

## **ILARIA AND THE MEXICAN BOY**

GABRIELE SOLIANI<sup>1</sup>

Counselling sessions with Ilaria began in September 1999, and all occurred through the good auspices of her aunt. Ilaria is 17, she has been living with her divorced father for two years because her mom, after spending long periods in a psychiatric clinic, is now sentimentally bound to another man. Ilaria does not feel like living with this “new” dad, and after her grandfather’s death, who had loved her very much, prefers to return living with her natural father.

However, the unhealthy rapport with her natural father who had had very little contact with her in her adolescent years, upsets Ilaria very much since he expects his teenage daughter to be fully independent and mature in her choices.

Ilaria tenaciously dealt with her initial difficulties in meeting me. Eventually I got to know her: a fashionable, slender young lady with big, green eyes, a radiant smile and a crisp voice. Misunderstandings with her father and his harshness in her dealings with her caused her much pain, and a sense of void and futility. All this emerged in our counselling sessions.

I learned that she was not doing very well at school ; often behaving polemically towards her teachers. However I noticed in her a strong will to live a happy life, to be of help to others, and to reciprocate love. She was resolute, capable of perceiving the certainties of life, and had a good deal of humility, something that mattered a great deal to her.

I think that the “alliance” we formed in the first meeting, helped in not

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to: Dr. Gabriele Soliani, [gabriele.soliani@fastwebnet.it](mailto:gabriele.soliani@fastwebnet.it)

making her feel “judged”. This resulted in her returning for subsequent sessions.

In fact, the hidden concerns that lay in her heart emerged in our following meetings, together with “problems” and “menaces”. Her sensitivity which was often hurt by a father, who underrated her, forced her to look for affection in the arms of others.

A boyfriend had just left her, but soon afterwards she met another young man through an advertisement in a music magazine, which scouted for background female singers.

She was not sure, though, about what she was doing and so, consulted me. Affection had an overwhelming effect on her and sex appeal, too.

The search for the spiritual side of life was important to her; it was almost a devotion to go beyond, looking for an objective source of goodness and beauty.

To me this was the important key that opened the door to a real and full life.

Ilaria embraced Buddhism for a short time, because the so-called “ocean of compassion”, a search for harmony, beauty and peace, attracted her.

She also wanted to tell me about an experience she had made during one of her many travels abroad, alone or with some friends.

She had met a Mexican boy with whom she had had “only sex”. Her own behaviour worried her and she reproached herself with the belief of having acted wrongly.

After four meetings her father forced her to stop and threatened to leave her without money. I have not seen her any longer, but she called me one evening, to tell me she would go away from home to work at part-time jobs and to finish her university studies.

I reassured her that her intelligence and her magnitude of resources would help her do well in life. I think that Ilaria is in some European city at this time, but not in the arms of a Mexican boy.

Key words: alliance, confidence, courage, change.

«Doctor, my niece Ilaria does not appear to be well. She has a few problems that I think she should see you about; may I give her your phone

number?».

I began to know this young woman in September of 1999.

Ilaria's aunt and uncle were ,at the time, both my patients when her name came up one day, as we touched upon the subject of children's education and adolescence in general.

I expected the discussion to end there, as often is the case; on the contrary, the aunt politely insisted on making the appointment herself for the niece, which is something I preferred Ilaria to do on her own; nevertheless, I accepted.

Some days later, I actually received a telephone call from Ilaria!

She apologized for having to cancel the appointment, as she was not in a position to come for counselling due to a sore throat and a high temperature she was running. She asked that we reschedule to meet within ten days.

I was somewhat surprised at both the rapidity with which she made decisions and at her will to respect them. It was apparent that she found her aunt's recommendation trusting enough to respect the appointment with me.

I was also struck by her loud, crisp and melodic voice, very feminine and even a little seductive.

From that very first phone call surfaced some useful information about Ilaria: the aunt was her support, she was resolute in her engagements, she had the courage to face me, a doctor still unfamiliar to her, and that, as was noticeable in her voice, the young woman expressed a certain joy and love of life.

One knows how volatile enthusiasm in young people can be. To assure the young woman would maintain an ongoing interest in meetings, I decided to make the most of a simple telephone call and thought of immediately opening a symbolic space to her. I allowed her to connect with me by emphatically complementing her on the fine qualities she was showing.

Ilaria kept quiet for a few seconds and then answered in surprise:

«Really?»

