

Follow-Up

Augustus Y. Napier, Ph.D.

Increasingly, the family therapist is a technician. He or she is busy advising, interpreting, and prodding the family to change its relationship structure, its conflictual communication patterns, its reinforcement contingencies, its level of individuation, perhaps even its budgetary habits. The therapist's major contribution is what might be called "expertise in living," a consultant's purchase on the skills of surviving within this most difficult of human systems. Often the sum of the therapist's effort constitutes a kind of pressure on the family to behave differently.

The therapy described by Whitaker and Keith is of a very different sort. Rather than being expert intellectual "nags," these therapists supply a complex of emotional ingredients which have been largely absent from the family's previous experience. They become parents; they assist in giving birth to a new quality of emotional life. And while they furnish, in this account, intriguing clues regarding the therapeutic process, they fail to describe it explicitly, perhaps because some levels of this powerful interchange are not subject to rational analysis.

In an attempt to look at this family's progress in therapy, I drew upon three sources of information: 1) an evening spent with the family discussing the therapy, 2) a transcript of the family's meeting with Carl's family therapy seminar following the termination of therapy, and 3) a lengthy dictation by Molly on her perspective on the therapeutic experience.

In my meeting with the family, I found a complex system

comprised of two households living comfortably and affably within two blocks of one another. The boundaries of the two households were solidly established, yet there was close teaming between all adults around the children's needs and interests. While the children clearly "lived with" Molly, they were an intimate part of Ed and Linda's life and moved freely between the two homes. Molly and Linda had a relaxed, "sisterly" friendship; and while there were undertones of sadness in Ed and Molly's relationship, as well as a carefully-gauged, polite distance, there were also notes of consideration and friendly interest. I found it especially impressive that this "extended family" could get together to share the holidays, and that, independent of psychotherapy, they could call "crisis conferences" in order to metacommunicate about their relationships.

The following excerpts are taken from the family's discussion with Carl's family therapy seminar following the termination of therapy. They indicate some of the changes that have taken place:

Molly: "It's really a miracle to me the distance we went from August of 1974 when I really felt murderous - I mean I really didn't know what to do I felt so murderous - to December when we all spent Christmas together. I'm sure the fact that we were in therapy had a lot to do with it."

Linda: "The way things are right now is that we sort of have an extended family. Ed and I live two blocks away from Molly and her kids and the kids sort of come and go. They seem to be comfortable with having family in two houses instead of one,

and I get support from having Molly there, as though she were a sister or somebody to rely on in emergencies and, you know, have holidays with. We do that kind of thing; it's comfortable. There are times when we draw closer and there are times when we're not so close, but it's a kind of supportive system."

Molly: "It was surprising to me how long it took the children to work out the divorce in their own minds so that they accepted it. For a long time they would say, 'Remember when Daddy used to live with us?' And, 'Why doesn't Daddy come back - you two don't fight any more?' I think it was just last spring or summer that they really integrated it and liked things the way they were."

Molly: "I felt like the old anger always got in the way of Ed and I being able to communicate about even the simplest things. It was only after we got divorced and then the therapy that we could communicate with a lot more ease."

Ed: "There have been several occasions recently when I've talked with Molly and it's been like talking to a friend that I'm not so entangled with. Just some anxiety or depression at the moment that it was helpful to share with Molly, and that it would be more difficult to share with Linda because we are so involved."

Molly: "And I thought, gee whiz, you know, we had to go through all this, we had to get divorced and get other people involved before Ed and I could take Andy and Tom out for a hike and have a nice time. And I really believe that it's true - our relationship requires the presence of other people, even though

they aren't always physically there."

Molly: "One of the products of therapy is that the three of us, when we reach those points of tension, are able to do our own therapy. The first time it happened was when you were going to buy the house two blocks away from me. At first I thought, 'Oh great!' Then I started to have real anxiety about it - 'What am I doing moving these two right into my own neighborhood, in my own territory and what's going to happen?' So we all had lunch and we each expressed our anxiety and we each cried and we all felt better."

While this family seems to have moved from a high degree of interpersonal conflict to interpersonal "rapport," a remarkably successful negotiation of the divorce process, I think it would be mistaken to look only at these visible, interpersonal relationships. In a long statement prepared by Molly, we see another perspective on the therapy, notably the profound intrapersonal changes that were taking place. A closer look at this statement also provides us with information about Carl and Molly's relationship, which was quite intense. Shifts in this relationship formed a model which radiated into the other family members' lives and into their respective families of origin.

There was a great deal of preparation before therapy began. For years Molly had been developing her fantasy of being in therapy with Carl Whitaker, accumulating a massive transference as she re-worked this idea internally. She first became intrigued by Whitaker when she was a graduate student and read The Roots of Psychotherapy. Later she listened alertly to reports of those

who had been in therapy with him and was drawn to the notion that he was "tough": "I think one of my half-conscious formulations must have been that if you really had guts you went into therapy with Carl Whitaker. I also heard stories that he 'made' people bring in their parents, and I fantasied bringing in my mother and thinking it would be impossible and then imagined being thrown out of therapy because I couldn't bring her in."

