

Life in the Mind

by Moshe Dann (March 2014)

The dark mahogany armchair in the waiting room reminds me of her soft arms. Rubbing the wood's deep grain, I wonder if magically she would appear. But she is gone, and I am here, not there, and this is only a chair with sturdy legs and smooth unyielding back.

Prof Howard Weiss, PhD, clinical psychologist, took a thin file from a cabinet near his desk and waited for Robert, his next client. He opened it, reading his notes and wondered whether there was anything he could say that would be helpful. *He's stuck... I'm stuck.*

The delicate fragrance of his last patient, Betsy, a business executive in her late 30's lingered in the room, reminding him of the still-single sadness in her eyes, her elegant pants suit and practical, delicate off-white shoes. She had left early, an appointment downtown.

Opening the window, he listened to the grinding of a mechanical street sweeper and an argument between a policeman and a driver who had just received a ticket for parking on the wrong side of the street. An early September Indian summer day, Howard thought, as whirling metal brushes scraped the street, leaving the asphalt black and gleaming. Leaves were beginning to fall from slender trees shimmering in the morning sun, traffic moved slowly along Eighth Avenue and beneath, as if subconsciously, the distant rumble of the subway.

Seven minutes to nine; he wondered if Robert would be late, or show up at all. The door of his office ajar, he could see across the waiting room the sign of his colleague, Agnes McKinney, PhD. Most of her patients were scheduled in the late afternoon and evening when he was teaching, or at home upstairs, writing and helping Renata, his new wife; a former student, she filled the emptiness in his life after his divorce. Blonde, blue-eyed, lithe and leggy, she wasn't a good cook, he thought, but at least she didn't nag; he could not bear nagging. And, from the beginning she was good in bed, her openness making up for his ex-wife's stinginess. *The Ex*, he thought, *like Lot's wife*; dark brooding eyes that glared when she was angry. *Renata's gentle eyes were a comfort.*

Almost nine, and Robert had not shown up. Closing the window, he turned on the air conditioner and opened Robert's file again, looking over notes for some theme that would guide him, clues that would explain his behavior, subtle hints that would reveal the sources of confusion and desperation that Robert carried with him like a door-to-door salesman with a suitcase filled with things that no one wanted. Howard read:

Continues to move from one relationship to another, seducing and being seduced, exploiting and perhaps being exploited as well, unable to commit because he does not trust them, or himself. Drowning in self-absorption, seeks life-savers in women who cannot meet his expectations, masking confusion with sexuality, searching for "authenticity," some Truth about himself in the embrace of another. Cannot bond because he undermines his fragile identity; does not know what he wants or where he is going, and loads this into a weapon to attack others and himself.

Nine, and Robert had not arrived. Each patient, Howard thought, a puzzle that challenged him to fit together, or not. He had no illusions, however, relying on the process of self-discovery as the only pathway to freedom. Robert's angst-filled stories floated up from the page like soap bubbles, defying the gravity of examination, bursting at the touch of reality.

Child-like demands to be loved, unresolved, cannot be fulfilled because no matter how much he is given, it is not enough, never enough. That's the rules. A no-win situation. Self-sabotage is the ultimate weapon. Wants to be rescued but lives abandonment. Desperate search for self and acceptance. Longing for (dec'd) father's approval, he lives in the shadow of his absent embrace.

Howard wondered what Renata was doing. He imagined her making coffee on their new Italian coffee-maker. He had bought coffee and a cheese Danish on his way to the office, but he wanted another, and would have to wait until Robert left, if he arrived at all. But more than that, he wanted Renata. She would be on her way to work at a marketing firm in midtown, he thought, no time for his sudden passion. He looked at the calendar, the day marked with a smiling face, their fourth anniversary.

Nine-0- three, Howard looked at his notes.

