

**And Then She Laughed: Counseling Women**

by Sylvia Estrada Claudio (2015). Pasig, Anvil. 184 pp. PhP 340. ISBN 9789712731556

Reviewed by Margaret Helen Udarbe-Alvarez, Silliman University.  
E-mail: cas.malvarez@yahoo.com

As a teacher of clinical psychology, I always take pains to explain abnormality without putting my students in a panic. Because we discuss very human situations, we inevitably find ourselves resonating with many of these and begin to think we are symptomatic or “abnormal”, much like the medical student who, on learning about a new disease, begins to think he or she has it. Every now and then, reading *And Then She Laughed* (2015), you might find yourself wondering if you’re depressed or if you had been psychologically abused and just didn’t know it. And then, yes, the self-reflection might be distressing.

A bit of anxiety is good, to be sure. However, I believe that the purpose of this book is intended to go in a positive direction; otherwise, it would not have been written. After years of clinical practice, especially in the helping professions, everyone needs a grounding of sorts, and this book is the product.

The author Sylvia Estrada Claudio MD PhD has a background in both medicine and psychology, along with years of counseling practice. Her counselees have been adult women in the majority, although she has also had male counselees, including gay and bisexual men, as well as children. The more common counseling issues have revolved around surviving and healing from rape, sexual harassment, abuse in intimate relationships, and depression (these are chapter titles in her book, by the way). These concerns are toxic and, for many, everyday struggles that the counselor or therapist listens to and lives through as she models survival and healing to her counselees. Thus, the need to ground oneself.

I am amazed at how well the author has done this—from the setting of her clinical practice and the person of the therapist, to the

many issues of concern brought to her attention, expertly weaving in what she learned from textbooks and the classroom with many take-home points from actual clinical experience. For the professional in particular, Dr Sylvia Estrada-Claudio very realistically tells you to accept your limitations, as she did. With a sense of relief, you find you can unburden yourself of the pressure to always know and do what is right, for she did not always know. "And then she laughed," then becomes a celebration of sorts.

When we watch movies, we get into the habit of waiting for the scene at which the title of the film is spoken by one of the characters. It usually does not occur until past halfway into the film. Thus, I did not expect for this book's title to have an explanation so early in the book, let alone in the prologue. One of the reasons why psychotherapy practice can be exhausting and emotionally draining is that we rarely, if ever, get feedback from our counselees on whether or not we are doing good by them, or if we have helped them in some way. I had a counselee with clinical depression who had previous attempts at suicide; we had weekly sessions for over three years. Whenever he missed an appointment, it was usually because of a trip out of town which he would have previously told me about. Then, he suddenly stopped seeing me. I actually looked out for local news on deaths and such until one day, on my way into the building where my clinic was, I met him at the elevator on his way out. He was smiling and in good spirits, saying he might come in to see me some time. And then he didn't. I would like to think I helped him in his healing. More than likely, it would have been a combination of many factors. The point is, most of the time, we don't really know if we have helped someone through our presence and intervention.

The author's narrative in the prologue of her book of how her counselee got lost getting to her clinic, but laughing over the experienced freedom of being lost but independent, gives one a peek into the exhilaration we can feel in helping. I daresay the words found themselves into the title of this book because the author wished to paradoxically express both the seriousness and gravity of counseling women (after which one can laugh), as well as its necessity of purpose (it will happen with someone else's help).

Throughout the book, one is invited to know the person of the

therapist, from which Dr Claudio has developed her own approach to counseling and psychotherapy. I'm excited because, while no two counselors ever develop personality and approach to life in the exact same way, the problems they are faced with in the counseling setting are very similar and, despite our feelings of helplessness, resolvable. This makes this book one for the counselor who is stuck or experiencing some kind of existential crisis in her chosen career. The author tells you this book is not meant to be a teaching tool—it is neither a book on theory nor an attempt to guide others to develop clinical skills. But in the telling of her own counseling experiences, the clinician in training nevertheless gains so much.

Some of the author's significant learnings that could be ours as well include the following:

- It is not our wellness that is at stake here, it is the counselee's.
- Luckily enough we have a strong women's movement in this country. Often we have so many groups and issues we quarrel among ourselves. But there is one thing that unites us. When a woman says she was raped, we believe her.
- An emphasis on the human aspects of our work would make it clear that it is also our professional responsibility to be aware of emerging ethical guidelines that help us teach, cure, and work in a more humane way.
- It is said that the difference between a counselor and a friend, is that the counselor must confront a person with the problems, mistakes, and the tasks they need to undertake for their learning, healing, and happiness.
- Children from a variety of family formations, including LGBT families, grow up happy, healthy, and socially responsible.
- The successful psychotherapeutic relationship is a special one because it is uneven in a good way.

The meditation chapters on professionalism and power, on love, intimacy, and families, on depression, and on love and sexuality, are especially useful because the author discusses these issues from the standpoint of experience and in light of the limitations of classroom learning.

More importantly, however, this is a book for those whose problems these are. The author addresses women's concerns, no matter

where they might be at the time—the woman deep in a relationship struggle who has not sought help, the person in the process of healing, and even individuals closest to these women who might not be aware they are in a problematic situation. But the author herself cautions against dependence on self-help books for they “are missing the most important aspects of psychological healing that involves the help and support of other human beings, whether these are friends, relatives or a professional.”

There are numerous other caveats throughout the book (“I am not against motherhood, nor do I discount its importance,” “I am not ‘objective’.” “Most of the work I do is cognitive-emotional.” “I am an agnostic.” “I do not advise women to leave their relationships as a ‘solution’.”) Sometimes I felt that they were unnecessary, but I find that the author has stayed true to her experiences in the field and there must have been times when she had to explain herself. This is one of the reasons I saw this book as a grounding—a context and a reminder. This was about the person as professional, no presumption of authority except over her own self, and yet reflecting in the end her expertise. Gentle, but firm. No nonsense with a touch of humor. Needless to say, everyone in clinical practice, LGBT psychologist or otherwise, needs to do this kind of grounding. This book shows you how to do just that.