One Thing She Said, One Thing She Did

Carroll Arkema

As a compliant good guy—
who of course then
had fathoms
of denied
and repressed anger—
I wanted to be a minister.

I graduated from Princeton Seminary,
did well there academically,
as I had also
in college;
but that was head-knowledge.
Afraid of congregational ministry,

I enrolled for nine months
in a Chaplain Residency
Training
Program
in a General Medical
Hospital in West Philadelphia.

Carroll Arkema is a pastoral psychotherapist and poet working in New York City and New Jersey. He is the author of Beyond Me: Poems about Spirit in Scripture, Psychotherapy, and Life (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2014). Email: arkemac@verizon.net.
I was supervised by Joan—a female Chaplain—both individually and in a group once a week to learn from my patient visits how to become a Healing Presence.

The structure of the program fostered personal as well as professional self-discovery—which meant discerning one’s strengths as well as limitations.

At one point during those nine months Joan said something which changed my life: I’d been talking in the group about a patient and her family,

and Joan, listening, smiled and said, “Did you hear yourself use the word “fascinating” as you were talking about the family’s dynamics?” I actually had not been aware of this,

but her energy brought me up short; whereupon I realized that I had been talking with a kind of intensity that revealed my fascination.
I had come to know and trust Joan and her observations about me. What she would say rang true, and came from a stance of listening and hearing me, then highlighting what came from inside out of me, rather than prioritizing how well I complied with her or the Program’s criteria or expectations of a Student Chaplain.

Her comment about my fascination helped me notice, know, and define myself, and to begin to trust and build an identity around what fascinated me!

With regard to my repressed anger, it began to emerge in the context of my trusting relationship with Joan—as such feelings do once it becomes safe to express them.

My anger initially came out in a passive-aggressive way: I stopped preparing for individual supervision in the required way I had agreed to.
I was half-consciously arriving
at our supervisory sessions
without
verbatimsm—
written accounts of my talks
with patients whom I had visited.

I see now in hindsight that
I was testing how Joan
would respond
if I was not the compliant
good guy I had begun to tire of.

Joan asked me why I was no longer
bringing in verbatims.
I actually didn’t know.
I was still mostly unconscious of
my anger about complying with Authorities.

She said she really didn’t want to
take this stance, but that
until I came
prepared with a verbatim,
she was suspending supervision.

I felt relief, shame, abandoned by her,
even though I had broken our
contractual relationship.
I also felt disoriented;
but talked about it with a peer,
who loved me into understanding
the opportunity that lay in this:
a new me
emerging!
She thus reframed it as growth
and encouraged me to talk with Joan.

I contacted Joan and returned to
supervision, verbatim in hand,
uneasy,
but hopeful.
Joan agreed that something new
was emerging, and we laughed.

This nonjudgmental reframing of my anger
by both Joan and my colleague—
both of them
female—
helped me begin to integrate my
anger and its energy into my self

as an enlivening and potentially
empowering feeling which
I needn't be
afraid of,
but could begin to put into words—
like telling Joan I hated doing verbatims!

Again, we laughed. Joan understood
how vulnerable I felt exposing
my pastoral
conversations
with patients, and I’d come to
trust her because she modeled
that she could be ambivalent
about being firm, but be
assertive
and firm
nonetheless, thus helping me
modify my judgmental superego.

Thus in that relationship with Joan
I began to define myself
and become
more whole.
I learned to notice what fascinates me,
and that anger can be constructive energy.

Of course this was just a beginning:
I was only twenty-four.
It has taken—
is continuing
to take—all the years since then
to refine and actualize what I learned.