I reassured her with more of the same meaningful words.

The aunt's recount of the niece was as follows: Ilaria had been living with her father for a short time after her maternal grandfather's death, with whom she had lived for many years.

Her mom, having been released from a psychiatric hospital, was now living with another man. Ilaria had neither family nor house she could relate to as home, and so

the only solution seemed to be her father, who was leading a single life after the divorce.

The day before our rescheduled appointment, Ilaria called to cancel; this time, without stating a reason. Although her voice was sadder and lacked the vitality she showed the first time she called, she still expressed the wish to see me and asked we reschedule the appointment yet a second time.

I was not really surprised at this. I took into consideration the "insecurities" of young people and the variability of a woman's emotional state.

The aunt was not aware that Ilaria was giving up. She did understand and tried placing the situation in the following perspective.

She gave as possibilities the money for counselling Ilaria may be lacking, her father's intrusion prohibiting her from going, or the total solitude in which Ilaria lived her days. After a while Ilaria called, only this time, to ask directions to get to my office. She was resolute and in good spirits.

Upon arrival by bicycle, she sat on an adjacent, low, retaining wall, and began reading a book. I observed her from a distance and took note of her tasteful and fashionable clothing.

Her trousers showed her slenderness. Her face was marked by large and made-up eyebrows, big green eyes and a full smile. She said she had been waiting for half an hour fearing she was at the wrong place.

« Were you reading something, Ilaria?» I asked.

«Yes, I'm reading the story of Kurt Cobain, the singer of the Nirvanas, who committed suicide some years ago. He wanted to be useful to others, but nobody understood him.»

«Useful?»

«I too want to do something for others.»

Ilaria is 17 and a half years old. She has been living with her single father for three years. Now, her difficulties appear to really be with him.

«My Father does not accept me for who I am, he is mean to me, is always telling me to “get busy”. He hardly talks to me, and when he does, he shouts. I'm at home alone all day, I eat alone after school, and sometimes I don't eat at all. I sit down to study but I don't get anything done. He returns home late nearly every night, and takes his silly women with him. I hear them while they're making love. I can't bear with neither him, his money, nor his Porsche sports car any longer.

When I told him that I was going to see a specialist for my problems, he started shouting, and demanded I tell him who he was and what he did. I'm sure he'll call you.»

«Are you presently in school, Ilaria?»

«Yes, I attend a modern language high school, but I'm doing poorly because I cannot study. I manage to get through by the skin of my teeth. I am neither getting along well with my classmates, who are the reason for my staying away from school, nor with my teachers who consider me polemical and keep reminding me of my poor academic results.»

«Do you engage in extracurricular activities? Do you have other interests?»

«Yes, I like reading, music, and I'm interested in understanding people's behaviour. When I enter university I would like to pursue studies in psychology.»

This will to help others was a definite trait, which emerged more than once during our meetings. I learned that she was also a volunteer at her town oratory, and helped an African child with her homework.

« How about religion? Are you a believer, Ilaria ?»

«Yes, I believe in a being but I am not a Christian. You know..... I don't like priests and the church, much. I am interested in Buddhism. »

«What is it about Buddhism you like ?»

« The idea of peace and harmony.»

« Do you like the notion of “ocean of compassion”, as Buddha called it?»

« Yes, the ocean of compassion!»

After this reply her gaze pondered and her eyes appeared more beautiful.

She proceeded to talk of her family members and smiled as she tried to give her story a title.

When she mentioned her maternal grandfather, with whom she had grown up, she did so with glossy eyes and eventually could not hold back her tears.

« Were you getting on well with your grandfather, Ilaria?»

« Very much so. He loved me, he understood me, he paid attention to me, and most importantly, did not criticize me. He was a simple man.»

«What about your mom?»

«Poor mom. She was ill but she loved me, too. I've helped her a lot. Now she's living with a man, but I don't feel like staying at her house. I've always led a free life, maybe an exaggerated one for a young girl my age.

I did all that I wanted to do. I started travelling at age 14 and I've travelled through half of Europe either with friends, or alone.»

«How is your sentimental life?».

«Do you mean my “love” life? I recently broke up with a boyfriend. There was a strong and mutual understanding between the two of us that extended to our sexual relationship. I don't understand why he no longer wants to be with me. He tells me I'm special and that he continues to value my friendship, yet, it is over.»

« Are you special, Ilaria ?».

