

Book review for Helen Gerondis, *Why Am I So Angry? My Search for the Truth*

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There are many first-hand accounts of eating disorders and many manuals offering advice to both sufferers and the professionals who work with them. This one is different.

Greek-born Australian Helen Gerondis has written a courageous account of her battle with over-eating which is revealing on many levels. Gerondis has a high level of formal education (she is a barrister, in addition to qualifications in several other disciplines). Unusually, however, her writing style is distinguished by a transparent, childlike honesty in recounting her “search for the truth”. In particular, her encounters with a variety of health practitioners and psychotherapists make intriguing reading for a professional reader. Relatively few patients/clients write about their experiences of seeking help, and when they do so as candidly as Gerondis, we should pay close attention to what they say. With a few notable exceptions, the helping professions (GPs, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, psychologists) do not emerge from her story covered with glory. One psychologist is remembered only for her chain-smoking, another for his repeated lateness! Professionals she consulted are treated as sources of information—along with self-help books and relevant websites. This, I am sure, is how many clients see us, and the “psychoeducational” model of therapy which currently dominates treatment in this country also sets up counselling and psychotherapy to be viewed basically as “teaching” or “coaching”.

For Gerondis, written feedback from a psychologist (and in one case a lecturer in one of her courses) seemed more lastingly useful than being told things orally. “Having the psychologist’s report to which I could refer whenever I wished made her actual presence and working with her in person unnecessary for me so I stopped seeing her.” (2013, p. 83). Gerondis incorporates excerpts from this report into her book, altering the psychologist’s third person descriptions into the first person—giving a strong impression that she had accepted the assessment unquestioningly, and internalised it (2013, pp. 80-81). Like many clients, Gerondis searched for the meaning of her problematic behaviour, but she also valued practical strategies to help her manage her eating better. The relational aspect of psychotherapy seems to have been comparatively unimportant to her—unless of course the professionals concerned violated the norms of social politeness. “I

have personally found that the only times I have been helped by going to a psychotherapist has been when a diagnosis has been made and I have been able to work out how to proceed”.

In common with many educated people, Gerondis attributes many of her challenges in life to the restrictive and oppressive effects of the culture and historical period in which she was raised—in particular, to blatant gender inequality (both in Greece and in Australia). Social workers would resonate with such social/systemic explanations, and they are valid enough, yet human behaviour and attitudes are rarely the result of a single “layer” of causal factors. Gerondis, born into a Greek-Orthodox family, was also profoundly influenced by her childhood experience of a Catholic school, where, as was common at the time, she was taught the Genesis 2 account of Eve’s temptation of Adam as literal truth, and was left with a sense of shame and “wrongness” about being a girl who would one day become a woman. On more than one occasion, Gerondis takes issue with the Christian tendency to prefer the second Genesis account of creation to the first, more sophisticated and liberal version. Gerondis states that she is no longer a believer, and admits that the Catholic church no longer teaches the literal truth of Genesis 2. She nonetheless includes criticism of the Adam and Eve story—supported by “expert witnesses”—on numerous occasions, to the end of her book. Once again, it is information—in this case, erroneous and stigmatising information—that commands her attention.

Gerondis describes herself as a young mother as a “stressed, irritable, impatient, over-reactive person” (2013, p. 42). This particular genetic bundle is characterised by fearfulness, high sensitivity, and intense emotional reactivity. Jerome Kagan calls it the “reactive” personality type (1989) and Ernest Hartmann refers to it as “thin-boundaried” (1991). It is found in many creative, artistic and innovative people, as well as in a disproportionate number of individuals who suffer from emotional disorders of one kind or another (eating disorders among them). Often the same individual is both creative and emotionally troubled. Being born sensitive and fearful often predisposes a person to “take things personally” and to blame oneself when things go wrong. As Gerondis comments, “the extroverts just disregarded the rules and did their own thing anyway. The introverts had a harder time as they obeyed the rules and lived their lives accordingly” (2013, p. 63).

Gerondis says that her mother “looks sad” in a photograph of her parents and herself as a six-month-old child (2013, p. p. vii), and attributes this to her mother probably feeling shamed for having given birth to a girl instead of the boy, still considered highly desirable in Greek culture at the time. Her mother is certainly not smiling, but nor is she obviously unhappy. The mother is later described as fearful, controlling and withholding. Thin-boundaried individuals feel things deeply, especially losses and deficits. Not being allowed to have a doll one wanted as a child is remembered lifelong. The trauma caused to Gerondis by early instruction at the hands of ignorant and insensitive nuns must (she feels) be challenged, and re-contested fifty years later.

This of course is the nature of trauma, but it is vividly dramatized in the artless and undefended way that Gerondis presents her material, covering key incidents and moving on to other themes only to return to the same incidents. Again and again, she appears to achieve clarity on the roots of her problem, only to revert to anger and confusion, and to canvassing alternative possible causes, depending on what she has just found useful in the words of an article or self-help text.

Gerondis' mixed feelings towards both her husband and her late father are evident throughout the book. She alternates between appreciation and irritation in a way which may appear confusing to a reader, but which accurately mirrors the day-to-day and moment-to-moment "swing" of feelings in any close relationship. A more sophisticated, neatly organised account of her relationships would have lacked this authenticity. How we feel in the moment has its own compelling truth for all of us, no matter that this feeling may not represent the "whole truth". Once again, this is the reality of a person struggling with a psycho-physiological disorder—you may feel that you understand the "why" of your actions, but after a time, you find yourself embracing a different explanation. All of us do this to some extent, of course, but the shifts of both mood and conviction may be more intense in the case of someone with a chronic condition like Gerondis'.

Gerondis has chosen to organise this book around her own anger, and she meticulously lists the many things in her life that have made her angry. This, plus the book's title, gives the impression that it is mainly about anger—yet it is not. To me it is about loss, feeling "less than", and Gerondis' lifelong struggle to prove her worth and to be able to like herself. She has achieved a great deal, but honestly admits that she has not completely overcome her tendency to binge-eat. Rather, she has found ways of managing it so that it does not cause her so much anguish, and she no longer worries about it as much as she once did. This, I think, is her triumph, because it is also a triumph over the tendency of sufferers to dwell on their own pain and allow it to dominate their lives. This gradual "letting go" of self-absorption is something that seems to me to become easier as we get older—though perhaps that is not the case for everyone.

The book could have benefited from a professional edit (which does not seem to be part of what Balboa Press offers), but most of the small errors (eccentric use of capitalisation) or awkward expression (referring to pheromones as "body odour") would not be noticed by the vast majority of her readers. But in contrast to the slickness and superficiality of so many self-help books and anecdotal accounts, Gerondis' stands out for its integrity, and for providing professionals with some invaluable feedback on how often our "expertise" falls short of being helpful.

References

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