

THE LOYAL HUSBAND: A PARALOGUE

by Gisela Schwarz and Lynn Hoffman

GISELA'S STORY:

The meeting in Paradise

The first part of the story began early in 1998, when Lynn Hoffman and I met at the Paradise Ranch near Dallas, Texas. Harlene Anderson and the Houston-Galveston Institute had arranged a conference for people who had been long-time friends and visitors of the Institute, going back to when Harry Goolishian was still alive. At home in Austria, my work is divided between my job as the manager of a school psychology office in a town near Graz, and my private practice in the same town. I am one of a group of physicians and therapists who make up an informal community there, but my professional life was changing and I was looking for new opportunities and support.

So, after the meeting in ³Paradise,² I felt the wish to keep in contact with Lynn. It was then that our email conversations began. I had been struggling with a client, a middle-aged farmer, who was suffering from depression and found it hard to speak. I told Lynn my client's story and also my frustration with his depression and his inability to put his feelings into words. Here is what, over time, I told her.

The Reluctant Husband

It was in that previous October, 1997, that a farmer living in a small village in Southeast Styria was referred to me because of a severe depression which had culminated in a suicide attempt and a hospital stay of several weeks. After he was released, the psychiatrist from the hospital had recommended couple therapy but the first interview with the therapist was extremely unsuccessful so he was referred to me.

When we began to meet, my client told me of the ³cold and harsh² relationship between him and his wife. She had increasingly taken over the farmwork as he became more and more incapacitated, sometimes not even getting up in the morning. For him, their troubles began many years ago when she had an abortion against his wishes. They had three children together: a boy, 17; a girl of 15; and a girl of 5. His wife constantly reproached him, saying that she had had many chances to marry but had chosen him. He said he could not bear feeling rejected and treated like a bad child any longer, but because of the bad experience with couple therapy, he did not want to bring his wife in again.

Nevertheless, I had the impression that our talks together were helpful and seemed to stabilize him. I also learned that his village was a place where people live alone and do not often see their neighbors although they gossip a lot. To help him build up an outside community, I suggested he go once a week to the village inn, which was where people in his village met. I continued to feel that it was important for his wife to come in, but he could not make himself ask her. On the one hand, he wanted to tell his wife about his feelings, but on the other he felt he could not make his reality visible to her.

This was when I first wrote Lynn about my difficulties with this situation. Looking for a phrase to describe my client, I thought of the word ³Nachlassig,² and Lynn began to call him the ³Reluctant Husband.² However, she offered me words of encouragement, and told me not to give up. So I persisted in trying to talk with him.

It turned out that in his family, the members used to help each other in their everyday work. In his wife's family, there was always quarreling. She was an only child and her father had died when she was young. In his family, he was the third of five children. One brother died young, another brother was a deaf-mute, and one of his sisters suffered from severe depression. His father had died a year before and he told me he had been going to the cemetery daily to talk with his father.

He also told me that one reason he had given up outside connections was because his wife was so jealous. All through their marriage of 18 years, she had been jealous of his mother, brother and sisters. He said that he felt torn apart. It was clear that he couldn't be loyal to his wife without being disloyal to his original family. It also became more and more clear that nothing would change without the participation of his wife. At this point, he did ask her and she agreed to see me alone. It turned out that she was also jealous of his relationship with me.

In our meeting, the wife said that she wanted to give the relationship a try because she loved her home and working on the farm, but that she had little hope. She said that her husband never supported her when there was a quarrel between her and his mother or sister. She accused him being jealous of her relationships with other people. But she did agree to meet together with him and me.

The Loyal Husband

When I told Lynn about this development, she said he was not a ³Reluctant Husband² but a ³Loyal Husband.² I saw the couple together and even though both of them could remember the good feelings in their marriage and cried together, they neither could see the other's point of view. Lynn had told me about Michael White's idea to ask people who they would want to join ³The Club of Their Life,² so I asked them who was in each of their own clubs, both now and in the past. Neither had felt understood as children by their parents, but the husband at least had his mother and siblings for support, where his wife was alone. Both of them behaved like children without many resources, but neither could see any resource in their relationship.

However, before the end of the session, they each made a concession: the wife agreed to go out for a drink together after the session, and he got her to postpone a visit to her homeopathic physician, whom he did not trust. However, she did not come back. I again felt stuck, but Lynn now spoke of the Hopeful Husband and encouraged me to persist.

