

Reflections of a Midlife Lesbian Feminist Therapist

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SUMMARY. In this paper the author evaluates her own work as a lesbian feminist psychotherapist from a critical perspective. Using the work of Kitzinger and Perkins, Carter Heyward and Samuel Sandweiss, she suggests that psychotherapy, as constructed today, has become primarily behavioral, cognitive, apolitical, and disconnected from its original purposes. After describing her own midlife spiritual crisis she details, through journal entries, a journey toward a deeper and more absorbed state of mental health. The author then questions how a therapist might utilize techniques drawn from spiritual and body work practices that might help a client find a place inside that is more soul healing, rather than just of the mind. [Article copies available from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-342-9678.]

INTRODUCTION

I have been a practicing therapist for the last 25 years. Since the early 1980s I have also identified as a feminist therapist and have

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practiced what I consider to be ethical and political psychotherapy. In addition, I teach and write in the areas of feminism, therapy and international women's concerns. In all my years of practice I have also been in and out of therapy to work on my own issues. In the course of my own personal work I have experienced couples counseling, group therapy, work on eating disorders, individual psychotherapy, and various models of growth-oriented therapy. My therapy helped me to deal with being married, coming out, the breakup of two long-term relationships and other very painful and deep intrapsychic issues. Most of that time I thought that I was getting help as well as helping countless clients who came my way.

Now at the age of 50 I have come to evaluate my therapy, as a therapist and as a recipient of care, in a different and more critical manner. I see that most of that work, be it with psychologists, social workers, or psychiatrists, tends to be behavioral and cognitively directed. I find that this orientation no longer works for me. In fact, I might say, that it really probably never did work. I changed during the course of therapy as much as a result of time and situational changes as the result of therapy. I believe that this can also be said of the work I did with clients.

Recently there has been a spate of books published critiquing the current state of feminist therapy. Books like Kitzinger and Perkins' *Changing Our Minds: Lesbian Feminism and Psychology* (1993) and Carter Heyward's *When Boundaries Betray Us: Beyond Illusions of What Is Ethical in Therapy and Life* (1993) all call into question the nature of feminist therapy today. I find that I am asking myself similar questions, ones which I would like to explore in this paper. These books argue that feminist therapy has lost its political and ethical roots and that for lesbians seeking personal and social change, we are in fact doing a disservice. I would go further and argue that we might also have lost our sense of connectedness with each other and that there is a lack of connection to the deeper and more spiritual aspects of working with people. This connectedness is far more absorbing than is the cognitive or behavioral form of therapy that most of us have had the experience of practicing.

CURRENT CRITIQUE OF FEMINIST THERAPY

Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins (1993) are stirring up quite a controversy with the publication of the book *Changing Our Minds*. In that most provocative book they argue that feminist therapy has become apolitical and has lost its roots. Instead, feminists who were once quite critical of psychology have now given up their skepticism and have substituted "personal explanations for political ones." They have disguised "real material oppression as emotional disturbance." What was once a rebellious language of lesbian feminism has been coopted by the profession of psychology. Words like "power," "freedom," and "liberation" once had meanings that went beyond the individual. Now they are individualistic. They are about freeing the inner child, feeling empowered in one's own life, liberating oneself from bad relationships or seeing the pathology of one's family of origin. Whatever happened to real liberation, power and freedom?, they ask. To them lesbian therapy has become a tool of victimization and "cooling out" of political action.

They also argue that lesbian therapy has undermined the nature of lesbian friendship and community. Once we turned to our sisters, our friends. We built networks that supported us in our pain and sought to create alternative communities, to counter the dominant social forces. Now we seek the therapist to clean up our lives and, in turn, therapy pathologizes us. What were once normal life occurrences, breakups, sadness, feeling badly, are now unhealthy. In fact, they argue, it is hard for lesbians to remember that unhappiness is a normal part of life.

