

Experts Don't Write Books©

by Ilene L. Dillon, M.S.W.

In the early 1980's, I wrote a series of booklets I call "The Bounce Back Series." It was my idea to create the booklets for a mail-order business, designed to supplement my hourly wage as a psychotherapist. I wrote about everyday issues, such as being manipulated, jealousy, victimization, self-esteem and anger and arguments. My favorite was "Bouncing Back After Making a Fool of Yourself!" Once I finished them, I felt the weight of having posed myself as an "expert," and expressed my thoughts to a dear and wise friend. After a brief discussion, she chided me with this statement: "Ilene, experts don't write books; *people who have something to learn write books!*"

Indeed, I had written about all the topics with which I had been struggling in my life up to that point! Like most psychotherapists, my early life was fraught with problems and difficulties, including abandonment, early loss of my birth mother, early boarding school, physical and sexual abuse, and constant moving that took me to 14 different homes and 17 different schools by the age of 17. With psychologically unsophisticated parents, I had no help in processing the emotions that inevitably derived from those experiences, including anger, fear, hurt, shame, remorse, feeling victimized and unworthy of love. In The Bounce Back Series, I had written about most of these emotions, and later would write about the others—about all the things I needed to learn! (I still have not written anything on rejection, even though at age 35 I realized my whole life was about rejection—I was either getting over rejection, being rejected, or preparing for the next

rejection as my constant way of life! Perhaps I don't have more to learn about it, and hence didn't need to write on the topic!)

Married at the age of 19, left to fend for myself at age 28 with a 10 month old child, no family or help, and a graduate education to finish, it soon became clear to me that in order to avoid a miserable life for me and for my daughter, I had to make changes within myself! The good fortune was that I was getting a degree in social welfare, picking up tools and support for doing that internal work. In graduate school in the mid-1960s, we social welfare types were being encouraged to become "change agents." As I realized how confused, angry and messed up I was, it became abundantly clear to me that setting myself up to be an "expert change agent" for others when I didn't even know how to be a change agent for myself, was ridiculous! At that moment I vowed: "If I can get my own life together, and help one other person *in my lifetime*, I will consider I have 'done it'."

Years later, after two divorces, one bipolar ex-husband and another moderately sociopathic one, financial struggle, 20 years of single parenting, being the sole support of myself and my two children, and a host of other experiences, I would joke that I had experienced a host of difficulties "so that" I could help my psychotherapy clients when they came to me with similar issues!

There was a lot of truth to this joke. Over time, I learned to view our earth as a "Giant School," to which we have all come in order to learn and grow. I realized that we learn through our experiences, such that every experience is an opportunity (if we will but take it) to learn and grow. Depending upon our individual early life experiences, we receive our "homework assignments" for life!

That means there is *value* in those difficult early experiences; and it was up to me to find and use it. I learned to look at each of those early experiences, searching for what I might have learned from having them. Molestation, for example, has given me a tremendous empathy. Working my way through my feelings has taught me how important it is to confront one's molester as well as to forgive him or her. I learned what it takes to build and strengthen one's own self, when there is little outside help during the first years of life. I learned where true power resides, why it is vital to set personal limits with others, that forgiveness is more for me than for the other guy (regardless of the circumstance); and I learned to appreciate myself for surviving, without becoming a drug or alcohol addict, going crazy, or running amok. I learned to appreciate the strength of the human soul, the importance of accepting help, and the ability to be vulnerable without fearing devastation. I also learned that there is no such thing as "overly sensitive" (there is just "I'm too sensitive for you; but I'm just-right sensitive for me!"). And I discovered that I was never really rejected. It was just that other people (including parents) were too involved with themselves to adequately care for and love me. Learning that our earth is a Giant School made it all make sense. It also gave me a way to work with whatever came up in my life, realizing that everything was a potential lesson, and that identifying and learning that lesson allowed me to progress and change smoothly.

The things we need to learn in this Giant School are presented to us throughout our lives. Sometimes they seem manageable; often they seem overwhelming. I learned that we are never given more than we can handle, however, no matter how overwhelming things may seem. I also noted that once a lesson is presented, it doesn't go away! And if I turn and learn it as soon as possible, I am finished in an instant and free to go on to other things.

