

**“Small Towns: A Close Second Look at a Very Good Place.”**

an excerpt from the 1987 Iowa Humanities Board lecture

by Minnesota author, Carol Bly

Associated with the Harvard Medical School, the Center for Psychological Studies in A Nuclear Age is designing workshops for high-level Americans and Russians and others, in which family-therapy skills are used. One spectacular project was a workshop in Moscow. The participants were members of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War: the idea of the workshop designers — Dr. Richard Chasin of the Center and Soviet sociologist Nikolai Popov and Soviet psychiatrist Marat Vartanyan, Deputy Director of the All-Union Research Center for Psychiatry — was to use family-therapy methods for de-stereotyping. In addition to the workshops, the Center produces and distributes publications on group process and the use of interpersonal skills in explosive, political circumstances. An interesting priority of the Center is to urge the idea that it is not sane to take a reasonable, businesslike attitude towards nuclear war: such reasonableness is spurious.

So much for the use of social-work practice far away. It is invigorating to know of it, but what I would like to do this evening is show you a scene in rural Minnesota. It is slightly, but not a great deal, changed from the actual scene which took place. I was trying, for the first time in my life, to use just two of the simplest social-work skills: questioning-getting data and feeling, for the sake of empathy — and then making sure I made a mental picture of the other person's story.

Let us say we are sitting in a classical American small-town place. It is the VFW Lounge. Here we are, with the quarter-inch woodgrain paneling, the gold-color eagle over the bar. We can have set-ups or we can have bourbon and seven, or brandy and gingerale. We are crowded warmly into a booth. The Post Commander is there. He is a grumpy fellow, I think, who is nicer to his lion-colored Labrador bitch than he is to people. There is a shy woman there who is sergeant-at-arms for the VFW Auxiliary. It is curious that diffident people do that job very well: they would not be so pushy as to serve up front at the Fair stand. They don't feel comfortable with the higher-ups who dominate the church circles making Dorcas Kits. But they can take hold in a womanly way at the VFW Auxiliary meetings. I have seen them carry our gigantic fifty stars around the room, squaring the comers of their march. If they had to, they could remove the flag from a coffin, fold it into the heart-breaking triangle, and take it firmly across the undertaker's green grass cloth and present it, on behalf of the President of the United States, to someone's widow.

Our sergeant-at-arms is sitting here cheerfully. Jack Slippy, a man who has recently lost his aged father, is here. We know him as the dumb hand who, if you put him up on a tractor, even a comparatively simple one like a Deere 3120, can do about \$500 worth of damage in an hour. But now we know him also as a person dignified by a family death. A few of you — and I — are jammed into the booth. Finally, Jack's wife, Bernice, is here. Her style with Jack is this: whenever he opens his mouth to say anything, she nudges his elbow with her elbow — an easy act since all our elbows are on the table, and Bernice says to Jack, "You just shut it, Jack."

Perhaps we are getting a little sauced. Even so it is an uneasy alliance, because I know the Post Commander probably thinks I am a communist. There are two levels of communist: there is an outright communist and then there is "some kind of a communist."

Suddenly Jack Slippy says "You know, those environmentalists are a bunch of communists!"

Bernice shoves her elbow into his elbow. "Jack, you just shut it," she says promptly.

The Post Commander says, "I've heard that some of those guys are pretty pink, though." He adds, "If you ask me."

This is a conversation in which none of the traditional humanities behaviors work well. If I assign to Jack the stereotype of ignorant, hostile plebe, I have dishonored him and done nothing to make any change. Worse, at the moment when I assign him some role like that, I am assigning myself the role of educated truth-knower and superior person — and that does me no good. When Bernice Slippy tells Jack to shut it, she is simply acting out of old, bad small-town values: do not talk about politics or religion. And worse, when your husband says something with any intensity, call it off somehow. The sergeant-at-arms is enacting another small-town value: she is saying nothing because she believes that talk, whether about communists or environmentalists, isn't much.

I have decided to exercise my poor beginner's grasp at social-work skills. "Which environmentalists did you mean, Jack?" I ask. "The ones in our county or the ones in Carver County?"

