

# Politics, power and ponderings

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This article was written in March 2008 as a challenge to counsellors and psychotherapists to be more reflective in their work, particularly in view of the current climate of debate about the state regulation of counselling and psychotherapy. It is as relevant to anyone who finds themselves in a position of power and is offered here, as it serves as an example of reflective practice which is a skill we will be encouraging in managers through our Masterclasses in Self Reflective Management.

Will you stay beside me while I pull the threads of my thoughts and my heart's cry together? Will you wait with me while I look over events of the last few days of my life and weave a tapestry of understanding, while I worry at the thoughts and feelings inside me? Will you be able to do so even if I don't know how long it will take, or what it will look like in the end or even whether it will be of any use? Will you take time with me and wonder?

Do you remember when you were young or inexperienced, or both – when you thought you could, or maybe even would, change the world, or at least some small part of it? When you thought those with the power and the authority, misunderstood and mismanaged? When you thought those others who were in charge, or where the professionals, missed the point? When you felt so small in the face of a system's greatness? Was there a time when you thought – “When I have the power I will do it differently”? It is a human condition, it seems.

I recently watched a Panorama programme “No more Mandelas”, presented by Fergal Keane. I watched Rev. Frank Chikane, previous activist and pacifist in South Africa, a respected champion of the people in the apartheid era, who had worked closely with Archbishop Desmond Tutu for the dignity of his people against oppression and discrimination. I listened as the same man now defended and excused the abuses of power by his boss, the president Thabo Mbeki. The programme interviewed the incoming president of the African National Congress (ANC), Jacob Zuma, a man facing charges of corruption, racketeering and tax evasion. Desmond Tutu said of Zuma that he is “someone of whom most of us would be ashamed”; Zuma brushed aside the deep concerns held by many around his actions and those of his associates, which include those convicted of corruption, as though they were irritating but insignificant flies. How had these changes come about? How had these men lost their way, seemingly abandoning their previously strongly held values and beliefs?

In the same programme, Job Sikhala, Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe, pondered on the plundering of his country. He described the system under Robert Mugabe, where abuse of power is rife and where some of his countrymen are given much and some so very little. He accused Mbeki of failing to play “his moral role” as an established African leader and not speaking out against Mugabe's “black apartheid government” in Zimbabwe. I felt a deep sadness that yet another country in the land of my birth, vibrant Africa, was being torn and beaten by the few individuals who abuse the power they hold.



On a slightly different note, I have just finished reading "A million little pieces" by James Frey. It's the story of one young boy's pain and low self esteem which leads him to descend into years of addiction. It's the story of one man's fight to conquer his addictions. It's about triumph through personal responsibility, self understanding and love. It's about the gaining of personal power against all the odds and against the insistence of a rehabilitation system which declares that it knows best.

What does either of these things have to do with me? Well, I saw the programme, read the book and was moved by them both. But what do they have to do with you? I believe these stories have something to do with all of us because they are stories of power, of status, of authority, of position and of money.

Are we not similar in some ways to the African politicians mentioned above? Did we and our profession not start out wanting to bring a brave new world to our society? Did we not set out to free ourselves and others from the constraints of a medical model? A world where emotional struggles were acknowledged and honoured? Did we not set out to accompany, support and challenge while an individual worked painfully through their issues of hurt, anger and a myriad other emotions? Was it not our purpose and goal to empower another by facilitating them through their own very personal journey, no matter where or how long? I wonder then if we still hold these things dear enough. Or do we, like Chikane, Mbeki, Zuma and the clinic in James Frey's book, once we have gained the recognition, the professional status and the power, do everything we can to hold that power and to increase it for our own good.

Am I or are you a tyrant in the client's country? Do I, do we, impose our beliefs and systems without due regard or appropriate consultation? Do we put them above the needs of our clients? Are we working for the people, or the power?

Do we stay reflective enough to catch ourselves changing as we move from a place of no power to power? Are we aware of the subtle changes this brings to our thoughts, feelings and behaviours? Can we stay true to the values of our disenfranchised youth when we find ourselves in authority and holding the power? Or do we alter slowly, insidiously, so that we can hold on to the power at all cost?

Do we consider our clients enough in this new world where money speaks? Money for counsellors' jobs, for teaching posts, for research projects, for writing books? Has our lust for professional standing and the power that brings eroded our values?

I wonder if we should take a leaf from James Frey's book. He knew he could not fight a system, could not convince the authorities in the rehabilitation clinic that their method of staying sober was not right for him. They believed in a formula, a system, an evidenced based approach. He knew it would not work for him. Against the odds he held to his own standard, to what he knew would work for him. He worked until he could look into his own eyes in a mirror. I cannot change the direction of psychotherapy and counselling in this country today. I cannot stop what I believe is the injustice of therapists and organisations turning away from those they set out to support in favour of the paymasters and paymistresses. But I can challenge you, as I challenge myself, to look in the mirror at the end of a day of working with clients and ask, "have I worked in a way that has empowered my client?" Can we look deep into your own eyes and be satisfied? Or do we need to look away?



And what of you and I? Did you consider skipping this article written by some unknown woman with no book, no university post and no published research to her name? Could you stay with me through my meanderings, my wanderings? Or did you find yourself tapping your foot, wanting to know where all of this was going? Did you hunger for references, research evidence, and solution focused models? Or could you stand by me while I told you of my pain? Could you reflect on what any of this means for you, or far more importantly, your clients?

Gayle-Anne Drury

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Author's note:

I am aware that parts of James Frey's account have been discredited and he has been accused and has owned to the fact that he fabricated parts of his story. It is a shame that he cannot look himself in the eyes about his own book, but the point remains that in therapy, as in many other professions, there is a danger present when professionals "know best" and refuse to listen to the experiences and knowledge of others.

References

Frey, J. (2003). A million little pieces. London: John Murray Publisher.

Panorama – No More Mandelas, Fergal Keane. Broadcast on BBC 1 at 20.30 on 11 February, 2008.

