



Crestwood Recovery Resilience Solutions

Connect with the person instead of the problem

By Dr. Lori Ashcraft

It's the pain of the work that often teaches me and "grows me" the most. Sometimes it exacerbates my own depression and anxiety, while at other times it distracts me from my personal anguish. I need to learn how to experience the pain and suffering of others without being pulled down to the same level of consciousness – helplessness and hopelessness. Once this happens I'm left with no strength or positive energy to lend them until they develop enough strength and confidence to manage their lives. I begin to learn this during my first week on the job from a man named William. While I continue to learn this over a period of years, the experience with William is the starting point.

I read William's chart before I venture out to meet him. His previous case worker describes him as "a 42 y.o. cauc. male schizophrenic." Too bad he's not described more accurately. Once I get to know William, I describe him like this: "William has a heart of gold; he is very kind. Despite his vulnerabilities, he is very courageous. Despite being misunderstood most of his life, he is very understanding. He has no friends, but will make a great friend if someone gives him a chance. In spite of being diagnosed with schizophrenia, William connects positively with others and easily wriggles his way into their hearts."

William was born in a state hospital and spent most of his life there. Now, with the meager income from his social security disability check, he lives by himself in a rented bunk-house on a ranch on the outskirts of a hot, dusty, little town at the northern tip of the San Joaquin valley in California.

I spend half a day just trying to find his place. Once there, I carefully stepped around cow-pies, past cattle corals, through deep dust, and lots of sticky weeds. I knock on the door several times before William opens it. He probably feels sorry for me, standing there on his creaky wooden porch looking dusty and hot, holding my county-issued plastic briefcase.

Once inside, William's huge dog, which I swear weighs 200 pounds, jumps up on me, bracing a

paw on each of my shoulders. With my plastic briefcase in one hand and my purse in the other, I'm not sure how to get him to "stand down." I take a few awkward steps back hoping this will force him to return to "all fours" but he happily moves along with me. William doesn't see this as a breach of manners, so most of our conversation takes place with the dog and me in dance position, dog-breath fogging my glasses. William tells me his story of growing up in the state hospital, and recently being placed here on the ranch. He has no friends, and he's sure the cowboys are making fun of him and deliberately tormenting him.

Hundreds of bottles of water line the walls of the kitchen and front room because William is convinced that the water supply will run out. He fears most things, real and otherwise, and spends most of his time worrying about what is going to happen next.

By the time I drive off in my rattletrap county car I thank God for that overbearing dog, because now I fear for William's safety as much or more than he does. I worry that the men on the ranch will continue to be mean to him; worry that he'll run out of food to eat; worry that he'll be friendless and was lonely; worry that he'll have to return to the hospital.

Every time I think of William, which is often, my heart sinks. I connect with him at a heart-level which is good – a prerequisite to being able to authentically support him. But not knowing how to maintain a state of positive consciousness, I am now incapable of supporting or empowering him. I am now as worried and hopeless as he is. My worries don't end when I leave work. I worry about William when I'm buying groceries; doing laundry; feeding my dog; weeding the flower bed in my back yard.

I accidentally connect my compassion to William's problems, instead of to William himself. I'd like to tell you that this baptism in pain taught me once and for all to establish contact to people instead of their problems; to stay focused on their strengths and not their circumstances. The truth is that this takes practice, and in my case, lots more of it than I care to admit.

I continue to see William nearly every month over the next year. He assumes I'm visiting him because I'm planning to readmit him to the state hospital. As miserable as his existence is at the ranch, he dreads the thought of returning to the hospital more than anything. He concentrates on reassuring me that he is alright. Our conversations usually start with me standing on the front porch, either muddy or dusty, depending on the season. Most of the time they sound like this:

"William? It's me. Are you in there? I brought some red licorice for us. Can you come to the door?"

"No!"

"How's your dog, Max? I bet he misses me."

"Are you alone? Did they come with you?"

"I'm alone. It's just me. They didn't come."

“Okay. I’ll let you in but you have to wait until I get ready.”

The “wait” takes about five minutes. Finally William comes to the door. Max squeezes passed him to conduct his usual sniff test. I follow them into the front room. William and I sit in two hard rickety chairs while Max circles and pants, waiting impatiently for his share of the licorice.

