
GERONDA'S PASSION

by

Hans Lobstein

When I was ten years old I cried all through my birthday. Here was a table laden with presents, flowers, food; everybody was kind and smiling. And I was deeply hurt. Why can't they be as friendly all through the year? Why all that pushing and bullying, do this, do that, I am in charge and you are only a child, for the rest of the year? Then, suddenly, on my birthday I am supposed to be grateful for their smiling faces. The injustice of it! The hypocrisy! I am expected to be a traitor to my own integrity! The battle lines are clearly drawn all year, I know my place, they know theirs. My public and my private self are safely delineated. And then, bingo! All is lost, shattered. I am supposed to be happy and grateful for their kindnesses . . . I was always great on justice. How I revelled in my self-righteousness, the little prig I was.

Repeat, repeat. Who has heard me? Who is hearing me now? If nobody hears, I am liable to repeat myself, louder and louder, until I feel I have been heard. It's always like that. If I don't feel I have been heard, I am nobody. If I am nobody, that is frightening. So I must shout louder. Is that what makes children shout and scream? Very likely. I cried

quietly all through my tenth birthday. It is with me still.

Only now I am grown up, and grown up men don't shout and scream. They don't cry either, but that's another story, or it may well be the same. Instead they make a noise in other more socially acceptable ways: they shoot guns and drive violently fast cars, or kick each other in the groin on the football field . . . Not all, but enough. Those that don't, like my father in his old age in Chicago, mumble and rave about the death penalty. Hang them all. Hang the murderers.

And the opposite is also true. I have said that before, too. Say it louder! Say it again.

At a group weekend workshop for the Open University we sit in a circle on the floor. It is about 10 a.m., Saturday morning. We had started the night before but nothing much had happened, people arriving late, talking, eating. We were to start seriously on Saturday morning at 9.30 a.m.; it was all agreed. Geronda has not arrived. She went home last night while the rest of us stayed overnight. She comes rushing in, sorry I am late. My mother rang, she wanted to know what I was doing

this weekend, why I wouldn't come to see her, I had told her I was away at this group; she knew it well enough, but she wouldn't get off the phone. Mother, I told her, mother, please listen. I am NOT neglecting you. I am NOT disappearing without telling you where I am, what I do, please mother, do be sensible, I'll ring you as soon as I get back this evening . . . and on and on she went.

After 20 minutes I thought, this is too much. What can I do? Everybody is so sympathetic, or making out they are, how can I stop her, how can I get on with my planned programme? Do I have to jettison it all? I asked her, Geronda, do you want to do anything about it? No, no, she said, I know all about what you have in mind, I don't want to hit stupid cushions and scream at my mother, thank you very much, I just want to tell you. Very well, I heaved a sigh, as she carried on. After another 10 minutes or so, I took my luck in my hands. I have had enough, I said, now you either do something about it or shut up and let us get on with something else. I am fed up with all this talking. Dead silence. I know I had overstepped my mark. I was the callous unfeeling group leader who only wanted to get on with what he had planned, not deal with the immediate here and now, set in his ways, inflexible, insensitive, unfeeling, stubborn. What is he going to do now, he has shut up Geronda who obviously has a problem, and now what? I waited in the silence. It was a knife edge. She could easily say, very well, I'll shut up. And sit there crossly, and I would have failed. I would have to start all over again and it would be a bad experience for us all. Still, we

make mistakes. I had made mistakes before. Another one won't be the end of me.

But she didn't. Suddenly, very quietly and quite out of keeping with her rushed anxious words before, she said, well what do you want me to do? And now I was up against it. What do I tell her? She had already poured scorn on beating a cushion, letting it all out. I should have known. There is always a refusal at first. Very often, any suggestion I may make is scorned at first. We all have to establish our esteem. They show me they have a choice, they are people with a mind of their own. Very well, I have learned that long ago and I often make a suggestion which I know will be refused and that's all right. The second or third suggestion is then quite happily taken up. They are no longer just passive acolytes. Anyway, here Geronda gave me a chance, a challenge. What do you want me to do? she had said. Off the top of my head and without thinking, I said: nothing. You don't have to do anything. I'll do it all for you. I didn't know quite what I was talking about, but I had an intuition that she was seeking for something quite different. I said, hold my hand, that's all you have to do, and I'll do the rest for you. I held her hand with one hand and with the other I held the hand of the first person in the circle - remember we were sitting on the floor in a circle, about 8 or 9 of us. I was now facing the first person in the circle, holding her hand with one hand and holding Geronda's hand with the other. I asked Geronda to take the other hand of the person we were facing, so we formed a small triangle. And I said

