



Choices: Sanctuary and Intimacy or Objectification and Misogyny

by Naya Arbiter

5/1/2010

Choices: Sanctuary and Intimacy or Objectification and Misanthropy?

Naya Arbiter May 2010

Let us begin with definitions:

Sanctuary: *A place of refuge, safety, protection and asylum; a holy, consecrated spot*

The notion of sanctuary dates back to ancient times. Many civilizations provided the persecuted with impunity if they reached a recognized sanctuary. Western culture later adopted this concept where during times of battle, troops could retreat to the nearest church where they'd be free from harm.

Intimacy: *The feeling of being in close personal association and belonging together. Genuine intimacy in human relationships requires dialogue, transparency, vulnerability and reciprocity. Also means 'to state or make known'*

The Intimacy vs. Isolation conflict is articulated by Erik Erikson as one of eight stages of human development. According to Erikson, each stage builds on the successful completion of the stage before it.

Over 40 years this author has found, whether working with sex addicts, veterans, rapists, rape victims, domestic violence victims, or substance abusers-- the level of sanctuary directly affects outcome. True sanctuary creates an emotional climate where the intimate disclosure that precedes healing can occur. A sanctuary environment allows authentic 'meeting'. Do we actively develop our vocabulary of sanctuary with the same fervor that we pursue techniques, software, and the continuing educational hours to maintain our licenses? Or do we unwittingly degrade sanctuary because we ourselves are uncomfortable, fearful of hearing truth from different perspectives, and paralyzed in the commonly established roles and paradigms of our field?

What are the sanctuary elements needed for people to name, claim, integrate and use their experiences?

How do we construct sanctuary?

- For veterans to tell of their nightmares, the eyes of the dead, the dismembered child, being two seconds too late to save a friend....
- For the small child to recount his mother's rape as he helplessly watched...
- For the minister addicted to internet porn, discovered by the teenage son of the women with whom he is having an affair...
- For the women held hostage and gang raped in a field for 14 hours...who went to the county jail flaunting her drugs so she would be arrested and "safe" but couldn't say what really happened
- For the women raped by her father since childhood —but he is a police officer so...who could she tell?

- For the university president arrested for obscene phone calls to teenagers---himself a victim of childhood sexual abuse
- For the woman prostituting, stabbed, and left to bleed out in the alley by her pimp, her blood stained his white suit so he refused to call an ambulance
- For the little boy, every morning he knows what kind of beating it is going to be by what kind of belt his mom hangs on the door knob.... (He grows up to be a rapist)
- For the 'good husband' a family man with a secret life of prostitutes who one night going down the stroll in a strange city honks for the hooker --and as she turns he realizes it is his own daughter, supposedly in college, who is prostituting...
- For the woman raped by the priest in childhood, the priest who a few years later presided over the burial of her father, her marriage, and baptizing her children.....
- For the man serving a life sentence for murder. It's his 33rd birthday, his fifteenth year in and he's never told the truth to anyone. He tries to figure out how to have dignity-- sees kids just like he was going in and out, he would like to help but doesn't know where to start....

These are real stories; some found sanctuary and built a life. Some didn't and killed themselves. Why is it safe for some to pick up the phone and make that call...and others literally die instead? As helping professionals, it's our responsibility to improve our processes so that more people feel safe enough to ask for help.

The Need for Sanctuary

It might be argued that in today's world, with war, genocide, and millions incarcerated--- we are in dire need of those who have crossed the bridge of degradation to dignity, number to name, changed their paradigms, and traveled emotional distances with the courage to tell their story—making it safe for those who follow. It might be argued that we need more consciousness, authentic friendships and a generation of emotionally literate young people with the heart to create sanctuary for those from different backgrounds. If more sanctuary existed and emotional intelligence was developed in the young-- might there be less addiction? Many are needed with the courage to engage in community building and peacemaking --not only for self and family, but for community and planet.

Working in the field of restoration, reconciliation and recovery the ability to build and expand our vocabulary of sanctuary for ourselves, co-workers and those whom we serve may well be one of the most overlooked 'non-negotiables'. Despite the plethora of tests, instruments, indexes motivational interviewing techniques, NIDA studies, focus groups, 12-Step gatherings and conferences do clinicians regularly ask "what makes you feel safe?" "When have you experienced sanctuary and acceptance? It is different for everyone.

