

In the Recovery Room

Keynote Address

Honoring our Lives as Healers: A Day Retreat for Healing Arts Professionals

Good Samaritan College of Nursing

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A Native American grandfather was talking to his grandson about how he felt. He said, "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry one. The other wolf is the loving, compassionate one." The grandson asked him, "Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?" The grandfather answered: "The one I feed."

I want to explore this story with you and to suggest two questions for today and beyond:

- what are we feeding?
- what is being starved?

in our individual lives, and in the organizations in which we attempt to find purpose and meaning, as well as a paycheck.

If you have space in your head and heart today, you will likely also feel the resonance of these questions in the larger organizations which surround us and are supposed to serve us: government, economic systems, etc. especially at a time of almost surreal turbulence in those systems.

What are we feeding?

Which wolf has been over-fed for so long that it has become vengeful, greedy, alpha, unwise, almost feral in its isolation, its sense of unquestioned entitlement, unexamined authority and "always being rightness?"

Sadly, tragically, even (or is it especially?) in the "softer," fields of health care, education, social welfare, to prove ourselves to the "hard" = better hegemony, we feed the white wolf:

- Size: Larger is better
- Scale: Spread out and do more with less
- Machinery: Gizmos almost for their own sake, matter, stuff
- Data: No time for stories, too subjective
- Numbers: 6,000 member mega churches, number of hours in a seat listening to an expert = CEUs (if it can't be measured it doesn't exist)
- Abstraction: Theory is more important than practice

- Competition: Ranked first in blah, blah, blah, exemplary school, highest test scores, ranked first in . . .
- Speed: Faster is always better, even when it isn't
- Money: No amount is very enough for all of the above, but there is never enough for the unnamed hunger that goes unfed for the most part
- Action: No time for reflection
- Words: Happy talk, one version of truth, PR, banter, war stories everything's always great - until it isn't.

Solar, certain, heroic, top-down, expert and data-driven, the white wolf is relentless. It has taken on a life of its own. The white wolf is not the enemy, not to be thrown out, blamed, scapegoated. We created him; we continue to overfeed him.

I'm simply saying that when the means (perfectly wonderful & miraculous machines and necessary research) are the ends there is no health, there is no wholeness, there is instead:

- addiction = a life of unreality, driven-ness for the next fix, the next staving off of disaster
- a naked emperor whom everyone fears telling his behind is showing,
- a house of cards we all know is falling down.

Why is it falling down? Because it's one-legged; the white wolf, like all addicts has driven off its partner in this case the black wolf, the lunar, the wolf who knows what she doesn't know and admits it. Most of us underfeed her in our personal lives living on the scraps of time and money left over after we've fed the white wolf on whom we believe our survival depends, and perhaps, in things as they are, it does. In organizations we do worse than underfeed the black wolf, we make fun of her, punish her, call her touchy-feely, you know the drill. The black wolf, like the black sheep, is she on whose head we place our fear of death, our hatred of limits, all messy feelings: grief, anger, tenderness—love. And then we drive her out of town, banish her to the farthest margins. We say things like: I can't see what a day of reflection with other healers contributes to our work in this clinic; there's no time for listening to one another in agenda-driven meetings; no money for sustaining learning/ wisdom/ innovation communities—we can't defend "personal enrichment" in the budget .

*People are hungry,
and one good word is bread
for a thousand.*

~David Whyte, "The Loaves and the Fishes"

I have entitled my address "In the Recovery Room" because this room, today, here, is a recovery room for each of you has chosen to feed the black wolf, despite all odds, despite not enough time, not enough money, too much work, —or maybe, at least in part because — against the odds— we were able to wrestle CEUs out of an accrediting bureau which only credits knowledge from on high, surgically implanted into your heads.

Whatever the reasons, we are here, and I am grateful for that.

What happens in Recovery? You as nurses know better than I— we regain consciousness.

I think it's fair to say that we have participated in creating systems that are almost totally asleep, unconscious to over-feeding the white wolf, the ravenous one, the addict which—I repeat— is not to blame—the wolf of competition, speed, measurement, has gone rogue and runs us because we have disconnected it from its other half, the ends for which the systems were created:

- * healing
- * wisdom
- * peaceful wholeness
- * kindness
- * compassion
- * spirit
- * life—— dare I say it in public? love

When I googled "what happens in the recovery room?" the first site I saw was a recovery from addiction site.

