



BY KAREN STEWART, MA

heroes, saints, and whistle blowers

What a lovely opportunity this issue of *Health&Healing* offers: an opportunity to reflect and write about our most memorable patients. While I think about my clients a great deal, due to confidentiality issues I never have an opportunity to write about them. However, I can describe in general ways what I have learned from them and offer this small tribute to each and every one.

What stands out when I think about clients who have left indelible imprints is their indomitable courage. They have shown incredible courage in their capacity to face great challenges—either from internal problems or problems in the outside world. Not only have my clients faced these challenges, they have taken risks that require great courage.

Living with chronic depression and anxiety can drain energy, creativity and even the will to live. I have known clients whose inner world is so painful that facing each day is a difficult challenge. While medication has brought relief from depression to some, others unfortunately do not respond to pharmacological intervention. Anxiety and depression can be immobilizing or make the simplest tasks difficult. Self-esteem falls as people criticize themselves for being weak for having problems—as if somehow the problems were their fault.

And yet, I know people suffering from severe anxiety and depression who make the decision each day to get up and

carry on with their lives with courage and determination. These folks even find the ability to be grateful, to find humor, and to live with grace under such conditions. Sometimes their friends and families don't even know the extent of their suffering, though without exception, they are able to draw on support from others. These people are heroes in my book.

Other clients face challenges from without that call for remarkable courage. I remember with great fondness clients who have cared for children, spouses, and aging parents with debilitating physical challenges and/or emotional illness. These clients have given endless hours of care to their loved ones, in many cases without thanks or even recognition of their efforts. While of course they get tired and irritable at times, by far most of the time they give willingly and with great love and tenderness. They are as close to saints as I think I will see.

Other clients have faced real world issues and stood up to the powers in charge at great personal risk and with significant consequences to themselves. I remember especially a young man who risked jail because of his stand against the Vietnam war. Other clients have confronted employers or agencies about illegal or unethical matters. Many have stood up to physically and emotionally abusive spouses and family members in defense of themselves or others.

Quakers use the phrase “speaking truth to power” and these clients have

done so with authority in spite of fear and doubt. These folks are “whistle blowers;” they are unwilling to silently stand by in the face of wrongdoing or misuse of power.

All of these clients take risks—risks in being, caring, and acting. Risks do not come easy and are always taken in spite of fear and sometimes to our surprise. An example of this comes from a young mother who needed to leave an abusive spouse. She gathered her resources and worked hard to make a realistic plan to leave; however, the day before she planned to go she came into my office, seemingly defeated. She stated she just couldn't do it. We talked and I assured her that I believed she would be able to leave when she was ready. Since I was not taking this risk, I was loathe to tell her when and how she should do it. She left him the next day! I love her story.

Sometimes when we are in the midst of great darkness, pain, and turmoil we believe it will last forever and we will never see light again. Then to our surprise, light appears right before us and we are free. I find great comfort from this young mother's story for myself when I am going through a difficult time and I relate her story to clients in similar situations. Sometimes our strength and courage surprise us. The human spirit is awesome and I feel privileged to be a witness for clients who are heroes, saints, and whistle blowers! **h&h**

Karen Stewart, MA, and David Stewart, PhD, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at Suite 220 at 811 Ninth Street in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. Web address: www.stewartpsychologists.com.