

Letters to the Editors

Dear Maureen and Hugh,

Jolyon Grimwade in *ANZJFT* 2000, 21, 4 in an article titled 'Silence' writes 'I have looked into the literature but found no reference to silence as a positive feature of Family Therapy ...'

In this very journal in 1995 I published an article explicitly titled 'Silence', subtitled 'Therapy with Holocaust Survivors and their Families' in which I write:

In psychotherapy, talking is cure; silence is usually associated with defensiveness, resistance, negativism and denial. The positive aspects of silence are often overlooked. The sufferer may experience silence as strength and courage. Silence can be a mark of respect. To remember, we stand together in silence; in silence we pray to honour the dead. As one survivor said, 'When they walked into the gas chambers they were silent. Those who watched them watched in silence. The whole world remained silent. To talk about it now in order to gain personal relief is to desecrate their memory.' Silent suffering and guilt is often a testimonial — a memorial to those who have perished. 'They have no grave and no tombstones, my silence is their resting-place, their memorial candle' another survivor said to me.

Many who survived say that what keeps them going more than anything else was the wish to stay alive in order to tell, to bear witness. Many live in dread that when they die, their story will die with them. For most survivors there is a struggle between remaining silent or talking, and this is often paralleled within their families, where the children wish parents to communicate and the parents are reluctant to do so.

It is not the role of the therapist to promote either silence or communication, but rather to indicate a willingness to listen if the families choose to talk. The therapists need to show a readiness to discuss the family's ambivalence about talking or not, and to elicit their fears and anxieties about it. The therapist may be helpful by offering indirect ways of communicating and this provide a compromise solution. As has been observed, oblique methods are often the only ones appropriate when confronting the enormity of the Holocaust.

Prior to this (Lang, 1994), I explored the subject in an article published in *Generation* titled 'The Long Shadow'. It was accompanied by an extensive symposium, including contributions by prominent Family Therapists such as Harari, Hoffman and Kaslow.

This theme was further expanded later in 1995 in the *Family Therapy Networker* and again more fully in *Resilience — Stories of a Family Therapist* (Lang & Lang, 1996). *Resilience* was extensively reviewed (e.g. Gunzberg, 1996; Oakes, 1997; Relph, 1999; Stressac, 1996) including in this very journal (Tapping, 1996). 'Silence' was also

included in a book titled *The Family and Family Therapy in International Perspective* (Gielen and Laura Comunian, 1998). Marta Lohyn (1998) in the *ANZJFT*'s 'Worth a Third Read' chose 'Silence' as the article that struck her as the most memorable and wrote movingly about how it resonated with her own family's experience.

Ironically, one of the other contributors to 'Worth a Third Read' was Grimwade himself; his article appears on the same page as Lohyn (30). It is impossible for me to overlook Grimwade's failure to do a proper literature search. Further, the readers are entitled to expect that the *ANZJFT* itself would ensure that such significant omissions are not made.

References

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Dear Editors,

Firstly, thank you to Moshe Lang for his corrective response to my exploratory discussion published in *Network News* (Dec., 2000). I know his paper and I simply forgot it. Right under my nose. I am sorry.

'Silence' (Grimwade, 2000) was never intended to be a 'proper' paper. Perhaps, if it had been forwarded for consid-

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eration to the Explorations Editor, Andrew Relph, he would have picked up the gaps that Lang has demonstrated. It was to be another chat piece in NN, but I was awed when 'Silence' appeared almost as an epitaph to a foundational feature of our journal. Maybe this is why it was picked up. I am glad to have had my enquiry most usefully extended, but I am saddened by the demise of NN, even if I accept the reasons for its passing.

I have taken pause to consider why I might have forgotten Lang's paper (1995). I was fascinated by it when it appeared, as I am fascinated by the way he writes and the help he is able to provide, but somehow conceptualised the paper as a specialist response to an horrendous historical fact: the Holocaust. But, re-reading the words Lang quotes from his original paper had a peculiar, déjà vu quality. Peculiar because the sentiment seemed to have been part of my thinking. I remember asking about not saying something in therapy at a Margaret Topham workshop in 1985, but my disciplined enquiry about silence probably was triggered by Lang. My investigations began in 1996 and became a sub-plot to my enquiries about the practice of psychoanalytically trained family therapists.

Lang (1995) is suggesting that not enough attention is paid in family therapy to the positive aspects of silence. I ask my colleagues again to consider why this might be so: is it a failure to notice silence? Or a mere failure to write about it? Or a commonplace associated with therapeutic timing that has been overlooked? Or, as I tried to suggest (but without conviction for lack of evidence), a feature that differentiates therapy with families from other forms of therapy? All these are possible and not necessarily mutually exclusive.

If it is a differentiating feature, has this to do with length of contact, the volubility of children, the high tension of family sessions, or the varying nature of the contract between therapist and each of the participants, as one of my 'wise elders' suggested?

In that study (I am still trying to bring it into publishable form, the data is very rich, and methodologically difficult to present) I left out many Australians who might have been included as 'wise elders' as I travelled to London (where, again, I missed out on Skynner and Dare and Carpenter).

I thank Lang for his letter, apologise for the error, and thank you, dear Editors, for the opportunity to explore the issue and then be able to continue the exploration, here. There is a community interested in the question; it seems to me that students looking for research projects might well pursue the phenomenon of silence in therapy with families.

Cheerfully yours,
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