



## Fables and Reflections

### Nine

#### The ark one hour long

In the late 1980's, I came across Sue Holland, a psychologist who had lived and worked for many years on the White City Housing Estate, at that time a sort of ghetto for disadvantaged people situated in West London. Inevitably, the estate had a certain notoriety and consequently, in some circles, also a kind of glamour. The glamour inevitably extended to Sue. She won respect by just working in that place for all that time. But what she had achieved was genuinely admirable. She concentrated her efforts chiefly on depressed women, many of them black single mothers. A large number of single mothers lived on the estate and, over the years, Sue helped them develop their own counselling service and network for mutual support. In effect she helped them create their own human and humanising community, where beforehand there had just been concrete facades, dangerous streets and human desolation.

Sue's approach and success gave her a name in professional circles and consequently she began to be wheeled into the various conferences and training courses to do a turn. Sometimes, one of the women from the estate was asked to come along too. I saw the presentation on more than one occasion and admired the effort - even though the reality of those long patient years of development, all that ordinary flawed humanness, and that stubborn *belief* in humanness despite everything, somehow failed to come across to a big audience in a hall, where the pressure was more for an instant answer, a sound-bite to take home.

A few years before she left the estate, Sue Holland said some very striking things to a group of social workers on a course. They are worth passing on.

The first thing she said was this : every day the average single mother on the estate received an onslaught of sophisticated "communication". But it is a corrupt form of communication, fundamentally and incessantly manipulative.

Much is one-way - all directed *at* her and not in relation or response *to* her. Most, of course, comes from the TV screen, for which she is just a dot in the vast TV audience. Much else is entirely and solely concerned with getting something out of her - a sale, a vote, assent, compliance - so the smile, the concern, the manners, are all a front, a soft cover for hard purposes that takes no account of the real and particular *her* at all.

Much else again is fragmentary, responsive only to the odd bit of her, not the whole person. Everywhere she meets the State or other supplier of her human needs, it is through some kind of glass screen, some line of defence, the other side of which sits some harassed and overworked official. That person's main interest inevitably is in the least possible individuality and the greatest possible speed - so when she goes for her State Benefits, or to the post office, or to the health centre, that is what she is most likely to meet - a defensive screen, an official who will respond badly if she asserts herself in her own specialness and particularity. And always she will meet *haste*, a pressure on her to impose herself as lightly as possible and to move along, quickly please, there are others waiting.

She goes shopping and meets more rush, more communication based on a fundamental disinterest in her welfare and in her as a whole person. The customer may always be right but only so long as s/he keeps his/her place in the queue and has a purse s/he can be persuaded to empty. The pretense of the relationship, the exploitative truth lurking behind that pretense of relationship, are clear, rarely acknowledged but absolutely clear. Do you have a Nectar Card? asks the cashier? Would you like some cash-back? Have a lovely evening.

And through the door and onto the computer screen each day pour the usual floods of hard sell literature, those phoney personalised messages belted out on the processor - "Dear Felicity Fudge, I am delighted to tell you that you have just won..." - the *appearance* of the personal touch, the *reality* of the cold claw scratching and raking without cease.....

In all history, have human beings been more isolated, more cut off, more belittled, more fragmented? The vast majority of the technologies and learned skills of communication which that single young woman encounters on her wretched, ugly and dehumanising housing estate, constitute a neglect and an abuse of her as a citizen and whole person, day in day out.

The purpose of Sue's example was to put into relief for that group of social workers on their course the sheer healing power a properly conducted old-style social work interview could have for this young woman.

"What?" they exclaimed (they all seemed depressed about the reality and purpose of their chosen occupation.) "The *healing power* of a social work interview?" They did not associate their role, these days, with power or with healing.

Members of the general public, on the other hand, do probably associate social work with power: but a hostile bumbling kind of power to do with depriving people of their liberty or failing to do it correctly. But *healing power*? - no way.

We presuppose here the sort of social work interview that is already largely out of date, since the social work approach has been much reorganised since Sue Holland spoke on this course. We also presuppose a reasonably competent interview, conducted by a worker able to do justice to the basic skills and concepts of the discipline, and who as a person and as a professional is warm, genuine and accurately empathic. For, while disciplines, functions and approaches change, our basic need for effective communication does not change and never will.

So, in this interview, the woman is listened to properly and as a whole person. She is not compartmentalised and the interview is not conducted according to the needs of a bureaucrat's form. She is engaged with in a warm and genuinely respectful way. There are no glass screens. She is given time, as much as an hour. She is told how much time she has, so that she knows where she stands and can pace herself accordingly. Her needs and experience across a broad spectrum are looked at, possible services examined and described, her choices and options discussed. She is helped to make her own decisions.

For an hour she matters. For an hour she is neither Thing, nor collection of Symptoms, nor Customer, nor outward edge of a segment. She is ordinarily human, in the round, with a shadow. She is allowed a self. Sue Holland was effective in relaying the sheer power and healing impact of this - in contrast to virtually all the rest of the young woman's dealings with the world. That social work hour stood out as a raft of sanity, civilisation and community in an ocean of human detachment, desolation and despair. It stood solid and meaningful and potent - the surroundings a flux and clamour and steady draining.

But the example suggests a wider and more pessimistic conclusion - that for all the astonishing advances in communication technology over the last century, for all the hugely learned and intelligent assimilation and deployment of knowledge on communication with people under various conditions - conflict, stress, bereavement, etc - true communication has not in reality advanced at all. On the contrary perhaps. All that knowledge, all those techniques, all that technology. What after all has it really achieved?

Are people really better connected now than they were? Do individuals and groups feel more empowered as a result of all this accumulated expertise and this new technology? Are communities more communal? Is the world more peaceful?

Surely not. What has advanced beyond doubt is expertise in *mis*-communication, distortion, dissimulation, mass manipulation, the abuse and perversion of the tools we made at the beginning of history to help connect us. And this is where the new technology really seems to flourish - in the hands of the mind-benders, the profiteers, the spinners, the phone hackers, the speech-makers, the featherlight and slithery “public relations experts”, the artful dodgers - eating away at the ties and bindings that hold a community together, driving each individual into a defensive shell.

### Afterword

I shall conclude this piece with an appeal, as follows :

If you are a member of a helping discipline or caring profession, please hold to your faith in and practice of your basic communication skills. If Society is to survive, a time for you and your skills will come. The skills of human connectedness are Society’s only hope. Maybe you can teach your skills to others who might wish to learn them.