To my surprise, the husband now asked if he could bring his mother into the session. She wanted to meet the person her son liked to talk to so much. When she came in, she told me that ³he always gets a longing when there are two or three weeks and no talks with you.² In her presence, he acted more like a tender and protective person, where with his wife he seemed to be the torn-apart child who could not fulfill his father's expectations. He wanted to bring in his sister who suffered from depression, but she would not come. There was one more person in the picture, a woman friend, but her husband was jealous too, so he didn't see her often.

His mother came in two more times, and it seemed to me that his loyalties to his family of origin had become stronger. It was at this time that Lynn and I decided to let the husband know about her involvement in his story. He was very

interested and impressed that a ³lady,² as he called Lynn, would want to hear his story, even though there were a language, a culture and an ocean separating us. I brought his comments back to Lynn and I translated for him Lynn's words of acknowledgment and support.

In the following sessions I felt that a bond developed between the two of them. He seemed eager and sometimes even impatient for her messages, and I was kept busy informing Lynn what was going on. During the process, I myself felt supported in guiding him. At the same time I felt like a medium translating between different languages and cultures.

A short time after this, he informed me he was going to the hospital for some emotional relief, even though he knew this would not change his family situation. So we didn't meet for two months. Then, when he called, he said things were still the same. Again, I felt things were at a standstill, but Lynn wrote me ³to keep holding my Loyal Husband's hand because it looks as if things are reaching a divide and he may need you.²

This prediction was an example of an idea that Lynn and I had previously talked about. She had told me she was thinking a lot about the concept of empathy, but she wanted a more interactional word. So she came up with ³tempathy,² meaning the ability to grasp the communications that travel between people like underground rivers. Or maybe it was just that being on the outside, she was able to sense what I, with my closeness to the situation, couldn't see.

Events now developed very quickly. When the husband came in to see me, he told me that his wife had refused to pay him even one visit in the hospital, even though his doctors had pressed her to come. She was also thinking of leaving the house. He said this was a hard and sad time for him, but on the other hand, he felt he had to make a decision and was no longer constantly on the edge of tears. After one or two more meetings, he told me that with the help of his friends and family he had gotten a divorce. The effect was that he felt sad but relieved, as if he had given up some of his burdens.

Fortunately, his mother and sisters were able to help him with the house and farmwork. His mother told him that he would always have a place near her, even though she had previously thought that she might leave him if his wife left. It was at this point that he told me that his wife had ignored one important rule in the life of a peasant family: She had taken the place of the father. After they married, she had wanted to take his father's chair at the table, and after his father died, she in fact did so. He said that it brings bad luck when a wife takes a man's place, and that she should have taken a seat at his mother's side. Now that she had left, he had taken this seat himself. If in the future there should be another wife, he told me, she would sit next to his mother.

When I asked Lynn if she had any thoughts to send to this Loyal Husband, she asked me to ask him what place he would find for his ex-wife. In the next session he told me that he had already found one. He said she now feels to him like a sister, and that she will always be the mother of his children and have an important place in this heart. But the place for a woman to join him as his wife is now free.

After this session, he came one more time and then told me he wanted to stop, because he now thought that he had to try to live with his everyday support system. But he still wanted to hear if Lynn had any more reflections. And Lynn said to tell him how impressed she was that he had made this big change without losing anybody in his life. After this, I

didn't hear from him, but Lynn said she thought that he needed distance from the impact of all these events and he agreed with her. At our last meeting, he asked me to give greetings to Lynn even though he had never seen or met her. Maybe I should add that this whole therapy took place over a year's time, and also that he had medical support throughout.

CLOUDS AND IMAGES AFTER THE THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

In looking back on the path we walked together with this reluctant,-loyal,-hopeful husband, helping him to develop his story and write a few more chapters, I think two facts made the difference: first, that we encouraged him to open the doors to his inner home and second, that we let him know that there was a community who cared for him.

One element that pushed the couple apart was the deep rejection the husband felt by his wife's not including him in the decision to abort their child. Having three children and working together did not outweigh the fact that she did not acknowledge him as a husband. For her part, a critical issue was that she could not make an alliance with his family. Living in the countryside with few neighbors made this resource all the more important, but they could not take advantage of this. Torn between loyalty to his wife and loyalty to his own family, the husband finally felt able to make the decision to divorce.