Carl had also spent years treating schizophrenic patients individually, an experience that was very rewarding for him and allowed him an early "turn on" to the subtler aspects of Molly's "facultative schizophrenia" and, I suspect more importantly, to her mother's more overt craziness. Carl's secure relationship with Dave Keith also allowed him the freedom of a profound involvement with the family; assistance from and periodic retreat into the professional "marriage" is particularly critical when the family contains either a latent or overt psychotic process.

The initial question for the patient is whether he or she can trust the therapist. Molly had expected forcefulness in Carl, though she worried that he would be invasive and destructive like her mother. Several critical events allowed Molly (and other members as well) to move into therapy with more security.

Soon after Molly had scheduled the first interview, she had a terrifically angry explosion at Ed, frightening everyone in the family. When she related this incident in therapy, Carl said casually, "Well, there are orgasms and there are orgasms." Molly was "jolted" and intrigued by the remark. Carl's casual

tone seemed to imply a lack of fear of her anger, and he found something vaguely "positive" in her outburst. Where she saw murder, Carl saw sex. It was the first of Carl's "one-liners," sudden, offhand remarks that everyone in the group found spun them around with such power.

Molly's suspiciousness of Carl continued, however, for several months. She was afraid he would not accept her decision to divorce; she feared losing her autonomy and coming to obey Carl's every wish. Molly also wondered about Carl's adequacy, and in an early dream she pulled three masks off his face until she arrived at the face of a little boy.

Then came a turning point: "Sometime in the fall of 1974, around October, I related a very frightening dream I had which entailed a group of robbers systematically moving down my street robbing every house. I knew they were coming and I left Andy and Tom in the house and went next door to the neighbors, hoping the robbers wouldn't realize the boys were sleeping there and would bypass the house. After some scenes and struggles, I escaped down the highway with a man I was currently in a relationship with and ran into a gas station to tell the highway patrolman about the robbers, only to discover that the highway patrolmen were the robbers. Carl's reaction to the dream was that I was the mother bird luring the danger away from my nest to protect my babies. This interpretation affected me deeply; it moved me and surprised me. Carl somehow managed to give me a very positive feeling about myself in an area in which I felt the most vulnerable and suspect - my ability to mother my children

and my own craziness interferring with it. I had only seen that in the dream I left my children and ran off with a man plus all that other crazy stuff going on. After that remark, I accepted Carl as my therapist and the program for my part of the therapy for the next few months was outlined."

Molly had preconceptualized her therapy on an intuitive level, and had chosen a powerful figure to help her carry out her "plan." Once she had answered her doubts about the therapist's "humaneness" she was able to allow those yearned-for changes to begin.

Another decisive element in the beginning of therapy was Carl and Dave's forceful take-over of the children. Molly: "I remember feeling tremendous relief when Carl wasn't disorganized or panicked by their chaotic behavior. I seem to remember endless sessions where they ran in and jumped on him and wrestled with him while I just sat there and watched."

What Molly "just watched" was probably the only example of confident "parenting" that she had ever witnessed at close range; in addition to freeing her temporarily from her role as parent and allowing her to regress in the service of the family ego, Carl's play with the children also modeled the process of therapy: the tough, caring, "in-charge" parent being available to the entire family.

Of all the qualities which the symbolic parent (therapist) offers the family, perhaps the most basic is the validation of not only the family group but of the individual persons. All three adults found it quite important, for example, that Carl

and Dave accepted Ed and Molly's decision to divorce and did not pressure them to stay married. And each of the three was deeply touched when the therapists, at different moments and in different ways, found something positive in aspects of their person that they had despised. Ed: "I felt that it became all right for me to be crazy, or angry, or just upset. I had always downgraded and hidden those parts of myself."

It is one thing for a family to find a symbolic set of parents and to participate in a bilateral psychological "adoption" process during which they seek in the therapists some of the qualities of the "good parent" that were absent in their own actual parents, and during which the therapists symbolically re-parent aspects of themselves which they identify in the family; it is another thing to deal with the agonies of being disloyal to the family of origin. One of the advantages in this therapeutic approach is that the patient is not forced to choose between the original parent and the therapist, but is helped to maximize gains in the existing family relationship and at the same time "borrow" qualities from the therapist. The therapist actually gains power by not trying to "steal" the patient. It is only through being available to the larger system that the therapist acquires at least the minimal trust of that system, and is thus able to insert himself/herself into the family's set of loyalties. By being Molly's mother's therapist, Carl was able to mingle with Molly's introject of this mother on a very profound level. He probably did not help the mother, but he was able to infiltrate Molly's internalized image of this mother

in a way that would not have been possible if he had ignored the actual person of the mother.

There were several identifiable stages in Molly's deepening involvement in therapy:

1) Validation of the actual parent. Molly had been sure that her mother would not come for an interview, and she was "all worked up" to bring her bodily if necessary when her mother meekly capitulated. Molly: "All I remember doing during that session was sitting there and crying while Carl and Dave talked with my mother. I felt it was a great achievement and something that I had always imagined would be entirely impossible to do."