Sanctuary Yesterday and Today

Cultures throughout the ages have had spaces, places, and ceremonies that represent sanctuary. Establishing sanctuary was a prerequisite for healing, vision, celebration, and transition. Sanctuary was present from the dreamtime of the Australian aboriginal people, to Asclepius' Temenos in Epidaurus; from the dances of the bushman of the Kalahari-- to the soul catching, sweat lodge and rites of passage of the American Natives. All created space for the sanctuary

that preceded acknowledgement and transformation of the spiritual and psychological. We cross the centuries to industrialized, 'civilized' nations where thousands of us seek relief from addictions, therapy for anxiety disorders, and elevated blood pressure. We study meditation... We practice yoga. Our global 'progress' has decimated and degraded sanctuary and ceremony-- and that degradation contributes to the wounded feeling function of our time.

Sanctuary is not space without boundaries. It is psychological space supported by a physical environment where boundaries are created with the intent of repelling that which is lowest in our nature, and inviting that which is sacred, and authentic to enter. With entry of the sacred, comes consciousness and transformation.

Developing Sanctuary

Do we not have an obligation as helping professionals, regardless of our specialty, to aid as much of the "whole person" as possible? To develop a vocabulary of sanctuary we must start with ourselves. What constituted sanctuary when we were five, ten, twenty years old? What constitutes sanctuary for us today, what are the elements that we need to feel safe-- to be able to say anything? Who are we comfortable saying 'anything' to in our own lives? How do we create the emotional climate that is needed for the suffering-- to present an astounding contrast from the world in which they've lived?

The emotional climate of sanctuary starts with the faculty. It's easier to stop smoking in a smokeless environment. It's easier to establish sanctuary in an environment where adults have established authentic friendships and rigorously protect and develop those relationships.

Retention is always positively impacted when faculty do not indulge in gossip, have unfinished business with each other, or harbor resentments. Bad habits on the part of the faculty typically create a low emotional-ceiling --easily intuited by those seeking help. This is particularly true in correctional environments where projects to reduce recidivism often succeed or fail based on the authenticity faculty are able to build with each other.

Typically, authenticity creates 'buy-in' to the project by incarcerated people. 'Free world' staff members provide the most interesting soap opera in town-- and every detail is noted by the incarcerated. Those in prison are typically described as having authority problems, in fact the problem is typically with 'vested authority' rather than 'personal authority'-- a distinction made by Stanley Milgram in his landmark book , Obedience to Authority.

Gangs, criminal organizations, street crews, mafia, cartels, numbers men, and enforcers all were adept at forming and maintaining organizations on *personal* rather than *vested* authority. Interestingly, many who initially joined such organizations report that they joined *seeking* sanctuary in some form—personal, family, or neighborhood protection. To create a sanctuary environment for transformation—it is useful to understand that many sanctuary experiences were on the 'wrong' side of the law .

By asking hundreds of people 'in need' about their experience with sanctuary, this author has experimented with a multitude of interventions and strategies. A few include:

1. Having the environment represent those served, inclusive of art, posters, books, and customs.
2. Development of curricula that are inclusive of multi-cultural role models. These curriculums are gender accountable as opposed to gender-responsive, reinforcing emotional literacy and emotional responsibility for both men and women. (www.extensionsllc.com)
3. Inclusion of ceremonies/holidays that represent the global village.
4. Changing the vernacular at residential sites to “students” and “faculty” rather than “counselors” and “clients”
5. Discussing, in initial interviews, when and where the prospect felt safe-- physically, psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally
6. Having ‘sex workers’ in recovery participate in screening new-hires served as an effective filter for hiring.
7. Structured focus groups between sex workers and sex purchasers articulating their personal experiences from a feeling perspective
8. Development of a quality assurance system whereby those served give daily feedback on their teachers in a non-threatening and productive way.
9. Creating a culture where no faculty member teaches any curriculum without having personally gone through it themselves.
10. Development of a process of “reciprocity partnerships” whereby an agency’s faculty is assigned a partner (NOT their supervisor) whose task it is to discover each other’s strengths and foster integration.
11. Developing curriculum for women to 'de-role' from rape and objectification; inclusive of a presentation for men regarding their experiences.
12. Developing a multitude of teaching tools that move treatment away from didactic sessions, allowing rotating leadership and settings with multiple roles so that no one is left behind-- and all involved can have a strength-based, growth-oriented experience.

