

The King's Speech

Through the Lens of an Eloquent Case Presentation

By Elizabeth Lehmann

The King's Speech is an acclaimed 2010 dramatic film based on the life of King George VI of England. At the heart of the movie is the therapy relationship between the Duke of York (Colin Firth) who in the course of treatment becomes King, and his speech therapist Mr. Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush). The film is reviewed from the psychological perspective of Accelerated Experiential-Dynamic Psychotherapy (AEDP) developed by Diana Fosha (2000).

The King's Speech is a 2010 Academy Award winning dramatic film based on the life of King George VI of England, further informed by the life of screenwriter David Seidler (Seidler, 2010). It stars Colin Firth, co-stars Geoffrey Rush, Helena Bonham-Carter and Guy Pearce and is directed by Tom Hooper.

For the sake of transparency, let it be said that this reviewer unequivocally recommends *The King's Speech*. Absolutely stunning, the relational and psychological depth of the movie captivates and inspires. Experiencing *The King's Speech* is akin to attending an eloquent case presentation, the patient being Prince Albert, Duke of York, who in the course of treatment becomes King George VI, first outwardly, then inwardly.

Two disclaimers, before proceeding:

1. Be forewarned that no attempt is made by the reviewer not to spoil the movie for those who have not seen it.
2. There are publicly acknowledged discrepancies between certain historical facts and the movie's storyline. For the purpose of this review, the movie is accepted at face value, as presented, and discussed accordingly.

The opening scene poignantly depicts Prince Albert, the Duke of York (Colin Firth), agonizingly delivering the closing speech of the 1925 British *Empire Exhibition* at Wembley Stadium, painfully stammering throughout. His speaking performance visibly unsettles not only himself, but also his devoted wife, Elizabeth, the Duchess of York (Helena Bonham-Carter) and the rest of the attending audience members, including the movie viewer. Through this scene, we are privy to videotape of the patient before treatment, seeing and feeling firsthand the suffering for which the Duke eventually seeks professional help.

As so often happens, the Duke continues to live with his affliction, untreated, until it is undeniable that public speaking engagements and radio broadcasts will not only be an unavoidable part of his life, but will increase. Led by his caring wife the Duchess, he

begins the process of actively seeking treatment, coincidentally right around the time John Bowlby, later known for attachment theory, would have been in supervision with Melanie Klein in London (Schwartz, 1999).

Since his problem is perceived of as being “mechanical,” speech therapy is sought. After multiple failed attempts with prominent speech therapists, the determined Duchess eventually finds for her husband an “unorthodox and controversial” practitioner, Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush), recommended by the president of the London Society For Speech Therapists.

Using a pseudonym, the Duchess sets up an initial appointment. Mr. Logue expects to be meeting the patient, but the Duke's wife comes alone, wanting to interview Mr. Logue first. Among other things, she lets Mr. Logue know she expects him to come to them to give therapy sessions. He replies: “I can cure your husband, but for my method to work, I need trust and equality here in the safety of my consultation room. No exceptions.” After basically saying, “Then forget it,” she turns around and makes an appointment for the Duke.

Needless to say, it's a challenging undertaking for both the patient and the therapist. Not only does the Duke feel humiliated by and ashamed of his affliction, but he's being asked to try yet another speech therapist, no less an Australian commoner who will not come to him, but who he himself must go and see. And unbeknownst to him, he suffers from attachment trauma impacting all his relationships, including the therapeutic one.

Mr. Logue is a maverick practitioner who, through experience and intuition, has arrived at his own psychologically-oriented approach to treatment, firmly believing in his method and the conditions he feels need to be met in order for it to work. In addition to the expected defenses of a patient who has stammered most of his life, Mr. Logue faces the added complexity of failed past attempts at treatment, as well as working with someone completely removed from his social class — in fact, a member of the most elite. Not only is Mr. Logue presented with, what in AEDP is referred to as “barriers to receptive affective experiences” due to childhood trauma (Wais, 2008), he also has a huge social class barrier to overcome in order to truly be able to “deepen the patient's receptive affective capacity” (Fosha, 2010). And he's not even a trained psychotherapist, much less an AEDP therapist, which of course wasn't even a possibility then!