What particularly touched me was my role as a translator between different languages, not only between German and English but between the therapy position of Lynn, which seemed oriented to the present and future (the American way of perceiving?) and the European orientation to the past. All my sessions were in German, but the reflections, including my own with my inner voices, were in English. Then there was my client's personal language, which felt so heavy and constricted and which he explained by saying that one word meant two or three sentences to him. He was not used to talking about feelings and relationships in his everyday life.

The fact that I myself had to mediate between languages had something to do with my own story. My role in my own family of origin was to be a medium, and as a child of divorced parents I always had to stroll between different worlds. So I was practicing my own life pattern in another context. I think that clients we meet or connect with always have something to do with the story or process we ourselves are moving through. So what a "hopeful sunrise" it is to find a way to build up not only verbal but also what Lynn calls "sublingual" bonds between different languages, cultures and our own personal stories.

LYNN'S STORY:

I met Gisela in January of 1998 at one of a set of meetings originally organized by Harry Goolishian and Harlene Anderson along collaborative lines. The following story shows that it is true, as Harlene has said, that you can never know what will come of any conversation. Gisela and I had some very good talks together, and after I got home we began to correspond by email. I had just bought a new IMac computer, which made internetting (inter-knitting?) very easy. When I got home and looked at the pictures I had taken, I confused her with another woman. Yet by mistake I sent her the right picture. Here is another lesson, that a mistake can be a prelude to discovery.

In her messages, Gisela told me about a situation she felt stuck with. A farmer in a small village had been sent to her because of a suicide attempt. After being discharged from the hospital, he was referred to

Gisela. She found it hard to talk with him, as he was very depressed and spoke slowly. She thought it might help if he brought in his wife, but because of a bad experience with couple therapy, he was reluctant to ask her. So it was that we began to refer to him as the ³Reluctant Husband.²

Not long after that, the husband told Gisela that his wife wanted to meet with her alone. Then they both came in, and Gisela was able to help them to express some good things about their marriage, even though the loyalty issues that separated them still held firm. After this meeting, each seemed to move a little toward the wishes of the other. Then the husband's mother said that she wanted to come in.

I was impressed with Gisela's work. I also thought, ³How could I ever have thought this man reluctant?² In my messages, I began referring to him as the ³Loyal Husband.² We also decided to tell him about me, the woman across the ocean. Gisela began to transmit ideas from me back to him and vice versa. There was a sense that things were moving.

Then he voluntarily went back into the hospital. For the next two months Gisela only spoke to him by phone. This was discouraging, but I told her to keep holding his hand (metaphorically of course), because I felt that things might be reaching a decision point and that he would need her.

While he was in the hospital, his wife decided to move out of their house, and after he came home, he went ahead very quickly with a divorce. This was when he told Gisela the story of how seats were traditionally assigned at the family table, and how his wife had disobeyed the ritual. Shortly after these events, he decided to leave therapy. However, I asked Gisela to ask him if we could write up an account of this story for the Fishernet, and he agreed.

I had never used the Internet in this way, and felt that it was an interesting resource. Most of us who work collaboratively are not able to fall back on teams, so we have to find other ways to re-people our work. Using the Internet to add a reflecting person seems logical.

Not only that, but I am convinced that introducing witnesses into a person's immediate network, as Michael White does, is one of the most useful things a therapist can do. One can draw from natural assemblies, as Gisela did when she worked to restore her Loyal Husband's links to his family and community. At other times, you might draw upon artificial assemblies like reflecting teams. White's also makes groups out of colleagues or clients who have been in the same situation. He calls these ³communities of concern,² and I call them ³attending communities.²

Gisela mentioned my concept of ³tempathy,² and I guess I should explain what I mean, because it is the sort of term intellectuals often gag over. Jan Bavelas of Victoria University in B.C. has been doing research that shows that the trait of empathy is social and interactional rather than individual and internal. Working collaboratively, as I had begun to do, reinforced this idea. I wanted some way to describe an empathy that traveled between people so I made up the word ³tempathy.² Hunch, sixth sense, intuition, mean something similar, but the reflecting format seemed to promote these manifestations independent of personal gifts. Gisela was the first person I spoke to seriously about this idea, and I was grateful for her interest during our exchanges.