to the person I was facing, on behalf of Geronda, I am frightened, please help me. (I was frightened, too, so I was speaking for myself as well). Dead silence. Nothing. I said it again, please help me, I am frightened. Nothing. We let go the hands of the first person and moved on to the next and held hands again, the three of us. And I said it again, I am frightened, please help me. And Geronda burst into tears. Tears streaming down her face. We were still holding hands. After a while she said, I can do this by myself. She let go of my hands and faced the third person in the circle, holding hands, and said: I am very frightened, please help me, and the person facing her also cried, and so did I. I feel quite weepy, just writing it all down now. She went round the circle on her own now, saying the same to each person, but more firmly now, directly, unhesitatingly. And each person said quite spontaneously, yes, I'll be glad to help you, and some gave her a big hug. By the time she reached the last person, she was smiling and laughing and happy. Thank you, she said, thank you all. But that set off several other people, all being reminded of their own special circumstances: so we paired off and worked in pairs, co-counselling, with gestalt and psycho-drama . . . It set the tone for the rest of the day.

At lunch time Geronda played the piano, beautifully. She is a concert pianist, after all. She plays me beautifully, too. She knows how. Geronda has a desire for nothingness. She reads R.D. Laing, (The Divided Self, page 89: 'There can be no spontaneous action as there can be no spontaneous

perception. And just as commitment in action is avoided, so perception is felt as an act of commitment that endangers the freedom to be nothing that the self possesses'). She wants to experience nothingness. She is not allowed to. At one time she wanted to take all her things, all furniture, out of her room at her parents' when she was in her teens, but her father was cross and made her put it all back. Sounds trivial but the hurt was her father not understanding and not wanting to, not even trying to. I encouraged her. I said, nothingness is beautiful. I gave her a book on meditation. The only way I know to empty one's mind, and I am not much good at it myself. My mind is cluttered up all the time. Geronda is very good at meditating and she tried to teach me. She says that every time she looks out of the window, everything is something, never nothing. She can never start with an empty, clear, clean mind. Always committed to, always directed to and by something. Even if it is your own inner voice. I did an experiment with her. I drew a line on a piece of paper and said, one end is your inner life, the other end is how you are anchored in the outside world. Where would you put yourself on that line? She put herself close to the 'inner life' end.. We then found places on the line for people we knew. I came somewhere in the middle. All people came nearer the 'anchored' end than she did. In fact she saw them all in that half of the line, she was alone in the 'inner' half. I said, what do you want to do with that? Long pause. I suppose I am different, she said. Perhaps I can use my difference and build on that. I have something other people don't

seem to have, by my perception of myself and them. Perhaps I can do something worth while with that . . . And she left it at that.

Geronda was once a patient in a mental hospital. A highly intelligent and sensitive woman. They gave her drugs at the hospital. The drugs take the pain away by the middle of the day, but the early morning is worst. She wakes up in the small hours, and there is the pain. She feels like exploding. Like a volcano about to erupt. The pressure is enormous, just under the surface. She walks about in the morning as if every step is surrounded by bubbling boiling lava. One false move and the whole thing can go skyhigh. I feel like that many mornings myself. Like a tight inner spring all wound up with nowhere to go. My ears are buzzing and my eyes squint. The explosion is imminent but it never comes.

The hospital lets Geronda go home occasionally to look after her two children, and they give her a basket of drugs to take home with her. I tried to persuade her to spend two nights with me, and no drugs. I knew there would be no pain. All I had to do, I felt, was to hold her tight, very tight, and there would be no pain. A simple remedy which is not easily provided by the National Health Service. Drugs only, thank you, or we have some electric shock treatment now and then for a change.

