PARADIGMS LOST: RE-MEMBERING HERSTORIES AND OTHER INVALID SUBJECTS*

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ABSTRACT: During the First World Family Therapy Congress, Dublin, 1989, the author was the only women on a six member panel discussing ‘The New Paradigm’. This article re-presents her attempt to re-member women and other ‘invalid’ subjects, (e.g. those in poverty) in what was imagined would be an otherwise male oriented discourse. Until recently, within family therapy, the contrary and negatory experiences of women in families and society gained little recognition. This article joins others in adding herstory to history.

When thinking about presenting my ideas for a plenary session, entitled, The New Paradigm, at the First World Family Therapy Congress in Dublin in June 1989, I realized that I was to be a woman alone on a panel with five men. It was this last element that was to provide much of the impetus for what I would say. Generally in such situations where the lofty notions concerning paradigmatic shifts are paraded, I assumed that the issue of gender is accorded no high ground as a legitimate area of discourse in such a debate. On the

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other hand, since I knew the work of my male co-panelists (Luigi Boscolo, Gianfranco Cecchin, Harry Goolishian, Karl Tomm, and Jim Sheehan), I expected that they would be espousing different ways in which the voices of diverse client groupings might be heard and their stories re-instated within a more co-operative ‘therapeutic’ domain. The opportunity to assert the female story was hard to resist, especially within a panel where participants were known to be disposed towards inclusivity rather than exclusivity.

In considering the question of paradigm shifts through HIStory, it appeared to me that most of them referred to economic, scientific, and philosophical domains. Very little heed has been given to very major shifts through time with regard to human relationships in terms of gender. How women were written out and subsumed by MANkind has largely been ignored in academic and popular discourse. The long standing antagonisms between the sexes have been resolved within an uneasy marriage ceremony where the two become as one, with the male perspective being THE ONE.

In Ireland this antagonism is treated and denied in fairy stories and pub parlance. Irish novelist, James Stephens, writing in the early part of this century, devoted much of his literary genius to elaborating in fairy story form the battle of the sexes. In this story a fairy woman laments the passing of her philosopher husband.

You were my husband and you are dead.
It is wisdom that has killed you.
If you had listened to my wisdom instead of to your own you would still be a trouble to me and I would still be happy.
Women are stronger than men; they do not die of wisdom.
They are better than men because they do not seek wisdom.
They are wiser than men because they know less and understand more (Stephens, 1978).

Not to be outdone, her friend’s husband, also a philosopher by inclination, had the following pithy retort exemplifying the underlying tension between the protagonists.

A woman should be seen seldom but never heard.
Quietness is the beginning of virtue........
These are serious truths, which cannot be controverted,
(Stephens, 1978).

The further elevation and erasure of women is also typically expressed in a conversation I overheard in a Dublin public house. In