Carter Heyward's book *When Boundaries Betray Us: Beyond Illusions of What Is Ethical in Therapy and in Life* (1993) criticizes feminist therapy from the position of that of a client who wants the nature of feminist therapy to change. She believes that therapy is inherently good but is too rigid and boundaried. In a description of her own therapy she had not been able to maintain "empathic connectedness" with her therapist and she felt abandoned and betrayed. She believed that successful therapy would not be too rigid in its imposition of limit setting and that a healthy therapy relationship would allow for intimacy and an authentic emotional connection.

I mention these two books because they are currently being debated in feminist therapy circles and they provide a springboard for me to articulate the arguments that I now have with the very nature of feminist therapy, particularly therapy with lesbians as it has come to be practiced today.

There is also the work of Dr. Samuel Sandweiss which I think is also relevant to my own personal critique of therapy. Dr. Sandweiss is a psychiatrist who began looking at transpersonal psychology in the 1970s. Now, having taken over 17 trips to India to study with his guru Sai Baba, Dr. Sandweiss suggests that western psychology is devoid of any of the elements necessary to bring about true healing in a patient. He argues that there is an extensive amount of work already done on synthesizing psychology and spirituality but that it has never really been seriously integrated into mainstream psychology. He looks to the work of Ernest Becker, Soren Kierkegaard, Arthur Maslow, Otto Rank and Carl Jung for inspiration about the higher states of consciousness, but laments that psychology fails to understand the relationship of higher states of consciousness with the "normal" and "abnormal" mental states with which the field deals.

The work of these authors fairly clearly delineates where I am coming from today. I will tell you the story of my own personal journey, one that began in the summer of 1994, although I now see that it actually began thirty years ago when I rejected organized religion and then became a political activist, atheist, feminist and then lesbian.

MY JOURNEY

In the summer of 1994 I became 50, began menopause, ended a relationship that I had hoped would become a major one in my life and verged on the edge of the worst personal crisis I had had in many years. My friends and I feared for me, so much so that I actually went on medication for awhile, only to develop an agitated depression that was far worse than the original symptoms of sleep problems, suicidal ideation, weight loss and complete despair. I gave up hope. I had done all that I was supposed to do in life. I had two masters degrees and a PhD. I had two published books and

countless articles. I had married, had a wonderful child who was now grown, and I had become a lesbian and had been happily partnered for nine years, until six years ago when my lover left for a client of mine. After that I had experienced dating, being involved with wonderful women and I had traveled extensively. I had gone to Africa, and gone around the world teaching on a ship. I had driven myself cross country, and I had been offered a Fulbright. I owned my own home, I had tenure, and I was chair of my department. I was a valued and trusted colleague. I had dear and wonderful friends, at home and in the world. What more did I want? I had it all.

What I realized in all that pain was that I had had an outer life but what was missing was an inner one. All my life I had felt like a shell of a person. I just filled up my emptiness with experiences, people, degrees and eventually I would feel whole, I thought. Well, it did not work anymore. All those coping skills I had developed no longer worked. I was having a midlife crisis and I saw that it was futile.

Into that abyss a friend's hand came. She told me that I was having a spiritual crisis and she offered to do a healing for me. This friend was a healer who I had scornfully derided for months because she was too "new age." I had insulted her and been amused in my political haughtiness at all her "airy fairy" language and images. But I was in so much pain I grudgingly agreed. The first healing, in which I sat leaned against her, felt warm and loving. I had images of my parents come to me, but nothing I had not experienced before. I felt better and the horrible pain in my chest went away for a day, only to return the next. She then suggested that she knew an excellent breathing healer, who could help me. I was cynical but still in pain. I would try anything, just help me want to get up in the morning and take away the ache in my heart and the gagging in my throat.

I actually thought of going to therapy again and, in fact, had one session with my old therapist, who provided me with charts and diagrams "explaining my pain" and from whence it came. The session did nothing for me and I went away 75 dollars poorer and still aching miserably.

