

"You Don't Know My Mind"

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I am aware that the approach of most of you in the audience today is analytical and intellectual, and I thank you all for the many contributions you have made to our fields of work. My approach today is not scholarly in the classical sense. I have attempted to distill my years of experience into a simple, direct and practical approach to working with adolescents who are seriously and persistently mentally ill. My hope is that you may benefit in some small way from my experience, as I have benefited so much from the work you all do and share.

After four decades of working with adolescents, the last twenty years as a therapist with seriously and persistently mentally ill adolescents and their families, I am beginning to understand that the meaning of the phrase "the **Mind**" is fraught with controversy. The definition of "the **Mind**" begins in the dictionary. The exploration of the meaning of "the **Mind**" extends across disciplines, resonates throughout art, literature and music, encompasses a motley list of synonyms and rhetoric and culminates in the following dialogue between a veteran therapist (that would be me) and a tearful sixteen-year-old student who is currently in residential treatment.

"I really do want to help you," I say, "and I'm trying to understand. Please be patient with me and tell me one more time. I need to make sure I hear what you are saying." "Fine," he responds, "but you better listen really carefully because this is absolutely the last time I'm going to tell you ... I'm not saying it again. I am

sick and tired of staff telling me that I can't think what I think and feel what I feel. I am sick and tired of being hurt over and over and over again whenever I say what I'm thinking. I don't - and won't - accept staff's feedback that my thoughts and my feelings are irrational, immature OR unreasonable. Even you don't know what's inside my head - **YOU DON'T KNOW MY MIND!"**

Most of the students with whom I work have been in out-of-home placements for an extended length of time. They are not adjudicated, they are rarely involved with the juvenile justice/legal system. Their stories are different, their backgrounds varied, their diagnoses run the gamut. Treatment in less restrictive environments has been ineffective for them. A common denominator among my students is their ongoing struggle to find meaning and purpose in their lives while wrestling with serious and persistent mental illness.

Most of my students share a fierce desire to be (or at least feel) safe. Underneath their aberrant behaviors and presenting symptoms lives a very creative, resourceful "real" person who has somehow managed to harness the strength and courage necessary to **WILL** their **Mind** to create some kind of safe place in which they can exist in relative comfort. Their **Mind** becomes a haven, a respite from the cruelties, hurt and unrelenting pain that they experience in "real life." Something else my students share in common is loved ones who would, so to speak, "give anything" for their children to "get healthy and come home." In most cases, "getting better and going home" is the goal of the students as well, and they demonstrate an almost palpable longing to return to their lives and families.

Most of my students, on any given day, would echo the statement "YOU DON'T KNOW MY MIND." They remind me constantly and consistently of the necessity of exploring "the Mind" through their perspective. I have discovered that this journey of exploration is not only worthy of our time and attention, it is critical to success - both our clients' and our own. My students have very effectively cut themselves off from the "collective Mind," the Mind which encompasses the shared reality in which we love and live and work together. They are emotionally isolated, and from their point-of-view, their withdrawal from the collective Mind insulates them from pain. One truth I have experienced in my work with disturbed adolescents is that the sooner I join them in exploring their Mind and their reality, the more likely they are to eventually take the risk to begin building a bridge to the collective Mind and reality in which their loved ones live and in which their families so desperately want them to share and participate.

In order to successfully live at home, my students must be willing to build a bridge between the refuge of their Mind and the collective Mind in which their families live. They must willingly risk the possibility of experiencing pain and discomfort. They must embrace, integrate and practice skills that allow them to begin to tolerate pain. Then they must venture out of their Mind, acutely aware of ever-present danger, with the intent of developing enough of an attachment to the collective Mind that they can keep the agreements they make with

their caregivers (most of which are focused on safety) and return to their homes and families.

I begin my work with a student by explaining that I cannot "fix" or change them. I tell them up front that there are only four things that I can do: 1) create a safe place in which they can be honest; 2) teach them how to effectively use the tools they have; 3) share other points-of-view with them and 4) walk beside them in their journey. (I also love them, but I rarely tell them that I love them ... I just go about the business of loving them.)

It is in this context that I share the content of the blue print for building the bridge. The bridge rests on four supports, I call them guidelines.

