

# GRACE NOTES XXIII

**DR SALMA SIDDIQUE** asks us to be mindful about shouting at empty boats

**E**PICTETUS (AD55-135) ONCE SAID '[women and] men are disturbed not by things but by the views which they take of them'. This reminds me of the story of a woman sailing on a river as night falls. She sees something looking like a boat in the river floating towards her. At first it appears that there is another person in similar pursuit of a relaxing evening on the river. However, something changes and it appears the boat is moving at speed towards the woman's boat. In a panic she starts to shout and wave to signal the immediate danger of a possible collision. The boat continues to move at speed. With alarm the woman jumps to her feet and begins to shout and scream at the boat. The boat smashes into the woman's boat at which point she realises that the other boat is empty.

This is a classic Buddhist story of mindfulness and 'empty boats' (adapted from Chödrön, 2008). It can be seen as a life lesson on the human condition which teaches us that we need to be aware of shouting at empty boats. This story is a familiar narrative of the stresses and strains held within interpersonal relationships of the Persecutor, Rescuer and Victim positions of the drama triangle (Karpman, 1968; Zveic, Cernetic & Kosak, 2011). While the Adult ego state captures the essence of mindfulness as a 'here and now' state fully engaged in the present reality, and maintaining relational OKness.

It has long been held that psychological therapies offer a reframing of suffering and misery. The return to the historical teachings of Vipassana informed us that mindfulness is a process of bringing into awareness through the focusing on sources which generate drama through images, thoughts, feelings and sensations. The slowing of breathing and the quietening of the mind help us to be in the moment. The therapeutic moment is one where we sit on the edge of awareness and/or the edge of

discomfort. It is what Daniel Stern (2004) refers to as the 'temporal contour along which the experience forms during its unfolding' (p219). It is a realisation of the experience or sensation before language names the story. It is in the space in-between of reconnecting with the thoughts, feelings and behaviours [...] which can be experienced as ellipses (Siddique, 2017) which define the present moment of the story. Freud understood anxiety as a reaction to threat and depression as the accounting for loss. In an uncertain world politics is filled with falsehoods. Hannah Arendt (1977) recognised that crises only become disasters when we respond with prejudicial intrapsychic influences of falsehoods, with rigid and archaic material. We could recognise instead what Berne said, that 'every person is the product of a million moments, thousands of "states of mind", hundreds of adventures and usually two parents.' (Berne, 1975) A mutuality-moment of meeting on the edge of awareness of the unfolding experience and knowing where to place on the horizon line, the vanishing points.

The Buddhist story of the empty boats resonates in this era of uncertainty, of what the future may hold with Trump's and Brexit's policies. Maybe some of us are standing in our own boats and 'shouting at empty boats' as an act of frustration and anxiety. Mindfulness as an approach is about recognising when we find ourselves caught in the path of empty boats. As therapists we need to be aware of our potential for ourselves and for our clients of such 'shouting' and practice more of living in the moment.

#### References

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