

SWEETNESS AND LIGHTNESS

The most appealing benefits of calm, to me, are sweetness and lightness. Sweetness is a beautiful feeling that we all share when our minds are not focused on our personal insecurities and we are therefore engaged and touched by life as it happens. Lightness is the spirit and humor that bubbles up when it is impossible to take ourselves and our perceived problems seriously because they're not pre-eminent in our thinking.

Sweetness and lightness get bad press, though. For many people, sweetness looks like wimpiness in the face of difficult people and lightness looks like goofiness in the face of the dark side of circumstances. Actually, until I understood the immutable strength and resiliency that underlie sweetness and lightness, they put me off, too. I thought sweet people were just asking to be taken advantage of, and light-hearted people were missing the importance of life.

Of course, when I held those opinions, I had not experienced much of either sweetness or lightness. I was working hard all the time to avoid being taken advantage of and get what I thought I needed and deserved from life. I was determined and persistent and would have said "brightness" (being a star, being smart, being in the forefront) was more important than "lightness." In the company of people living in sweetness and lightness, I was often uncomfortable and usually off-balance because their comfort and ease didn't have a place in my ideas about life. Yet, there they were, seeming to be getting a lot more enjoyment and satisfaction from ordinary daily events than I was despite what I considered to be their mental handicaps.

One such person has been on my mind a lot lately because she died a few weeks ago. Many remembrances of her that were gathered to be read at her memorial service were compiled for her friends, and, when they arrived in my mailbox, I realized that her sweetness and lightness were the cornerstones of each, although all represented different aspects of her life, different kinds of friendships and working relationships and family connections.

Her name was Drema Sue. She was the first person who generally lived in a state of sweetness and lightness with whom I became good friends, and through that friendship, I discovered many, many more such friendships with people who now are the treasured heart of my life and work. She was an R.N. working as a counselor when I first met her, and she worked with a group of mental health colleagues who responded to their own gratitude at recognizing the power in the way our thinking works by dedicating themselves to assisting others to that recognition. Before I met her, I had heard a story about her work with an extremely troubled person that I found unbelievable. After I met her, it was more credible, but still amazing. Later, when I saw the "troubled person" in

question telling the story for herself on videotape, I was moved to tears of appreciation for the feelings of sweetness and lightness, which are life-enhancing and life-saving.

Here is the story, from Dr. Bill Pettit, in whose office Drema Sue worked as a therapist in the mid 1980's: "I especially recall her truly marvelous skills as a therapist. This was shown so clearly in her therapy with a woman referred to us who was blind but cognitively intact after shooting herself in the head, so that after meeting with Drema Sue for a relatively short period of time, the patient could say, 'In all honesty, as much as I'd like to be able to see again, if I had to give up the feelings that I'm living in now and go back to the feelings I lived in before, I'd rather be blind.'"

I inquired about the details of that case when it happened, and watched that videotape segment again and again, because the whole idea that this could be true, that people could find such beautiful feelings that they would not trade them for anything else in life, was so far out of my world that I was awestruck and dumbstruck. I couldn't imagine any logic, any persuasiveness, any assertiveness, any technique that would take a person, within a few weeks, from a life of such misery and despair that she would shoot herself in the head in an attempt to kill herself to a life of such peace and contentment that blindness didn't matter to her. Yet the physician in whose care she was, with her permission to share her full story, had showed me her file. And yet there she was on videotape, clearly blind, seated quietly, and saying those words in a heartfelt but matter-of-fact way.

When I asked Drema Sue about it at last, she took it quite for granted. "Isn't she fortunate to have gotten in touch with her own deeper feelings?" she said. "I'm happy I was there to share that." She couldn't think of anything particular she had done, except offer her love and hopefulness to the woman and just point to the fact that we all have the qualities of sweetness and lightness within us.

What I learned from spending time with Drema Sue and others like her was that sweetness and lightness are not learned behaviors, or "adopted" attitudes that people put on and take off as the situation requires. People who genuinely know them and feel them are suffused with them; they are the essence of their lives, not a stance. They are unconditional love of life and others pouring through the ideas that guide them through everyday life. Things occur to people in that state that lead to spontaneous acts of *caritas*, the purest of love and service.

At first – and I think this is how many people start to "try on" different ways of being from childhood forward – I tried to emulate these feelings, to get a sense of what it would be like to have them. But I quickly saw I couldn't trick myself about my own truth. If these feelings aren't true and coming to life within me, I can't know them or share them, even if I can imitate them convincingly and describe them authoritatively. As long as I held doubts and kept in reserve the possibility that I could always jump back to my more

cynical, long-accustomed ideas and ways, sweetness and lightness eluded me. My happiness was cosmetic, not authentic. I could play at changing, but I didn't actually change, and so I didn't actually experience the quiet hopefulness that illuminated Drema Sue's experience and work or her clients' certainty and strength. It was like a partial subscription to a magazine, so that you got the slick cover and the table of contents every week, but not the interior substance.

This was unbelievably frustrating to someone who had always been known as a "quick study." The harder I tried to learn, the farther I seemed to get from the subject and the more I intensified my efforts. I remember fretting over this at lunch one time with Drema Sue, and she just laughed and said, "It's like trying to come up with lessons plans to teach a fish to swim, isn't it, when you work so hard at what just comes naturally."

It sank in, finally. To try to "take on" something meaningful from the outside in, by observing, copying, acting it out, was working against nature rather than relaxing into the natural. I was filling my head with ideas about sweetness and lightness, rather than opening my heart and mind to the possibility that those were available and intrinsic human qualities that could surface as effortlessly in me as in anyone else. I was losing the point that what is natural and essential is not special, but universal, part of all. The only way to find it was to abandon the frenzy of striving for it. I was trying to figure out how to become something I might already *be*, if I stopped trying.

That's what the blind lady "saw" when she realized what she had found was more precious than anything she could look for or at beyond her being.

©Judith A. Sedgeman, EdD