I entered the small office and knew immediately I had come to the right place. The waiting room was decorated with African arti-

facts and collectibles. Six years ago I had gone to Africa after another crisis and had been told there to “go home and heal yourself.” I thought I had done that, but clearly my Africa connection was continuing and there was more work to be done.

A tall, white haired and elegant black man greeted me and took me to a small room where he explained to me what was to occur. He then had me lay on a mat on the floor and began to play the most amazing synthesizer music I have ever heard. He taught me how to breathe through my mouth and out my nose and then guided me through a meditation, using the breathing, the music and his voice. Within minutes I was transmuted! I was taken to places I had never been before. There were visualizations, chants, breathing and images that came forth. He worked me through the chakras and helped me to see and feel the pain within my body. In two hours I cried, quaked and then returned, feeling whole and without pain. I knew that I had to return, to do more of this deep and meaningful work.

A few days later I went back for my second session and the work went deeper and I felt even more hopeful. In that session I realized how I had never felt loved nor did I love myself. I worked on letting go of the people who had to leave me and I finally got to my “core.” I entered a place I had never reached in psychotherapy. I entered my own soul and felt it deeply. I felt a vibration in my body that actually scared me, but I went with it. My body vibrated so frantically that I was afraid I was hyperventilating. My guide soothed my fear and I went deeper. Finally I saw a white light shining through my body and I began to heal. I could not believe what had happened to me. The radical, feminist, atheist, therapist had had a spiritual experience. It was real, no denying what had happened to me. I left the session still vibrating and it took hours for me to return to my normal state, but now without the chest pain, the gagging and the torment.

I went home after that session, committed to finding other ways of continuing this kind of journey. I knew that psychotherapy, with its behavioral and cognitive approach, did not reach where I needed to go. I wasn’t sure how, but I would find a way to experience myself more deeply and to the core I now had an image of.

A few weeks later I called a colleague at work who had been recommended to me for more healing. She taught religious studies

at my college and had opened a meditational retreat center not far from home. I had two sessions with her, in which she did energy work healings. She laid me on a table and worked with the energy flow around me. In the first session my dead parents came to me and told me for the first time that they truly loved me and they brought with them the recently deceased Rebbe Schneerson of the Hasidic order of Judaism. My family name had been Sneierman, of that lineage and heritage. I had long ago rejected all of that, but now with my move toward spirituality it was appropriate that my orthodox family background would return and offer me a path.

In the next session a most wonderful event occurred. The pain in my throat had returned and I still felt somewhat tight in the chest. With more energy work my guide was able to help me move the pain right up to my mouth. I began to gag and cough and gag more. I felt like I was in labor somehow and then all at once I spewed forth something. I was not sure what it was, but my guide said that it was a demon. I called it my "dybbuk," a Yiddish word for devil or demon. Alice moved it out of the room and I began to cry hysterically. After I calmed down we both knew something quite meaningful had happened. I had spewed forth a demon from long ago in my life. At that point I knew that I was ready for even more work, work on my soul, on my spirit, on my deepest self.

THE RETREAT

Alice then suggested that I was ready for a three-day silent meditational retreat on the mountain top of her center. I was apprehensive but I trusted that this guide would offer me what I needed. I felt that she was a messenger for me and that I had to listen to her. I did gird myself, however, once again bringing the *New York Times* and books, just in case I could not handle three days of silence, alone.

The following paragraphs are excerpts from the diary I kept those three days. The journal was the only dialogue that I engaged in, alone on that mountain top, surrounded by birds, gurgling brook, deer, late summer fields and a pond. Alice came to me for a few minutes in the morning and at night; she brought food and practices for me to try. Otherwise I was there, by myself, going inward as far

as I could go. It was there that I was reborn, at 50, finally becoming a whole person.