Jack says: "I just mean generally. Bunch of commies." Then he realizes that sounds dumb, so he gets redder in the face. "All I know," he says loudly, "is they are wrecking everything for the farmer."

The Post Commander says they are a bunch of city slicks who don't understand rural problems.

"Did you mean the environmentalists working on the slough project?" I ask. I look at Jack, since he brought it up, and he has the most noticeable feeling of anyone in the booth.

"All I know is," Jack shouts, "we're going to lose everything that means anything to Americans!"

Then he adds, "If the bank takes your relatives' farm I'm going to lose my job." I recognize the first accurate thing that has been said. I also recognize genuine anger.

"I'd be very mad if I were going to lose my farm. Or lose my job. I'd be very mad," I say. "I'd also be scared, I think."

Jack looks at me with his jerking eyebrows. Various emotions go by like freight in his face. He looks angry still, and a little pleased, and generally pleasantly excited.

Now I am guessing everyone is thinking about anger and something that makes them angry. I am looking at the sergeant-at-arms, trying to guess: if she is angry about something what would that be? I pretend I am the sergeant-at-arms and I think, "So how would you like to live in this town all your life and serve in the Auxiliary and in Aid all these years and been canning for forty years

if you count the summer I started helping my mother — how would you feel if some city girl, some hot-shot Home Extension agent; came to your Homemakers' Meeting and told everyone it was dangerous to do open-kettle canning? Who does she think she is with her permanent around the sides and back, and then a regular old Heine haircut in the front so she looks crazy? She is pretty, and young, and not yet tired. Anyone can do canning if they have all the fancy equipment she's got."

I am still day-dreaming through a possible anger for the sergeant-at-arms, when the Post Commander says, "I got to say that everything the environmentalists do isn't all that bad." He adds: "They are preserving the slough. I go in there a lot with Silver."

I swing into a question for him, for fear he will stop talking, "Is Silver your tan-colored Labrador?"

"Silver and I," he says, we go in there, not just to hunt, either. We go in there pretty much all year round. She gets up birds for the fun. When it's frozen we go in on the ice."

The sergeant-at-arms says, "Dogs are funny on ice. They try to hang on with their toenails but they lose it anyway."

"We go in there," the Post Commander says, "and it is very beautiful in there." What happened in this conversation, I think, is that anger which was being genuinely felt got inappropriately attached to communists and environmentalists. The anger itself, however, was genuine. It needed a little quiet questioning in order for the anger to move over to where it really belonged — about losing farm jobs. Then, when the anger was spoken about accurately, it was laid to rest: when we talk accurately about anger, much of its desperate quality disappears. It leaves space for other emotions to come take their usual, obliging places in our heads. In this conversation, the Post Commander found space to remember that he enjoys nature. Love of nature entered the booth. Amusement at dogs entered the booth. We had a mental image of the slough.

I have tried to move several such conversations from the original, hostile, projective remark about some supposed enemy to a particular, accurate estimate of the same subject. The invariable side effect has been gradual, affectionate recall of some more positive experience — such as prowling about a slough. The pleasant anecdote, however, never shows up until the original hostile feeling has been questioned, allowed to settle, to find its proper level. Surely — if such pathetically simple, beginners' procedures as I know of can make such change — surely it would be wise to learn all the social-work skills we can!

Yet how odd it is to ask a thoughtful audience, gathered through the generosity of a Humanities Board, to start learning family-therapy process! It sounds very eccentric indeed. But then I remember the widow's comment, "I never realized how much he meant to me until he was taken away" and I think: we must try any process in the world if it will improve our imaginations.

If the Harvard people are wholeheartedly trying family process with Soviet and American groups, we may as well give it a shot: we can learn the skills, teach them to our teachers, and

practice them in our lives. I suggest we get trained family therapy people to teach interpersonal skills to our third and fourth grade teachers, to seniors in high school — who can enjoy experimenting with them in small groups — and I suggest we hire trained social workers to take some of our adult groups through day-long workshops.