

Review

Resilience: Stories of a Family Therapist

By Moshe and Tesse Lang
Mandarin, Melbourne 1996

It is probably inevitable that this book will be compared to Irvin Yalom's *Love's Executioner*. This will be unfortunate because the two volumes have quite different agendas. Yalom's work set out to present idiosyncratic and extraordinary cases exemplifying his existentialist approach, and especially to record his struggles with these cases. Moshe Lang, working from within the more prosaic family therapy tradition, presents us with a book of nuance and flavour, containing kernels and nuggets rather than laboriously worked out studies. One reads Yalom as one would a book of short stories, each playing out some internal tension of plot and theme, whereas *Resilience* is a collection of brief sketches and vignettes, each serving as a vehicle for pithy observations and cogent insights. The Langs' work is more accessible and less "grand" than Yalom's and the details are more immediately striking.

Moshe Lang is the co-founder of one of Australia's most prestigious family therapy centres and is well-known to therapists around Australia. *Resilience*, co-authored with his wife Tesse, is a collection of fifty-two (not thirty as the cover claims) stories by a master family therapist who continues to grow and change. The volume has numerous virtues. The vignettes comprise far more of the book than the commentaries, and thus they largely speak for themselves with the authors' comments being, for the most part, merely addenda. As well, Lang is not averse to confessing the blues, his errors. In one case, the sketch "Crime and Punishment", he said quite the wrong thing in the first minutes of the first interview and kicked himself for weeks afterwards. Also, Lang shows how his thinking has grown and changed over the years; in his early work he routinely assumed that all members of a troubled family had to be interviewed, but later came to recognise the value of individual therapy within a family context. Hence we may learn much from this book, including pointers to how we ourselves may grow and change. As well, it has the added precious virtue of being immensely readable.

Compared with the Langs' earlier volume *Corrupting the Young*, this book has more detail and a wider span. I especially enjoyed their account of the "sin" of "post-conscious therapy" (talk first, think later), and Moshe Lang's use of the "so what" technique. These reminded me of some of my own spontaneous, and not always quite so helpful, responses. This twinge of recognition will probably occur for many who read *Resilience*. For me it was strongest in the anecdote entitled "Positively brutal" where a woman client explains how she has tried to tell many doctors how bad things are but none have understood, probably because none have really wanted to hear. Reading this I felt a distinct "Ouch!" Yes- some things are almost too painful to listen to, and the temptation to rush into problem-solving, to be "helpful," is near overwhelming. Perhaps I could have been one of those doctors? Perhaps, perhaps ...

In the Introduction the Langs imply that *Corrupting the Young* was a kind of pilot project for *Resilience*. If that is so, and considering the differences in scale, scope, and detail between the two books, perhaps the authors should give some thought to considering the concluding section of *Resilience* - titled "Generation to Generation" - as a kind of pilot for their next effort. For "Generation to Generation" is about therapy with the families of holocaust survivors. I found this to be the most absorbing section of the book. I wanted to know more about the people concerned, their hopes, their inner lives, and their ways of coping. The authors say that they refrained from writing on this subject for years because they were afraid that they might trivialise the Holocaust and the magnitude of its impact upon survivors and their families. While their concerns are fair, I can think of no one better placed to write such a book. Further, given the frequency with which one encounters descendants of holocaust survivors, it would be a very significant contribution indeed.

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