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Sitting on the deck of my mountain cottage on the first morning of my silent retreat. It has been lovely so far. Alice left me with three things to do: read a few stories about the destruction of the old and going down into the underworld, giving up of the self and dying—metaphorically. I then did a ritual in the moonlight listing all the things I want to let go of and then I burned them while listening to quiet meditational music. It was really quite moving, as I gave up my clutchiness, my fears, anxieties and desperation. The moon was full, the crickets were chirping, the gorge running full with the rain run-off. I wept as I chanted, “my mother, my heart.” I am in a crisis of the soul, a dark night of the spirit and this finally feels like the right way to be dealing with it. Drugs and psychotherapy are not the answer anymore.

LATER: Feeling joy! In the sun, on the deck, listening to wonderful music after a morning of spiritual practice, walking in the woods and being with myself as I never have before. I have been visualizing the chakras, saying goodbye and forgiving those who have left me, and forgiving myself for my own flaws and frailties. Each piece builds on the next, helping me to see the terrains of my life with its oceans, deserts and mountains, all to be dealt with as they come my way. I am happy to be here, glad to be on a new journey of self discovery, glad to know a new part of me—a spiritual self that I never knew was within me. I felt joy at the pond, laying in the clover, listening to the stream. This morning I felt thrilled and awed by the butterfly that lighted on my arm and stayed with me for over an hour. I felt glad for the bird feathers I found and I felt so pleased, once again, to be alive. I have found that elusive self deep within. I am glad for the music playing, for the rushing brook, for the smell of my sweating body, for the flowers around me, for my child, for my friends, my home, my job, my ability to find this calm place within. I have been here before, but fleetingly: sitting by the ocean, in the arms of a lover, swimming, writing. But rarely can I get there for any length of time.

Now I know how to do it. I will return to this safe, absorbed place

deep within me, again and again, now that I have found it. I have never reached this level of happiness, either through therapy or through relationship. This self is now me, deep and lasting. It resides in my chest, a great white light shines over me and surrounds me. I know it sounds silly, but all these things have happened to me in just this one day.

LATER STILL: Now I am to have a dialogue with my divine friend within. The self who has been with me since birth and the only one to walk with me to death. This self knows all about me, all that I know, feel and have gone through. This divine friend is here with me at all times, even when I forget. When I forget I get lonely and it is a reminder to find that friend within again. The loss of that friend leads to that awful existential angst I always experience—the awareness of the ego. When I find that friend I see that she can be loving and can hold me when I need holding. She can love me unconditionally, as I have never been loved before. That divine friend is my lifelong companion. Even when I condemn her, turn my back on her, am mean to her, she puts up with me the way no one else would. She sees me dissipate myself on relationships, run in fear away from myself, she sees me expend lots of money and energy in ways that do not bring the return I deserve. This divine friend says to me: I love you, Elaine, all that you are within and all that you are without, I love you as you are, you need not change a thing, you are whole as you are, you are lovely, kind, and all that I could need in a friend. This divine friend asks me to take better care of myself; to eat well, exercise and choose how I spend my time wisely. Choose your lovers more carefully, she says, and this divine friend asks and entreats me to love myself as she does. She weeps for the pain I have suffered, laughs for the joy I have known and knows that I am loveable, in the way I do not know myself. This divine friend tells me that I can find her whenever I take a breath, this divine friend is always here with me. All I need is to go inward and there she is; for this divine friend is me.

STILL EVEN LATER: Now I must confront my fears and imagine what I am without them, without my body, without my emotions, without my thoughts, without my work, without my personality, without my consciousness. This will be difficult but try I will:

Who am I without my body? I FEAR I am nothing. Without my

body can I exist or is there something beyond this? If I don't believe there is something called energy then I will live in terror. I remember when my mother died there were ways that she came to me many times, long after her death. She has no body but she is still present, often living in my memory, being called forth in my mind's eye. She exists without a body and so would I without mine.