However, the patient longs to be relieved of his suffering, has inner resources such as the ability to persevere and is “wired for healing and resuming impeded growth” (Fosha, 2010). The therapist has a proven track record, confidence and genuine care and concern for his patient, exhibiting “sleeves-rolled up engagement and willingness to help” (Fosha, 2010).

To our delight, we are able to see a video of the Duke's first session (including what occurs in the waiting room beforehand), excerpts from subsequent sessions, as well as video of lived experience in-between — an AEDP therapist's dream come true! Grant it, the

quality of the video is a little better in *The King's Speech* than in AEDP presentations, but the development of the relationship and the unfolding of the therapy is just as compelling as fine AEDP therapy, in many respects paralleling it, although at certain points radically diverging from it.

What we see is by no means a classic AEDP four state and three state transformation process (Fosha, 2010), although some essential AEDP constructs are beautifully demonstrated in the movie. Most resonant with AEDP, and at the heart of the movie, is the crucial role of the therapeutic relationship in healing.

The Duke and Mr. Logue's first session together makes for a riveting and highly engaging scene. Mr. Logue takes the reins from the beginning, attempting to establish what he believes must begin to happen in order for the therapy to be successful. Having the Duke come and see him in his consultation room on a London backstreet was one of the conditions, flying right in the face of royal propriety, contributing to greater resistance from the get-go.

Mr. Logue continues in this vein throughout the first session. "In here it would be better if we were equals," he says, and kindly yet firmly insists he be called by his first name, "Lionel," with the Duke being called by his family nickname, "Bertie."

Although he'd been unequivocally told by the Duchess of York while setting up the appointment that royalty do not talk about their personal lives, Mr. Logue disregards that, as you see in the transcript below:

Th: What was your earliest memory?

Pt: What on earth do you mean?

Th: Your first recollection.

Pt: I'm not here to discuss personal matters.

Th: Why are you here then?

Pt: (*angrily shouting*) Because I bloody well stammer!

Th: You have a bit of a temper?

Pt: One of my many faults.

Th: When did the defect start?

Pt: I've always been this way.

Th: I doubt that.

Pt: (*enraged*) Don't tell me! It's my stammer!

Th: It's my field. I can assure you no infant starts to speak with a stammer. When did yours start?

Pt: 4 or 5.

Th: That's typical.

Pt: So I've been told. I can't remember not doing it.

Th: I can believe that. Do you hesitate when you think?

Pt: Don't be ridiculous.

Th: How about when you talk to yourself? Everyone mutters to himself occasionally, Bertie.

Pt: (*red in the face and livid*) Stop calling me that!

Th: I'm not going to call you anything else.

Pt: Then we shan't speak. (*Lionel gets up to get some tea*)

Pt: What are you charging for this doctor?

Th: A fortune. (*whistles*) I'm just going to let this brew. (*sits down*) So when you talk to yourself do you stammer?

Pt: No. Of course not.

Th: That proves your impediment is not a permanent part of you. What do you think was the cause?

Pt: I don't know. I don't care. I stammer, and no one can fix it.

Th: I bet you that you can read flawlessly right here, right now. And if I win the bet I get to ask you more questions.

Pt: And if I win?

Th: Well, you don't have to answer them.

Pt: One usually wages money.

Th: A bob each to keep it sweet? Let's see your shilling.

Pt: I don't carry money.

Th: I had a funny feeling you mightn't. I'll stand you (front you) and you can pay me back next time.

Pt: If there is a next time.

