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Commentary: A Telling Moment

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This morning I am invited by one of my young musical friends to Morning Program at the central school in our small village community. Having started her clarinet career in October, Martha is about to debut onstage in ensemble with several other woodwind novitiates. I am excited to go, but not a bit nervous. At the age of 8, Martha is a seasoned performer and completely at home on the stage.

As I stand alongside the small smattering of parents, grandparents and relatives who trudged in through the snow for the early morning performance, I take no small pleasure in my recognition by a variety of small agile figures, the constituent elements of the lower school. There is Lynnette, my favorite munchkin for so many years past, warming up for her performance in "Mars," an essay/gymnastics routine intoned by the 5th grade boys and performed by the 5th grade girls. And Amber, most precious substance, a talented clarinetist and gymnast adept, with the most remarkable fine porcelain complexion and shy lustrous smile. And bright Alissa, whom I'm just getting to know. And Pam, Vicide and Tiffany. And Z.

Just before the show comes a time for any young student attached to someone in that small assembled audience to approach the microphone and introduce their significant guest. I am not surprised, when out of all my young assembled friends, Z purposefully falls into line. Among those halting, shy, quavering, whispering, sing-song voices aiming to honor and pleasure that small sphere of orbiting connections, he will boldly signal our special friendship.

Then it is Z's turn. His neck reaches to the microphone, held expectantly by the guiding hands. He knows what he will say. He proudly intones:

"I would like to introduce my mother's psychiatrist, Seth Many." Whups! That's it. A moment of very brief silence. No applause, because all that is held to the end of the introductions. I have heard many introductions, and offered some of my own. Splicing gut and ear, chasing down intro pops at midday lunch with National Public Radio is a favored pastime. Regurgitant gaffes, like transposing the names of my two daughters on introductory occasions, spring to mind. I think I have a tolerance for the unpredictable. But heartburn besets me. I am thrilled, pained, embarrassed, at his words. Even Nancy Reagan confessing her [alcohol](#)([Drug information on alcohol](#)) (or was it cancer?); even Ronald, his Alzheimer's did, not prepare me. Role confusion, life imitating art.

What Z has done is momentarily lift the veil that conceals...another veil. Thrilling because he is doing in public what I do in private. Stripping the professional illusion that psychiatrists are invisible *machers*, not just real friends and enemies, creditors and debtors, parents and partners, but detached angels. An

illusion fostered by a xenophobic profession carefully cultivating the illusion of transcendental social levitation.

This role-playing, an injunction against real contact, sustains an ethical and legal confidence game, useful as a marketing tool where the deepest breaches in confidentiality are commanded by law, wherein the incessant incest of life, those revelations for which psychiatrists are enabled, must be handed on to the "appropriate" authority. I'm embarrassed. Appalled! Mother Mary! These private parts are not to be thus exposed in public! Woe unto me. And Z! Doesn't he know this is nothing to crow, this therapy of significant other to a shrink?

I am struck twice in my own duplicity. The stigma of psychiatry has found its way deep into my brain, creating a limbic response, rendering my friendship suspect. What to do? Reprove Z? Deny his trust? Suggest that mother and I do not share those most intimate details, the privilege of the confessional, the seminal soup of the profession? Where Z is simple and clear, shall I confound and confuse? He is right: his mother, in her genuine good humor, refers to me as "her psychiatrist." Should I derogate his innocence, proclaim, "I am not her psychiatrist, just her friend?" Why obscure this truth, puncture this pride? Do not divas and movie stars publicly and routinely acclaim and denounce their shrinks? Why should this revelation be taboo in hometown U.S.A.?

Compounding patient and therapist in a private space is no less than equal opportunity, a leg up in a world that conspires against systems that protect true expression. Shrinks are in the bottle to nurture and maintain what would shrivel in the free domain. To sustain what otherwise could not be born. In those private airtight chambers, life may reconstitute itself. Stigma serves well this transcendent concoction. Uncorking the confidential genie takes the bounce out of the brew, creating a demeaning mix in which private meanings are distorted in favor of public blandishments; and patients, children, parents, friends are subject to instant devaluation.

We live in a telling time where rap and scat have lost their sting. Where programmed virtue is epigrammatic xenophobia. Where the Stranger lurks everywhere, "Just say no" is the Mother of Invention. And the children chant the news of the day in endless repetition. So I cherish this moment in open fresh air. It is a thrill unlike any other to have the voice of a child speak the truth, when truth is not studied echolalia, but a complex disclosure of moment and consequence. Not doctrinal tranquilizer, but a stimulant probe, the social equivalent of a fart, the moral equivalent of aurora borealis.

After Morning Program, teacher approaches me with a smile. We know each other from having shared amateur performance stages several years back. She smiles. "Well, that was a surprise!" I smile too (wanly), "Yeah...Sorry I didn't have my business cards to pass out with the endorsement."