Who am I without my emotions? My emotions often rule me, they tend to determine how I am in the world. Without them perhaps I would be less colorful, interesting and textured as a person. Without them I would be like all the boring people in the world I never wanted to be like. But without them I might still be me, just less pained.

Who am I without my thoughts? This is hard because my thoughts make me an intelligent being and they have helped me develop a whole life and even a career out of them. But they rule me and my emotions. My thoughts become like a trap, they keep me jailed. I remember reading that "the self emerges between two thoughts" and I am trying now to stay between the thoughts so that the self can come forth. This is the state that I am seeking. I prefer this thought-free state, then I just am, existing, breathing, being. To exist in the world empty of thoughts, that would be bliss.

Who am I without my relationships? At one time I thought I was nothing without them, a *lá* the Stone Center thinking about women's identity. To be without a primary relationship meant that I did not exist. Now I know that a primary relationship and friendships are important, they do give meaning. But without them I would function, a bit emptier, but still alive. Without relationships I am still me, nonetheless.

Who am I without my work? This is far harder because with no other self definition, at least I have been able to sustain my life through being a therapist, then a professor and now a writer, too. Without my work I feel terror! Without my work there is dead time, nothing to occupy me, no way to prove any meaning to my life. Freud said there is love and there is work. If I have neither can I exist? I think the answer someday will be yes, but for now I must have my work to do service to others. I must work, once again to do work at giving to the world. The answer is that somehow I must

keep work as part of my life, for otherwise there is no reason for living. I love to work and will for as long as I am able.

Who am I without my personality? I would be boring. It defines who I am, creates me, presents me as complicated, complex, fascinating and difficult. My personality is lively, playful, challenging, deep and interesting. It feels like the most important part of me, it is my self creation. I have a big personality, take up a lot of room but without it I would still have a soul. Inside there is goodness. I have created a facade but under that there is a whole, healthy, loving, joyous spirit. I would still exist and would still be me.

Who am I without my consciousness—waking and in a dream? I am afraid I don't know what my consciousness is. Without consciousness it seems that there is no existence. To be conscious is to be alive, to be open, feeling, thinking, perceiving and in awareness of one's own existence. Without it I would be dead. Now what would it be like to be dead? I think it would be fine, to leave this state of consciousness and go on to nothingness. I once feared it beyond words, it was a night and day terror of mine to be dead, falling into the abyss, into infinity. But now, once again I look to mother's experience. She had a near death event at the time of my brother's birth. She said she walked toward the light, felt great peace and was being met by her dead father and other loved ones. If that is the beginning of death then I will embrace it. I do not long for it but I will welcome it when it comes. Without consciousness I might die, be nothing in body, move my spirit and energy into a new place.

LATER, LATER AND LATER: Tonight's practice was wonderful. I began by listening to a tape on the nature of ecstasy. Then I listened to wonderful music by Shlomo Carlbach that came from the Jewish ghettos of Europe. It reached into my collective unconscious and I reveled in the sounds of fiddles and flutes. I danced in ecstasy on the deck, in the full, red moonlight. I wept for the joy of having come to this place in me, of the joy of having peace in my heart and the beginning of a path that provides me with solace and hope. I danced and wept for surviving. I danced and wept for my father's family killed in the Holocaust. I danced and soared for having something in my heart besides the pain. I danced and wept for coming out of my crisis of the spirit and for doing it by myself,

rather than through the love of another, which I know can be removed at any time. I danced and wept for finding a new means for growth. Therapy is not the answer for me any longer. I will not do it and I will not go to it either. Therapy is not what reaches into the soul, into the center nor into a level that I know can be reached. This is a wonderful gift I gave to myself for my 50th birthday. It is far better than any party I might have organized nor any interlude I might have orchestrated. I gave myself me through this experience and it is the best gift I could have given myself, I could not imagine doing anything better nor more healthy.