« I don't know what he meant by the word 'special'. I'm looking for a steady point, I am looking for affection. »

At our first appointment Ilaria often spoke of "anguish". I dropped this subject after asking her to talk to me about it at least once. I remember her growing confused; in fact, I did not understand what she meant.

I realized I made a mistake and did not touch on the subject again, even though she had initially sought counselling for that reason. Before leaving her, I wanted to make an empathic interpretation which, in part, reflected the one I made the first time I heard her speak on the phone.

That is:

- she was a girl who could smile at life,
- she was courageous,
- she was quite independent,
- she could love,
- she could tackle the situation,
- she was not polemical,
- she wanted to better herself.

As "therapy", I asked her to bring me, i.e. on a strictly voluntary basis, the verses she wrote and to write new ones. I then asked her to "colour" her days in her diary and to see me again within fourteen days.

Going home, I remember that I was happy I had helped her whet her resources. I was also happy I had spoken to her formally, since this gave her a sense of self-worth. At our second meeting Ilaria appeared carefree and confident. She immediately began to talk of her "new love". She spoke of a test recording she made with a percussion player of a musical group advertising for young, female, background singers in a music magazine .

« It's he, it's he! He's the one I want. He is the "solitary wolf". »

« Ilaria, you are a daring person. »

« Yes, I am! »

I think that my face showed disapproval of the way she was about to begin living an affair.

However, I didn't like my reaction simply because I was running the risk of closing, rather than opening up, a sense of responsibility in her.

To not continue making such mistakes, I asked her to read out some poems she had been asked to bring. She agreed to do so humbly and with joy. I jotted down only some meaningful phrases:

- which pattern becomes me?
- I am dying inwardly
- I pretend to be, but I am not
- does anybody want to draw my existence?
- I am looking for.....the celestial star.

A smile shaped her face again. I think that she felt she had given something of herself. It was always the same story with her father: rude shouts, accusations of irresponsibility, and requests for a greater application to her studies.

The counselling sessions ended quickly and after a short reference to Buddhism. She had coloured her days and, to her surprise, she found out that six days out of seven were coloured in light blue.

Before leaving she told me that she would have liked to talk about the human body.

I assured her we would at the following week's meeting at which she in fact, arrived punctually.

She listened to music through ear phones and seemed to me more embarrassed and aloof. I remember this because her hand was ice-cold.

She didn't look happy. Maybe my room caused her anguish, the exertion she endured at school gave her fatigue, or she may not have been ingesting the calories needed by her growing body, to combat weakness. I did not understand! She told me that she was always alone in the evenings and that, after eating a pasta dish, she would throw herself in front of the tv and did nothing else.

«I would like a house full of people.»

«Will your future house be like that?».

«It certainly will!»



«Do you think you'll give a lot to others?»

«Yes, I do».

She discussed her pleasant childhood with her grandfather and described it in these exact words: «There, I felt in a true family». She then told me, «I trust you now and I can tell you. Last year, in New York, I had an affair based on sex only, with a Mexican boy. What do you think about it?».

I did not answer her, but asked instead:

«How did it go?»:

«It was over after a while. He was a fellow who took command of the situation at hand. When we were making love he slapped me and insulted me. At first I was embarrassed, then.... I liked it but it was not normal for a girl of 17. Do tell me it wasn't normal. Then I did the same with my boyfriend, and he left me. I wanted him to insult me while we were making love, but he did not want to. Am I normal? Now, that's enough! I have found Buddhism and I want to devote myself to this spiritual search. Oh yes, now I am serious.»

«What does this spiritual search mean to you?».

«It means a reference point. My father is ridiculing me for it but, I couldn't care less. I'm going my way but do tell me that affair of only sex with the Mexican boy was not good. No, it was not good ».

I retorted, «Maybe you were looking for a strong man and you simply fell in his arms».

I realized I had made a mistake because I was beginning to “lecture” on something Ilaria did not understand.

In fact, the dialogue came to a halt.

I took the time to examine myself and realized I was judging her, rather than helping her resources come to surface.

For this reason I stopped immediately.

I scheduled a new appointment for after a week.

The day before the appointment she called to cancel because her father was so against her going for counselling that he threatened to leave her

without any money. This, aside from his usual shouts and his vulgar and profane language which upset her.

She said she would come no more. I didn't hear from her till February 2000 when she called to ask me if she was doing well to think of living on her own.

