

Beneath Still Waters: Legacies of Quiet Men

In a narrative linking the teaching of group work with experiences in which people who are quiet by nature, the I discuss the importance of presence, belonging, mutuality, and "counting." While our profession relies greatly upon words, this narrative asserts that quietness and resonant communication can also convey much about human relationships.

by
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After 18 years in social work practice and nearly 12 years of teaching, I have come to know many things. One is that it is possible to touch other lives in deep and lasting ways and that such moments of synchronicity and resonance often occur unexpectedly. I have also come to know that one cannot force such moments to happen, that one must be open to the possibility of creating the circumstances in which they can occur. I've learned that people touch other lives by being totally present with the other person, by genuine caring, and also by knowing that such connections are often formed in ways beyond words. Those of us who are quiet by nature often become keenly sensitized to the nonverbal dialogue that occurs between people. Such constant awareness is as incorporated into the art of our practice as are words and skills. This is a narrative about that topic, circumstances in which people can come to know ways of touching one another's lives, of connected knowing, and about creating the experiences that enable others to enhance those potentials in the educational process of becoming social workers.

We Are Both the Message and the Messenger

As a social work educator, I have tried to teach effectively by applying my knowledge, my practice experience, and my self in the service of others' learning. I strive to teach in a way that will strengthen students' capacities to tap their reservoir of compassion and humanity, as well as their intellects, so that their future clients will be more humanely and effectively served. I continually try to create forms of dialogue that may be developed and nurtured in a class milieu that fosters the learning of both the formal content and the more ineffable spiritual aspects of social work.

I often use the notion of helping students "find their voice" in working with others. By this I mean their unique ability to convey (and be receptive to) thoughts, feelings, genuineness, caring, and the meaning, in addition to the words employed, in establishing a good working relationship. They are the voice that sends the messages, they are the voice that can make words music, and, if they "connect" with people, both their voice and their greater

message are heard. Learning to convey such notions can be effectively done using creative classroom activities to augment more formal lessons. To foster the ability to know others, what we do in the classroom must be congruent with what we teach students to do with clients. To do this we must first work to create a "we" that works together to achieve mutual goals.

Students often have vague preconceptions that they must discover "magic words" and that if they know and utter such words at precisely the right moment, desired change will happen. Similarly, many fear (though rarely openly state) that there must also be words that, if said at the wrong moment, will effect awful events. They often overemphasize the spoken word as they begin learning skills. Students are aware of nonverbal language before they take my courses but see such communication as only a vague adjunct to the spoken word. They see silence (or that communication outside of sound) as something, at best, to be reached into (Shulman, 1992) rather than as the universal ground of communication that utterances embellish. What I try to nurture and develop are students' capacities to use that great body of communication in relationships and knowing others.

When I began wrestling with writing this paper, I was engaged in teaching an abbreviated summer course in group work. In that course, I tried to teach specific techniques and to use narrative to convey a broader understanding of the nonverbal as-

pects of knowing others. In one class session, a discussion with a student provided a serendipitous opening into the subject of this essay—ways of achieving connected knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), of touching others' lives, and of becoming a social worker.

In a class exercise, students were divided into two groups and asked to do exercises to accomplish two things: 1) to interact to create a sense of "we" among the group members, and 2) to role play various steps in the group process. One group did a lively and animated job of their assignment and the other a terse and brooding job of it. The quieter group finished first and I met with them separately to process what had occurred. Students began talking about how in that week many of them had encountered financial dilemmas, personal problems, and so forth. They felt that others had sensed their stress without having to explain it in detail. They felt that their collective accumulation of problems, and their empathy, made it difficult to "get into" a role play. Afterwards, I ended the exercise and class with a brief discussion of what had and hadn't worked and why one group was seemingly upbeat and successful. The class ended and many students stayed to talk with one another or me. Between conversations, one young student, Coreena, hesitantly handed me a note.

The gist of Coreena's note was that she thought teachers too often equated happiness, a lot of talking, and conviviality

in classroom exercises with success. She suggested that sometimes "melancholy" things come up and though people are not happy while talking and are rather quiet, they do communicate verbally and nonverbally and that important things get done and sometimes painful things are shared. Thus, she said, such groups are also successful in their own way. I was struck by several things: the first being her courage and forthrightness, the second being the accuracy of her observations, and the third being another spontaneous observation that followed. She said, "I'm a very quiet person and people don't always understand quietness—sometimes my quietness even seems to make people angry." I must admit that I never perceived Coreena as being "quiet." Her facial expressions were usually active and pleasant—rather like unfolding flowers when she beamed in class. Her nonverbal expressiveness always spoke volumes. We discussed ways that quietness is perceived, that it often makes others uncomfortable and that it can sometimes even evoke anger in others. While there may be auditory silence in the absence of words, the whole person can radiate other messages that may or may not be consciously received and, also, others may make inaccurate interpretations of silence.

