

GENE WHITFORD LECTURE – THE PASSING AGE OF CHARACTERS

Who of you knew him personally?

What I will do is to raise an hypothesis that I will ask you to check against your own experience. I will give some of my own examples, and I will recommend a course of action.

The purpose of this address is to honour Gene's memory.

But it's not just that. Gene was a mover and shaker within our profession and the originator of many worthy initiatives. For example, in SA he was behind the setting up of PCSA. This was an ingenious device. It's committee of 12 were elected by ALL members of the profession. It was the only organisation to bring together all facets of this disparate profession, in that there were strictly NO members, yet every registered psychologist was a member. There were no membership fees. The operating funds came exclusively from an annual state-wide conference. A newsletter which I set up and edited kept all psychologists (including pre-registration ones) informed. The Council ran excellent professional development activities and lobbied for the profession on the local scene.

The Gene Whitford Memorial Lecture is not only to remember Gene and his founding role in this national body of private practitioners, but to also refresh our knowledge of the man and his legacy, such that we might continue to draw on this in furthering our mission, both personally and collectively.

Why "The Passing Age of Characters"?

Gene was identified by his distinctly individual style. In my view, it takes such an individual, with such a robust sense of self, to truly make a difference.

Gene was many things to many people. To some he was an irascible old coot. To some he was a master of social engineering. To some he was a standard bearer and inspiration, and to others he was an anchor who could be counted upon to hold ground. Never mind what YOU thought of him, because Gene certainly didn't. He spoke his truth without fear or favour.

Gene was what we would call "a character".

On one occasion a meeting of the psychology profession was called at which the Registration Board was represented. The Board's registrar was putting a viewpoint about the legalities of some issue, upon which Gene vehemently reminded the registrar, in no uncertain terms that he was, indeed, NOT a member of the Board, but its administrative officer.

Gene was, on occasions not a diplomat, but rather more of a blunt instrument. If he had human failings, avoidance behaviour was not one of them. He was not known to resile from conflict. In fact he seemed to enjoy a good stoush.

Gene belonged to an age in Australian history which I believe is almost gone. An age of colourful characters. Within our own profession there have been many colourful and distinctly individual characters who have moulded and forged the profession. These were people who had a simple clarity in their understanding of things, whose perceptions were not clogged and clouded by the minutiae of petty considerations. Such people made their presence felt, were not afraid to strongly state a belief, could argue a position with conviction and who, when shown to be mistaken would generously concede the point without permanent damage to ego or reputation.

Gene is often remembered for making his presence felt. On more than one occasion he would take up a seat near the front of some gathering and inadvertently disrupt the proceedings by the ear-piercing feedback that his hearing aids would emit. At one workshop I attended on Sleep Disorders, as if to assert that he had no such problem, Gene, sitting in the very front row, fell into a deep sleep, and drowned out the presenter with his snoring.

Characters such as he seemed to have a sense of entitlement. Entitlement to have, hold and express a considered view. This sense of entitlement went without question. It lent them the courage to assert strongly and clearly without need for what I observe today as utter tentativeness, the statement that dies the death of a thousand qualifications and a hundred escape clauses, and is buried under a mountain of verbal padding.

One such character, Miss Mary Smith, was a very early educational psychologist in the South Australian Education Department. She was much loved and respected by those who came after. At the time when registration was imminent in South Australia, she had such strong feelings against some of its implications that she resigned her post. She was a very knowledgeable and experienced psychologist. At an early PCSA conference she stood up (aged 80 something) and soundly remonstrated with some of the speakers and questioners there. She said "I am amazed at the diffidence" of this group.

One might claim that these were simpler times. Perhaps so, but the message that I took from Gene and his ilk was this. Stay with the point. State it clearly and unequivocally, and be prepared to face the consequences.

There was a time while active in the Psychologists' Council, that Gene saved our profession from having egg on our collective face, that would have stuck for a very long time. It was at the time when a lot of people in the USA (particularly) in the psychotherapeutic professions were pursuing a line of activity that ultimately gave rise to coining of the phrase "False Memory Syndrome". With the diligent work done by academics here, such as Sheehan and McConkey, in the realm of memory, we should have seen this coming. Gene sponsored a visit by American speakers Ralph Underwager and Hollida Wakefield, who were alerting the professions to grave mistakes being made by people who could not distinguish therapeutic from forensic work. If we had not confronted this issue at that time our public image would have been severely tarnished and public confidence in psychology would have been damaged. Because of his endorsement of these visiting speakers Gene attracted unbelievable opprobrium and hatred from within his own profession. Fortunately he was stalwart enough and had the courage of his own convictions to persist anyway.