If I hide, refuse to learn, drag my feet or try to escape, the lesson does not go away. Instead, it keeps coming back, over and over and over again. Furthermore, each time it comes back, the lesson is harsher! Finally, I discovered that it is better to accept the learning that is presented to me and get on with it; because embracing it and doing the work makes my life easier, happier and better for me.

Emotions are powerful things. It is usually “on the wings of emotion” that lessons are presented to us. We have an experience and an emotion related to that experience arises. The emotion is there to “signal” us—to the fact that there is something to learn, and (based on the signal of that particular emotion) to the fact that there is a particular type of learning that needs to be done. For example, you may be in a new marriage and notice that you are feeling lonely. Your emotional reaction “alerts” you that something needs to be changed. But what? Most of us go to our partner and request that they change! More powerful is to turn to ourselves for change. The “signal” of loneliness is that we have more energy going out than coming in. Knowing this, we can do things to bring energy into ourselves, such as utilizing one of our personal talents, asking our spouse for a hug or time together, reading a book, getting a massage, taking a long walk in nature or relaxing in a hot bath. We might even discover that we’ve felt lonely most of our life, and had expected marriage to fill that loneliness, not recognizing we must first fill it ourselves. Of course we will want to work out with our spouse what may (or may not) be happening in the relationship that creates the original energy imbalance, but especially in the short term, we can learn what needs to be done, what to do—and then do it—because the “signal” of loneliness has brought the need to learn and grow to our attention.

Over the years, I decided to learn as much as I could about emotions. To my dismay, I found that most therapists are never taught, specifically, about emotions. At one point, my office took a survey of 37 professional schools in California that prepare psychotherapists for licensure. We asked: “Do you now—or have you ever—have a stand-alone course on Anger?” Of the 37 schools, NONE of them could say “yes.” Astounding! People turn to psychotherapists for help with their emotions; and psychotherapists aren’t really taught anything about the emotions themselves! (Psychotherapists *do* learn about emotions, but usually as a result of their own therapy, the “school of hard knocks,” and whatever extra courses they find and take. What is important is that there is no agreed-upon way of understanding or working with emotions among psychotherapists.) But personally, I *needed* information about anger, realizing that I was a “Recovering Angry Person,” so I set off on a lifelong quest to learn how to work with and master emotions, particularly anger.

For nearly 30 years, I learned, experimented and grew. I came up with an approach for working with emotions that worked, first for me, and then for clients and seminar and lecture attendees. Slowly, I became a “Recovered Angry Person” instead of one in Recovery. In the early 1990’s (apparently having more to learn!), I wrote 10 parent manuals on different emotions that were published by Enchante in California. They told parents how to help their children work with the emotions of Anger, Grief, Guilt, Fear, Hurt, Jealousy, Loneliness, Love, Shame and Remorse, and Intimacy. (Available in updated form, titled “The ABCs of Anger: Building Emotional Foundations for Life,” “The ABCs of Loneliness,” “The ABCs of Love,” etc.) Seven of these books were

combined by the publisher into a manual that could also be used by teachers. I had, in fact, become a “recognized expert.”

So, it is with great humility that I have become an “Expert” on “My Expert Solution” as well! I am still learning. I will learn from you who ask questions and want to learn and grow. I am learning by accepting the “expert” title. All of us are growing. The “problems” with which we are presented are really only “puzzles;” and puzzles can be fun! Consider starting to view your own life as part of the “Giant School,” each of your “problems” as a “puzzle,” and come to the experts on this site—including me—for tools, wisdom and support as you solve your puzzles. I look forward to sharing what I have been privileged to learn with you. Now that I have done a lot of my own personal work, I have the privilege of helping *many* others, not just one! When we honeymooned in China in 1998, our solicitous Chinese hosts looked after us very well, including providing for our most essential needs, such as restroom and toilet paper. When I would thank them, they would respond with a smile, saying “It is my *honor*.” Their response never failed to charm and reassure. And now, it is my *honor* to be of help to you!

Ilene Dillon, M.S.W.

July 4, 2009

© Ilene L. Dillon, M.S.W., El Sobrante, California, 2009