



Obituary

Deconstructing Minuchin

Wai Yung Lee

I last saw him in this past summer, at the Sinai Residence where he moved to after Pat's death. I was pleased to see him looking tanned under the Florida sun, much healthier, as compared to a year ago when he was mourning the loss of his partner of sixty years. He asked me to help him prepare for his keynote address at the forthcoming Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference in December, but in fact he had already worked out a title called 'Deconstructing Minuchin'.

He kept saying that this was going to be his last lecture. While the Residence was built like a five-star hotel, he called it 'the final exit'. I thought he was just joking, as he always joked about life and death, a theme that popped up in our conversation each time I visited over the past few years. This once-a-year visit with Sal Minuchin had been the highlight in my life ever since I returned to work in Asia. I think he felt he owed it to me, as he was the one who encouraged me to return to my homeland (Lee, 2009).

It was the year of 2001, right after 9/11, when he came to Beijing to provide training to a huge group of professionals coming from different parts of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Everyone was ecstatic and mesmerized by his performance. Sal was exhausted after the training and he said to me, 'I am an old man, like Segovia. Just give him a guitar, put him on the stage, and he would play beautifully. But off the stage, he is just a very old man. It would be more appropriate for you to come back here to work with your own people...'

I was in tears and I kept saying, 'No, no, no. I don't want your guitar...'

As much as I fiercely objected to the idea, my career path seemed to pave its way naturally in that direction. Sal and I would meet every

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summer when I returned to New York for a holiday for the past decades. After enjoying a sumptuous dinner at our favourite restaurant, the Modern, our two families would always say, 'Same time, next year!' but each time Sal would whisper in my ear, 'I don't know if I will have next year!'

Over the years, many things have changed and people we hold dear have passed. We became convinced that Sal Minuchin was immortal! We once visited a Buddha temple and the monk asked him if he would come back to visit again. He replied, 'No, I am very old. I will not be able to come back!' The monk said, 'Don't be so sure. Never be so sure!'

Ironically, challenging certainty had been Minuchin's major focus in his later years. Being a well established founder in the field, it was amazing to see how he assumed a position of uncertainty in challenging the certainty of the establishment, insisting that certainty prohibited possibilities.

Complementarity, a core concept in Structural Family Therapy, actually resonates with the concept of Yin and Yang in Chinese mythology, the balance of which must be reached to achieve harmony and order. However, when harmony and order become absolute values, complementary patterns may sustain an unhealthy homeostasis through a rigid distribution of roles, conflict avoidance, and excessive mutual loyalty that stifle growth and individuation (Colapinto and Lee, 2017). In order to disrupt long established patterns, one has to challenge the certainty of the family culture, and sometimes the culture in which the family is embedded.

In his keynote address at the Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference in 2009, the aging Master intensely challenged the mental health practice, in which children are overly diagnosed and medicated, to an audience of over seven thousand. In the live broadcast of our dialogue to a Chinese audience of 160,000 in 2016, he playfully challenged the presumption of what people perceive as the 'ideal family', saying that it is normal for families to experience difficulties and that the ideal family is one with the ability to repair conflicts.

One thing he did not succeed in challenging was the certainty of 'death'. But as the monk had said, I was made to believe that, perhaps, even death may not be that certain after all.

References

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