

The Art of Rationalization

Selective ignorance is potentially alive and well within any profession.

BY JADE WOLFE

Why is it we find some subjects too irritating to dwell on for very long? For me, paradoxical dilemmas can be maddening. The resulting implication of course being that it is a matter of accepting rather than changing or resolving a conflict.

Age is a somewhat silly concept in my perspective, but reaching forty was a great relief in many ways. Humor being a daily staple of mine, every new year provides it in greater abundance. This is partially because of my perspective. Friends hear many of my sentences begin with, "Well, I'm over forty now so..." thus justifying otherwise (socially) eccentric choices. Equally, it is applicable for retrospective observations.

Rationalizing a 'presently-past' behavior can be satisfying. For instance, I do not hesitate to talk to inanimate objects. While this can alert some people as to a need to 'sign me in somewhere' for assessment, I proceed undaunt-

ed. My view is that until it is proven to me that no life force of any kind exists within my computer printer, I will continue to apologize if I swear at it. So far, the evidence is in favor of my printer having it's own will because when it is spoken kindly to, there are no malfunctions such as paper jams, unscheduled breakdowns or scary smells upon use.

But, I veered away from my original thought, also a privilege of 'being over forty'. Freedom to choose our behavior, within some rather obvious social guidelines, is an important need. However, there are so many subtle restrictions we unnecessarily lay upon ourselves. Sometimes one layer too many accumulates and 'something has to give'. This unintentional 'smothering' is one of the many pitfalls ensuring mental health professionals long-term employment. I know, I used to be employed as such. Let me be the first to say, having a professional label of 'counselor' or 'crisis intervention worker' does not mean you have some secret enlight-

enment eluding the general population.

Sadly, stressed-out people often need permission to help uncover whatever has been choking them.

Mental health care can support this kind of effort. It can be a frustrating endeavor. There are some unforeseeable facets. Agendas are an example.

Whenever people interact, there are agendas. In this narrative, an agenda might be viewed as a recognized topic for discussion, a challenge to work through, or list of goals to achieve. Less obvious yet just as important are the unspoken, perhaps unconscious agendas. And it was not apparent to me until I had been experiencing this 'life cycle' for a while of the existence and significance of those unspoken agendas. It can be so useful to remember we all possess a few agendas.

Being aware and comfortable with being a lesbian has been great for me, but not always an assurance of comfortable outcomes professionally. There were instances where agendas became the real issue, superceding appropriate care of clients. And one has been turning over, unresolved in its paradoxical state of late.

Guilt is definitely a connection to the past. Most likely guilt plays a part in my need to re-examine and 'let go' of this past 'paradox'. As I mulled over it, an unforeseen agenda came into focus.

Through the course of my tenure as a mental health counselor, a young lesbian I worked with was trying hard to come to terms with a bout of depression. Her moods were low and permeated her days with overwhelming despair. It was more than apparent that she needed to take a break from ignoring herself. Karen wanted to maintain a 40-hour work week, keep

up appearances with friends, and be a good partner. This left her, at best, a half hour every other Tuesday to deal with her personal needs.

Now having gotten to know her, it was obvious to me that Karen's lifestyle wasn't the primary issue of this depression. Therefore, I felt justified in not spending much time on the topic when offering her an option of entering a treatment facility. We talked about the benefits of rest, group activities, and assessment for a possible chemical imbalance to treat depression. She saw the merits, and in spite of the social stigma of 'hospitalization', which has not changed over twenty years as I keep fervently believing it can, agreed to give herself this gift of care.

Now here's the 'kicker' for me. This particular facility had no qualms about her lesbian partner having visiting rights. But it did not guarantee my client was free from those sneaky, often self-guiding hidden agendas.

Selective ignorance is potentially alive and well within any profession. There were two key staff members (out of over a dozen) who harbored a selective ignorance. Karen did not receive care without the influencing prejudice regarding homosexuality. Some of it was subtle and some not. The result was not dramatically tragic I am so thankful to say. However, Karen had made a difficult choice. She had relinquished quite a bit of privacy in hopes of learning how to take better care of herself. She was trusting this staff to help and care for her. And honestly, because she trusted me initially to offer the option, I have held onto some anger toward myself. The loss of her personal dignity and insulting treatment was totally unnecessary, unethical and unforeseen.

One psych nurse actually spent private counseling time expounding the sinfulness of homosexuality. The other avoided any personal attention, including shift observations of medication effectiveness. These two professionals had a hidden agenda. It affected their behavior in caring for another human being. The ridiculous preaching of one and failure of the other to adequately assess medication were serious breaches of ethical conduct.

The client was able to stick out the treatment time, although the first impromptu 'counseling' session resulted in a late night call to me requesting I help her 'get the hell out of the place'. Confidentiality precludes me in detailing the ensuing steps taken. I will state that it was of little consolation for either Karen or me to know these two staff members would, in the future, not ignorantly select to be professionally biased.

It was possible to find a medication for the depression. In spite of the dubious treatment, she was able to appreciate her accomplishment. And, as with anyone receiving some type of counseling, it is the client who learns to heal themselves. Just as through physical challenges we learn to appreciate the restorative/healing properties of our own bodies, it is equally true for the less tangible realms of our beings.

Coming to terms with an irritating paragraph of a life chapter is good. But, I wonder how often my own hidden agendas shade a perspective and subsequent choice. Ultimately might it not be better to no longer have so many instances based on a 'we-they' scenario? There has been much time and energy wasted by dividing lines. A kind of perpetual domino effect takes on a life of its own. The need to have someone to distrust begets the need to maintain selective ignorance feeding a belief of superior ideals. And it is much harder to hate someone once you have shared some level of understanding.

Our planet is getting smaller every day. Hidden or unspoken agendas need not belong here. None of us are immune to agendas. Awareness can tip the balance, so we need not become part of a paradox. Maybe I misuse the word 'paradox' by standard definitions. Well, after all, I *am* over forty now.

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