

My Father, My Client:  
The Hidden Power and Influence  
of the Therapist's Family of Origin on Clinical Work

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We've all had clients who remind us of our parents or siblings, sometimes positively, but most often not. The father who stands by while his wife verbally abuses their children; the mother so depressed, she cannot see past herself to her teenaged son sliding into a drug haze; the woman who resents her sister for being the good child, receiving praise for doing all the right things while she struggled, unseen, just to get out of bed and go to school every day. We've heard it all. This is the stuff that makes up our clients' lives but also our own. However, sometimes the similarity to our own lives and the issues our clients bring up in us are not so obvious, and the simple yet critical question, "How does this client remind you of your mother, father, sister, brother, etc.?" is just not enough. It doesn't get our attention in a way that takes us deep within ourselves to have a profound and lasting impact. Like so much else in life, we have to experience this question the hard way to truly learn the lessons embedded in the remarkable opportunities our work presents us. Just such an opportunity came my way earlier this year in the form of a client named "Andrew."

Handsome, intelligent and charming, Andrew has been sober about two years. Recently retired and in his late sixties, he struggles with staying in or ending his third marriage of ten years. Now that he is not drinking, he sees his wife and himself as basically incompatible. He appreciates her as a good, loving woman but doubts either of them can be happy in their marriage any longer. Yet he can't bring himself to actually end the marriage. He doesn't want

to hurt his wife, admit failure, or be the bad guy. All his life, he has been haunted by fears of being worthless, using achievement and endurance to prove he is anything but. If he divorces for the third time, he is certain his inherent worthlessness will be confirmed once and for all. So he hangs in there, tolerating his boredom, avoiding sexual intimacy, going to AA meetings, and staying preoccupied with his books and the Internet.

When asked how he's doing, Andrew flashes a dazzling smile, saying, "Oh, I'm fine." When asked about his marriage, he shrugs, saying "It's okay." When I bring up his impoverished childhood with an abusive, alcoholic father, he often responds, "It could have been worse." When asked what he wants to do about his marriage, usually he just stares at me, looking bewildered. Then he launches into an intellectualized portrayal of his life and dilemma, complete with minute details and vivid descriptions, almost void of any emotion except for those we might call "positive." No sadness. No anger. Mostly good-natured resolve. Despite my use of person-centered, insight-oriented, and cognitive-behavioral therapies, our sessions were always ending the same with Andrew being appreciative but not obviously closer to his feelings nor to deciding what to do. He seemed frustrated, and I'm afraid I probably seemed this way to him as well.

Andrew trusts me and wants my help, but we've hit a wall. So I took this case to my peer supervision group which gathers monthly at the Satir Institute of the Southeast in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Under the guidance of Jean McLendon, LCSW, who studied for years with Virginia Satir, we study the Satir Growth Model and practice its application to our work. We began this particular session with a family sculpting of the relationship Andrew and I share. I chose a male colleague to play Andrew, having him stand with his arms outstretched to suggest his openness but with locked knees, representing his resistance. Jean suggested I interact with

my sculpted client as me the therapist. Easy enough. I linked arms with him, demonstrating our excellent rapport and strong alliance. We made eye contact and smiled at each other. Then I tried to get the sculpted Andrew to move with me, to walk across the room, but he silently refused. I gently pulled on his arm, encouraging him, but he didn't move. Of course, he never stopped smiling broadly or nodding, suggesting he intended to come with me, but he never budged an inch.

“This is exactly what it feels like now,” I said. “Andrew appears to want my help, but I can't seem to move him.” Jean asked me how I felt, and I thought for a few seconds and then said, “Inadequate.” Now, this is not something I feel as a therapist much any more after twenty-one years of experience, and I felt embarrassed to be saying it in a roomful of my colleagues. But we're all there to learn, right?