Gene was a good promoter. This is another lesson we can take from him. He understood that it's not primarily other people who promote us, but we ourselves. If this were not so, the Gene Whitford Memorial Lecture might well be called something else.

Another lesson we may take from Gene's example is this. The enduring value to the community of our professional practice has been secured by our steadfast refusal to fall in with popular fads and trends and to continually reassert the dignity of the human individual, our free thought and free expression, and to bear the responsibility for these freedoms.

On what do I base my assertion that we are running out of characters? That will become apparent...

In the three decades since I began working in this field I've observed a phenomenon which I consider a role reversal between the professions and the administrative services. It is marked by a completely different attitude, and a raft of changes to job titles. For example, then people who looked after issues of staffing usually had some level of training and expertise in psychology and human relations and were called Personnel Managers. Now, the people who do that frequently have no training or interest in psychology and are called Human Resources people. This is to reflect that humans in the organisation are treated as

being resources, rather than the prior meaning of that expression which saw people as having resources.

This is simply one example of the switch in roles.

Belonging to a profession, such as psychology, was always predicated upon the higher ideals of furthering human knowledge, effecting positive change in people's lives, and making an important contribution to the society. In order to carry out this work, clerical and administrative services were required.

The shift has been that now, in many organisations, large and small, corporate or governmental, these ancillary services staff have an attitude to their work which suggests that the organisational structure is the *raison d'être* for the organisation and that the professionals are merely the coal-face workers who exist to do their bidding. This role reversal may be subtle, it may not be immediately obvious, but it is pervasive and plays out across our whole community. Out of ignorance of our profession and ethical standards, demands are placed upon us that are inappropriate and risk compromising our work and our health.

The theme of this congress is "On the Threshold of Recognition...etc." How well are we equipped? In some ways we are, but if we're to sustain our value and recognition in the wider community we need to take account of this sociopolitical context.

I would like to read you a recent letter to the Editor of Adelaide's daily paper, the Advertiser (from March 3rd this year), by one Lisa Shanahan, who is a Senior Clinical Psychologist, and Health Service Executive in Tullamore, Ireland.

Her letter is titled "Recognition for Trained Psychologists".

She says...

I have been watching with interest the development of the argument that doctors in rural areas are poorly supported and poorly paid relative to the workplace expectations placed on them.

I am an Australian born and trained psychologist working in Ireland. Why Ireland? Because I am valued in the health sector here and my responsibilities and remuneration reflect this.

IN South Australia I am paid the same as a social worker. I mean no disrespect to the work of social workers, but as someone with a six years' Masters degree to prove it, I find it incredibly disrespectful to be paid the same as a three-year graduate.

Psychologists work with people who are often vulnerable and accordingly have significant responsibilities. We are a small group trained in specialist assessment, having the skills to formulate and articulate complex cases and therapies, yet our career structures and pay rates demean us.

If this government is serious about top quality offender rehabilitation programs and a mental health service which is cost effective and proactive, then the professionals who can achieve this need appropriate recognition.

Dilution of professional status as evidenced by generic pay scales and conditions can only ultimately lead to dilution of professional service.

I will be back when I get some professional respect!

So, to the theme of disappearing characters...

(She sounds like a bit of a character!)

Why do I say that we are losing our characters?

For one thing, I observe that the immensely bureaucratic processes associated with recruitment actively sifts colourful characters out. In recent years I've noticed, particularly in the public sector, that such people are unlikely to be selected and, indeed I wonder if they choose not to apply for many of the positions on offer. One only has to read the job adverts to see why. These are often so abstruse that they reveal almost nothing whatsoever about the work involved.

I believe the sociopolitical climate in which we currently find ourselves, both drives out the Genes of the world, and is not conducive to producing new ones. One might say they are a dying breed, victims of “Genetic selection”.

The Rise of Law...

In a civilised society we aim to sort out differences not with a club but by discussion and problem solving methods. Increasingly our courts have become the place where this is done. This fact has spawned a huge industry that, in the public mind wields immense power. So now we sort out our differences with a metaphorical club. Notice the proliferation of legal training offered by our universities, the glamorous new buildings provided for it and the numbers of students going into these courses to see that this is so.