“What do you want this time?” William asks suspiciously.

“Nothing.”

“If you take me away there will be no one to fix dinner for Max. You know that don’t you?”

“I didn’t come to take you away. Let’s eat this licorice before it gets old.”

Probably because none of the terrible things happen that we’d worried about, we both become more relaxed and less fearful with each visit. The bottles of water, which serve as a symbol of fear, are fewer in number each time I visit. We don’t talk about the status of the water bottles. We both know what’s happening and we don’t want to jinx it.

By the way...supporting wellness

William inadvertently teaches me how to support wellness in ways that appear to be casual and natural. This is an intentional way of supporting wellness that appears to be unintentional. Watch how the lesson unfolds for me.

As we chew on the sticky licorice, William tells me how well he and Max are doing. He does this because he thinks it will convince me to not “take him away.” The more he tries to convince me, the more he actually convinces himself. My job is to keep him thinking and talking about how well he is doing. The more he tells me about how well he is doing, the better he does. The skills he is teaching himself about sounding and being well are sticking to him. He starts believing them and so do I. He’s able to transfer this new identity to his conversations with the cowboys. They in turn begin to find him likable and teach him a key cowboy skill -- how to chew snuff. This deepens his connection with them and reinforces and builds on his socialization skills. I do wish there was a better way to do this, but it’s not my call.

Letting Go

My last visit with William takes place in early spring. He is ready with the toughest lesson of all. I have to keep relearning this one since it’s a hard one to hold on to.

There is more rain than usual this particular spring. Cow pies merge with mud, enhancing the ranch aroma. William places some old boards along the path that I “tight rope” along. I have the red licorice in my coat pocket and hum as I balance along the boards. I leap from the last board to the front porch steps and knock loudly on the door.

No answer. No dog barking. No commotion or rattling around inside.

“William, it’s me. Can I come in?”

No answer. I knock and call again, but no response. A drupe of dread falls over me and I stand paralyzed by fear on the front porch not knowing quite what to do. Has he fallen? Has he been taken back to the hospital? Heart attack? Stroke?

“William, come to the door” I scream. “William...”

“You lookin for Willie?” A slow quite voice behind me asks?

“Yes. What happened? Where is he? When did you last see him? I’m so worried about him.”

“He rode into town with Bob this mornin’. They both needed a haircut. We made a doctor’s appointment for him too cause he just aint gettin’ over that cold. Max went too. You know how he is.”

“Oh thank God!” I say, wilting with relief.”

You want to go inside and wait for them?

“No. I think I’ll go. Oh, would you like some licorice?”

Sure. I love that stuff. Sure you don’t want to keep some of it?

“No. I won’t need it any longer. Tell Willie hello for me.”

I drive on to my next stop engulfed in a mixture of satisfaction and sadness. William and Max are moving on. He is beginning his new life with real people. This is good and I am proud of him – yet I’m left with a feeling of loss. There is some legitimate grieving to do. Beyond legitimate, there is an emerging fear related to my sense of self-worth. The fear wants me to grab William and Max and pull them back, take care of them in order to feel worthwhile.

Don’t rob power from others

Somewhere deep within me, at the speed of insight, I gain a few moments of consciousness around the dynamics of power. This is the beginning of understanding the critical step of shifting power to the person who is trying to recover. They need to own their own power and my job is to reflect the evidence of their power to them and reinforce it. After all, they are the ones trying to recover, so they need all the power they can get to do this. It’s just like William to save the hardest lesson for last.

My ego wants validation that I am a good person; one who helps others; one who is weller and stronger than those I help. If I hang on to William and Max and all the others and insist on care-taking them I can feel worthwhile but I will keep them small. I will rob them of their power. And when they don’t make any improvements I will have no grounds to validate my own work or my skill as a professional. I must find my own power within me and not take it from others. Then we can both

grow stronger. So I let go, but I don't stop loving them. There is still a little place in my heart where I hold William and Max. They stay there forever. I hold a place for them without holding on to them; I care for them while not care-taking them. Letting go leaves me feeling alone and a little empty but as time goes by I learn that if I can just stay in that empty space, hold it open for as long as I can without filling it with distractions, I can find more of my own self. This is how I get bigger and stronger – not by robbing power from others.