

William- A Story of a Positive Focus of Power, Not Force

One situation we often face in providing recovery services is that of going through a painful and stressful event with someone who is having a challenging life experiences. If we aren't careful, aren't paying attention, we can be pulled down to the same low level of consciousness the person is experiencing. Once this happens we are left with no strength or positive energy to lend them so they can begin to manage their problems. Another pitfall we may fall into is caring for someone so much that it ends up as caretaking and sometimes even controlling them. When this happens, we're not only operating from the negative levels of consciousness, but we're also keeping the person there as well.

When Lori started working in the human services field, she didn't understand this concept and frequently allowed herself to slide down into a negative state of consciousness. Her first job in this field was as a social worker in a rural area of northern California. She had a caseload of 120 people who had some sort of disability and were scattered over hundreds of miles of dusty farm lands and deep forests.

Lori was issued a plastic briefcase and an old county car with loud humming snow tires for winter treks into the high country. The valley farm lands were very hot in the summers, and of course, the car had no air conditioning. The whole experience was quite a challenge, but she was naive enough to assume it was doable.

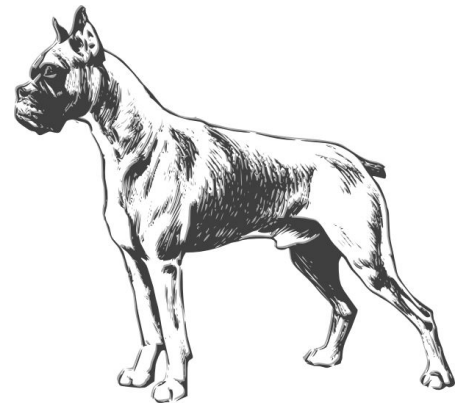


One of the first people Lori worked with was William. She read his chart before she ventured out to meet him. He was described by his previous case worker as "a 42 y.o. cauc. male schizophrenic." Too bad he wasn't described more accurately. Once Lori got to know William, she would have described him like this: "William has a heart of gold; he is very kind. Despite his vulnerabilities, he is very courageous. Despite being misunderstood most of his life, he is very understanding. He has no friends but would make a great friend if someone would give him a chance."

William had been born in a state hospital and had spent most of his life there. Now, with the meager income from his social security disability check, he lived by himself in a rented bunk-house on a ranch on the outskirts of a small valley town.

It took Lori half a day just to find his place – the search ending in careful stepping around cow-pies, past cattle corals, through deep dust, and lots of stickery weeds. She knocked on the door several times before William was willing to open it. He probably only did so because he felt sorry for her, standing there on his porch looking dusty and hot, holding her plastic briefcase.

Once inside, William's huge dog, which Lori claims must have weighed 200 pounds, jumped up on her, bracing a paw on each of her shoulders. Since she had her plastic briefcase in one hand and her purse in the other, she wasn't sure how she was going to get him down.



William didn't seem to think of this as a breach of manners, so most of the conversation took place with the dog and Lori in dance position, the hound gazing playfully into her eyes and panting dog-breath at her, nearly fogging her glasses.

William told me his story of growing up in the hospital, and recently being placed here on the ranch. He had no friends, and those around him made fun of and tormented him.

There were hundreds of bottles of water all over the house because William was convinced that the water supply would run out (he may have been ahead of his time). He was afraid of most things, real and otherwise, and spent most of his time worrying about what was going to happen next.

By the time Lori left she was really glad he had that dog, because she was now afraid for him too and worried as much as he did. She worried that the men on the ranch would continue to be mean to him, worried that he wouldn't have food to eat, worried about his not having friends and being lonely; worried that he'd have to go back into the hospital.

After this first encounter, Lori worried about William every time she thought about him – which was often. She had a sinking feeling in her heart. She had connected with William at a heart-level which was good – a prerequisite to being able to support him. Yet, at the same time, since she didn't yet know how to maintain a state of positive consciousness, she had rendered herself incapable of coming up with any creative ways to support him because she was now as worried and hopeless as he was. Let's listen to Lori as she recounts her continued worry and work with William:

"I continue to see William nearly every month over the next year. He assumes I'm visiting him because I'm planning to readmit him to the state hospital. As miserable as his existence is at the ranch, he dreads the thought of returning to the hospital more than anything. He concentrates on reassuring me that he is alright. Our conversations usually start with me standing on the front porch, either muddy or dusty, depending on the season. Most of the time they sounded like this:

Lori "William? It's me. Are you in there? I brought some red licorice for us. Can you come to the door?"

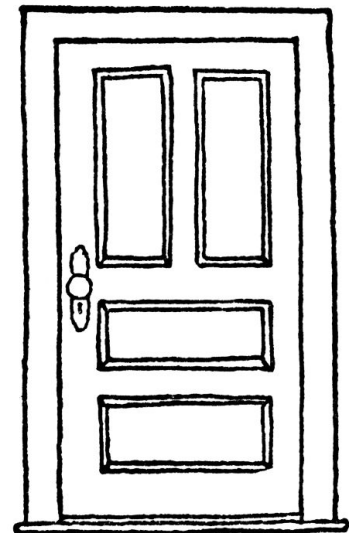
William "No!"

Lori "How's your dog, Max? I bet he misses me."

William "Are you alone? Did they come with you?"

Lori "I'm alone. It's just me. They didn't come."

William "Okay. I'll let you in but you have to wait until I get ready."



The "wait" takes about five minutes. Finally, William comes to the door. Max squeezes passed him to conduct his usual sniff test. I follow them into the front room. William and I sit in two hard rickety chairs while Max circles and pants, waiting impatiently for his share of the licorice.