1. Don't Be Too Weird

2. Don't Do Dumb Things

3. Don't Be Naked ...

and my personal favorite

4. Deal With It!

Guideline #1: Don't Be Too Weird. Early in the therapeutic process, I validate my students for complying with the job description of "adolescent." I honor them for wearing "unacceptable" clothing (or little clothing at all!). I give them positive feedback when they flaunt hair styles that belong in a "B" grade science fiction movie. I tell them that I "hate it" when they listen to something that only remotely resembles the normal adult's definition of music. I also constantly inform

and remind them that the **collective Mind** does, in fact, have a saturation point regarding its willingness to tolerate "weird." Building a bridge to the **collective mind** requires a measure of sacrifice and conformity. **"Don't Be Too Weird."** This rule gives some loose perimeters to the edges of the **collective mind's** willingness to tolerate that which is unconventional. I teach my students that "going home" involves a willingness to recognize the perspective of the **collective mind** and modify their behaviors to some level of conformity.

Guideline #2: Don't Do Dumb Things. I constantly and consistently remind my students that they are **SMART** - and that when they do dumb things, it is unbecoming of who they really are. When they are faced with a dilemma, I encourage them to ask, "What is the **SMART** thing to do?" I rarely speak of "good" or "appropriate" or "right." These words run counter to the job description of "adolescent." "Right, appropriate and good" may be interpreted by my students as me being rude and condescending to them. Using these words may also be interpreted as an appeal to them to abdicate their power. Oh, how important it is to them to make sure that everyone knows that they are in charge! Focusing on **SMART** allows my students to hear information that is essential to the process of bridge building. We discuss making **SMART** choices and the power in the words **I CHOOSE ...** or **I CHOOSE NOT TO!** I invite them to begin to take responsibility for their choices. As they begin to own their behaviors and feelings, they test the weight of the bridge they are building.

Guideline #3: Don't Be Naked. I hope you all laughed. This is an appropriate guideline for sexually reactive teens. In a larger sense, it speaks to the necessity of my students understanding that the **collective Mind** is guided by a sense of values and ethics that must be adhered to, even when they are not agreed with! I remind my students that what they deem "acceptable" may be outside the values and ethics of the **collective Mind**. I honor their beliefs about what is "acceptable" to them and I encourage them to record their beliefs in their personal journals. I explain to them that they can use these recorded thoughts and beliefs for reference when they establish their own homes. I tell them over and over and over again that they do not have to agree with the values and ethics of the **collective Mind**. I also remind them that if they want to live at home, they must respect and follow the values and ethics of the **collective Mind** for as long as they choose to live with their families.

Guideline #4: "DEAL WITH IT!" is my personal favorite. Marsha Linehan calls this guideline "radical acceptance" - a term first coined by the American Vispassana Tradition of Buddhism. A.J. Mahari writes,

"Radical Acceptance is a way of saying yes to each and every moment mindfully. Life lived mindfully, with radical acceptance of all that is in each and every unfolding here and now moment is manageable and transforms endless suffering into manageable pain and in time, into a greater, more stable and consistent peace of mind."

I teach my students that working at tolerating the thoughts and feelings that have caused them pain and suffering gives them the opportunity to get to know themselves and their thoughts and feelings in a new, more productive and manageable way. I teach

them that embracing "what is" is the first step to healing. My students express delight when they come to recognize the truth of Marsha Linehan's statement, "To accept something is not the same as judging it good." Once they realize that they can "deal with it" without agreeing with the position of the **collective Mind**, their willingness to keep agreements they make increases dramatically.

In closing, I would like to share with you a fable for our time. There was once a young woman, beautiful to behold, who was smart and creative and resourceful. As a toddler, she was full of contagious enthusiasm. Everyone wanted to be around her, she radiated joy and hope. She also had a secret. Her grandfather began fondling her just after her third birthday. He was having intercourse with her on a weekly basis by the time she was eight. Now grandfather was a well-respected member of his community. He was looked up to as an example of integrity. Everyone knew he was a great teacher and a wonderful friend. Grandfather did an outstanding job of teaching his sons, and the young woman was not really surprised when her uncle "took me to him" just after she had her eleventh birthday. It was the "stranger who wanted me ... and I didn't even know him!" that pushed her over the edge shortly after she turned thirteen.

The beautiful young woman was luckier than some. She had always had a "safe place in my mind that I go where no one can hurt me." After the stranger rape, she began spending more and more time in her "safe" place, which she eventually named "Otherworld." The

young woman accessed Otherworld through a portal. Otherworld was full of life and color, a stark contrast to the black-and-white drabness of her daily existence. In Otherworld, she was married to a handsome cartoon character. He was the mayor of their town, and everyone loved both the mayor and his charming wife. They had three perfect children and life in Otherworld was free from pain and suffering.

