

## From the Editor: On Contingencies and Home

As a child, I learned early about contingencies and home. Anything was possible and we must plan for it. Especially notable during that time was the Cold War and the threat of nuclear attacks. My father addressed this problem with creativity and the help of *Popular Science* magazine. In his oft-mysterious workshop, next to our coal-burning furnace, dad unknowingly crafted the stuff of my nightmares; screens of lathe and black plastic, which he explained, we'd press over the insides of our basement windows to keep out the light and radioactive dust "when the bombs came." With only a jelly jar, black thread and bits of aluminum foil, he carefully fashioned a Geiger-counter device he swore would work. I was both comforted and appalled.

In our root cellar, mother's canned tomatoes and applesauce sat neatly next to dated jugs, filled with water. I tried to imagine spending weeks in that tiny space, crammed between my parents and older sister (stuff of her nightmares) waiting for the air to clear. I'd lay awake at night and list what I'd be allowed to bring into that space; my Chihuahua, Bootsie, (thank goodness I didn't have a Doberman,) a few Nancy Drew books, and my scrap books, (think gum wrappers and flattened cardboard megaphones). Sometimes, I'd pull open the plywood door to that

make-shift bomb shelter, flip on a light switch and peer into the dirt hole. I'd note the pipe hanging from the ceiling that my dad said would "filter out the bad air and bring in the good." I was doubtful but also trusted my parents. Home was wherever they were, and if we were well-prepared and together, I figured I'd be safe.

The concept of home, safety, and contingencies has stayed with me throughout the twenty-two places I've been privileged to call home. In each spot, I've tried to create a secure space for myself and my family. And each time I've moved, I've grieved. In a new book by Louise DeSalvo, *On Moving: A Writer's Meditation On New Houses, Old Haunts, and Finding Home Again*, I find thoughts that resonated with my own truths. Her ending quote, "No matter where you go, there you are." reminds me that the concept of home and its contingencies, motivates us all. No matter if it's a root cellar or a palace, home is a place meant to keep us both emotionally and physically secure.

So it is no small thing that this issue of *Coalition News* contains thoughts about home and homelessness. Homelessness, especially in this economy, is everywhere. Check out Chris Lewis's insightful review of the movie, "The Soloist." This film (and book) also speaks volumes about mental illness and is worth seeing and/or reading.

A guest article from Liz Kuoppala, Interim Executive Director of the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless, gives us additional insights into the plight and grief of those homeless living among us. Liz is a 2009 recipient of the Ann Bancroft Foundation "Dream Maker Award." We certainly admire and appreciate the work she does and thank her for taking the time to share her experiences and expertise.

Thanks, also, to MCDES member, Charlene Follet, for her comprehensive spring conference review. If you missed Renee Katz's presentation, Charlene's



Sharon Dardis

summary will make you wish you hadn't. During the conference, Renee mentioned our "internal homes," once again reminding us of how past experiences interplay with our current situations. Homes, both present and past, are more than just places; they're a feeling.

Recently, my much-loved mother-in-law made a courageous move to a nearby nursing home. She, and we, had such mixed feelings throughout this long process, but like cream rising to the top, we knew safety and security were the paramount issues. Sitting in her wheel chair, oxygen tubing snaking across her room, she rolled her eyes at us and said dryly, "Oh yea, these are the golden years." She wanted us to know that this maybe wasn't the perfect situation for her, but rest assured, she'd done her own contingency planning. Like my father in his workshop, she'd been crafting safety nets; supportive friends and family, ways of remaining useful, and attempts at still being able to make a difference. She has a lot of visitors, and slowly but surely, is beginning to see this new space as home. As she has suggested, and I was also thinking, this long term care facility now becomes, for her and for us, one more sweet and redeeming version of home.

So, once again, anything is possible. We continue to plan for it. The physical layout of home is ever evolving but the concept is the same. We moved grandma's recliner, her television, and a favorite fuzzy throw into her room. When we left that first evening, she was snuggled in, feet propped up, remote

*Coalition News* is published quarterly by the Minnesota Coalition for Death Education and Support. Your submissions are encouraged.  
 Editor: Sharon Dardis    Layout: Verla Johansson  
 Deadline for September newsletter: **August 1, 2009**  
 (covers September, October & November events).  
 Please send your items to:  
 Sharon Dardis  
 9267 Wedgewood Dr., Woodbury, MN 55125  
 Fax: 651-731-8117 (call first) Email: SDardis@aol.com  
 MCDES is a nonprofit 501(c)3 volunteer organization whose purpose is to promote and provide education, opportunities for networking, and support to individuals and groups involved with the care of persons confronting death and their families and friends, and those who are bereaved, regardless of the cause of death.