Then Jean asked me do a sculpting of my childhood relationship with my father. My stomach tightened and my heart quickened. She was on to something, but had anyone asked me minutes earlier if Andrew reminded me of my father, I would have said, “Well, sure, in some ways. They're both successful businessmen, they're both basically sweet-natured, and they're both alcoholics. But my father never quit drinking, was not nearly as gregarious as Andrew, and to my knowledge, never seriously considered ending his only marriage to my mother.” Then why my anxiety with this proposed role play?

I chose a tall, sweet fellow to play my father and a petite, dark-haired woman to play me. I placed him into a position almost identical to the sculpted Andrew except I pulled my colleague's shoulders into a slump. This was important. My father was more obviously burdened than Andrew. I placed the woman on the floor on her knees, pulling on my father's hand. When I looked at the fellow playing my father, I was struck by how well he portrayed

being defeated. I was equally amazed at how the woman on the floor radiated hope and a desire to be helpful as she clung to and jiggled my sculpted father's hand.

Jean asked me to describe what I saw. "I'm trying to reach my father, to get him to come alive, to step out of his shell," I said, the first hint of sadness choking my voice.

She asked me to step back over to sculpted Andrew, to tell him how hard I'm working for him. I did, but it made no difference. He smiled but stayed firmly planted in his spot. I gently challenged his tendency to intellectualize. I told him I knew about the pain he had hidden inside, that in order to get unstuck, he needed to feel his feelings. I was there to help him, wanted him to trust me. I told him all the things I wanted to say to the real Andrew, but no luck. He remained unmoved, speaking for the first time. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I really am fine." The same frustration I had felt so many times in my sessions with Andrew flooded through me.

Next, Jean asked me to step away from Andrew and interact with my father-daughter sculpture again. I offered words of support to the little girl who continued to tug on her father's hand. I implored him to admit his sadness and frustration, to embrace his life as his own, to see his daughter and acknowledge how hard she is working for him, for them, for the whole family. But he, like sculpted Andrew, remained unmoved. He said he didn't know what to do, he thought he *was* making contact. What did I want from him? I told him I wanted him to acknowledge the little girl and to tell her how he felt. Jean asked him if his life was as hard as it looked. He replied, "It's painful." My eyebrows shot up. "My life is painful," he repeated. This word surprised me, but deep down inside, I knew it was true.

"Painful how?" I asked.

“It’s painful to work so hard,” he said in a weary voice, “to be addicted to alcohol, to not be able to tell you or anyone how I really feel, to see you reaching out to me but not knowing how to reach back.” My heart jumped to my throat. This was not how I expected this role play to go. I’d participated in role plays before in my own therapy. The players I created always reflected only my pain, not that of others.

Then the little girl pulled on her father’s hand again, and when I looked at her, I saw she was crying. Jean asked me what I needed to do. Without hesitation, I knelt down beside her, taking her hands in mine. The words flowed out of me right along with my own tears.

“You’re just a little girl,” I whispered. “You’re working so hard and you shouldn’t have to. You deserve to be free to play and just be a kid. You love your daddy so much, but you can’t save him. It’s not your job.”

I looked up at my sculpted father. His eyes brimmed with tears and he nodded. Regret and grief washed over me like an enormous wave. “I know you want another chance,” I said to the little girl. “Another chance to do it again and get it right. Another chance for your father and your whole family.”

The woman playing me wept as though I were telling her story and not my own.

“Your father loves you,” I continued, meeting her brown eyes with my own, “but he can’t see what you’re trying to do. He doesn’t understand how much it hurts you for him to be distracted and depressed. He doesn’t know how to feel his true feelings, and you can’t make him. He loves you though, and all you really have to do is love him back.”

Jean suggested I affirm the little girl, so I told her I loved her for her courage and her big heart and I was sorry she thought she had to work so hard as a child. She and I stood up, and I asked my sculpted father to embrace her. He did so, and then remembering something from my

childhood, I asked him to pick her up so her feet were off the floor, the way my father used to hug me. He did and as they hugged, I began to cry harder. I cried for the little girl in me who just wanted to be loved. I cried for my father who grew up poor but who endured and achieved his whole life, whom I realized hid his own pain behind his shell of distraction and through cheerful drunkenness. I cried with a new understanding of how much he loved me anyway.

