

Ordinary People by Judith Guest is the story of a dysfunctional family who relate to one another through a series of extensive defense mechanisms, i.e. an unconscious process whereby reality is distorted to reduce or prevent anxiety. The book opens with seventeen year old Conrad, son of upper middle-class Beth and Calvin Jarrett, home after eight months in a psychiatric hospital, there because he had attempted suicide by slashing his wrists. His mother is a meticulously orderly person who, Jared, through projection, feels despises him. She does all the right things; attending to Jared's physical needs, keeping a spotless home, plays golf and bridge with other women in her social circle, but, in her own words "is an emotional cripple". Jared's father, raised in an orphanage, seems anxious to please everyone, a commonplace reaction of individuals who, as children, experienced parental indifference or inconsistency. Though a successful tax attorney, he is jumpy around Conrad, and, according to his wife, drinks too many martinis.

Conrad seems consumed with despair. A return to normalcy, school and home-life, appear to be more than Conrad can handle. Chalk-faced, hair-hacked Conrad seems bent on perpetuating the family myth that all is well in the world. His family, after all, "are people of good taste. They do not discuss a problem in the face of the problem. And, besides, there is no problem." Yet, there is not one problem in this family but two - Conrad's suicide and the death by drowning of Conrad's older brother, Buck.

Conrad eventually contacts a psychiatrist, Dr. Berger, because he feels the "air is full of flying glass" and wants to feel in control. Their initial sessions together frustrate the psychiatrist because of Conrad's inability to express his feelings. Berger cajoles him into expressing his emotions by saying, "That's what happens when you bury this junk, kiddo. It keeps resurfacing. Won't leave you alone." Conrad's slow but steady journey towards healing seems partially the result of cathartic revelations which purge guilt feelings regarding his brother's death and his family's denial of that death, plus the "love of a good woman. Jeannine, who sings soprano to Conrad's tenor..."

There is no doubt that Conrad is consumed with guilt, "the feeling one has when one acts contrary to a role he has assumed while interacting with a significant person in his life," This guilt engenders in Conrad feelings of low self esteem. Survivors of horrible tragedies, such as the Holocaust, frequently express similar feelings of worthlessness. In his book, "Against All Odds", William Helmreich relates how one survivor articulates a feeling of abandonment. "Did I abandon them, or did they abandon me?" Conrad expresses a similar thought in remembering the sequence of events when the sailboat they were on turned over. Buck soothes Conrad saying, "Okay, okay. They'll be looking now, for sure, just hang on, don't get tired, promise? In an imagined conversation with his dead brother, Conrad asks, "'Man, why'd you let go?' 'Because I got tired.' 'The hell! You never get tired, not before me, you don't! You tell me not to get tired, you tell me to hang on, and then you let go!' 'I couldn't help it. Well, screw you, then!'" Conrad feels terrible anger with his brother, but cannot comfortably express that anger. His psychiatrist, after needling Conrad, asks, "Are you mad?" When Conrad responds that he is not mad, the psychiatrist says, "Now that is a lie. You are mad as hell." Conrad asserts that,

"When you let yourself feel, all you feel is lousy." When his psychiatrist questions him about his relationship with his mother, Calvin says, "My mother and I do not connect. Why should it bother me? My mother is a very private person." This sort of response is called, in psychological literature, "rationalization".

We see Conrad's anger and aggression is displaced, i.e. vented on another, as when he physically attacked a schoolmate. Yet, he also turns his anger on himself and expresses in extreme and dangerous depression and guilt. "Guilt is a normal emotion felt by most people, but among survivors it takes on special meaning. Most feel guilty about the death of loved ones whom they feel they could have, or should have, saved. Some feel guilty about situations in which they behaved selfishly (Conrad held on to the boat even after his brother let go), even if there was no other way to survive. In answer to a query from his psychiatrist on when he last got really mad, Conrad responds, "When it comes, there's always too much of it. I don't know how to handle it." When Conrad is finally able to express his anger, Berger, the psychiatrist says to Calvin, "Razoring is anger; self-mutilation is anger. So this is a good sign; turning his anger outward at last."

Because his family, and especially his mother, frowns upon public displays of emotion, Conrad keeps his feelings bottled up, which further contributes to depression. Encyclopedia Britannica, in explicating the dynamics of depression states, "Upon close study, the attacks on the self are revealed to be unconscious expressions of disappointment and anger toward another person, or even a circumstance..., deflected from their real direction onto the self. The aggression, therefore, directed toward the outside world is turned against the self." The article further asserts that, "There are three cardinal psychodynamic considerations in depression: (1) a deep sense of loss of what is loved or valued, which may be a person, a thing or even liberty; (2) a conflict of mixed feelings of love and hatred toward what is loved or highly valued; (3) a heightened overcritical concern with the self."

Conrad's parents are also busily engaged in the business of denial. Calvin, Conrad's father, says, "Don't worry. Everything is all right. By his own admission, he drinks too much, "because drinking helps..., deadening the pain". Calvin cannot tolerate conflict. Things must go smoothly. "Everything is jello and pudding with you, Dad." Calvin, the orphan says, "Grief is ugly. It is something to be afraid of, to get rid of". "Safety and order. Definitely the priorities of his life. He constantly questions himself as to whether or not he is a good father. "What is fatherhood, anyway?"

Beth, Conrad's mother, is very self-possessed. She appears to have a highly developed super-ego, that part of an individual's personality which is "moralistic..., meeting the demands of social convention, which can be irrational in requiring certain behaviors in spite of reason, convenience and common sense". She is furthermore, a perfectionist. "Everything had to be perfect, never mind the impossible hardship it worked on her, on them all." Conrad is not unlike his mother. He is an overachiever, an "A" student, on the swim team and a list-maker. His father tells the psychiatrist, "I see her not being able to forgive him. For surviving, maybe. No, that's not it, for being too much like her." A psychoanalyst might call her anal retentive. Someone who is "fixated symbolically in orderliness and a tendency toward perfectionism". "Excessive self-control, not expressing

feelings, guards against anxiety by controlling any expression of emotion and denying emotional investment in a thing or person. "She had not cried at the funeral.... She and Conrad had been strong and calm throughout."

The message of the book is contained in Berger's glib saying that, "People who keep stiff upper lips find that it's damn hard to smile". We see Conrad moving toward recovery and the successful management of his stage of development, as articulated by Erikson, "intimacy vs. isolation". At story end, his father is more open with Conrad, moving closer to him, while his mother goes off on her own to work out her issues. Both trying to realize congruence in their development stage (Erikson), "ego integrity vs. despair".

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