

What Are We Hiding and Whom Are We Hiding From?

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I cannot begin to tell you the joy and honor it is for me to be here in New Orleans giving this plenary talk to those who are about to begin an Institute. New Orleans is a very special place indeed. With the recent storm, Sandy, in the Northeast, now more than ever, we identify with the trauma and the struggles that have come to bear on this great city, post Katrina. We also surely identify with the resilience, determination, and reparative grit of our members who live in Louisiana.

My own relationship with New Orleans deepened in 2002 when AGPA was here. There was a big East Coast blizzard that year that delayed many and prevented some from getting here at all. During my first year, Mary Ann Robinson and I were co-chairs of the Institute committee. The New Orleans planning committee worked wonders and provided much pinch-hitting. The program went on, of course, but fear and some anxiety were in my heart then as we launched that Institute. "Stumbling along and hanging in," as Philip Bromberg calls it—that is what we did.

When I started to prepare these remarks, fear popped up again. The bubble over my head said, "Interesting title, 'What are we hiding and whom are we hiding from'? Now what is it

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This article was the Institute Plenary Address at the American Group Psychotherapy Association's annual Institute and Conference in February 2013, "Overcoming Obstacles: The Power of the Group," in New Orleans. The Institute's two-day groups, led by experienced instructors, were devoted to small group teaching, both experiential and didactic.

that you have to say about it?" When I shared my concern with my husband, John, to provoke me out of my fear, he said, "Mary, you are not writing the Gettysburg Address, for God's sakes. Just remember who you are talking to." As our AGPA group came to mind, I felt calmer; I began a walk down memory lane.

Now, this talk is for you here today as you embark on your Institute for the first or maybe the 30th time.

Psychotherapy is hard, humbling work, as Ken Corbett said at the New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis graduation this past June. It is also lonely work that takes a toll on our hearts and minds. For us, group is an answer. So this is your time, your Institute, in which to process and hopefully metabolize some of life's jolts and joys and to take care of the group therapist, as well as the group, inside yourself.

We learn best by doing and experiencing. Ignatius of Loyola spoke about *sentir*, felt knowledge, as the most important teacher. These Institutes provide the opportunity to feel what we know. Segalla (Segalla et al., 1988) speaks of group as providing a "multiple self-object field," a term originally coined by Irene Harwood. It is in the group that we get access to parts of ourselves to which otherwise we do not have access; we also can find ourselves in the other. Here today, you have the moment to decide what piece of work you want to do for yourself in your Institute. What are you coming in with that would be helpful to learn or to do for yourself as a group therapist? For our personal growth, emotional risks need to be taken: To be courageous, as Jerry Gans urges us, "If not now, when"?

So, what are we hiding and from whom? From ourselves? In the 1970s and part of the 1980s, I was coming to AGPA as a non-member. Can you believe it? I remember so well sitting at the Group Foundation luncheon when I was introduced to Jeanne Pasternak, then chair of the Membership Committee. If you met Jeanne in those days of membership recruitment, look out! There are people here who can remember the big Uncle Sam "I WANT YOU" poster. Jeanne and I talked a bit and then she said, "Mary, this will never do. We want you as a member of AGPA, and ... can I ask you why it is that you are hiding from us"? Now, we know that Jeanne and her committee set records for membership num-

bers in those years. For me, she tapped into the question of why I was hiding. I had to think about this of course.

My hidden stories are fear- and shame-based, and my reasons for hiding are historical. Picture a general store in a small town in the Catskill Mountains of New York State along the Delaware River called Long Eddy. The general store, our family business, was the town hub where folks of all walks of life gathered. My father and mother, Henry and Alma, ran the store like an open group session. People came to talk. We laughed and we cried together, somewhat like AGPA. Some remember Anne Alonso at our 50th anniversary when she described AGPA as the village well. Our family general store was a place to share community news, the joys, the sorrows, and the heartaches, of which there were many.

I spent much time in the store, learning to work and to help my parents. But I understood only later how much being in the store had helped me. I was drawn in by the unique lives lived and the stories told. People came into the store to talk and connect, to tell their story. This is where I learned what life was really about. I learned what difference was and how much it had to teach. The life of the store was in fact "general store group psychotherapy." I did not know then that I was observing my father and mother as the first group therapists that I would see in action.

In this story, I am 9, shy, timid, but curious. "Freddy Stump," as everyone called him, was a mountain man who drove a team of horses out of the mountains several times a year to get supplies from our store. Freddy was short in stature, had a long, grizzly beard, few teeth, and big heavy boots. He looked gruff and rough from a child's perception, scary and forbidding. He was "the other" to me and my sisters and brothers.

On this particular evening, Freddy was telling one of his "yarns," as my father called them. It was early spring; the temperature was just above the freezing mark. There was a sudden huge sound from outside the store, like an explosion, as if a bomb had gone off, louder and more terrifying than I had ever heard. I could not speak, and anyway, I had been taught children should be seen and not heard. I felt stunned by the fear that a bomb had gone off and something horrible was happening that I could not see or comprehend. Freddy stopped his yarn, looked at me and

saw the terrified expression on my face. He chuckled, then said, "Why, little girl, it is only the ice breaking up in the river. That big boom is the ice cracking; it is the spring thaw beginning. Don't be scared, little girl." In the chaos of my frozen state, Freddy Stump saw and understood. At the same time, I felt ashamed and was red-faced for being exposed. No one else in the store reacted as I had. In that moment, Freddy Stump's face changed to one that was kind and loving, no longer frightening; my face and heart changed as well. The moment passed, but my memory remains as a heightened affective moment where I truly felt seen and understood by someone I would never have thought capable.