One morning, the beautiful young woman woke up in a strange place. At first, she believed that the portal had closed and that she would be able to live in Otherworld forever. As fate would have it, her bed was not in a new home in Otherworld, but in a room she shared with three other girls in a residential treatment center. She had stopped talking at home, you see, she was eating less and less, and her parents feared for her life. Shortly after her arrival, she spoke once to her therapist, informing her that "I really don't belong here ... but even if you make me stay, you can't make me change. I have my own **Mind**. I live in a place where no one can hurt me and I am happy there."

For months the beautiful young woman met several times a week with her therapist, saying nothing. During each session, the young woman's therapist reminded her that she was a person of worth and value, unique in all the world. Her therapist talked to her about her pain and validated her for having the courage to feel her feelings. (You see, although she did not speak in therapy, she cried a lot.) Her therapist talked to her (not with her, as she was not speaking) about the tools she possessed and

gave her suggestions regarding how she might effectively use these tools. Her therapist pointed out that even though the young woman believed that she "deserved" everything that had happened to her, other people had different perspectives and points-of-view about her circumstances. Her therapist even told her that no one deserved to be treated the way she was treated. And a most curious thing happened - at the end of every session, her therapist said, "Remember that I love you."

No one was more surprised than her therapist when the young woman spoke to her therapist for the second time. She chose to speak to her therapist in group therapy, after months of remaining electively mute. The young woman said, "I'm going through the portal as soon as I'm finished talking ... come with me?!" It was more a command than a question, and it was with a heavy heart that her therapist shook her head from side-to-side, indicating her answer. "But I need you to come ... you have to come ... please!" The therapist continued to shake her head from side to side. By this time, the beautiful young woman had moved from her seat. She was standing directly in front of her therapist, screaming, "Yes, you will come! I demand that you come! Now hurry, the portal is closing!" "I cannot come with you," her therapist replied. "Otherworld is closed to outsiders ... and all real people are outsiders." The young woman began to cry. "You don't understand!" she continued. She plopped onto the floor, resting her head against her therapist's leg. "Before I came here, I was so happy in Otherworld. Nothing hurt ... nothing was scary ... now I hate it there because I am lonely all the time. I

need you to be there with me ... I need you to love me." At this point, the young woman reached up her hand and grabbed the hand of her therapist.

The therapist placed her hand on the young woman's shoulder. The young woman wondered if this touch might calm the full body tremors she was experiencing. In a gentle but firm voice, her therapist began, "I know you are hurting. I will stand here beside you and together we will watch the portal close. It will be hard ... especially the first few times when the portal does not open again. The day will come when you will be able to look in the mirror and know for yourself that Otherworld is no longer a part of your present - it is in the past where it belongs. I will be here for you. You will laugh and you will cry. You will shout for joy and you will shout in anger. You will reach out and you will retreat. We will walk together, side-by-side, through the fire. You will use the tools and skills you have, (along with other skills and tools that you will learn and acquire), to follow the blueprint and build the bridge that leads to home - where your parents and sisters are anxiously awaiting your arrival."

There are many ordinary people who have an understanding of bridge building. Some of you in the audience today may remember Mr. Rogers and his neighborhood. It was a remarkable, creative, and very safe place to visit via the television. Mr. Rogers was extraordinarily successful in creating a sort of "otherworld" for literally millions of small viewers. Lady Elaine Fairchild

always had a bit of good news. Although Daniel Striped Tiger never conquered his "shyness," Mr. Rogers was most patient with and kind to him. Dr. Bill Platypus had something nice to say about everyone. Mr. Rogers was well respected in the neighborhood, and he showed respect to a great many "neighbors" who were often, in some way, "abnormal." Perhaps most important of all, Mr. Rogers was never afraid to say that he had "always wanted to have a neighbor just like you." Fred Rogers knew something about healing minds and hearts. He wrote, "There is a space between the needy and the person who is asked to help. That space is holy." The "otherworlds" my students create are sacred to them. My years of experience continue to validate my personal belief that I am most effective in my work (as are we all) when I remember both the sacred nature of my students' minds and hearts ... and the sacred nature of the ground on which we walk together.

I salute all of you who walk daily through the fire with those we serve. As we companion our clients on their journey, the fire through which we walk together tempers them and they become strong in the broken places ... as do we. Thank you. You are my heroes!