

I'M NOBODY! WHO ARE YOU?

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I'm apprehensive, but a little hopeful, too. I'm meeting Bruce Cushna today for psychotherapy at the Child Development Clinic, University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. I park my car in the parking lot next to the clinic and crunch the leaves underfoot as I slowly walk toward the front door. The director of the clinic offered me a few therapy sessions. I think I can use the therapy. I'm having a hard time managing my two hyperactive, mentally retarded, forever children, sons, plus my other four children. Kris (4) and David (11) are my two retarded sons, while the other three sons and daughter range in age from six to fifteen. Goodness, that is six children in eleven years. The rhythm method didn't work.

Therapy is new to me. I walk through the sliding doors and take a seat in the small reception area to the right. Soon Mr. Cushna beckons for me to come into his office. I follow and sit in the seat across from the desk.

He is tall, blonde, and soft-spoken. He doesn't wear a white lab coat or a suit. He leaves the top button unbuttoned on his shirt. I like that in him. I'm so focused on problems I'm almost oblivious to the surroundings, but I notice steel shelves containing psychology books at his right side; the only window is located near the ceiling. Good thing. Seeing people walk past would be distracting. Why isn't he saying something, like a comment on the weather or he's glad to see me? A little small talk would help put me at ease. Nothing. Just awkward silence. He's sitting in his chair gazing in my direction. Finally I get the idea. I'm supposed to speak first. I can go in whatever direction I want "Nice fall day," I say "Thanks for offering me some therapy sessions."

"You're welcome. I don't know what you want to talk about, but I'm ready to listen. We have fifty minutes and you can talk about whatever is on your mind," he says.

"Right now I'm focused on the horrible fund drive for the Iowa County Association for Retarded Children. I get a tightness in my chest every fall when the drive comes due and I know I have to find volunteers to go from door-to-door for two townships and take some of the territory myself.

Mr. Cushna shifts in his chair and silently encourages me to continue.

"It's humiliating. I dread it. The money supports transportation for the retarded to the one-room country school that my son David attends. Sometimes when I'm working on the fund drive, I think I see people peering from behind drapes when I come into their drive, park my car and walk to the front door to ring the doorbell. Occasionally no one answers. Most of the people are nice but I still hate to bother them or ask for help."

"It hard to request help even when it's for you son," he says.

"Yes, and it would be different if David and Kris were retarded but well-behaved, like Down's syndrome children, who are often pleasant, smiling and affectionate. Dave and Kris prefer you don't touch them or hold them. They're like perpetual motion machines, so active they can't sit still. They swear and use violent words. Where did they get that? Dean and I don't talk that way, nor do their older brothers. I remember talking David into the local hardware store. We went up on the balcony section where they toys are kept and the first thing David did was pick up a toy gun and tell at the people below that he was going to kill them. I remember scooping him up in my arms, not looking at anyone as we left the store, thrusting him in to the he back seat of the car and just sitting for a while. Talk about feeling like a nobody."

Mr. Cushna looks at me, then says:

"I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you Nobody too?
Don't tell!
They'd advertise you know!"

I can't believe this is reality. I can't believe my ears. Is he quoting poetry to me? No man has ever done that before. I lower my eyes and can't look at his face.

He continues:

"How dreary to be Somebody!
How public like a frog,
To tell one's name the livelong June
To an admiring Bog!"

Secretly I'm thinking, me on his level? My goodness, he's going to have his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Loyola this spring. He's certainly not a nobody. Did he feel like a nobody at some point in his life? I like the poem so much. Like that he can empathize. Like that there's a pair of us. Like that he's sitting there and I'm sitting here in this space at this time.

"Who wrote the poem?" I ask.

"Emily Dickinson wrote this poem and many others. She's one of my favorite poets," he replies.

For the rest of the session I talk about guilt feelings I have because I feel I'm neglecting the other four since I spend so much time with David and Kris. If I try hard enough maybe I can find the cure. I've had descriptors like "minimal cerebral dysfunction", "brain-damage", "schizophrenia", and of course, "mental retardation". I keep trying to find the reason and fix it, fix it, fix it. Hope some day my other sons and daughter will understand.

Before leaving I repeat, "The author of the poem was Emily Dickinson, right?"