And then something I dare to call miraculous happened. The fellow playing my father set down the woman playing me, and without prompting, scooped me up, my feet just skimming the floor. Instantly, I was transported back into childhood, into my father's arms and could even smell him, his soap and a faint whiff of tobacco. My head swam, my heart pounded in my ears. Then suddenly, the tears stopped. I was back in that room. Self-consciousness hit me, and I wondered how silly I must look to my colleagues. I also worried about being too heavy for this fellow to hold. I tried to wiggle free, but he held on. I don't know who said it, but the words, "Just be still" filled my ears.

I let go and fell deep into my grief, crying again. I told my sculpted father many of the things I never said to my real father who died when he was only sixty-nine, just three days before I was to graduate with my master's degree in counseling and two years before I myself quit drinking. He died years before I began to realize how I had tried to save him and that I couldn't.

"Oh, Daddy, I miss you so much," I whispered. "You worked so hard for all of us and I never got to really thank you. You always tried to be kind and gentle, and I never thought about how difficult that might have been for you when you were sometimes so sad yourself. I'm so sorry your life was painful. I never knew."

"It's okay," my sculpted father replied.

But that was not enough for me. “I’m sorry you died so young,” I said, “that you never got to experience recovery. That’s something we could have shared. I could have taken you to AA with me.”

And then I stopped. Hearing my own words, I realized, despite many years of therapy, I was still trying to reach my father, save him actually, twenty-one years after his death. As I came back into the room and to that moment in time, I got it in a way I never had before: I would never have another chance with him. He was gone. I needed to say good-bye, to let him go. I needed it to be enough to know how much we loved each other and be content with that memory. It was time to release the fantasy, once and for all, of how it could have been had I been able to save him.

“Bye, Daddy,” I said. “I’ll always miss you. You were a good father.”

“And you were a good daughter,” my sculpted father replied. And then he set me down.

I stood there for about a minute, gathering myself back up, feeling the support of all my colleagues in the room who had witnessed and shared my experience. Then Jean led me back to the sculpted Andrew, who quite frankly, I had forgotten all about. Seeing him standing there, still smiling, arms outstretched, I knew what I needed to do.

Jean asked which tools from the Self-esteem Tool Kit Andrew and I needed. Without a second thought, I chose two red, stuffed hearts, giving one to him and keeping one for myself. We each held our stuffed hearts in front of our real hearts, and I began.

“Andrew,” I said, looking into my colleague’s eyes, pretending they were the eyes of my client, “I’m sorry I’ve been pushing you towards what I thought you needed to do. I apologize for trying to get you to feel your feelings and make a decision so I could feel good about myself as a therapist, so I could feel adequate and successful.”

I paused and the sculpted Andrew just smiled at me and nodded. No rescue here.

Taking a deep breath, I went on. “I’m sorry I got you mixed up with my father and have been trying to save you rather than just be with you where you are.” Now I was cooking. The words came so easily. It was all so clear. Shaking my red, stuffed heart a little, I said, “I really do want to reach you, for your heart to make contact with mine so you will feel cared about and safe enough to open up, to go beyond your stories to tell me how you feel. So I promise to just be with you in the future, to honor the pace you choose to take on your journey, and to respect you enough to know I don’t need to save you because you can save yourself.”

With a deep sigh, he said, “Thank you. That’s all I need right now, a safe place to be while I learn to feel my feelings as I figure out what to do.” Then we embraced.

As I drove home that night, I felt new in my own skin, the way we do after a profound, cathartic experience. We think the world is going to be different, look changed, but it is we who are changed. It is the person behind our eyes who has been transformed, not the world on the outside. I had reentered my grief for my father and for my childhood spent doing cartwheels to get his attention and make him happy. This was not, in itself, new territory. I have spent many hours revisiting my family of origin and consciously healing wounded aspects of my life, but this experience changed me in a different way.