The burgeoning muscle of the legal system has not gone unnoticed by our legislators who are writing ever more threatening and belligerent laws and regulations. As an example, I compare our current South Australian draft Psychological Bill with the original model (1973). Most of us accept this increased authoritarianism with a resigned shrug.

So... How is this relevant? It scares people!

What do we know about Punishment as a control method?

Simply – It SUPPRESSES behaviour. Combine a system of complex and confusing rules, with the threat of severe punishment and people become either stymied (on the one hand) or lawless.

Are we observing this today?

Here's one example....

Saturday, a few weeks ago, we had a training seminar at Workcover Corporation head office. Adjacent to the building is an open air, ground level car park. One of our members drove into it, behind a man who had raised the boom gate. Once inside she realised that she had followed him into a private park for which you need a plastic card. Since no-one else was there, she approached the man to ask if he would swipe his card to raise the exit gate and allow her out. He really wanted to help but was unsure whether it would be against regulations to do so. Apologising, he left. For all he knew she could have stayed there until Monday morning. As luck would have it, she waited until another car owner arrived (there was a small number of cars in there) and hotly followed him out before the boom gate could fall on her car or block her exit.

The point?... I increasingly witness people being too fearful to do anything, even something decent (like assist a woman locked in).

Observe this, for yourself, in traffic. So, there you are, at the traffic lights, waiting to turn right. The traffic lights turn green.

However, the car in front of you won't budge. Why?

Because the driver hasn't been given a green turn arrow.

So often now, when anything new is suggested, people react to it first-of-all with the question “IS THAT LEGAL?”.

At so many turns we are reminded of the potential for legal action, and people are inclined to seek specific permission before doing even the simplest of things..

✘ Perhaps the ludicrousness of it is best shown in this cartoon.

Are there really less people among us who would qualify as “characters”? Maybe I'm wrong about this. I want to be wrong about it. Perhaps the characters haven't vanished, but have just gone underground (-like Russian priests in the middle of last century)? I do hope I'm wrong, otherwise, think of the implications this has for our work!

In recent times we have been acknowledged by the Commonwealth Government in the “Medicare Plus” program. This funding is distributed via the agency of G.Ps and, at this stage, usually pays the patient less than private health funds would rebate. At the same time I find myself invited by the local Division of General Practice to provide six sessions of CBT with Patient X, to deal with her depression, for example. This is more generous

funding, but comes at a cost. The cost is that my professional practice is being defined and prescribed by others from the medical profession, or career public servants.

Again, we're on the horns of a dilemma here. Do we accept the invitation and go down that path, or do we reject these overtures?

Is the benefit of third party payers worth the cost of losing our professional independence and self-determination?

We are faced with choosing between homogenisation versus individual expression; between technique versus craft; between checklists versus spontaneity and creativity. We are balanced on a knife-edge here.

This is a tantalising dilemma for me. Like Gene I'm also a Libran, and in my book being well balanced is the very essence of mental health.

How would Gene have solved this dilemma? He would have taken an approach that ensured he got the best of both possible worlds.

There is a permanent exquisite tension between these choices.

I know what we will do, and it is already happening!

Isn't it the case that our work is already becoming prescribed, dictated by published standard procedures or cook-book approaches, or constrained by the employing organisation out of fear of a legal assault?

Where, then is the art? Without it, our work would become fatuous, unhelpful, and the spirit be removed from our profession.

Clearly this trend is incompatible with our work. If we are to be genuinely useful, we need creativity, we need to think broadly and not be constrained in our thinking as our clients often are. If they had the behavioural repertoire and imagination required they wouldn't be needing us. Most examples I see of parents struggling with the task of parenting fall into this category, of just not knowing what to do, or not believing that it's OK to do it.

So... what do we do?

We must individually and personally fight this trend towards giving away our autonomy as practising psychologists.

It's my hope that you will set about disproving my hypothesis. You could make a practice of looking out for the genuine characters among us.

I urge you to take from this conference a little piece of Gene Whitford and work towards developing yourself as a character in your own right.

☒ AND ...

don't become like the weary old character pictured here.

Kym Harris
Psychology Private Australia Inc.
Federal Congress – Brisbane 2005