As I speak about this childhood experience, I feel shame. This is a small story. I feel somewhat ridiculous to tell it. I leave it and come back to it, realizing that I am having a parallel process or similar experience to what I am talking with you about. What am I hiding and whom am I hiding from? Do I expose myself like this to you? The voice inside and my old story says, "You should be seen and not heard, never expressive or assertive." But a louder voice beckons: "Carry on, Mary. Take the risk!" The horror and the beauty of our own work is that it is always with us. Our own narrative continues to evolve. As Darryl Feldman says, our personal movie is always running. How much of our self-awareness comes from hidden moments of insight where our feelings meet and we have the perfect interpretation? The metaphor of the ice cracking and the spring thaw speaks to the breaking down of my fears, hidden or not, and the release from pain. With risk or exposure, the fear can turn into a real thaw or even a celebration.

Intersubjectivity (Dluhy, 2008) and relational theory teach us to use ourselves in our work, that is, to stay in contact with our story as we do it. The link to your Institute is to be open to your own internal voice and that of the other. You might encounter your own Freddy Stump either within you or sitting across the room. If you are holding painful material that blocks you from being present to yourself and to your group, think about what risks you can take. Full disclosure is not necessary. A way to frame it is to ask yourself what is keeping you emotionally honest and present in the group, and what is keeping you away from the group? Our defenses are always present. Victor Schermer reminds us that the truth often hurts as much as its absence, and when we are in the

group or leading the group, we must bear in mind whether the truth can be told. For example, how open are we to the other? There are also layers of truth in each of us, as well as our own internal biases. For example, what we dislike, or even hate, in someone else most likely has something important to do with us.

Further, as we know, shame is a powerful inhibitor, tenacious and unforgiving. It is a behind-the-scenes affect, private not public, and much more difficult than guilt. Shapiro (1998) helped us to clarify from a self-psychological perspective that twinship can alleviate the feeling of shame within the group. Finding we are not alone is a very powerful healing force. In any group, regressed unformulated experiences may emerge. How soon do we distance in order to protect ourselves without even knowing it? How are we defending the precious, the hidden, parts of ourselves that we want to resist, rebel, and refuse, as Billow (2006) has articulated?

Some of these thoughts and ideas are exemplified in the following vignette:

A man in one of my groups remains hidden from the anger he feels toward his father's oppression. There is a long family history of a narcissistic father who dominates all the family activities including the family business. Sam feels he has no freedom to be himself, the writer he truly wants to be. He feels alone. He tells the group that no one in the family has actually seen any of his writing. When Sam is aware of his feelings in the group, he will not speak them, as if he is in his family. The group and Sam fall into a tug of war as they try to get him to express feelings he has in the room. The group catches on or members get frustrated that they are not going to get Sam to speak. They step back and are willing to give Sam time; however, his silence begins to pain me.

As I sit and bear witness to his not speaking, my internal story of being seen and not heard comes up out of awareness. I begin to observe Sam's silence and inquire about it. A grin on his face, he agrees that he is silent but says he does not understand why. At this point, I feel his hidden aggression and sadism emerge. I become even more attached to wanting and needing Sam to express himself. Role suction, as Leonard Horowitz calls it, occurs. It is not long before Sam and I are in an enactment. I want to

dominate him and get him to speak. I also identify with his need to be silent and the shame he might feel. I feel that I am both Sam and his father, as is he. It appears to me that he is controlling the group with his silence. Rather than being curious about this and leaving it to the group to explore, I try too hard to get him to speak. This does not work. The group becomes paralyzed. After several sessions where this plays out, I realize a sense of immediacy in the room. Something needs to shift. I consult the group and ask, "What do you think is going on here? What are we doing, and what do you think I am doing?" Carol quickly says, "Mary, it seems that you are locked into a power struggle with Sam just like his father." Joan adds, "Watching you and Sam is pissing me off. Why don't you pay this kind of attention to me?" This penetrates; the Ormont (1991) suggestion of asking the group for help frees me. Finally, I meet my internal story.

Intersubjectivity also teaches us that so much is co-determined. People can and do change, as long as we as therapists can change with them. In this group, I realized that I had been caught on the need for Sam to express my old anger at being seen and not heard. The group helped me to rediscover the wisdom of both. Being "seen and not heard" (holding back and not speaking) has sometimes been a good thing. The key is being conscious of the choice. Recognizing this piece of myself, I was able to take back my need for Sam to speak. As I contained my desire, the group began to do their work on what was coming up for them about Sam. Joan said that Sam reminded her of her father, "silently sitting there, seething with anger." She and others began to challenge him. Eventually, he picked up the challenge, joined the interactions, and started to assert himself and make himself seen.

As in all processes within the group, it takes more than a few repetitions to pull apart the projections and parse them. Progress was made. Our crisis of authority and hatred, as Agazarian (1997) articulates it, was met. Sam's aggression, the part of his father that he needed, became available in the group. Just recently he told the group that he was going to give his sister a piece of his writing, a poem, as a gift at a family gathering.

Here are a few thoughts I would like to leave you with. We are shaped by the common purpose of what brings us here to these Institutes. We are here to explore and to learn together what we

can about ourselves as group therapists to reflect on what continues to go well and what continues to impede. So trust the group and the group process. Speak for yourself, not for others. Consult the group if you are stuck. If you have concerns about the leader, express them. Ask yourself the question, When have I felt this way before? Free associate. Remind yourself that all does not have to be disclosed. If you stay with yourself and your feelings and allow your own process to develop, your own work will emerge.

I will always have my story. Freddy Stump will always be on my shoulders. In fact, I have a small figure in my office of a mountain man with a long beard that I had carved when I completed my psychoanalysis. I have brought it here with me, for courage. As you go to your Institutes today, think about who is standing on your shoulders. Thank you all. Have a very good Institute experience.

As a postscript, I want you to know that this will forever be my "stump speech."

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