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The Unmaking of a Psychotherapist

Barbara R. Wheeler, DSW

The year is 2014. I am sitting on my deck, in my rocking chair—only because 'ole folks are supposed to do this . . . sit and rock. The aspens and pines have not changed at all in the last 25 years. Have I? I used to be a psychotherapist—and, if I may be so bold as to say, a pretty good one—a Mormon psychotherapist. Ah, ha. There was a day—I remember it well—when “Mormon Psychotherapist” was a contradiction in terms. You know, like “enjoyable diet” or “constructive criticism.” That organization, AMCAP did much to align Mormonism and psychotherapy over the years. I wonder if AMCAP still exists?? They used to have some terrific conferences.

For many years, I worked at making my identity as a therapist. And during the most recent years—since about the turn of the 21st century—I’ve been working on unmaking my identity as a psychotherapist. Have I succeeded?? What went into the development of my professional identity? What is now gone from that identity? What is still with me? At age 80, notice that I am very good at reconstructing my past. So many memories.

When I think about that which went into my identity as a psychotherapist many years ago—that is now gone—I remember a ten year-old’s dream—while living in New Mexico. After playing with the Navajo children day after day in their village—where dirt paths carved a way between clay quansit huts—I told my mother, “I want to come back here when I grow up and help these
children. They are so poor.” My Mom encouraged me and, grasping a teaching moment, said, “That is called a ‘Social Worker.’”

My dream is gone. My mission unfulfilled. I never did return to help those beautiful people. Perhaps next year??

Also gone from my identity, is the high energy level I used to use to propel me through a day and through my professional career. With the loss in energy, also went the potential for burn out—a state that I experienced periodically as a psychotherapist. The high energy level of my younger days has been replaced with a PEACE: inner and outer peace. However, I do miss the good ’ole days of inner conflict and turmoil—so intellectually stimulating—particularly my value conflicts that were so necessary to the development of professional self, especially early in my career. I miss them. Yet, I could have avoided some of the accompanying pain. You see, by being baptized into the LDS Church at age 19—right at the beginning of my college days as a psychology major—I had to immediately deal with such issues as those relating to homosexuals, abortion, and gender. If I had waited until I was 65 to get baptized, it would have been less complicated. But, as I mentioned, also less stimulating and growth producing. If I still had some of those conflicts now, at age 80, to stimulate me, I probably wouldn’t need this pacemaker.

But you know, as I dig deeper into this subject. . . . being a Mormon probably did not affect my inner conflicts as much as I think it did because I noticed throughout my career, that most therapists—LDS and non-LDS—struggled with value conflicts. It just always seemed to me that high religiosity, connected to any religion, was directly correlated with high degrees of judgmental-ness. . . . and that perhaps we Mormon therapists were more judgmental than our non-religious colleagues. What a disturbing thought!! I guess I realize why I never did conduct research on the subject. I did not want to face the outcome, should the correlation exist.

The unmaking of my professional identity also includes a slight decrease in the overall bias from members of my church, toward
Female Mormon Professionals, and, more specifically female psychotherapists. I remember that during most of my career, how difficult it was to conduct therapy with some Bishops, Stake Priesthood Leaders, etc. Back in those days, women were not seen as authorities in matters outside the kitchen—especially in matters relating to the bedroom. I remember when I was cramming for my first sex therapy exam, in my second-year MSW training. As I held my text book, I gazed over the top of my glasses—I mumbled to Jim, “Can you picture me a ‘Sex Therapist???’”

Perhaps there was a lesson for us there. I did not give myself much of a chance at authority. Was I just as sexist as those Bishops and Priesthood leaders who would reject my authority?? Ah, ha, the lesson I learned . . . “Therapist. define yourself!!”

If these are things that are gone from my professional identity, what is left? What is left of the psychotherapist in me—if anything?? To what extent does the unmaking of a psychotherapist go, as the effects of time take their toll??

My values—my values are left. My religious ones have gathered potency over the years, as have my professional ones. And the two are so enmeshed now that the best celestial psychotherapist could not untangle them. Let’s see . . . we used to have a name for that in the psychotherapist biz—ah, yes—co-dependency. Yes, I have a co-dependency of values. (What a diagnosis!)

Also, still a part of me is my sense of self: as one making some small contribution—perhaps to my profession, but more importantly, to the one. The one client. How we struggled together on real-life matters! It has been a long time since that quarter—just prior to receiving my MSW—when I was sitting next to my mentor and valued teacher, Eleanor Stein, as we listened to a visiting psychiatrist tell us that we probably will not really help anyone until ten years after graduation. Yes! Yes! My secret thoughts exactly! He said them for me! Can we really help anyone? Is helping really a hoax? My wise teacher sensed I needed rescuing and in her typical powerfully serene manner, turned to me and out of the corner of her mouth said, “That’s a lie.” She was right, as usual. I did contribute something in therapy—and much
sooner than ten years. (Nine maybe?) The memory stays with me and cannot be undone as part of who I am today—at age 80.

The fact that change is possible is a powerful axiom—an axiom that will always be a part of who I am. Thank you Eleanor. I love you.

And now, even though I have not seen them for twenty to thirty-five years, I still have left, the sweet memories of my own students and clients who picked up where you, Eleanor, left off. That which those courageous people taught me in therapy and in the classroom, is so much a part of me now, that my soul’s progression will ride on it throughout eternity.

Also, with me are memories of my failures in therapy—all the things that did not work—and, in addition, all those humorous memories. Where is that book I was going to write about the funny things that happened in sessions over the years? I cannot carry those to my grave. I must get them down. They sustained me throughout the years sort of an antidote to symptoms of burnout . . . and they sustain me now: spontaneous humor that erupted from the human condition.

What is left of my professional identity? Just about everything. Perhaps there is no such thing as the unmaking of a psychotherapist—like unmaking that which we know—it’s impossible.

That which is gone seems insignificant and/or as useless as the fact that I cannot remember what I had for lunch an hour ago . . . where I put my glasses. Oh, well, seeing is not that important anymore. But, feeling still is!

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