He nods and I walk away from the session knowing I've found a gentle man. A gentle man -- I didn't know there were gentle men. What a gift to be able to share like I've never done before. I'm feeling more hopeful, lighter. Maybe he can penetrate the bathysphere iron walls that surround me, that protect me. I'm confused myself. I don't know exactly what I need protection from. I don't know how to trust?

The moment I get home, I find the poem in a book and copy down every word so I can memorize it.

Our therapy sessions continue weekly and the crunchy leaves turn to footprints in the snow.

After I know therapy is self-directed. I ponder all week about what to explore in the next session. The walls in his office seem to expand. One time it was my first kiss by a boy, a stolen kiss in a closet when we were playing hide-and-seek in his house. Another time it was the high school biology teacher showing me my scores on the maturity portion of a test. The test showed I had a maturity rate of a 30 year-old, the highest maturity rate of anyone taking the test in high school. Now how did that happen?

No topic feels forbidden. Gaining insights and examining my life, leaving me at times unable to sleep well at night leaves me edgy during the day, depletes my appetite. I can't turn my body or mind off. I want to totally examine my life, search out every memory and talk about it.

The therapy is having other effects. One of the other effects is remembering the first time I noticed there was an "I." I was in Marengo Memorial Hospital and the lab technician took some blood from me. When he looked at me, directly in the eyes, all at once I felt like there was an "I" here. What had I felt before, and why in my thirties did I suddenly feel there was an "I?" I remember reading books on schizophrenia, several years ago when David had a potential diagnosis of schizophrenia. I secretly thought I had a little of it, but I didn't have auditory or visual hallucination. Flights of ideas I had and have. It's just that my thoughts keep jumping around. Lots of times I refer to myself as "her" like there is a separation, a division in myself. But what happened that day, when the lab tech looked directly in the eyes, was sort of like a baptism when the priest pours water on your head and gives you a specific name. There was a "me." It was world-shaking in my little universe. The top of my skull opened up and an "I" was poured in. Strange that one glance could have such a profound effect.

The footprints in the snow are gone. The trees are budding when I arrive for my last visit. Therapy is over. My last visit. Today. I've been dreading this day since the first therapy session.

"It's a nice spring day," I say.

"Yes, it is," he says, and reminds me he will be receiving his Ph.D. and leaving the clinic. He's scanning my face to get a hint of what we might talk about today.

"I know I'm going to rattle on today. I've tried to peer into every nook and corner of my life with you since I know you're non-judgmental. That give me freedom, latitude," I say.

"That all right. I know you will eventually get to the point," he says.

"Well, I've had to think about what the world generally thinks of the retarded, and of course, I wouldn't have the Bible, the printing press, the electric light, have to agree somewhat with the world view. It's a fact that being normal or brilliant is valued, as it should be. If it weren't for intelligent, creative people we radios, cars, planes. I respect people who make such contributions. It's nice to say, "My daughter won the spelling contest, my daughter is in the marching band, my son is a big football or basketball star, my children all graduated from college with honors. Can I brag that David has finally learning to print a "D" at eleven and sometimes it's backwards? Seems like we all live through our children's successes. Isn't that natural and the way it is? If I had my wish all my children would pass from grade to grade with no problems and they'd all have photographic memories -- that'd be a help. But back to reality. There's another view. It turns nobodies into somebodies. It the religious or spiritual view. A friend who has a retarded son, told me to look up Mark 10, 13-16 in the Bible. It's hard for me to find passages because I was raised memorizing the Catholic Baltimore Catechism. We learned it by memory: "Who made you. God made me. Why did God make You? He made me to know Him, love Him, and serve Him in this life and be happy with Him forever in Heaven." I've heard the Bible all my life at mass, both Old and New Testament, but just didn't know where the passages were located. I pulled a slip of paper out of my hand and read it to Mr. Cushna:

"Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but his disciples scolded the people. When Jesus noticed this, he was angry and said to his disciples, "Let the children come unto me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it. Then he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them."

Mr. Cushna smiles and says, "So, you've found some peace looking at your situation in a spiritual way."

I spend time thanking him for his patience during these last six months and wishing him well with his job in Boston Massachusetts. I secretly think at one time in his life he had a desire to become a priest. Leaving him is hard, impossible. He's been at my side listening to all my concerns for six months. He's been my brother,

father, friend, confessor. I walk slowly out the door and sit in the car for a while before I start the engine.

When I meet God face-to-face, I hope He's something like a Rogerian.