

TERMINATION

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Partir, c'est mourir un peu. (Anonymous French author).

To leave is to die a little. Sadness and joy, peaceful and stormy days, tearing pains of growth, heady feelings of success, loved one perhaps not to be seen again, havens which have provided safety and from which one must now venture forth—we leave so much behind and take with us only memories, sometimes a newly acquired strength. The shores of the new world are still indistinct, a promise of hope, a felt excitement, but also an unknown threat, a possibility of failure. Yet, forth we go.

To terminate therapy may, sometimes, be even more difficult for the client knows that the gap he has left behind will soon be filled; he or she also knows that this process is inevitable and part of reality. It is difficult to maintain one's belief in the uniqueness of the relationship when a similar relationship will, no doubt, be established with another person. The leaving, then, becomes not only sad and exciting but tinged with self-doubts and anger, as anger that more painful that it has no realistic target.

Lest it may sound as if I am describing a one-sided phenomenon, let me quickly add that it is not so. When a client terminates therapy, my sadness at losing a friend, my joy and pride in witnessing a happiness to which I contributed, are often mixed with a fleeting bitterness and envy at the thought that others will, from now on, acquire the importance which I had in that fellow human's life.

The transferential nature of these feelings is, of course, evident. I often wondered, however, whether insight into the transference and counter-transference at termination is always essential, sometimes even necessary. Could it, perhaps, be sufficient for both client and therapist to simply experience and accept these feelings as a meaningful part of life? What follows is the transcript of a session with Anne (the session before last) and the manner in which we dealt with termination.

The goal was simply to help Anne get in touch with the totality of what she was experiencing, the fear of remoteness blocking the anger, the anger hiding the love, and finally the love and the acceptance of termination as a part of life and a part of growth. The technique used combined the "letter-writing" attributed to Sacks (1974) and the "hot seat" which has come to be associated with Perls and which is derived from Moreno's "empty chair."

Anne's social history and dynamics are not important. Suffice it to say that she came for therapy as a college junior because of academic difficulties and problems of an interpersonal nature. We met weekly for approximately two years with the exception of Christmas, Easter and summer holidays. Two weeks after the session transcribed below, Anne graduated with honors and returned to her home state.

Anne I don't know . . . I . . . don't feel towards you as I did last week. I am scared. I feel closed . . . like hard to communicate. I really don't know what's the matter with me.

Therapist Okay, Anne. Write me a letter and, in the letter, try to tell me what it is you are experiencing now. Just ramble on, as you have done before.

Anne Dear Dr. Naar, I was sitting here and, all of a sudden, I felt really scared (pause) and I feel like I am not ready to . . . you know . . . to leave yet. I feel so afraid. I feel like a little, little kid. You know . . . I want to run to you and hold on to you (sigh).

Therapist (Very softly) What do you feel now?

Anne (Very deep sigh) I guess I feel . . . I guess I feel . . . lonely (cries) and afraid. I don't know.

Therapist I want to ask you to do one more thing. Imagine that you have a dialogue with me and that I just received your letter. I want you to be me and answer.

Anne Okay. I know what you mean (pause). I just feel that I want to (as know . . . Well, I do know that you are always there (cries softly) herself)

Anne Well, I am and if you need to come back you can.

(as therapist)

Therapist What are you experiencing just now? You heard what I just said.

Anne Well, I, I feel relieved.

Therapist What else?

Anne Well, I think that . . . I don't know. Because I know that you always are going to be here . . . I close up or something . . . I don't know.

Therapist All right. Listen again. (Therapist plays on the tape recording 3 or 4 consecutive times, Anne's last statement while role-playing the therapist "Well, I am and if you need to come back, you can.") Tell me now what you are feeling.

Anne As soon as you say that . . . As soon as I know that . . . I don't know, I push it away. I don't believe it or something. (long pause) It's like I avoid . . . I don't want to think about it anymore. I have to know that you are there but I won't, like, face it or something.

- Therapist Now, switch chairs and be me.
- Anne (In a much more assertive tone of voice) Anne, come on! Stop (as therapist) turning away from me! You know you can do it if you would just try. You know, stop fighting it.
- Anne I want to but I can't. It's like what happened in here the other (as herself) day. There is a part of me that really wants to open up. There, there is another part that pulls me back and just does not want to open up.
- Therapist (softly) Can you add something to that or change it a little bit? Like, there is a part of me that wants to trust you and a part of me that finds it very difficult.
- Anne Yeah, that is right . . . (sigh)
- Therapist And when I am sitting there and say that you can come back at any time . . .
- Anne Part of me is really glad to hear that, you know . . .
- Therapist And part of you says . . .
- Anne Yeah, I know, I know . . .
- Therapist And what else?
- Anne It's just what you say to everybody and all that . . .
- Therapist Yeah, yeah, tell me that.
- Anne (In her imaginary dialogue with the therapist) I don't believe you, because (pause) you say that to everybody. That's your job. And when I go, you know, somebody else will be coming here, and when they go, somebody else after that (pause). You know, you must have said that to so many people and you will.
- Therapist Now switch chairs and be me.
- Anne You know, I almost can be two you's. You know. I can say (playing the therapist) "No, you know it's really you. I really like you and . . . (cries softly) and when you leave, I, I'll feel like I'll really lose something."
- Therapist Now, be the other me.
- Anne You would say the same thing. Only, you just wouldn't mean it.
- Therapist All right. What would I say if I meant what I said?
- Anne You would say . . . I just can't imagine you saying it.
- Therapist Say it anyway.
- Anne Okay. You would say "Well, yes, of course, you know I'll forget you. Everybody forgets everything . . . you know . . . life goes on."
- Therapist (softly) Now can you put the two together? The two of me that you played, together. Blend them into one.
- Anne (sigh) I really care about you and I'll really miss you but (long (as therapist) pause—very softly) life goes on.

Therapist Yes, Anne, you are right. I do like you very much. And I will miss you so very much . . . But life goes on . . .

For those who care, Anne's new shores kept their promise of hope. Five months after her departure, I received a letter from her, excerpts of which are cited below. Her letter moved me very much and showed me that, if she is so very alive in my memory, I have not been forgotten either.

“. . . It is so hard to express in words what I, somehow, am experiencing. I guess, I am just finally growing up. I want to tell you that, sometimes, I feel as if very gradually I'm relaxing. I'm starting to loosen up and enjoy myself—it's like I'm coming *into* myself if you know what I mean. I'm still watching things too much, thinking too much and not just experiencing, but I feel as though things are getting better all the time. It just seems to take so long. It's as if I can't push myself, I just have to let myself feel whatever I feel and go on that. This is all so abstract but I know you understand what I am saying—I'm never really sure if there really *is* any direction to all this—whether I am really growing—or whether that is just another passing thing. I *feel* life and growth and strength, sometimes, but other times, I feel all caught up and hopelessly trapped in the same old problems, compulsive games, etc., etc. What I *am* learning is how to just ride the wave and take what comes. Is there a core, an essence somewhere deep inside of me that *is* me, and that is strong and alive? I *think* so, or rather, I *feel* so. I think about our Saturdays together and things I discovered about myself with you, and it is real, it is not an invention. I guess what I'm leading up to, Dr. Naar, is that I want to thank you for helping me start to relax my grip on things and open up to life. It was so important, (is so important) to me that you care about me and accept me and listen to me no matter what . . .”

REFERENCE

Sacks, J. *The letter*, see p. 184-190 in this issue.