



Story Corner

The Pot Plant

Tesse and Moshe Lang*
3 Williams Road,
Windsor, Victoria

A common agony described by parents, more often by mothers, is the uncertainty, doubt and self-blame associated with bringing up children. They consult experts, read books, listen to the media, yet often this makes matters worse.

In my consulting room there is a plant which is just all right, with nice green leaves and the occasional flower. It looks better than some and worse than others.

My children gave it to me for my birthday. It looked beautiful, covered with flowers and with glossy green leaves; there were many buds and it promised to flower for months to come and be even more glorious. I was keen to look after it well, to make sure it developed and reached its full potential. After a few weeks some flowers died, and no buds came out. I asked my friend who was a keen gardener what to do. He advised me to water it more often. This I did conscientiously and with anticipation. I watched carefully and for a while it seemed to be working, but after a few weeks the plant looked worse. This worried me and soon I couldn't tolerate the anxiety; I talked to another one of my green fingered friends. Without hesitation she recommended less watering, and indicated that I had been overdoing it. I faithfully followed this confident advice. To my dismay there was no improvement. The flowers drooped and died, the leaves lost their gloss and it was just another pot plant.

I broadened my field of enquiry and was given wide ranging suggestions which boiled down to the fact that my caring had been too inconsistent. I continued to care for the plant as well as I could and thought to myself; perhaps in my room that is the best it can do.

I bought another plant in a sale. I put it outside and forget about it. It flourished.

One of the first videotapes I watched was of family therapy by four well known therapists. One behaved very strangely. His comments seemed inappropriate and irrelevant; and he appeared not to be listening to the family. I dismissed him as crazy and devoid of interest. I knew nothing about this particular therapist, Carl Whittaker, and thought this would be the first and last time I would hear of him.

Two weeks later I saw a family, with whom I had been working, and for the umpteenth time I heard the parents enumerating the faults of their son. To my surprise and horror I turned to the boy and said, "Do you think sometimes,, that you are the black sheep in your family?"

The boy, who until now had always appeared bored and detached, suddenly seemed touched and replied, "yes". This opened new themes and changed the direction of therapy.

Later, when I thought about the session I realised I had never used the term "black sheep"; in fact I wasn't sure I knew exactly what it meant. I did remember, however, that Carl Whittaker had used it in the session that I had so easily and confidently dismissed.

An Unforgettable Therapist

Tesse and Moshe Lang

*The Therapist was Moshe Lang.