My Psychologist, My Psychiatrist

Fred G. Leebron
Gettysburg College
My Psychologist, My Psychiatrist

Abstract
I could not distinguish between them except by what we did. I was ten, then eleven. I would not ride the school bus. I always slunk home saying I missed it. I made my mother come to school with me every day, and sit in the lobby so I could wave to her during recess and class changes. In the evenings my father would come home from work, hear my mother’s report, and storm upstairs, his weight pounding on the hardwood steps. I would be out of breath with crying, my head in the pillow, waiting to feel what he would do. He never touched me, but several times I was unable to resume breathing, and they’d take me to the emergency room, where a doctor or nurse would look me over, measure my pulse and temperature, and send me home. At night I stole into the bathroom and with my fingernails dug as deeply into my bare arms as I could tolerate. [excerpt]

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I could not distinguish between them except by what we did. I was ten, then eleven. I would not ride the school bus. I always slunk home saying I missed it. I made my mother come to school with me every day, and sit in the lobby so I could wave to her during recess and class changes. In the evenings my father would come home from work, hear my mother's report, and storm upstairs, his weight pounding on the hardwood steps. I would be out of breath with crying, my head in the pillow, waiting to feel what he would do. He never touched me, but several times I was unable to resume breathing, and they'd take me to the emergency room, where a doctor or nurse would look me over, measure my pulse and temperature, and send me home. At night I stole into the bathroom and with my fingernails dug as deeply into my bare arms as I could tolerate.

Eventually, on Saturdays, I was taken to see the psychologist. He had close-cropped black hair and horn-rimmed glasses, and his name was Rudolph and I called him Rudolph the Red-Nosed Shrink. We sat across a pale wood desk in his gray office in a pale brick building, and he showed me Rorschach after Rorschach and we did word associations which I consciously made more and more antonymic. A yellow glare projected from his glasses like a dental light. Every question that he asked me was attached to a form or picture. He was always shuffling papers and opening and shutting drawers, looking for the next approach. Our conversations were long silences interrupted by bursts of interrogation and response. He told my parents, in those short naked sessions when I sat in his bare waiting room while they murmured behind the door, that I was a very depressed kid. Years later I worked for a Department of Behavioral Psychology at a noted think tank, and came away with the conclusion that psychology was the practice of proving the self-evident.

Shuman, the psychiatrist, kept his office in the back part of his tree-hidden home at the end of a suburban lane. We played darts and ate crisp flat cinnamon cookies embedded with almond slivers. We talked about how I felt when I had to go to school, how I felt when I...
was sent to summer camp (I had not lasted at the previous two), how I felt about my family.

“Do you hate them?” he said, his pale lined face concentrated in a neutral expression.

I shook my head.

“When you’re away at camp, what feelings do you have about your mother?”

“I keep hearing her voice,” I said. “Then I look around for her and she’s not there.”

I was the youngest of five offspring. I did not know to tell him about the time six years before when the youngest sister and I stood poised in an upstairs bedroom, while in the next room my mother lined up our older siblings and whipped them one at a time with a belt. Once we all stood outside the shut door of my parents’ room waiting to be called in individually, where my mother sat at her desk under a green lamp and carefully pulled down our pants and spanked us until she was tired. My parents’ friends now told them that after four perfect children they deserved someone like me. On the coffee table in the den lay a bright white book with red trim, the cover art a cartoon of a self-reliant child in a cape and tights. How to Raise a Super Kid. Dr. Shuman told my parents I was a very depressed kid.

In the spring my oldest sister returned on Easter break from her freshman year at college. While we ate my mother’s special London broil and my sister sipped at an iced tea, she talked about her boyfriend and announced their plans to move in together the next year. My father said of course not and my sister other and began talking at once. Apparently I was moody, temperamental, and prone to hyperventilation. I was hospitalized for the next week, and assessed and treated for an enlarged thyroid. Over the ensuing months I had blood drawn every ten days and took six iodide tablets daily. I was still allowed to see Shuman. Another summer of camp approached, and I was worried.

“Will you write me?” I asked.

“We’ll see,” he said gravely.

I had never had such cookies—the way they broke into perfect pieces in your mouth, the tips of almonds that emerged like islands to rescue you in a sea of saliva. My parents tried to bribe me with movies and dinners out, but every Friday night I insisted on Shuman. He had a deep, quiet voice and he threw darts with an easy flick of his wrist. He was calm

That summer I began every letter home, “I hate camp.” I offered to cut my wrists. My parents wrote back telling me to get control of myself. In later letters I called my mother bitch and my father asshole. From the candy I bought and stored candy with the greatest mass—regardless of the taste—for my planned escape. I was going with a cabin mate named Trapper, a twelve-year-old who talked of cherry-popping and was from Tennessee. I wrote to Shuman five or six times. “I don’t like it here,” I said. “We have to do everything all the time. When are you going to write me?” I tried to make my letters take the form of the long answers I knew they all wanted. I imagined his house in the fall, surrounded by bright flames of trees as I rode up the drive in the backseat of my parents’ car for the first appointment of the new school year. Perhaps he’d be leaning in the doorway, his elbow cocked, a finger pressed to his forehead in thought. Although that was not the way it ever was—you didn’t see him outside the office, you opened and carefully shut two or three sets of doors just to get to him, secured in something like Chinese boxes as if what would happen in there was secret, select, and indiffusible. I never heard from him. My escape was thwarted by the head of the camp, who as punishment stuck me in a cabin with the nine-year-olds.

My letters from camp rest now in my mother’s safe deposit box. By the middle of seventh grade I was regarded as relatively normal. I got through high school, then paused before college to take a job as an aide at a psychiatric hospital. I thought—as I would again—that I wanted to be a doctor. In orientation we were taught how to deal with the patients. Don’t be afraid to talk with them. Ask what they are thinking. Ask how that makes them feel. Never ask why.

A Story by Fred G. Leebron

just shrugged her shoulders

“Then we won’t pay for your college,” my father said.

“You don’t pay for it anyway,” my sister said.

“Mom’s parents do.”

My mother rose barely from her chair and reached my sister’s face with a brisk slap. Five fingers, we always called these.

“I’m still moving in with him,” she said

“I think we all should go to see Dr. Shuman,” I said.

“I am not,” my oldest sister said, “going to see your shrink.”

For some reason, at the word shrink, I broke into tears, and ran from the table.

In March, near the end of the season, I was hurt in a hockey game, crushed into the boards during the final seconds by a large green jersey. During my check-up, the doctor meticulously felt along my adam’s apple, and asked my parents if I had ever behaved erratically or in a difficult manner. My mother and father looked at each