Like Coreena and others, I am, by nature, a quiet, taciturn person. In teaching, I must allow for that trait yet impart what I have come to know about human relating. What I convey is a sense of overlapping mes-

sages—about how "we" are doing, about the topic, about purpose, about dialogues, about how and what I am striving to communicate, and about the feedback I'm getting from them. This same fusion of information about messenger and message and response often occurs in practice.

Cultivating one's capacity for relating and communicating and caring enables one's whole being to speak or hear volumes in situations where words alone are insufficient. Regarding such tacit knowing, one of the major characters in the fine new novel *The Wrecked, Blessed Body of Shelton LaFleur* (1996) succinctly observed to the young man he was teaching that there are times when he didn't even need to hear someone talk to know what was inside him or her. So it is in working with clients or students. There is a need to learn many ways to resonate with what's within another's heart (Kelly, 1984; Buber, 1967) and to let students know that a momentary loss of words is not a death knell in relating—it may, in fact, be an opportunity to hear what's beyond the smokescreen of words.

When dialoguing with students, I try to respect that impulse which brings many of them into the field—the impulse to care. That calling is a gift, but a gift often obfuscated by words and by others' discomfort with the altruism of caring. The desire to relate compassionately to others is part of the resonant music of being human (Brussat & Brussat, 1996). Social work at its best and at its most effective

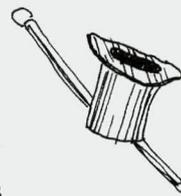
has its roots in compassion and spirituality and social justice. It is also best taught by nurturing the thirst for resonance with, and caring for, others (Josselson, 1996).

Words and skills and policies may embroider and grace impulses to care for others but will never substitute for the ability to experience that calling. That distinction needs to be understood by students. But, how does one come to appreciate such things? Some things, including the possibility of deeply touching another's life and how that happens, must be illuminated and learned by experiencing them. This is the sort of coming to know that is difficult to reduce to words; experience and sharing stories of experience are probably more effective ways of learning meanings in such instances than is rote learning. One way of imparting such understanding is to share examples of experiences in which people have come to such knowing. The following are stories of events in the process of my own coming to know and appreciate quiet communication, resonance, and the joy of touching another's life.

Perhaps my own tendency to quiet communication is inherited, but I tend to think of it as a trait learned young. A pale child of poor parents who left their home in a city to live in a small, all white, all Protestant,

Indiana town, I was a painfully thin boy of mixed Welsh, Jewish, and Black ancestry with a keen sense of being different and out of place. Quietness was modeled for me by my father and grandfather. I think my father, in particular, had discovered its ability to render him somewhat invisible in a place and time when such differences greatly mattered. The tacit message was that quietness offered some protection from life's unpleasantness. When I recall such things, further associations with tacit knowing are triggered. For example, when I was small child, my grandparents would take the grandchildren out into the yard after sundown on cloudless evenings. Placing a blanket on the ground, my grandfather would invite us to lie on our backs and look at the stars. He softly and sparingly spoke of the immensity of space, that each far star was a sun like ours, and that each star held the possibility of life. Those were big thoughts for a little kid like me to digest. He would lie with us and we could sense the immensity of creation from his nonverbal awe and from the knowing of him. We did this watching and imagining quietly and slowly and gained a tacit sense of eternity and an appreciation for the enormity of simply being—to know beyond words that life is wondrous and that the creation of things emerges from silent emptiness (Carse, 1994; Rinpoche, 1994).

We children compre-



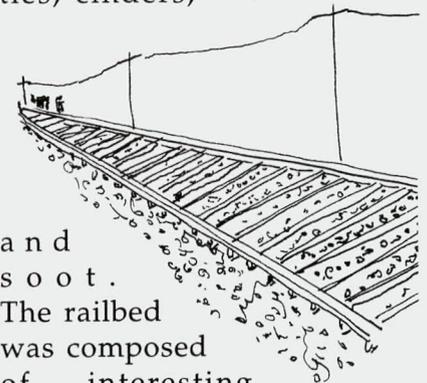
hended in ways beyond words that it was not that we were small creatures in comparison to the immensity of what we saw but that we were simply immersed in the greatness of possibility. From such moments I comprehended the metaphoric equation of words with stars. Like stars, words best shine when appreciated in the context of silent communication. Also during this period in my young life I learned to love poetry. My grandmother adored poetry and impressed upon me the notion that words ought to grace sentiments toward others and ideals rather than substitute for them. Quoting Emily Dickinson, there are things we experience, she taught us, that leave "...no scar, [but make an] internal difference where the meanings are" (1965, p.154). Such epiphanies in my child's mind shaped my conceptual frames for apprehending the world and later influenced my practice and my teaching. The first of two other linked experiences occurred in that same part of my childhood and helped me understand the power of subtle moments in relating. What follows is a more lengthy story of those experiences from my childhood and young adulthood. The memories evoked by the very act of writing the story remind me that the foundations of human dialogue and human compassion are often quiet and not built upon noble words (Bateson, 1987).

