

Keep 'em coming back. It is difficult to do good counselling if your client does not return for the next session. Although obvious, this is not always easy. And sometimes “getting it right” in the context of blinding insight achieved within the consulting room has no place in the arena of sustaining a relationship and actually being helpful.

And so it was that I found myself sitting across from a late 20s heterosexual couple in my first marriage and family counselling practicum at the University of Alberta, which is where I was a masters student at the time.

Admittedly, this was not the easiest couple to work with for a first-time couples therapist. Although their presenting concern was typical (an uncommunicative husband and a wife labelled as “nagging”), the husband’s presentation in session was not. From the moment he walked in to the moment he left, he cried. Not a wailing or sobbing cry, but a quiet, gentle falling of tears that inched down his face with damp regularity.

What to do? My first session with the couple was solo; that is, with no supervisor behind the one-way mirror. I don’t remember much of what I did with or said to the couple during that first session, though I knew one thing for sure: the next session I would have my supervisor as backup behind the mirror. Whatever my approach during the first meeting, it was enough to inspire the couple to come back again.

For my second session I felt better prepared for the tears that would inevitably fall. Advice from my supervisor was that I should meet briefly first with the husband; this way if he did not cry it would be safe to assume that the tears had something to do with his wife being in the room. Sure enough, when alone with me he did not cry, but instead conversed with relative comfort and ease. Upon retrieving his wife from the waiting room, the tears once again began to flow. Now what to do? I fumbled along with the husband and wife, eagerly anticipating the intersession break that had been scheduled to occur with my supervisor about 45 minutes into the session.

At the break, the directions from my supervisor were clear and simple: “Go back and say to the husband, ‘Your tears speak very loudly. I wonder who it was that stole your voice.’” Such brilliance! I confidently strode back into the consulting room, and upon the first sign of a tear delivered the message. Silence from the husband. His lower lip quivered. I thought at any moment he would burst with an emancipatory answer. But no, it was his wife who spoke first, and in grand fashion: “YOU KNOW DAMN WELL WHO STOLE YOUR VOICE! IT WAS YOUR UNCLE LARRY. HE’S ALWAYS TELLING YOU WHAT A WORTHLESS WIMP YOU ARE.”

“Wait a minute”, I thought to myself, “she ‘s basically giving her husband the same message as Uncle Larry. SHE is the “voice thief,” not uncle Larry!

I could not contain myself! The excitement of making such an insightful and potentially liberating interpretation this early in my career erupted into a triumphant exclamation: “It’s not Larry, it’s you! Can’t you see? Every time your husband tries to speak you jump in with scorn and criticism. You are the one who has stolen his voice!”

There are only a few times in my life when someone has looked directly at me with eyes of hatred and rage; this was one such time. The wife was furious. How dare I accuse her of being the cause of her husband’s problems? Little was said in the dying moments of the session. If I remember correctly, I left them with a communication skills worksheet. Their departure from the session was cold and hasty. My supervisor had lots to say during our post-session debrief, though the one thing that stood out was this: “I don’t think they are coming back.” And they didn’t.

I am fond of sharing this therapeutic misstep with students and typically do so just at the moment they are certain they have figured out the “true cause” of their client’s problem. I have come to learn that any such truth ought to be cradled with tentative arms, knowing that the imposition of our truths upon an unexpected client can have anything but the intended effect. And this I know to be true(ish).