Over the days that followed, I felt sad and missed my father but discovered I was also filled with a new compassion for him. My memories were softer. It was as though I had seen inside my father, gotten a peek at what our family life had been like for him. Surprisingly though, I didn’t feel guilty. I found I had a new compassion for myself too, really getting that I was just a little girl and that saving my father truly was not my job. It is just a false belief I had taken on along with my role of being the family mascot. We all know how that goes: Make

them smile, give their lives meaning, and they will be saved and we will be loved. While I have known intellectually for a long time that this is a false belief, my experience that night with my Satir study group peeled away several more layers. This realization sank into a core place within me, granting me deeper liberation from my childhood and a richer connection with my father and myself.

But what about Andrew? I'd like to say he has exploded with feelings now that I've found a new way to be with him and has made a firm decision about his marriage and is taking steps. But that's not quite true. It's hard to put into words exactly how my work with Andrew has changed, but it has. The chemistry and energy has shifted. It's less like an enormous ray of sunshine bursting through a dark cloud after a storm and more like the subtle way the light changes on the beach in summer just after the sun goes down. Nothing dramatic has happened, but the difference is notable - the haze is gone, the water is more blue, the sand whiter, and the world appears clearer.

The first time Andrew and I met after my Satir study session, I let go of my need to be productive and just relaxed. I engaged him in a gentler way, with no particular goal, and before the session was over, he had disclosed more to me about his father and his childhood than he had in all the months prior, revealing some very shocking details. In a subsequent session, he spoke more honestly about his unhappiness in his marriage, using the word "trapped" for the first time. I made the connection between his feeling trapped in his marriage and how he must have felt as a child but suppressed the urge to say it. If it's true, Andrew will discover it in his own time, and it will have more meaning than if I tell him. He chastised himself for waffling, calling himself a "coward" for not making a decision. I fought my impulse to reassure him he is not a coward but is simply human and instead, just let him know that no matter how long it takes him to decide

what to do, I will be there with him. We'll walk the path together, and in time, he'll know just what to do and how. The expression on Andrew's face was one I've not seen before. Relief? Deeper trust? Connection?

Overall, Andrew spends less time now intellectualizing and provides me with much fewer unnecessary tiny details. I suspect he is letting go of these defense mechanisms because he feels safer, and he feels safer because I am meeting him where he is and just being with him. I have let go of my need for him to behave differently in our sessions and towards his marriage, and he is reflecting this change in me. Until I made this transition, I fear I was simply another strong-willed person, like his wife and father, who wanted him to be different and for whom he thought he had to perform. Until I experienced how hard I tried to save my father and let this bruised rescue fantasy go, I was bound to try and save Andrew. Until I forgave myself for trying to make my father be different so I could feel loved, I was destined to continue this painful pattern in some shape or form with Andrew and any of my clients.

Helen Keller said, "Life is a succession of lessons which must be lived in order to be understood." As someone who could neither hear nor see, she must have learned many, maybe most, of her life lessons from the inside out. A colleague could have reminded me of what I needed to do with Andrew, or I could have read it in a book. It's neither complicated nor new. We hear it all the time. Meet your clients where they are. Accept them for who they are. We think we do it. I know I did. But because I lived this lesson with my whole self, not just my head or even my heart, and let the truth of it settle into my cells, bones, and spirit, it was transformative for me, a lesson paving the way to deeper understanding of myself and others and a more profound appreciation of the work I am honored to do.

So there it is. The lesson is in the experience. By experiencing myself in relationship with my father that night, I learned something I would have sworn I already knew. Our clients simply want from us exactly what my father and I wanted and what I believe we all want - to be seen and heard for who we are, to be acknowledged for the hard work we do as human beings on this earth, to be met exactly where we are and not turned into what someone else wants us to be for any reason, and to be given the support we need to save ourselves. It is within this safe space of acceptance, respect, and love, a sacred space really, that we heal and grow. Regardless of technique or modality, professional orientation or theoretical grounding, this is the very least we can do for our clients and the very best we can give them.