Geronda is my friend. She gave herself that name one day, sitting on the settee. I looked into her deep, still eyes and asked her: What is your name? And without hesitation she spelt it out as it came to her, G, E,

R, O, N, D, A. From whence it came, neither of us knew. She has two small boys, twins, a relic from a dead past, a holiday in France. I don't know all that much about her, except her large green eyes which look at you as if the problems of her life had to be solved straight away, right here and now. She used to live in Barnes but the doctors at the hospital advised her to sell out and move nearer the hospital. So she came to Twickenham. She hated the new suburb where she didn't know anybody and nobody knew her. At first she had long hair brushed to one side, but later she cut it short.

Geronda is a woman of immense feeling and involvement. Whatever she does, she does with great care, completely, passionately and without reserve. She has so much passion that it cannot be contained in the screwtop jar of modern urban society. The tighter you screw down the lid, the more explosive she becomes. She is the product of a well ordered educational system which turns the torrent of passionate curiosity into a trickle of tepid repartee that can be managed by teachers. She is the result of the screw top coming off, and what we do to screw it on tighter. She visits the hospital whenever she cannot manage by herself, when the pain becomes too much, when the drugs which she had been given run out or lose their effectiveness, about once every three or four months, and the twins go to a nursety for a week or two. At the hospital they administer the newest drugs or give her electric shocks by wires attached to her head. Then she comes home again with a new supply of pills to be taken daily.

I was not able to see much of Geronda at the time since I was working most evenings. But in August I had a holiday and we saw a lot more of each other. The twins were still at the nursery then. She was reluctant to enter the the experiment and give up her pills. I don't know why I was so confident that my 'therapy' would work, how I had the temerity to suggest it. Perhaps it was a good excuse to get her into bed with me. I was dead set on trying it, to see what would happen. The pain was worst early in the morning, every morning, an intense internal pain somewhere in the middle of her body.

Anyway, she came. She was going to sleep in another room, she knew well enough that she could not get involved with me, there are no half-measures for Geronda. But in the end she came into my room. I was in bed first and watched her undress. She is a large woman and knows it. She wore a sweater and a skirt. The sweater came off first. Then she pulled a short nightie over her head. She had her back to me. She took off her bra underneath the nightie. Then her hands went to her skirt and unhooked and unzipped it. She stopped. She turned around and looked at me for a long time with her penetrating, sad, enquiring eyes. "I am shy about my bottom" she said. I turned my head.

She was warm and cuddly, large and soft. We lay together for a long time holding each other silently, feeling here and there, exploring, touching. And that is all that happened. We held on to each other, close and tight, and I stroked her large breasts and down her soft body, and so we

went to sleep. I held her tight during the night, whenever she woke and moved, and early in the morning. And there was no pain, not during the night, not in the morning, not all that day. For the first time in years there was no pain and no depression and no drugs. We were both happy and contented. I made her a cup of tea and breakfast for us both. I forget what we did the rest of the day, but I held her close and cuddled her whenever she felt lost or doubtful. There was no pain that day or the next night or the next day and, so far as I could tell, no fear. No pills for two days.

But what now? I had made my point, but that was all. When I went back to work, she went to live in her new house, and she was back on her drugs prescribed by the hospital. She took the boys back from the nursery. Fair and small, they clung to her aggressively, needing her attention. She hated that house and the demands made upon her. Eventually she went back to the hospital while her mother looked after the twins. She was given more electric shocks and more pills. When she came back, the psychiatric social worker gave us her address and telephone number in case we needed to call her in a hurry. Look, she told her, you have a nice house, two lovely children, enough money. She was obviously comparing Geronda's circumstances with those of some of her other less fortunate clients, as she saw it. She did not say, as a marriage counsellor once said to another friend of mine: look, you have a devoted husband to look after you, what more do you want? She said nothing about passion. Or compassion. Geronda tore out her hair one by one.

The traveller tells of alabaster and marble in the hills. The dust from the quarry settles over them and spreads into the valley across the land. Alabaster and marble in the Derbyshire hills, limestone turned into vases and statuettes for the tourist shops. The traveller has the

knowledge; the stranger accepts his word. "I have never been this far north" says the stranger in the fast car. The traveller smiles politely. "North! You are not even in Manchester. This is only the Midlands".

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