

Cactus wives – a psychological profile

Presentation given on 16th November 2014 by Professor Maria-Theresa Krankenkopf on the occasion of her retirement from the Phyllobolic Institute for Nervous Diseases, Barking, England.

Ladies – and it is especially to the ladies that I am these remarks addressing – and of course Gentlemen: as we all know, in our specialty we encounter many problems that are on the marriage couch revealed. So a Gestalt approach requires that we clinicians an understanding of our patients' marital relations develop. It frequently happens that in an atmosphere of clinical confidentiality, and without our encouragement, our patients project on to us the role of Marriage Guidance Counsellor.

Many years ago, when I am first coming to this august institution, I am interviewing a middle-aged couple. They held hands throughout the session and addressed each other thus: "Lovey-dovey" and "My sweet", and according to my notes they kissed three times each other. No problems there, I am thinking, but just after they left the loving wife put her head round the door and said: "I have trained my little doggie to piss on that bastard's Haworthias." When I am finding out what things are Haworthias I must say I am not surprised.

I think most of you have heard mention of "A Sense of Humour". Many learned articles about it produced have been, and there are thereof as many theories as there are psychologists. Let me keep matters simple and state that many peoples, especially in this country, like to tell little stories that may be untrue but which contain references to bodily functions, sexual practices of merely clinical interest, and delight in the misfortunes of other peoples that in my country we call Schadenfreude. Often these stories are elaborated with verbal incongruities and infelicities, and their hearers acknowledge the supposed skill of their tellers by making the noise "Ha Ha!" So when a woman patient is complaining that her husband thinks the Earth is a giant cactus and that we humans live on its surface in the style of mealy bugs, I say: "But surely your husband is telling the joke thing, and you are supposed to sound the "Ha Ha!" "Oh no", she said, and withdrew from her handbag a copy of her husband's magazine Cactus World.

In my right hand here I have the case notes of a colleague and former fellow-student from Mitteleuropa. There it is customary to take all cacti indoors for the winter, because temperatures are lower than they are in Barking and cactus growers can obtain comfort from sharing the heating that they provide for their plants. One patient's ex-husband marries a new wife each year. Every October his wife says: "If it is bringing those plants indoors then I am you leaving", and he brings them in anyway, and she leaves him. Every spring he marries a new wife. He says, and it is here written (I translate): "Wives are two a groschen but cacti take years of nurturing."

My colleague also describes a case where a young man follows in the footsteps of the great Humboldt to South America in pursuit of cactus plants. There he meets many beautiful cacti and also a woman of the opposite sex that he marries and brings back to Europa. He has plenty of money and she thinks this money is for purchasing a washing machine, an oven and a dishwasher. But he spends it all on a computer-controlled environment for his greenhouse.

She does not like washing the clothes with yellow soap in a wooden tub and becomes very angry and throws paint all over the greenhouse and puts glue in the lock. This woman was referred to my colleague by the District Court for pre-sentencing reports.

I have myself in this country also a case encountered where the wife fetched water from a standpipe in the yard and washed the clothes with yellow soap using what I believe calls itself a dolly-stick and a washboard, while the husband had an automatic water-pump for the greenhouse and computerised temperature and humidity control. But the woman did not long remain my patient, for she left her husband and went to work with pigs.

Also from my case notes I can tell you about the woman whose husband made her peel his Conophytums, and that is many times more hard than the peeling of grapes. I can also tell you about the woman whose husband a machine constructed, separating grit for re-use from spent compost for the purpose of. It consisted of a heavy rotating drum attached to a hosepipe. By the turning of a handle, the lighter components of the compost were washed away, leaving the grit behind. The wife every Sunday morning to operate this apparatus was required.

You will all have read the paper in "Mental Cases Review" that was outlined in The Times in October this year. That paper sought to relate a man's desirability to women to the car that he drives. The salient point to illustrate this presentation, ladies and gentlemen, is that only 3% of women would consider a man who drives an estate car. Now you are all thinking, ladies, that a man with an estate car is a valuable catch. Such a man can attend to a woman's greatest needs: to move furniture wherever and whenever she desires; to take the refuse to the Waste Disposal Zentrum; and to accommodate her essential luggage on a weekend away. But I can see you shaking the head. Of course you know that the estate car is the mark of the cactus grower and you want the cactus grower like the hole in a head.

One time I persuaded a patient to ask her husband to take me to a cactus show. It is true, we clinicians will any sacrifices undergo the advancement of learning to promote. I was made to balance a crate of cactus plants on my knee because in the back of the estate car there was not space. We parked in a line of at least fifty estate cars and we entered a hall resembling the chapel at our Phyllobolic Institute. Inside there were wives carrying plants, wives taking the money at the door, wives selling raffle tickets, and wives making sandwiches and the inevitable tea. There were groups of men standing around and talking intently. Some must have been telling the little stories called "jokes" because they made the "Ha Ha!" noise. Others were waving their arms about and complaining. All were wearing baggy trousers with dusty knees, and baggy jackets with green stains where the cloth was worn thin. Most had the head bald, but this baldness was compensated for by facial hair in white projecting tufts. I am told that the word for this is "porrect". You can imagine that I naked felt without my white coat. I thought that I had been on the bottom pinched ("geesed" as you English call it) and I turned quickly round to give a cactus man a big slapping, but no person was there. Then I found attached to my nether rear a cluster of cactus spines. This is what my patients tell me they find often in bed or on the bathroom floor.

I have for you brought many more occasions and instances my presentation to illuminate, but I have to say. Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, I must now be leaving to go and water my Mitrophyllums.