Addiction has its roots in the word for "deliver, yield, devote, from ad (to) and dicere "say" to say or declare.

As individuals and as organizations, we live in various stages of addiction to the values and tools of the white wolf; who can blame us—it's how we were trained, the only tools we learned to use or to value, if we suspected others were out there somewhere. In the time honored tradition of 12 step work, I will be the first to admit that I am powerless to conquer our shared addiction. Conquering is a tool of the white wolf anyway, and the white wolf's tools will never serve the recovery of the banished black wolf. But we are powerful as we have the courage to, perhaps at first alone and in confidential groups such as this, but then more and more publicly, feed the black wolf and bring her home to the ailing pack.

Transformation is always through language. Peter Block

One definition of courage was to speak one's mind by telling all one's heart. Annie Rogers

It is no accident that 12 step groups are primarily story circles, places for multiple, diverse and contradictory truths to be told. Transformation is always through language, yes. Here is a list of tools and skills for recovery, for transformation of ourselves from co-addicts to co-creators of health:

- * I create dedicated space and time in my life to write and reflect on my own stories,
- * In the workplace, with colleagues, patients, bosses, orderlies, boards of trustees, with investors and accrediting officials, we dedicate space and time to speaking, listening, slowing down.
- * In these spaces which we protect as vigilantly as we protect and monitor patients in recovery, we tell the truth(s) of our lives and work and listen to the truths of others.
- * We write and tell stories: "accounts of happenings" We say what happened and what is happening among us in this moment.
- * We let the words, the stories, BE, be a life force to awaken the deadened-by-abstraction-and-competition-and speed bodies of self, other and organization.
- * We are fierce stewards and sustainers of the telling places and practices, because the ways of the black wolf are fragile in the dominant white wolf culture and the first to be abandoned in times of crisis.
- * We have the courage to speak our minds by telling all our hearts AND we have the patience to listen while others find their courage, their voices.

In recovery rooms (I am not arguing against the need for emergency rooms, or surgery rooms, to be sure) we sit, heedless of position, or white wolf authority,

- * reflecting
- * creating / collaborating as equals
- * healing the healers
- * being real.
- * building the new in the shell of the old---

It really isn't hard to do: a fifteen minute investment at the beginning of a three hour meeting and at the end for the black wolf. (I advise against traditional prayers in these circles for recovering the black wolf, because such words are worn, have become pro forma, and because they deny the damage that has been done to some of us in the name of the religions of others.)

Having said that, though, I must emphasize that this work of healing the wolf pack, of creating a better world out of better words than memos and grant applications, is religious work---

re = about
ligio= binding

- * binding means and ends
- * binding meaning into language again
- * binding compassion with achievement
- * binding people tools with machinery tools
- * binding the work of heads, hands, hearts
- * lunar and solar
- * reflection and action
- * mystery and certainty
- * numbers and stories

* facts and imagination

Daunting though it may be, I'd rather participate in the task of speaking into existence a leadership of wisdom and knowledge, of both the white and the black wolf. I sometimes invite others to pay my "what if" game.

What if I said "leader" and it evoked an image of someone who always kept sight of what's in the middle? what are we gathered here to give life to? told her own stories and made space for yours? asked, 'what can we make of this?' rather than 'whose fault is it?' didn't privilege some stories over others for the sake of political correctness or the need to appear cool, or in the know? had the courage to ask: what's going on in the room right now? what isn't being said? what am I feeling? what are others feeling? spent time and energy creating spaces for people to generate meaning, to learn to take risks, to tell the truth, to make commitments? was courageous enough to integrate life-giving and soulful tools into her practice: circles, silence, flowers, poetry, stories knowing that it might expose him to ridicule knowing that it would expose her to ridicule (if the leader is a woman)

In short, what if we said leader and that word connected with someone who is conscious that publicly enacting what I have called" the black wolf's values makes her (or him) vulnerable, less valued, and does it anyway, intentionally and respectfully. Does it anyway because we are running out of time, because it is the very definition of insanity to continue doing things the way we always have: the maimed, one-sided one-wolf way, the tragedy of dying systems and under-valued care-givers' way.

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