Finley

I first recall meeting Finley Steward when I was 10 or 11 years old. When I now recall Finley, I do so from the memories formulated and stored by that younger self in another time, place, and social circumstance. I must confess, though, that my adult mind cannot completely articulate the feelings, impressions, and observations of my younger self.

Finley Steward lived in the small town in which I lived. He was referred to as the "town tramp," a term which has since taken on a different and more derogatory meaning. In that place and time he was a rarely seen figure who lived on life's margins and minimized human contact; he also successfully escaped all diagnostic labeling other than "odd." Before I ever met him, I'd asked my mother and grandparents about "that old man who wore the dirty old clothes." They gave me his name—actually both of his names. He sometimes called himself Willie de Weece; apparently, no one was sure whether Finley or Willie was his true given name. Little else was known about him other than as a young man he had worked as a hired hand for two spinster sisters in a neighboring town before withdrawing into a more reclusive and itinerant life. Though he was reclusive, I came to know that in simple and unintended ways people could still enter his isolation and affect him. I also came to know that he could reach out and affect me in enduring ways.

Of a seeming advanced age, Finley was a short man with chronically soiled hands, a deeply tanned face, and, regardless of the temperature, a man who always wore many layers of filthy clothing. He sported several days' growth of whiskers and crudely staved off the development of a beard with scissors. Finley had a very pronounced body odor—months' or years' worth of accumulated and caked sweat and dirt. My grandparents characterized him simply as "odd" but intelligent and harmless. I first met Finley after my family moved to a house immediately adjoining a grain elevator and a New York Central Railroad line. The rail line still teemed with the last of the old steam locomotives and reeked of tar-impregnated ties, cinders,



and
soot.

The railbed was composed of interesting stones such as quartz, small fossils, and agates. It was a veritable gold mine to the rock-hound I'd become, and I spent my summers searching for rocks for my collection. While searching I would sometimes see Finley forlornly walking the tracks.

The rail lines that cut through town were Finley's paths home. His "house" was an old, abandoned railroad storage

building near the rail depot a half mile from my house. On one sweltering July day, I was searching the gravel hoping to add to my collection of miniature fossils when I looked up to find Finley walking slowly toward me. Hesitantly, he approached me and when he came near he quietly asked what I was doing—that he'd seen me so occupied many times and wondered what my searching was about. By his manner he seemed timid but intrigued and certainly not a threat. Nowadays, children would probably be warned to flee at the sight of such a character. I was not so warned; the message from my family was to treat everyone with respect regardless of their "station" in life. Though I'd said a shy "hi" to him on a few occasions when I'd unexpectedly encountered him in alleys as I'd walked home from school, that was the first time he ever initiated a conversation.

I told him of my collection of rocks and fossils and showed him some of the things I'd found that day. He pointed out one bright white, flaky quartz stone as being one he liked. I asked if he wanted it and he very hesitantly said "yes," took it, and thanked me. Finley then did what I later discovered he'd never done before—he invited me to come to his house and see his own collection of stones.

As Finley talked, his face brightened and he said that in his years of roaming and scrounging for things, he'd picked up a lot of "pretty" rocks and had made a special place

where he could display them. I sensed that he was talking about something for which he felt pride—these were seemingly his treasures. I also felt his hesitation about having a visitor see his home and sensed fear—fear of the loss of his invisibility and of being vulnerable, of being ridiculed, or of losing something of value. It had never occurred to me to speculate what he must live like, let alone to judge him. I didn't think about being trusted by him; I was merely intrigued by the possibility of seeing some new rocks and minerals, possibly from far away places. Several days later I decided to visit him to see his "treasures." What I experienced that day and years later evoked empathy and a way of knowing beyond words. Only recently have I tried to put those experiences into words.

