

PEN POINT

REFLECTIONS

FROM THE QUIET CORNER

Reticence isn't necessarily bad. In fact, talking will not change reality and too much talking about problems may make things worse.

BY JIM CAMPBELL



I'M RETICENT. It is a trait that runs deep with the men in the family. We don't talk very much about our feelings and fears, our griefs and gripes. When I was a little guy and got into crying, my father would say, "That's enough crying now." I soon learned that, while crying was okay, it wasn't good to let it go on too long. Mother, when something got lost, broke or bent, often repeated the old adage,

"There's no use in crying over spilt milk."

Maybe it has something to do with our distant family roots in Scotland. Highlanders are reputed to be uncomplaining, to use few words and have long silences. I doubt it was just to save their breath for playing bagpipes (which, of course, would have been a most worthy exercise). No, I think the idea was that too much talking about problems doesn't help much and probably

Illustration by Gerald Heydens

makes things worse.

Those who aren't inclined to talk a lot about feelings have been, in the past 20 years or so, under constant pressure to change. They have been accused of being uptight, putting up false fronts, living in states of denial and repressing their feelings. That is heavy stuff.

The mainstream idea is that it's dangerous to bottle things up; it's healthy to vent your feelings, your rage and frustrations, to register every complaint. In the sixties they said, "Let it all hang out." The assumption is that if you don't, you'll explode.

Apparently the popularity of the idea that everyone should be open to reviewing pains and problems is rooted in psychiatry. Learning to listen is an important skill to have. Talking things out is helpful for a lot of people. But maybe a little bit goes a long way.

Missing the point

Those who assume everyone needs to talk things out miss an important point. The non-talkers, the quiet ones, are not necessarily in a state of denial. They're certainly not into repressing reality. Their pain, their grief and their disappointment is real. But they know that all the talking in the world will not change the reality, wipe the slate clean or recover what they have lost. In fact, they are sure that retelling the stories, describing details of the pain and explaining the anger keep the wounds open.

Darius, the ancient King of Persia, knew how to keep anger alive. When he heard Athenians had burnt Sardis, he ordered his servant to repeat, three times before serving every meal, "Master, remember the Athenians." At every meal his anger expanded and the wound was kept open.



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There are lots of people like Darius who keep their wounds open.

There are others who choose a different way. They accept what has happened to them as a fact of their lives, square their shoulders, and move on. They don't expect closure. They don't expect the slate to be wiped clean. They don't expect to forget the past. What they refuse to do is allow the hurt to have a life of its own, to define who they are, to have the power to set the daily agenda of their lives or determine the future.

It is comforting, as we leave the past century behind, to find new studies that report that reticent people have known something about how to work things out and how to cope with upsets. The latest word from researchers is that controlling your reactions, holding back your emotions, is healthier than expressing them.

Some psychologists say that revisiting your bad feelings can work like poison, like an infection in a person's spirit. By reactivating hurt feelings, you define yourself as a person who feels awful. And so, when you feel good, you naturally assume it is not the real you.

Letting anger flow probably never 'clears the air.' It actually reinforces and increases the anger. As far as one can tell, people who often vent their anger don't appear to be all that happy or content. Unhappy because every day, maybe every meal – like it was for Darius – is seasoned with anger.

So, how am I doing? Fine! As long as I avoid groups that want me to "talk it out" or "Get it off my chest." 🌿

■ *Jim Campbell of Oakville gets things off his chest by writing Pen Point for Home Digest.*