Home continued on page 7

**Conference Review** continued from page 1

She kept the interest of the audience throughout the day, using powerpoint, handouts, cases, stories, and involvement from the audience. More than any other presenter I have ever heard, she succeeded in engaging us interactively, even with just one microphone. For instance, when she asked for examples of our own counter-transference issues, or of our reactions to a scenario, or what our initial impulses and then our secondary impulses were, and what we might then do, she asked the audience member's first name, and then repeated or summarized each response quickly, clearly and succinctly for the audience.

Dr. Katz also referred to the ethical standards of the many disciplines represented at the conference. She had prepared copies of different codes of ethics and at one point she asked persons representative of a particular discipline to read excerpts which pertained to the topic even though the code might not use the exact words "counter-transference" (e.g., a nurse read from the code of ethics for nurses, a section which applied to the need for a number of competencies, including awareness of heretofore unconscious reactions to clients.)

In our packets were copies of the powerpoint presentation and questionnaires designed to raise awareness of our own fears of different kinds of loss, our family rules about death and dying, handouts which we could also use with clients. There was also a provocative list of questions aimed at helping us identify our diverse reactions to clients/patients; she used all of the handouts effectively. If you weren't at the conference, you might be able to find a colleague who was and who has the packet. The questionnaires are also included in her books.

Some ways to reflect on counter-transference are to ask ourselves the questions: "What stirs us up? What is

my initial reaction to a particular client or to a scenario (mine or of a colleague)? What are the feelings I experience most intensely? And is there a pattern of my reactions, such as over-involvement, avoidance, idealization, etc? Are there some issues or kinds of clients which "hook" me?

A common example of counter-transference is experiencing intense, unusual feelings, like pity, frustration, outrage, impotence, or helplessness. Other early indicators might include: giving special treatment to a patient or family, using self-disclosure in ways that are unusual for you, experiencing increased self-doubt, promising more than you can deliver, or withdrawing from customary patterns of supervision or consultation. One of her handouts gave a more complete list. In the list of Self-Awareness Questions there was a novel question to help in our reflection: "At what developmental stage of my life do I feel when I am with this patient/family?" Other key points she made were:

- ◆ how important it is that we examine our professional arrogance – our unrealistic self-expectations and the belief that we have the answers, and that we instead bravely acknowledge our humanness.
- ◆ in order to be effective, we as helpers need to be able to be touched by our clients, which means we are "often missing our outer layer of skin and we need to renew it." That renewing includes good self-care, re-entering therapy, continuing education, and getting trustworthy support and consultation.
- ◆ the importance of a ritual at the end of the day like this: "what surprised me today? What touched me today? And what inspired me today?"

The title of the one-day conference was *When Professionals Weep: Personal, Professional and Ethical Intersections in Grief, Bereavement and End-of-Life Care*. Actually, if we applied what we



Ted Bowman, MCDES Board Member with  
Renee Katz, Speaker, Spring 2009 Conference

learned, the content of the conference would be very useful no matter what population we work with. A very satisfied audience left the conference full of helpful information, a wealth of "a-ha's" and a commitment to renewing attention to our counter-transference vulnerabilities.

**Home** continued from page 2

in one hand, call bell in the other, watching her favorite show, "Deal or No Deal." We couldn't help but smile.

DeSalvo talks about the rituals folks perform when leaving homes they've loved. I've often done that. In my mind, I can mentally still walk through my childhood home with its coal furnace and peer into that root cellar. I can also physically walk through my mother-in-law's house, now quite empty without her. For now, it stays intact, offering her hope, in case of contingencies. But in her head, as in mine, we can still go back. We can still sit on her sunny deck and visit. We can watch the yellow finches at the feeder. We can turn the key and walk back in. A plaque on the door to her room reads, "Home is where Mom is." Thankfully, home abides within each of us in one form or another. Wishing each of you a summer filled with the comforts and contingencies of whatever you best call "home."