She told me she was studying hard to pass the year, and that in case she failed she would enrol as a private student. She planned to pay for school fees by working at part-time jobs in pizzerias.

«I know English very well and could easily live abroad. I want to go to university.»

I responded, «Ilaria, you are a very intelligent and sensitive young woman, capable of assuming responsibilities. I think you will succeed.» She thanked me a lot and left. I haven't seen or heard from Ilaria from that day onwards. Her aunt did call me a couple of days later. It was nearly midnight, and she asked me if I had any leads or knew something of Ilaria's whereabouts, because she had left a note to her father and disappeared. The aunt could not help but think of some rash act on the niece's part, and with her father, agreed to alert the police.

I just told her, «Ilaria is a person with a good head on her shoulders. I think she'll do well for herself and there's no reason to worry».

Maybe Ilaria is in London, but I do not think that she is with another Mexican boy.

*Riassunto*

Le consulenze con Ilaria sono cominciate nel settembre 1999, e tutto è avvenuto per l'interessamento della zia.

Ilaria ha 17 anni, vive da due anni col padre divorziato perché la mamma, dopo lunghi periodi di ricovero in clinica psichiatrica, ora si è sentimentalmente legata con un uomo. Ilaria non se l'è sentita di passare i suoi giorni con questo "nuovo" papà, e dopo la morte del nonno, dal quale si è sentita molto amata, ha preferito tornare col padre.

Da subito però è stata male perché il padre, vedendosi arrivare in casa una figlia adolescente che lui praticamente aveva incontrato pochissime volte, la trattava con durezza e pretendeva da lei uno stile di vita improntato ad indipendenza e piena maturità di scelte.

Dopo alcune difficoltà per poterci incontrare, tenacemente superate da Ilaria, ho potuto vederla: è una ragazza "alla moda", con accentuata magrezza, grandi occhi verdi, sorriso smagliante, voce brillante.

Nei colloqui emergeva il dolore per l'incomprensione con suo padre e la durezza con cui era trattata, il senso di vuoto e inutilità che le procuravano i litigi con lui; anche a scuola non andava molto bene ed era spesso in polemico atteggiamento con gli insegnanti. Vedevo però un forte desiderio di vivere, gioire, essere utile, amare ed essere amata; notavo una certa decisione nelle sue aspirazioni, una capacità di intravedere le certezze della vita ed anche, non poca cosa per lei, una buona dose di umiltà. Penso che "l'alleanza" costruita nel primo incontro la fece sentire ascoltata e non giudicata; per questo volle tornare altre volte. Infatti nei successivi incontri sono emerse altre "possibilità" che Ilaria custodiva nel cuore, insieme a "problemi" e a "minacce". La sua sensibilità, spesso ferita dalla continua svalorizzazione del padre, la spingeva a cercare fra altre braccia l'affetto che sentiva forte pulsare in lei; si era lasciata da poco con un giovane (era stata lasciata) che subito, utilizzando un annuncio su un giornale di musica dove si cercavano coriste da parte di un gruppo, si era vista più volte con un ragazzo.

Però era sicura di quello che faceva e mi chiese consiglio: l'affetto aveva per lei un effetto travolgente, e così pure l'attrazione fisica. Un punto importante per lei era la ricerca dell'aspetto "religioso" della vita, come un desiderio di andare oltre, ricercando una fonte oggettiva di bene e di bello. Questo per me fu la

chiave importante per vedere in lei risorse per l'edificazione di una vita vera e piena di soddisfazioni. Ilaria si era da poco avvicinata al Buddismo perché era rimasta affascinata dall'armonia, dalla ricerca del bello e della pace; il cosiddetto “Oceano di compassione”. Mi volle poi parlare di una esperienza avuta nei suoi tanti viaggi all' estero, fatti da sola con amici, dove incontrò un messicano col quale ebbe « solo sesso » ; era preoccupata di questo suo modo di fare e si rimproverava dicendosi d'aver sbagliato. Dopo quattro consulenze il padre la costrinse a non farne più, minacciandola di lasciarla senza una lira. Non la vidi più, ma una sera mi telefonò dicendomi che se ne sarebbe andata di casa, cercandosi piccoli lavoretti per finire gli studi e iscriversi all'università. Le dissi che poteva farcela perché era una ragazza intelligente e con molte risorse. Penso che ora Ilaria sia in qualche città europea. . . . ma non fra le braccia di un messicano.

Parole chiave: alleanza, fiducia, coraggio, cambiamento.