Father's expectations dominant – and unmet. Struggles to establish independence, separate identity. Raised in traditional but not observant Jewish home, rebels against authority but deeply craves structure, wants to be part of the wider world, but clings to alienation. Relationships with women are confusing–liberating but demanding, minefields waiting to explode. Wants to love and be loved, but is disabled in relationships because ultimately they are traps that expose his self-doubt.

Howard thought about his late father, a medical doctor with a high-end private practice on Long Island. His mother still lived in the house where he was raised, still active in local

community affairs, and, like his father, still critical of his life-style and his choice of spouses. Devoted to their work, his parents often left him and his sister to fend for themselves. Howard did well in school, destined for a career in medicine, like his father, but he decided on psychotherapy, to his father's disdain. "At least psychiatry," his father had begged; Howard had refused.

Sons share a certain destiny with fathers, Howard thought, an inevitable clash between living one's own life and competing with an authority figure whose successes and failures become part of one's self-image, a primal, archetypical conflict that remains unresolved.

Why was Robert late? Howard looked at the watch Renata had given him for his 53rd birthday; it replaced the one his Ex had given him when they married.

Howard wondered if Renata would accompany him to a lecture he was invited to give in Chicago on "The excuses of therapy." He would provoke his audience; how troubled people use therapy as a way of avoiding real conflicts. A paradox: how does one know something about another? Filled with answers, we are bereft of questions. People spill out their pain and confusions and they expect some insights, directions, rewards for listening. They want to be healed, or maybe only to be understood and to be loved. But, he admitted, they are living out stories which are deeper and more hidden. His colleagues would stare jealously at the beautiful young woman on his arm, his presence enhanced by Renata's charm and subtle smile, the audacity of it all, a world of cocktails and silk ties, bouquets of ideas, a milky way of words. With so much to discover, he would conclude dramatically, why are we afraid of falling off the edge of the world?

They expect me to know, but I hear only fragments of what's really happening. Truth is partial. We are gatekeepers of illusions. After eight months, Howard had begun to question whether he could overcome Robert's resistance, his Cobra-like mistrust poised, ready to strike.

Howard looked at his shoes. As a child, he was expected to shine his shoes before going to school. It became a habit that set him apart, a sign that he was meant to achieve, a mark of distinction. Still in grad school, he had married a woman of appropriate social standing and parental approval, an early romance that withered after two children, reality and the feminist movement. He remembered her scowls and thorny silences that grew between them, a sense of unalterable destiny. Renata, he thought, redeemed him from bitterness and disappointment, a passion that rescued him from regret. Now grown and independent, his children would survive as best they could, he thought, trying to make sense of themselves, searching for their own paths

in a bewildering world.

Nine-0-five and Robert was absent. *Why is he so indecisive? Why is he unhappy, and, can I change that?* Howard often thought about these questions, which applied to all of his patients, tangled in webs of uncertainties and impending failures, looking for advice and answers. Would it be honest, he thought, to tell them that he had none? But Robert 's struggle resonated deep in Howard's own psyche, and the more Howard tried to distance himself, the more he felt drawn into Robert's loneliness.

To live without a sense of direction is chaotic, Howard thought. One can feel lost, alone, enslaved, and survive, however, if one has faith in oneself. Hope is the beginning of salvation, but it requires the ability to believe that in the end there is meaning and purpose. Although Robert's floundering and self-doubt seemed crippling, perhaps that was the traction he needed to move.

Centuries ago, Howard thought, people went to rabbis and priests for solace. His great grandfather, he was told, had been a rabbi in Poland, or Russia, but, his father didn't know the town from which they came, or their original name, or what had happened to them and their families, histories lost, buried in unknown graves along with their religion. And, did it matter? Here and now, Howard gazed at the open door.

Howard felt impatient and frustrated. *Have I missed something? What is he looking for? Direction? Stability? Love? And why can't he find it? Why isn't he satisfied with what he has? What brings waves of angst that sweep him out into a sea of depression?* Howard gazed at his nameplate on the half-opened door. *I've put in my time*