

Most Remarkable Move

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The rectangular Waiting Room
was about eight by fifteen feet;
it had a long narrow hallway
beginning at the left side, which
led along down to my office door.

There were several chairs set
along the two longer walls,
only two of which I could see
as I looked up the hallway
when I came out of my office.

Most clients did not wait for me
in those two chairs. I would walk
up the hall, greet the waiting client,
who would then follow me
back down the hall to my office.

One young woman, age nineteen,
was so afraid to come for therapy
that her father came with her
for her first therapy session;
he then left after a few minutes
when she felt safe alone with me.

She didn't speak readily,
so I allowed for silence,
only gently asking questions,
and gauging the pace of
my verbal communication
by how much she would say.

She was facing the last year
of college, and was uncertain
what to do after graduation—
torn between getting a menial job
for a year to gain social confidence
or to pursue a Master of Fine Arts.

Her mother, organized and resolute,
her father passive and withdrawn,
left her falling short of mother
and identifying with father;
afraid to speak up to mother,
disliking being like father.

This parental environment
provided very little safe space
to explore and define herself,
to express her feelings or interests,
her questions or her needs for help,
to be loved and valued as herself.

Her mother called her independent,
but actually left her on her own,
which left her feeling very lonely,
questioning her lovability and value,
and feeling conflicted about
trying to connect or express herself.

As is usual in such a family,
she survived by seeing herself
as the problem, as did her parents,
though fortunately the father
was also in psychotherapy,
acknowledging he had issues too.

She accepted his lead in seeking
help outside the family system.
She spoke of being afraid to talk
outside of her home, and of being
afraid to show her Art in school,
fearing it would be criticized.

In the second session with me,
in the context of telling me
that her mother doesn't listen
nor patiently support her
and that her father became distant
when she entered high school,

she said that she wishes she could
just say what she thinks and feels.
“You’ve come to the right place,”
I thought, a safe place apart from
external influence, and where I
was interested in her inner world.

She said that verbalizing things
makes you weaker, and that
showing her Art makes her
vulnerable to criticism;
and that even positive feedback
ends up feeling like an expectation.

These dual fears of criticism
or disappointing expectations
left her afraid to speak or act,
afraid to expose her creations
even to herself, sometimes detaching,
or seeing her work as contrived.

Gradually, over the next two summers,
she talked to me more and more.
She explored the whole range
of topics and emotions
appropriate to her age, about
her family and being in college:

a former friend growing distant;
a boy she felt ambivalent about;
her mother disapproving of
a photoshopping job she liked;
her two younger sisters each
unique and different from her.

She was gradually defining herself—
by sharing her beliefs and feelings;
by comparing herself to other
people, family members, peers;
by telling me extended family history,
by expressing her negative feelings.

Then one day it happened:
a most remarkable thing!
I came routinely out of my office,
intending to walk up the hall,
and there she was! Sitting in
a chair where she could see me!

She had always sat around the corner,
which—consistent with her shyness—
had given her time to hear me coming
and to prepare herself to be seen.
She had needed time to prepare for
the intimacy of eye to eye contact.

My heart thrilled to see her there!
It was a huge move,
seemingly small, but conveying
so much of what had happened
between us: that she could
be close to me and still be herself!

That she could navigate the
closeness and distance between us
with more confidence and ease,
even anticipate being with me
for a time. She even smiled, and
forever after waited in that chair.

Her father was a Christian pastor
of a quite conservative church,
expecting unquestioning assent
to detailed prescribed beliefs.
I was impressed by her courage
in sharing her doubts with me.

She knew that I was also a pastor,
but she had experienced and come
to trust that I was interested in her
own beliefs, and that questions
were a way of defining and
consolidating her unique identity.

She was motivated and insightful,
able to make connections between
her current struggles and their
roots in her family dynamics.
But we both wondered if there
might be something organic also.

After consulting with a peer,
I decided to tell her that she may
have what was called Asperger's.
She was actually relieved; she felt
more fully known; said, "whatever
it's called, I still must get on."

Before the diagnosis, she said she felt
like she was in a race with other people
and that she was losing. Afterwards,
some pressure was off, but she still
wants to practice communicating;
get a job; do one new thing a day.

She postponed getting her MFA;
decided to live with her parents—
with some shame about that; but
to look for a non-demanding job,
thus freeing her to build her portfolio;
and to keep looking for her passion.

Eventually she left, as all clients must;
saying Goodbye, but without a hug.
I'm guessing she's doing fine
as she finds her way in life—
having defined herself enough,
and saying a healthy goodbye.