AFTER-WORDS:

5.15.04

Gisela: Thinking back, I wanted to ask what it was that made you change the phrase you were using for my client from ³Reluctant² to ³Loyal.²

Lynn: If things have stayed static for a long time and there is suddenly movement of any kind, this is a cause for hope. The Loyal Husband's wife said she wanted to come in alone, and he did not resist this. Then the two of them came in. Then his mother wanted to come in. The ice pack was breaking up and I wanted to signal this shift to ourselves. At this point we hadn't taken the husband into our confidence yet. I do feel bothered about that.

Gisela: I was also confused about how to go from seeing the husband alone to seeing the wife alone and then seeing the couple. I got worried about my own loyalties.

Lynn: That's why I try not to settle too securely on one person's side or another. Sometimes I use the image ³the mystical body of Christ² (even though I am not a Christian) to suggest that there is a larger entity involved, even when people may be getting a divorce. If there are children, the loyalty field is always in play. But if one person is seriously hurting another, of course I take sides.

Gisela: Another point I was curious about was when the husband had gone back to the hospital and nothing seemed to be happening. You surprised me by saying that I should continue to hold my husband's hand because a crisis point was coming up. What made you say that?

Lynn: I don't know. Sometimes I do believe that I am channeling, because I am impelled by nothing better than a hunch. There was a quickening of events. The Loyal Husband had voluntarily gone into the hospital, his wife refused to visit him, so -what was all that about? But I would have said ³Hold his hand² in any case. You had made a strong connection with him, and you would want to be faithful to that.

Gisela: I also wondered about the part where you asked about what place his ex-wife would have in his life.

Lynn: I was still pursuing this theme of loyalty and feeling that in a farming family with such deep roots it was best to hope that everyone would end up connected. Perhaps the relationship could go on through parenting. The husband did say that his wife had become more like a sister and that she would always have a place as the mother of his children.

Gisela: One more question. I was puzzled when the husband suddenly left therapy after the divorce. We had such intense sessions just prior to that decision. I hadn't expected things to end this way and didn't know what to think of it.

Lynn: These processes have a life of their own, and you follow their lead. Once the divorce decision had been made, the husband was free to take the initiative in lots of areas. If there had still been problems, I assume he would have held on to you. But the fact that he did not was a sign that the ³system,² as we used to call it, was righting itself. This can happen very fast. I no longer believe in slow terminations and ³mourning process.²

POSTSCRIPT FROM GISELA:

The last contact I had with our Loyal Husband was in May, when he asked me to meet him for coffee to talk about how he could contribute to the story we were putting together about our work with him. I had it with me and translated it for him. One thing he didn't understand was why we initially called him "reluctant." I reminded him about the time when he was so ambivalent about bringing his wife in. He said he could see what we meant, but that he would have used the word "afraid."

Lynn and I had discussed the ethics of putting this piece out on the Internet, so I shared our concerns with him. He said he appreciated our wish to protect him, but that he would like to make his story, as seen through our eyes, available to other people who might be experiencing a similar life crisis. He wasn't concerned about making it public because we did not use names or places. Much worse to him is the gossip of the village, which cannot be stopped by anyone. He told me he has his ups and downs, but finds it easier to talk to people now. And it seems that our connection is something special for him; something he has not experienced before. He had previously expressed a wish to write about his experience, but at that point he wasn't too clear how to go about doing that. I suggested that he call me in a few weeks and we could talk again. Before we said goodbye, he asked me to send greetings to Lynn.

CODA

11.30.04

Dear Lynn,

I met our Loyal Husband again last week. He has regained strength and confidence in life, and is building a new relationship with the woman of his heart. He told me that our common journey helped him to feel acknowledged, worthy, and brought out the part of him that loves life and sees the beauty in the world, not overlooking that there will be darkness too. He has built a good network with his family and his children always come to see him on the weekends. He also tries to help his girlfriend, who needs very much to stand on her own feet, but can lean on him for now. I gave him your affectionate wishes and he said he could not believe that you still remember him. He was very happy about that, saying to me ³She remembers my story, the story of a humble man!² I said, ³Yes, you are very special to Lynn Hoffman and me.² He stood straight up, eyes clear and smiling, and firmly shook my hand. I think this was a good work. Gisela

12.05.04

Dear Gisela.

I do too. But what seems clearer and clearer to me is that the conversation itself became the author - that the entwined back and forth between you and the family and between you and me formed a witnessing net which even after the so-called end of therapy still held feelings of concern and affection. All the same, if you did not have a gift for re-creating the process in lively and powerful words, I would not have felt so present in the work.