Objectification and Misanthropy

Objectification: *An attitude that regards treating another person merely as an instrument, object or commodity with insufficient regard for a person’s personality.*

Misanthropy: *The hatred of humanity; from the greek word 'misos' or hatred. Parallel to Misogyny: the contempt or hatred of women as well as misandry, the contempt or hatred of boys.*

It has been said that evil prevails when good people do nothing. Are helping professionals actively contributing the larger story that is needed in our world?

Those coming to us come to us for help, live in today's world in which desensitization to humanity is frequently the norm. Even Craigslist has been the site of sex sales of teenage girls. We are bombarded with examples of objectification, misogyny and violence. Ours is a time with arguments about what constitutes torture (water boarding) or genocide (Rwanda). Newspaper articles abound with labels: convicts, felons, sex workers, illegal aliens, prostitutes, veterans, inmates, victims, abusers, predators, addicts, refugees, insurgents, detainees, collateral damage.... By 2008, United Nations counted 42 million 'refugees' worldwide. The U.S. Department of Defense reports that more U.S. military personnel have taken their own lives than have died in action in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. Finian Cunningham of Global Research interestingly refers to this phenomenon as "Empire Pathology".

Newsweek reports the advent of 'war porn' where actual footage depicting the death of enemy soldiers has "taken the internet by storm." Interestingly, one of these sites started when a sexual porn site webmaster experienced problems with credit card payments from soldiers in war zones. His solution was to swap war footage for access to sex sites. Within two years there were 30,000 members. One wonders about the Iraqi child who will someday see footage of her father being eaten by a dog...collateral damage?

Historically, labeling and prejudgment have traveled together --yet, the rate at which we are objectifying, creating and naming others as 'enemy' is unparalleled with the advent of the internet. Different groups routinely argue that sexual abuse may not be on the 'rise'-- rather, it's more frequently reported. These arguments include clergy, workplace, and most recently the military – where sexual abuse now has its own acronym; MSA or Military Sexual Abuse.

Women veterans are nine times more likely to suffer Post Traumatic Stress if they've suffered MSA. In our political world, objectification is increasingly common, arguably allowing violations of civil rights considered unacceptable a decade ago. Arizona's Senate Bill 1070 allowing officers to stop on the basis of 'reasonable suspicion' being a prime example. Suddenly, the renowned surgeon, who happens to be Latino, driving a BMW with his assistants in hospital attire, is a possible 'illegal alien' and is stopped and harassed.

Are we alert to objectification and misanthropy in our own workplace? Are we conscious of the veterans, the Muslims, the elderly, and the youth? Are we ensuring that our agencies are good places for women to work? Do we have childcare provisions?

In a world where women still earn less on the dollar than men, are we ensuring parity? Do women replacing men in our agencies routinely earn less? Do men tend to be labeled "directors" and women "administrators?" Do men and women end up with the same benefits, computer equipment, cell phones, and offices?

Re-membering meaning

Sir Laurens Van Der Post; Carl Jung's closest friend, student of the African bushmen, survivor of a Japanese prisoner of war camp-- frequently re-told one of the oldest stories of the Kalahari:

*"The Bushman in the Kalahari Desert talk about two "hungers."
 There is the Great Hunger and there is the Little Hunger.
 The Little Hunger wants food for the belly; but the Great Hunger,
 the greatest hunger of all, is the hunger for meaning...
 There's ultimately only one thing that makes human beings deeply and profoundly bitter,
 and that is to have thrust upon them a life without meaning...
 There is nothing wrong in searching for happiness...
 But of far more comfort to the soul...is something greater than happiness
 or unhappiness, and that is meaning. Because meaning transfigures all...
 Once what you are doing has for you meaning, it is irrelevant whether you're happy
 or unhappy. You are content—you are not alone in your Spirit—you belong...The worst form of
 human suffering is to hide behind a life without meaning...and one will hide behind all sorts of
 indulgences and violence if one is thrust into such a life."*

Might we consider expanding the horizons of our work and create more sanctuary tomorrow than we did yesterday.

Let us help people 're-member', collecting 'dis-membered' pieces of their lives so they might re-discover meaning. Let us not slide into the twilight of indifference as objectification and misanthropy grows around us. In reference to adulthood, e.e. cummings once said, "*and down they forgot as up they grew.*"

A nine year old boy wrote a poem after the bombing of the world trade towers—at nine he grasped the importance of a life with meaning—of feeding the Great Hunger--may we do as well:

Remember the twins the towers
 Cloaked in the *smoke of hatred*
 Swallowed up in the fires of hell
 Soon there is nothing left but the ashes of sadness
 I wish there was peace on this kithless globe
 And let it begin with me