With misgiving, I walked from the hot railbed through the dusty weeds to the windowless door in the front of the shed that was Finley's home. I knocked softly and waited for what seemed an eternity. I heard nothing and knocked once again, and then I turned to leave. Some seconds later, I heard a soft voice ask, "Who's there?" I gave my name and told him I'd come to see the rocks he'd mentioned. I think that was the first time I'd ever given him my name. It sounded as though he began untying a rope, which must have served to secure the door to the frame and provide some measure of safety. In a few seconds he opened the

door a crack and looked at and around me. I again sensed fear and I remember being non-plussed by this—it had never occurred to me that I could evoke fear in an adult. Only later did I come to realize that it was not I that he feared but rather the crack in his isolation that I symbolized. He hesitantly, quietly, allowed me to come in, saying that the only way to get to his backyard gallery was through his one large room. I entered and my conscious awareness of being able to know another's reality was forever changed.

Finley's one room "home" was filled floor to ceiling with old clothing. To get to the rear door, it was necessary to stoop down and crawl through a tunnel in the clothing. In the middle of the tunnel was a side shaft to a chamber formed within the pile. Scented by years of perspiration, the chamber he had formed was his place to retreat and sleep. The shed had no heat or electricity, so the burrowed space provided a measure of warmth in the winter. Crawling further, I dodged a reeking old enameled chamber pot that was his toilet and then emerged into the backyard.

The backyard was a grassless area about thirty feet in diameter and was floored with packed earth. Its boundaries were demarked by old scraps of lumber nailed between box elder trees. Sitting in rows on the lumber were stones of various sizes and types, colored



glass bottles, and brightly colored pieces of junk. I looked at the display and felt disappointed, having imagined more exotic things. Though Finley was quiet and tentative, I felt his pride in his menagerie. In a moment of what I recall as a sort of empathic epiphany, I felt some of what he felt and realized that the beauty and meaning he saw in his stones was real to him and that my appraisal was my own—no less nor more subjective than his (Saari, 1991). Seeing that old man thus, momentarily feeling what he felt, I started to become consciously aware of experiencing empathy with a stranger and of the sense of knowing someone by way of that connection (Belenky, et al., 1986).

I carefully examined each rock and commented on its uniqueness and the way it sparkled in sunlight. I told him how much I liked, even envied, his collection and that perhaps we could trade if ever I got enough good things that he might want. Other than that we spoke sparingly and soon lapsed into silence. After a few minutes of further looking and after awkward good-byes, I exited back through his burrow.

In the years that followed, I periodically saw Finley. When our paths crossed, we would wave in friendly fashion but spoke little; our dialogue was in large part nonverbal but we did ask how each other was doing and acknowledged our shared interest. In those years I grew taller and thin and bookish and he grew more quiet and stooped and withdrawn. In that

period I never met anyone who had any notion of how Finley lived. I kept my experience to myself, fearing that sharing what I'd seen might make him the butt of ridicule.

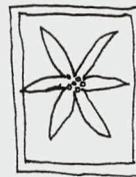
Ten years later, my parents' house was destroyed and, following a family diaspora, I moved alone across town. Soon to graduate from college, I was influenced by the nonviolence and social concerns of Quakers and was to become a conscientious objector in the Vietnam War. For my alternate service, I became a social worker.

At this juncture in my life, I had my last meaningful contact with Finley. I was sitting on my porch on another hot July afternoon just watching cars drive by. Life was not always exciting in rural Indiana. Glancing down the street, I saw a familiar, stooped figure amble my way. Finley walked with a wide gait that I can still picture. He shuffled along with his head down and his eyes fixed on the path ahead. Though he was aware of his surroundings, this habit seemed to preclude meeting another's gaze. I thought he'd likely walk on past and not notice me. But, as he came near, he hesitated and then came directly across the street and up my front walk. Only then did he look at me directly. His eyes appeared more aged and tired than I remembered as a child. As he approached he reached inside his shirt and pulled out a wrinkled and soiled envelope. He handed it to me and said "I wanted to mail this to you last Christmas but I didn't know

where you lived anymore and I didn't have a stamp for it anyway." Then he lowered his eyes and waited for me to open it.

I opened the envelope and in it was an obviously inexpensive Christmas card with a red poinsettia on the front. On the inside he had penned the following few words with a surprisingly flourished hand "You were always my friend. Merry Christmas, Willie de Weece." I was stunned by the simple words and immense meaning but merely said "Thank you...this is a nicer gift than I can tell you." With that he hesitated as if to say more, then gave a slight wave, turned, and walked on down the street assuming his usual downward gaze.

