

## The Morality Play's the Thing...

by Paul Abels

A recent film, *The Truman Show*, is the story of a young man who discovers his entire life has been staged with him as the central figure in a three decade long television show. Truman is a True-Man, in that he is unaware of the way he is being used. He is not a True-man because all of the experiences he faces are "set ups," seemingly real, but artificial experiences, with primed people/actors, who follow a script, not their own direction. He, alone, is doing what is natural, of course natural within the limits being set by a conspiracy of actions. All of his problems are resolved, worked out for him by others. But of course his problems are also created by others; they are scripted. Persons grow through the ability to work on the problems they face, and so he must face problems, and of course this gives tension to his life, which is much appreciated by the millions who watch the program. Truman is not permitted to search out his own solutions to problems. When things get too rough, a new character is introduced into the scenario. His wishes to leave town, to search out a long lost teen-age sweetheart, an actress who abandoned her written lines and tried to warn Truman that he was really on T.V. Unknown to him, his desires and plans are all deliberately thwarted, and he is forced to live the life others provide for him.

A series of technical errors alerts him to the fact that he is not in control of his life. Ultimately, and against great odds, he breaks out of the life-long narrative that has been selected for him, out to the world, "less safe" perhaps, but a world in which he will have the right to his own self fulfillment, and be able to make his own moral decisions. As the movie closes we see his once teen-age love, running to meet him. As he walks out of the dome in which his life was shaped, the scene shifts to T.V. audiences all over the world cheering. It is a like a universal morality play, and True-Man, "Everyman," has chosen freedom. The confused, but enthralled world which has enjoyed his enslavement and their own, by the way, for almost thirty years, glories in his freedom, not realizing their own conspiratorial guilt or personal enslavement. One might hope that his experience was a lesson learned, but in the closing scene, with *The Truman Show* off the air, the viewers just switch a channel to another program.

Like the television audience in *The Truman Show*, the helping professions may, though unaware of it, be unaware performers in processes controlled by some prime movers in our society whose orientation toward human needs is self centered and manipulative, and who often lack the "empha-

thy" that Goleman speaks to in his work on Emotional Intelligence.\* This unawareness on our part is often at a cost to the clients and perhaps to ourselves as well.

For the healing professions, those concerned with social justice, empathy is a given and we know that all decisions that we make related to our clients are moral decisions., that is, we are always trying to decide on what is the right thing to do. We are always actors in a morality play. The things we do or don't do make a difference in people's lives. The narratives in this issue reflect that idea. Our morality play's actors, the physicians, social workers, mental health professionals, and teachers, reveal their inner thoughts about their moral dilemmas, many which are created by the restrictions placed on them by powerful interests that can set the conditions for their practice. Dissatisfaction with some HMOs which have curtailed physicians ability to serve has created a growing protest from patients, to a movement by doctors to turn to unions, in an attempt to counteract the controls being placed on their ability to give needed service. Limiting service is seen by these doctors as a moral issue, particularly when the laws on the issues are illusive or enhanced by contracts they are committed to sign. All of us, physicians and patients alike are captive to the morality of the organization. We have seen traditional public services made private, and some organizations' policies change from caring to "privateering."

Morality and politics nowadays may seem like an oxymoron. The impeachment hearings have illustrated that moral decisions are contaminated by political influences, resulting in outcomes which ignore the public interest. Television has brought the morality play from the middle-ages into the modern age, and into public dialogue. There's something about a play that grabs our attention. Shakespeare's Hamlet proclaims, "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." Morality plays may not have been the rage during the middle ages, but they did draw crowds and "Everyman" was a hit in its day. It played out the story of humanity's battle with, and conquest over, evil. It was meant to muster our awareness and give rise to our "higher," more moral attributes. The hero need not be perfect, but close to it. It was often the person's temptations, and the inner struggles that helped point out the importance of the conquest.

The people who shape our lives are both moral and immoral, and at times both. Not that they would have us do immoral things, but like Truman, the consequences of their actions us as, persons, diminishes our autonomy and diminishes our ability to serve. The solution is to become aware of the forces impinging on us, and to raise the awareness of those we work with as well. The morality play is played out everyday in our offices, the classroom, and our organizations. We are "everybody." □

(I would like to dedicate this editorial to Iris Murdock, whose writings are often wonderfully moral. She died on Feb 8, 1999. I particularly liked *The Nice and the Good* in which all the characters are treated in a moral way including the villains. You might also want to read *Elegy for Iris* a book written this year by her husband John Bayley, about their love, her Alzheimer's, and their life together during her illness. It illustrates, powerfully, the relationship between love and morality.)

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\*Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. N.Y. Bantam Books

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