William “What do you want this time?” William asks suspiciously.

Lori “Nothing.”

William “If you take me away there will be no one to fix dinner for Max. You know that don’t you?”

Lori “I didn’t come to take you away. Let’s eat this licorice before it gets old.”

William teaches me an intentional way of supporting wellness that appears to be unintentional. Watch how this unfolds for me.

As we chew on the sticky licorice, William tells me how well he and Max are doing. He does this because he thinks it will convince me to not “take him away.” The more he tries to convince me, the more he actually convinces himself. My part is to keep him thinking and talking about how well he is doing. The more he tells me about how well he is doing, the better he does. The skills he is teaching himself about sounding and being well are sticking to him. He starts believing them and so do I. He’s able to transfer this new identity to his conversations with the cowboys. They in turn begin to find him likable and teach him a key cowboy skill -- how to chew snuff. This deepens his connection with them and reinforces and builds on his socialization skills. I do wish there was a better way to do this, but it’s not my call.

My last visit with William takes place in early spring. He teaches me about letting go. This is just like him to save the hardest lesson for last. I have to keep relearning this one since it’s a hard one to hold on to.

There is more rain than usual this particular spring. William places some old boards along the path to his porch that I “tight rope” along. I have the red licorice in my coat pocket and hum as I balance along the boards. I leap from the last board to the front porch steps and knock loudly on the door. No answer. No dog barking. No commotion or rattling around inside.

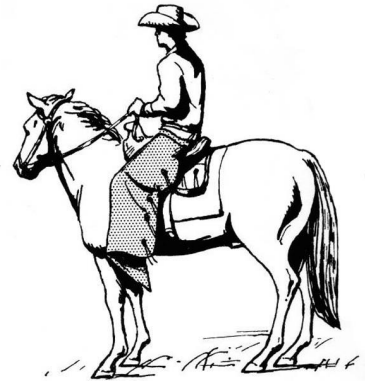
Lori: “William, it’s me. Can I come in?”

No answer. I knock and call again, but no response. A drape of dread falls over me and I stand paralyzed by fear on the front porch not knowing quite what to do. Has he fallen? Has he been taken back to the hospital? Heart attack? Stroke?

Lori “William, come to the door” I scream. “William...”

Cowboy “You lookin for Willie?” A slow quite voice behind me asks?

Lori “Yes. What happened? Where is he? When did you last see him? I’m so worried about him.”



Cowboy “Well.....He rode into town with Bob this mornin’. They both needed a haircut. We made a doctor’s appointment for him too cause he just aint gettin’ over that cold. Max went too. You know how he is.”

Lori “Oh thank God!” (I say, wilting with relief.)

Cowboy “You want to go inside and wait for them?”

Lori “No. I think I’ll go. Oh, would you like some licorice?”

Cowboy “ Sure. I love that stuff. Sure you don’t wanna to keep some of it?”

Lori “No. I won’t need it any longer. Tell Willie hello for me.”

I drive on to my next stop engulfed in a mixture of satisfaction and sadness. William and Max are moving on. He is beginning his new life with real people. This is good and I am proud of him – yet I’m left with a feeling of loss. There is some legitimate grieving to do. Beyond legitimate, there is an emerging fear related to my sense of self-worth. The fear

wants me to grab William and Max and pull them back, take care of them in order to feel worthwhile.

Somewhere deep within me, at the speed of insight, I get that I would be robbing them. My ego wants validation that I am a good person; one who helps others; one who is weller and stronger than those I help. If I hang on to William and Max and all the others and insist on care-taking them I can feel worthwhile, but I will keep them small. I will rob them of their power. And when they don't make any improvements, I will have no grounds to validate my own work or my skill as a professional. I must find my own power within me and not take it from others. Then we can both grow stronger. So I let go, but I don't stop loving them.

There is still a little place in my heart where I hold William and Max. They stay there forever. I hold a place for them without holding on to them; I care for them while not care-taking them. Letting go leaves me feeling alone and a little empty but as time goes by, I learn that if I can just stay in that empty space, hold it open for as long as I can without filling it with distractions, I can find more of my own self. This is how I get bigger and stronger – not by robbing power form others.

Lori also learned the difference between compassion and losing herself in someone else's pain. In her state of overwhelm, she had accidentally connected her compassion to William's problems, instead of to William himself. This is the critical distinction between connecting to the person instead of their problems. But since it's also a key ingredient in maintaining a positive attitude, we wanted to connect the dots to it.

We don't know of any magic formula for staying in a positive level of consciousness. It just takes practice, attention, and intention. In other words, we need to pay attention to what our level of consciousness is and choose to change it if it slips down into the negative zone.

Once we start down the slippery slope of negativity, we may be tempted to blame those around us for our downward slide, but that won't stop the slippage. In fact, that often allows us to slide even faster downhill, because we begin to see our self as a victim of

circumstances. This often deepens the negativity and lessens our chance to rise above it.

Negativity is a little like an addiction – we want it to go away but we get hooked on it. Here's a list of some of the reasons negativity is hard to give up:

- It provides us with a known way to escape from the responsibility of making good things happen in our lives.
- It reduces the risk of disappointment. Since we've started at such a low, negative level, things can't get any worse. If we plan for the worst, we aren't surprised when that is what we receive.
- There is comfort and agreement from others because we can often get them to jump on the "woe is me" bandwagon. But we've come far enough to know there are bigger, brighter, more healthful ways to live our lives.

Dwelling on the negative simply contributes to its power.

~ Shirley MacLaine