I did not see Finley again after that. Ordered away to another town to do my alternate service as a social worker, I began my career remembering that subtle experience he'd provided about human relating. I occasionally heard about Finley from townsfolk on the rare occasions when I returned. Finley reportedly became noticeably demented after I last saw him and was somewhat forcibly moved to the county home about seven miles away. Apparently he ran away from the home regularly and followed the rail line back to his old abode. After several such excursions, someone bulldozed and burned his shack and belongings so as to deter him from running away. Probably, those actions were well intended, but Finley returned home for the last time to a denuded lot with neither his build-



ing nor his gallery in the trees left standing. He was found sitting quietly on the packed earth that had once housed his treasures and returned to the county home. After his return he withdrew into absolute silence to his bed and died shortly thereafter. A broken heart makes little sound. Broken dreams less.

And so, I became a social worker and after practicing for many years, I've moved on to become a social work educator. In my current role I'm learning to meld the fundamentally correct social work curricular content with my own conceptual framing and experience in the actual "doing" of social work. In teaching the importance of relating languages, both verbal and nonverbal, I've found it necessary to model or exemplify that which works in practice while working with the students themselves and to contextualize the message of how to practice in stories and narratives.

I use our classroom relationship(s) as a form of laboratory in which knowledge, caring, and ways of conceiving the topic are transmitted. I am mindful of Nodding's (1991) suggestion that the experience of being cared for may be a prerequisite for learning to care for others in a helping relationship. I care about my students; they matter to me, though the expression of that caring is not always easy to deal with. It is often not easy for quiet people, and particularly quiet men, to convey thoughts and feelings and how they fit into the warp and woof of relationships for fear of humiliation in expressing them

(Josselson, 1996; Tagore, 1914). But, in doing effective social work, such messages (both tacit and overt) must be available. The ability to do this is, I believe, especially important for social work students to learn if they are to respond to the compassionate or spiritual aspects of their calling to the profession.

To enable students to learn about compassion and trust and caring and genuineness, I share occasional stories of self-in-practice. I try to create the same open and trusting environment that I suggest they learn to create so that they feel free to share their own stories. They are free to own their knowledge and thoughts and feelings and perceptions and use "I" and "we" in our verbal and nonverbal dialogues. In small ways they come to know me and I them. By experiencing such activities together, we all change (Kramp & Humphries, 1992). Through stories, journaling, and narrative accounts, it is possible to foster moments of epiphanous understanding, establish dialogues, construct meanings (Parry & Doan, 1994), and foster a sensitivity to the possibilities in future dialogues when they enter their social work careers (Duck, 1993). In doing these things, students often blossom, though I probably have learned more from them than they've learned from me.

And finally, when I think of the subject matter in this essay—teaching the place of words, presence, silence, dialogue, relating, connected knowing, and how people become nonverbally articulate—I

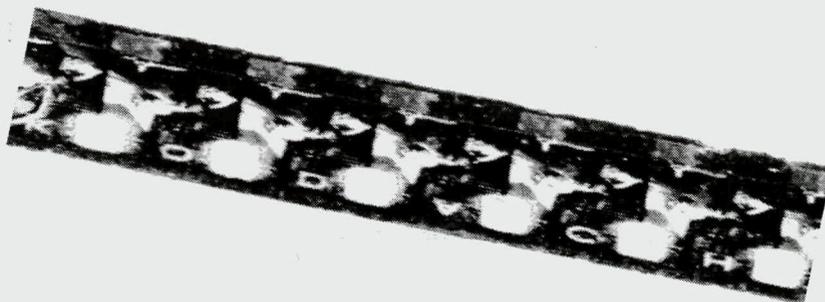
wonder why my interactions with Finley still so often come to mind and why caring and justice and human relating has come to matter so much to me. In unforeseen ways, that lonely, quiet, old man has had a lasting influence on my life's work. From him, family, and others, I learned to better comprehend subtle connectedness—a form of knowing that is not readily reduced to words. From them I also learned of class issues, racism, and the myriad forms of exclusion. I learned that people need to feel that they "count" for something, that they matter to someone (Thurman, 1996). To paraphrase the poet W. S. Merwin (1994), I learned to know that my knowing came not from words but almost from another language. I have also come to know that spoken language only sings as part of the harmony in unspoken dialogue, and though that silent dialogue is not readily reduced to words, it is graced by them. I learned, too, that moments of resonance and connectedness may have profound and lasting effects on people.

To me, when I was a young man in a small Indiana town on a day long ago, Finley became an unintended hero (McAdams, 1988). His kindness, consideration, remembering, and feedback about the times our paths crossed, and his acknowledgement that I mattered to him and that the narratives of our lives had intersected, enabled me to know about the knowing of people in quietly powerful ways. That led to my enduring quest as a prac-

tioner-turned-educator, to pass along gifts given to me by Finley and other quiet and caring men. □

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