Th: I haven't agreed to take you on yet. Please stand and take it from there (*pointing to a page in a book of Shakespeare's Hamlet*)

A plethora of rich clinical material is found in the dialogue above meriting discussion. Obviously the therapist, Mr. Logue, confronts defenses rather than bypassing them through engaging self-at-best in the complimentary ways that AEDP prefers (Fosha, 2000). His approach not surprisingly elicited a lot of resistance from the Duke, resulting in a fascinating jockeying back and forth for control throughout the session, with some moments of genuine connection in-between.

We can certainly appreciate the importance of Mr. Logue asserting himself as an authority in his field, as well as wanting to get around subjugating himself to his royal highness, and might even argue that this was necessary for the treatment to proceed. An AEDP therapist could perceive of Mr. Logue as pressuring toward a moment of radical authenticity and genuine connection, awakening another necessary healing condition from the get-go, which would have been impossible if he had stayed within social class confines (Gleiser, 2011). However, one can't help but wonder if he would have gotten further had he not been so confrontational, had waited until a little later in the treatment to insist on referring to one another as "Lionel" and "Bertie" and had at least actively sought and affirmed transference strivings from the start (Fosha, 2009).

It's important to note, however, that he does sincerely compliment the Duke's reading of *Hamlet*, saying, "You were sublime," and seeing the Duke's disbelief, he adds, "Would I lie to a prince of the realm to win twelve pennies?" The Duke retorts, "I have no idea what an Australian might do for that sort of money." He thanks Mr. Logue for his time, saying, "This is not for me," and walks out.

This first session was, however, by no means unsuccessful. Mr. Logue tackled some of the Duke's self-at-worst beliefs, such that his stammering was a permanent defect of character. This was done not only through his clever line of questioning, but also by having the Duke read from *Hamlet* while listening to loud music through headphones, effectively distracting him and interrupting the paralyzing feedback loop of anxiety and shame that arises from hearing his own stammer. Mr. Logue recorded the Duke's stammer-free reading on a phonograph record, amazingly capturing a self-at-best moment, which the

Duke refused to listen to at the time perhaps out of persistent shame, but managed to take with him as he stormed out.

Following his first treatment session, the Duke listened to his phonographic recording (experiencing self-at-best) after a humiliating radio broadcast, and a reprimanding “pull yourself up by the boot straps” pep talk (experiencing self-at-worst) from his father, the King. This sequence of events caused the Duke to return to Mr. Logue, willing to eventually comply with many of his conditions for treatment, including calling each other “Lionel” and “Bertie.” Furthermore, the banter of betting each other a shilling continued throughout the treatment, assuming an ever more significant relational meaning.

When the Duke and Duchess appear together for the next session, they present Mr. Logue with their conditions for continuing the treatment.

“Strictly business, no personal nonsense,” the Duke says.

“Yes, I thought I made that clear in our interview,” the Duchess adds.

Mr. Logue replies, “Physical exercises and tricks are important, but what you’re asking will only deal with the surface of the problem.”

“That is sufficient,” the Duchess responds. “As far as I see it my husband has mechanical difficulties with his speech. Maybe just deal with that.”

The Duke adds, “I am willing to work hard, Dr. Logue. Are you willing to do your part?” Mr. Logue says, “All right if you want mechanics then we need to relax your jaw muscles, strengthen your tongue by repeating tongue twisters...simple mechanics.”

The Duke adds that he’d like “*Dr. Logue*” to assist occasionally at some events.

Mr. Logue hesitatingly agrees to all of it, then states that he wants to see the Duke every day, rigorously working to get him into physical shape, as if he’s training for the Olympics. The Duke agrees and Mr. Logue puts him through the paces of numerous vocal workouts. Even though he doesn’t believe he’s addressing the root of the problem, Mr. Logue wisely chooses to comply with some of their wishes. It is significant in terms of the relationship, because the Duke and Duchess feel understood and met by him. And Mr. Logue knows time will reveal that their requested approach is only dealing with the surface of the problem. He further meets them by agreeing to assist the Duke on location, outside of his consultation room. In a sense, he shifts more into the position of following the patient at this point rather than leading, which definitely seemed necessary for the treatment to continue. His responsiveness to the expressed needs of the relationship is crucial at this juncture.