REFLECTIONS AT MIDLIFE

Well, it is now three months later and the lessons I learned on that mountain top are fairly well integrated. I still meditate every morning for at least an hour, using practices learned there as well as employing other readings, chants and tapes that I have acquired. The light and peace still surround me, although I see that there are times when I can lose the centeredness I have achieved. It takes just a very little time alone, breathing and finding that core, to come back to myself once again. I have had to keep a small private practice going, although I find myself turning away people or suggesting that they go to the retreat center themselves. For the few clients I have seen I try to teach them the practices I have picked up in this short time. But I feel like a novice and I feel like a fake, when I charge money to teach them how to find themselves. Perhaps one day I will develop a practice that somehow utilizes these meditational and body work practices. However, until that time I feel that I must continue to work on myself and then share what little I know with those who are interested and ask. Otherwise I keep this experience quiet because I know that I have to go beyond my own ego and the more I learn, the less I need to talk about it.

I understand that I have no control over what it is that happens to me but that I can control how I respond to it. I understand that it is my own thoughts that create my reality. But I do not believe in the cognitive approach that speaks of changing those thoughts. I am trying, truly trying, to go beyond ANY thoughts. I want to go to that

place between two thoughts and have that quiet, calm and absorbed space inside become my constant reality.

So how does this all relate to Kitzinger and Perkins, Heyward and Sandweiss? Well, it all comes together in my thoughts with a critique of psychotherapy as we know it. I know that many therapists employ relaxation techniques. Many also do body work and other non-traditional practices. However, what is missing, as I see it, is the connectedness and absorption of experience that is necessary for true change in a person. In my opinion it is not possible to find it in lesbian therapy or any other form of psychotherapy, as it is currently practiced. Kitzinger and Perkins argue that what is missing is the sense of community. We privatized human connection and made it a marketable commodity to be sold in a market place. We took away the revolutionary potential of lesbians by buying into the mistaken belief that therapy was the answer to all people's problems. They say that it is not therapy that is the answer and I concur. I have been afraid that if one became too spiritually oriented one might become apolitical and also lose any radical impulse. I see now the fallacy in that thinking. If one feels whole and at peace one can then engage in dealing with the inequities that surround us. Therapy might "cool" us out and depoliticize us but by using a spiritual practice in one's life there is plenty of room for radical action—in fact, one can then become energized to do more.

Heyward argues that the "boundaries betray us." I concur as well. As long as we establish the artificial, but necessary limits, given the way psychotherapy is constructed, we will always remain unconnected, even from the very therapists who should be helping us become connected. By this I mean that therapy should have been aiding us in feeling whole and at peace. Instead, because therapy is constructed as a business, with artificial limits placed on the relationship, it will always keep us from that which we are seeking. We are all looking for a sense of oneness with self and with other. Psychotherapy, today in the 1990s, cannot give us that. It is not created to provide that. Psychotherapy keeps us locked in our heads, in our behaviors, in our relationships. Instead, we are seeking a way back to our SELVES and psychotherapy, as I know it, does not have the slightest idea how to do that.

Sandweiss says that we need to find a guru, an avatar who can

give us grace and help us on that journey. He tries to do it in his practice, with clients on a one-to-one basis. He uses quiet, dark, meditative rooms and he sits with them, as he would with others in contemplation in the ashram. This is admirable and hopefully he helps them find that which they are seeking. I think he is onto something, something that works for him and for his clients.

I know for myself, that I am still seeking the answer about how to integrate this knowledge into my work with people. Will I be a lesbian "psychotherapist," as I once was? I doubt it. Somehow I know there is no turning back to the cognitive, behavioral, depoliticized, isolated work I once did. For me what I will do may include spirituality, body work, chanting, meditating or just being quiet with people. What I hope to do is to find a way to continue my journey inward and help people find such a path as well. I also know I want to continue to talk and work with others who are also on such a path to find out what comes next, for all of us.

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