

Review

Resilience. Stories of a Family Therapist

Moshe & Tesse Lang. (1996). Melbourne: Reed.
258pp.

In his playful yet deeply instructive book about Proust, Alain De Botton maintains that a genuine interest in or reading of an author is to look at *our* world through *his* eyes, not look at *his* world through *our* eyes. (P.214). In the age of the superficial, reapplicable psychotherapy technique it is refreshing to have a simply written yet highly sophisticated story book about psychotherapy and its practice by a master therapist and not another manual bound for disappointing results. By telling many short stories about his work Moshe Lang, with the writing aid of his wife Tesse, takes one into the heart and mind of his psychotherapy practice of thirty years. 'Resilience' thus becomes also a long story about one of Australia's great psychotherapists and readers can begin to see some of *their* world, and *their* practice through *his* eyes.

The raison d'être for writing a story book about psychotherapy is set out in the introduction. Lang maintains along with others before him and before psychotherapy too, that stories are healing. The therapist's work is to help the story to be told and it is in this process that experiences are transformed. Movement from the private to the interpersonal domain makes comparisons and solutions possible where only isolation and powerlessness were before. There is, of course, a long tradition of story telling in psychotherapy from Freud's stories he called case studies, through Milton Erikson and Irvin Yalom, to the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* where for years a 'Story Corner' was a regular feature. Lang describes stories as antiauthoritarian, even subversive and, because they are not generally right or wrong, they tend to put everyone (patients, therapists, teachers and pupils) on an equal footing. There are always many ways of telling and many ways of understanding a story and the metaphoric level is always the richest when human experience is the focus, strangely in contemporary narrative therapy this is largely absent.

This book contains over 50 stories, divided into 4 parts, children, couples, relations and generation to generation – working with Holocaust survivors and their families. Lang's capacity to fully attend to whoever is in his room shines through the text like a beacon of psychotherapy practice. The complexities of working with such a wide array of individuals and systems is discussed in the observations Lang makes around the stories he tells. These notes will be very helpful to the novice psychotherapist battling with the realization that the cookbook is insufficient. Lang is offering a journeyman style of learning here. He eschews the dictates of formula, on one page refusing the obvious to follow an obscure hunch, on another responding with simplicity and lightness to issues

which are oppressively complex. At times Lang's crisp writing style leaves his therapeutic technique opaque and one is left wondering what informed his decision to move in a way which may have seemed risky and strange to his clients but led to a very constructive outcome. This is however consistent with the reader being left to come to their own construction where the author, therapist and teacher facilitates rather than instructs. Nor is Lang always right, complete or successful in the psychotherapy he reports. In the face of enormous problems or catastrophic histories the simplicity of listening and the profound respectfulness of silence become cornerstones of the work.

In general however the style of writing like the style of psychotherapy is pithy, direct, personal and respectful. Here is a therapy documented which fits together the traditions of psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and family systems therapy. A rich tapestry which, in keeping with story telling and psychotherapy the world over distrusts forgetting and champions the resilience of those who remember.

Andrew Relph, Private Practice, Perth.

Ref: De Botton, A. (1997). How Proust can change your life. London: Picador.

Publication References:

Relph, A. (1999). Resilience: Stories of a Family Therapist. Australian Psychologist, 34(3), 229.