Not only does he do what they ask, he cleverly facilitates the shedding of rigid stances, allowing a break through of new “self” to emerge by approaching the exercises in a playful

manner. For example, at one point, for a breathing exercise he has the Duke lying on his back on the floor and the Duchess good-naturedly sitting on top of the Duke's diaphragm, being pumped up and down by his breath, like a child on a teeter-totter. Through the silliness of tongue twisters and singing something he wants to say as lyrics to a familiar tune, the loosening of habitual/procedural movement patterns also occurs. All of these further break the constraints that had the Duke "tied up" in stifled propriety all his life (Gleiser, 2011).

Although the Duke derives benefit from this "mechanical" approach in more ways than one, he eventually learns that, in spite of the gains he makes, he becomes silent when around his belittling brother, David, who both looked out for and bullied him during childhood.

We come to realize that the Duke's processional life walk is about finding his own voice, both literally and figuratively. It becomes apparent that there is a direct relationship between his stammering and how securely attached he is feeling to himself (Lamagna & Gleiser, 2007) and others. Furthermore, the more he is able to let Lionel in, allowing himself to experience Lionel as a secure base (Bowlby, 1989), the more his stammering improves.

As is so often the case when something major occurs, like the death of a parent, a door can open into a person's deeper level of experiencing, bypassing defenses and making direct contact with core affect more possible. This indeed happens when the Duke's father passes away. The Duke immediately goes to see Lionel who recognizes an opening and uses the opportunity to, among other things, eventually ask the questions he has been wanting to ask since the first session.

But Mr. Logue only does so after Bertie gives him an affective green light by responding to Lionel's expressed condolences and some shared self-disclosure (Prenn, 2009) about his own father's death, demonstrating dyadic coordination. Bertie reveals to Lionel his father's last words: "Bertie has more guts than all of his brothers put together." As he talks about his father, he starts to stammer and Lionel suggests he uses the technique he taught him of singing rather than speaking what he wants to say. "I'm not going to sit here warbling," says Bertie. "You can with me," replies Lionel, offering himself as a "true other."

Further aided by some requested liquor and Bertie's being encouraged to continue building Lionel's son's model airplane (something Bertie always wanted to do as a child but his father wouldn't let him) Bertie continues to tell his personal story. Lionel uncovers several traumatic events: early prolonged childhood abuse by one of Bertie's nannies; Bertie was really left handed, but was forced through punishment to become right handed; his brother David teased him and his father encouraged it; and an epileptic brother died at age 13, "hidden from view."

Bertie thanks Lionel for pouring him "a topper" of liquor and Lionel replies, "What are

friends for?" "I wouldn't know," says Bertie. With this exchange, one gets such a strong sense of the "unbearable aloneness" Bertie felt in the face of traumatic events, and the isolation experienced from the restrictions and expectations of being a member of the royal family. His wife has really been his saving grace, his one "true other." And now there is a sense of Lionel possibly becoming the caring, protective, actively helpful male he never had in his life.

Interestingly enough, Lionel and Bertie discover during a subsequent meeting that when Bertie is connected to and directly expressing his core affective anger, he does not stammer. Once they stumble upon this, Lionel playfully encourages Bertie to more demonstratively express his anger. The Duke begins with tame profanity and Lionel challenges him with "oh come on Bertie, surely you can do better than that! Don't you know the 'f' word?" After saying "fornication", at which Lionel mockingly laughs, Bertie finally blurts out THE "f" word, and then triumphantly repeats it over and over. Not only is he now having a formerly prohibited true self experience, his core affect of anger is being further processed. As an aside, this technique actually comes from the screenwriter's own personal experience (Seidler, 2010).

Seemingly buoyed by this outpouring, Lionel jumps up and suggests they go outside and "get some air." While walking and talking together, Bertie confides in him about complications with his brother now being King but wanting to marry the American divorcee, Wallace Simpson. Lionel wholeheartedly and confidently asserts that Bertie could be King. But Bertie is not ready to hear this and becomes enraged, turning on Lionel and pronouncing, "These sessions are over."

