

Inhabiting Terror

As I write today Carl, a 52 year old man, has just left my office. He works in the health care business and has three teenage children. He came to me because his wife had left him a couple of months ago after her discovering that he had had an affair with a mutual friend of theirs. He was quite distraught and upset and very much regretted his past behaviour and wanted to make things work. He realised that he really loved her and he wanted to know from me what he could do in order to get her back and to get her to see that he loved her. Carl's manner was somewhat jittery and unsettled. When he came into my room he immediately asked where he should put his coat and began to speak before I could explain what we might do. I explained the purpose of our meeting, which was fine with him, as he was anxious to get down to business and ask me some questions. He interrupted me from time to time to get a point across and shifted in his chair a lot as he spoke. He asked me a lot of questions and there was an urgency about how he presented himself. He sat with his legs crossed but his leg swung up and down as he spoke.

Being a psychologist is fascinating work particularly in seeing how people can reveal every truth about themselves as people in only a matter of minutes. It did not take long for me to figure out his problem, why his wife had left him, and how he has been unable to resolve his situation. All it took was a little observation. The description I gave above reveals a lot more than might appear. Being a psychologist is often like being a bit like a Sherlock Holmes where you have to piece together the truth based on the smallest observations about people. Within minutes I was able to say the following:

“My bet is that if I were to ask your wife what you are like and what the problems have been she would say that you are someone impossible to get through to, that you have your own agenda and that pursuing your own needs has always been paramount. I bet she would say that she finds it very difficult to have a conversation with you because within minutes you start to overwhelm and flood her with your frustrations and needs. I bet she very often says to you “There is just no point in trying to talk to you”. I bet she feels that for years you have done your own thing being almost oblivious to her. I bet she finds that you are quick to temper and often frustrated. She probably says that if you don't get your needs met or get satisfaction that you express irritation and either wear people down or disappear in a sulk.” And so I went on. This was all based on a patient observation of how he was in conversation with me. The truth is not hard to find.

His response to everything was “Yes, yes, yes”, that is exactly what she says. I went on to point out that his frustration with his partner's unwillingness to accept his apologies and his reassurance that he loved her was the wrong approach entirely. He seemed puzzled and very curious.

I went on to explain that the only honest and truthful position for him to take with his wife was to be brutally honest about himself. This meant that what he should say to his wife is not that “I love you and you should forgive me and let's talk it out and put it behind us” but something like “I have realised because of my behaviour that I must not love you like I want to believe. In fact you are right to mistrust me because my love

must be very fickle indeed. Not only that, I still find it hard to love you because I spend my time trying to put pressure on you to again meet my needs. My need to be forgiven by you has taken precedent over your need for space and freedom. No wonder you left me. It has been all about me, me, me. Even now, when you are the injured party, I am still wanting and wanting from you. Wanting you to forgive me, wanting you to reassure me, wanting you to make everything better for me.”

I emphasised that this is what he must learn to say. I pointed out how his own impulsive need to put himself first has always been the way in their relationship, that this is why he had the affair. I emphasised that he has always put pressure on his wife and the reason she wants little to do with him is that, even in his apologies, nothing is changed.

I then asked him to consider how it would be to put her needs ahead of his. He became aware that he did not know what her needs were. I said her need is simple – it is for freedom and emancipation. To be free of his emotional pressure and to be encouraged and justified in her distance from him. “But I cant do that because I love her”, he said. I challenged him again and said “No you don’t love her, if you did you would love her for who she is and who she wants to be and not for who you want her to be. You would want her to be free from you; you would applaud her need to withdraw from you because of how you are and have been. You would realise that your job is not to persuade her how great you are but to respect her for seeing your self-absorbtion. You would then support her freedom”.

“Only then”, I said, “might she then be free to love you for who you really are”. “And who am I?” he asked. “You”, I said, “are a man that is very frightened and sorrowful but is terrified of inhabiting that space. You want her to rescue you from the awful feelings you must first experience if your pleas to her are to have any authenticity”.

“But I will be desolate”, if I go there. “Desolate you must be”, I said. “Only then will your remorse be true”.

With tears in his eyes, he gripped my hand at the end of our session. “I know what I must do,” he said. He wrapped his scarf around his neck and pulled on his old anorak. As he walked away he stooped into the grief and the hope that awaited him. True spirituality is always about what you do with your pain. For the first time, he realised he must inhabit it and not be rescued from it.