This creates a big disruption in their relationship. Lionel has pushed Bertie too hard, too far. He is not there yet, not ready to be King. It is incongruent with where he is internally. When Lionel discusses this with his wife he says, "This fellow could really be someone great." Wisely, his wife responds, "Perhaps he doesn't want to be great. That's what you want." "Disruption is the realm of being on disturbingly different wavelengths" (Fosha, 2009). Yet sometimes, the temporary disruption of rupture, especially those that are repaired, can be the harbingers of something new – an invitation to cross a chasm to a new understanding, or more resilient relationship, or both, as we shall soon witness.

Lionel goes to apologize but the Duke won't see him. The Duke's brother, David, then renounces the throne. Bertie is to be crowned King, but is terrified of it, including handling his speaking parts at the coronation. Sobbing to his wife, he cries, "I'm not a King. I'm a naval officer!" Then he quickly apologizes to her for displaying such vulnerability, which a part of him obviously perceives of as unacceptable weakness. She lovingly caresses him.

Together they go and see Lionel again. As they walk through the door Bertie says, "Waiting for a king to apologize, one can wait a rather long wait ... here's your shilling," (handing him one). They apologize to each other and readily repair their relationship in a few sentences.

Riddled with self-doubt Bertie asks, "Is the nation ready for minutes of radio silence?" Lionel reassuringly says, "Every stammerer always feels like they're going back to square one. I don't let that happen." (In other words, "I am here for you. I will not let you fail. We will go through this together. I will actively help you.") "Clinically, in AEDP treatment, it is crucial to undo the patient's unwilling and unwanted aloneness. 'Being with' is necessary but not sufficient ... actually helping is essential" (Fosha, 2009; Piliero, 2010).

Bertie expresses being upset that his brother, before renouncing the throne, didn't give a Christmas speech to the nation like his father used to give. Referring to Bertie's father, Lionel says, "He isn't here anymore." Bertie replies, "Yes he is; he's on that shilling I gave you." Lionel beautifully responds, "Easy enough to give away. You don't have to carry him around in your pocket. Or your brother. You don't need to be afraid of the things you were afraid of when you were five." We see struggle, inner conflict expressed on Bertie's face and then a deep sigh. Lionel continues, "You're very much your own man, Bertie." He's now ready to reluctantly take in what Lionel is saying to him, unlike when they took the walk.

Another major relationship disruption occurs when they're at Westminster Abbey to rehearse for the coronation. The Archbishop, who is incensed that he wasn't consulted about finding the King a speech therapist, investigates Logue and discovers he is not a doctor and not a licensed speech therapist, depicting him as a fraud. This news greatly disturbs Bertie who confronts Logue.

Lionel confesses that it is true but says he never referred to himself as "Dr.," *they* did, and goes on to defend himself by explaining how he came to do what he does. He was living in Australia, soldiers were returning from World War I, many of them shell shocked, unable to speak. People said to him, "Lionel, you're very good at all this speech stuff. Do you think you could possibly help those poor buggers?" Lionel further explains, "I did muscle therapy, relaxation exercises, but I knew I had to go deeper. Those poor young blokes had cried out in fear. No one was listening to them. My job was to give them faith in their own voice and let them know that a friend was listening. That must ring a few bells with you, Bertie."

We come to better understand Lionel's background, how he arrived at his methodology as well as some of his beliefs about treatment. An actor who taught elocution lessons, he was asked to help returning soldiers who were having speech difficulties. In the process, he discovered he needed to go deeper to get to what was underlying the symptoms, and that he needed to be present as a "true other."

Affected by this, Bertie nevertheless continues to be enraged, still believing he has been duped by Lionel, and that his trust has been betrayed. Lionel mockingly sits in St. Edward's chair further enraging Bertie, who orders Lionel to get up, but he refuses to obey his order, saying, "Why should I waste my time listening to you?" Bertie vehemently yells at him, "Because I have a right to be listened to! I HAVE A VOICE!" To which Lionel respectfully and poignantly replies, "Yes, you do." Further acknowledging him he says,

“You have such perseverance, Bertie. You are the bravest man I know. You’ll make a bloody good king.”

The Archbishop comes in announcing he has found a replacement. The King says that will not be necessary. Perhaps by explicitly expressing how Bertie existed in his heart and mind, Lionel was able to bypass Bertie’s barrier to affective receptive experience (Fosha, 2009; Wais, 2008) and be taken in by Bertie. Earlier in the day, the King let the Archbishop know he wants Logue seated in the family box. This is a major breach of protocol, having a commoner sit with the royal family and is here understood as an indication of the importance of the bond that has formed between the two of them, with the ensuing shifts.

These examples highlight the triumph of authenticity over convention: even as Bertie’s fragile trust is tested with perceived betrayal, the two men stay engaged in honest emotional exchanges that penetrate through all appearances to arrive at the heart of the matter. They emerge, always after some struggle, transformed and closer (Gleiser, 2011).

The rupture is repaired. They rehearse. The coronation goes well. After more completely expressing his rage and standing up to the Archbishop, stopping him from replacing Logue, with new confidence Bertie finds his voice and truly becomes King George VI—inside and out.

When, with Logue’s assistance, the King successfully gives his first wartime radio broadcast, there is a sense of his truly embodying his Kingship. It seems apparent that his relationship with Lionel as his “true other” is what enables him to succeed. When he is nervously waiting in the broadcast booth, getting ready to go on the air, Lionel says to him, “Forget everything else and just say it to me. Say it to me as a friend,” as he looks at him with steady, calm, AEDP signature eye contact. With concerted effort and Lionel in front of him encouraging and directing him like a symphony conductor, King George VI gives his best speaking performance to date. “Isn’t this the essence of a True Other? ... Something in the patient brings forward in the True Other exactly what the patient needs on some level, and then the patient feels ‘met’ or ‘seen’” (Benau, 2010).

The King is met with enthusiastic congratulations and applause from Churchill, the Archbishop and others as he leaves the recording studio and makes his way to a balcony at Buckingham Palace, from which he and his family greet his appreciative subjects. It is during his procession from the recording studio to the balcony that we start to see a sense of mastery — “I did it!” in him, glimmers of joy, pride and confidence emerging, and shame being undone (Fosha, 2009).

In between his speech and appearing on the balcony, the King says, “Thank you, Logue”, puts his hand on Lionel’s shoulder and says, “Well done, *my friend*.” In this moment, we see the healing affects of gratitude and tenderness expressed toward the other (Fosha, 2009), i.e. Logue. The Queen approaches him and with heartfelt appreciation says, “Thank you, *Lionel*,” amazingly calling him by his first name. The barriers of social class have now been broken and they have truly accepted each other into their hearts and

minds.

The ongoing deepening of their connection is further indicated in the movie's epilogue:

King George VI made Lionel Logue a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order in 1944.

This high honour from a grateful King made Lionel part of the only order of chivalry that specifically rewards acts of personal service to the Monarch.

Lionel was with the King for every wartime speech.

Lionel and Bertie remained friends for the rest of their lives.

No, Lionel Logue was not a psychotherapist. And, as the movie reveals, he wasn't even a certified speech therapist. He was an aspiring actor who taught elocution lessons, responded to pleas for help from returned soldiers with speech impediments, listened to their experiences with an open heart and mind and developed a method for successfully treating people that was applicable to other populations, and was way ahead of its time. Bowlby was alive then, practicing in London, but attachment theory had not yet been born.

But what seems most important, deeply touching and ultimately transformative is that Lionel Logue fully embodied a "true other," including an ability to repair relationship disruption. And to him, I offer a heartfelt "virtual head bow" (Yeung, 2011) of humble respect.

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