Molly's mother had appeared dressed in sepulchral white, an impressive if somewhat bizarre figure. Carl and Dave had not only talked to her, but Carl "had a marvelous time" with this long-institutionalized woman. I can remember Carl's telling me about this exciting case where he was having a good time with the schizophrenic mother, and I have no doubt that his enjoyment of these interviews was profoundly significant for Molly, a validation of the mother at whose hands she had suffered so much disappointment and of whom she had probably been very ashamed. For several sessions, then, a positive relationship between Carl and Molly's mother.

2) Symbolic mourning. Molly's attention then shifted to her terribly ambivalent relationship with her lover. She had hopes that this relationship would work out, but events forced her to realize that it would not. She entered a period of deep despair and depression, "which was almost a relief in that I

didn't feel it necessary to keep up a brave and cheerful front any more." Molly also felt hurt by her sister's refusal to come for a joint session, and she felt abandoned when Ed and Linda did not appear for a session. She saw rejection and abandonment on all sides, plainly reexperiencing the early loss of her mother. Carl suggested that she bring her mother for more sessions, and while she was puzzled by the request, she complied.

3) Reunion. Molly brought her mother three or four times during the summer of 1975, and these sessions were particularly meaningful since her mother interacted with her children for the first time. She recounts: "By August, I felt more at home in the world, more relaxed with myself and more hopeful that perhaps I could be and was an adequate mother. I was absolutely amazed at the relationship that had developed between myself and my mother, taking her out to lunch with the kids, etc."

Before therapy Molly's mother had quite literally refused to admit the existence of Molly's children, and this denial was undoubtedly part of Molly's terrible self-doubts about being an adequate mother. Within the context of therapy, the family experienced a "normal" three-generation set, Molly feeling reunited with her mother and accepted as her mother's child and as a parent herself. This was possible partly because of Carl's "marriage" to the unstable mother, permitting Molly to assume a normal generational position.

4) Bilateral individuation. September, 1975. Molly was driving over to get her mother for a session, feeling good about herself, and wondering if she needed her mother to come anymore.

When she arrived, her mother refused to budge. Molly fought back: "I asserted myself, expressed my anger and in general acted freely and did not conform to my usual sweet daughter role. I drove away thinking that my mother would die because of what I said and that it would be the last time I saw her. She didn't, however, and I began to have a new freedom in relating to her." Having established a long-sought closeness with her mother, Molly proceeded to enter a rebellious adolescence. Her mother made her individuation easier by fighting hard for Molly's loyalty, railing against "that doctor" who had brainwashed her and hypnotized her. With coaching from the therapists, Molly kept up both the visits and the fight for her autonomy.

5) Release. During the fall of 1975 and the winter of 1976, Molly's relationship with her mother underwent a change. Her mother stopped fighting for her loyalty, as though releasing her. Molly not only felt free to be a separate person, but to enjoy the "breast feeding" regression in therapy; she also began to have very tender feelings toward her mother. As Molly entered the core phase of therapy, the generational roles were reversed, and Molly, who was receiving "parenting" from the therapists, became her mother's mother. In this way she probably felt less guilt about taking from the therapists.

6) Expansion of individuation into other relationships. Molly had often felt weak and ineffective in her relationship with her children. In January of 1976, which was the time when her fights with her mother had begun to ease, Molly felt very anxious about the boys' upcoming birthday and found herself

feeling helpless with them in the interview. Carl said blandly, "You're being too nice to them." She made a feeble attempt to deal with one of the boys in the interview, but his testing continued through most of the following week. "Saturday morning when I was trying to get them ready to take them over to Ed's, Tom totally exasperated me by passive resistance. He was dancing around with his toy gun and not getting ready. Suddenly, I grabbed his gun, threw it on the floor, and smashed it under my foot. This impressed him, but it made me feel very guilty. I felt that I had gone crazy and quickly confessed to Carl that perhaps I should let Ed and Linda raise the boys. He said that it was a muscle that I hadn't exercised and that I would get stronger." Molly began to fight harder for control of the children, and during this time she received considerable support from Linda as well as from Carl and Dave.

7) Therapeutic symbiosis. During February of 1976, Molly began to use some art materials (water colors, pen and ink) which she had bought several months earlier on impulse. She felt a great release and a surge of free expression as she became totally absorbed in making these drawings and designs. "I don't remember ever before creating anything without any fear of judgment, self-criticism, inhibition or censorship. I brought a whole bundle of these drawings in for Carl to see and at that time began to realize their psychological significance."

She also recounts dreams during this period involving babies and children, dreams which she interprets as dealing

with the birth of the self. "In one of my dreams, I was in my basement with several people, and there was a woman in the next room with a new-born infant. Carl was there and he wanted me to come in and touch it. I went in to look - it was pink and seemed to have transparent skin. I was repulsed and frightened and didn't want to touch it. Carl interpreted this dream as meaning that he was encouraging the birth of my 'schizophrenic self' and I was frightened."

This is the core phase of psychotherapy, in which the patient luxuriates in a profound symbiosis with the therapists, and in this condition of feeling taken care of and cuddled finds new trust in herself. Having broken through the binds in many of her "real-world" relationships, she is free to relate to herself in a more unitary manner, expanding her sense of her own power and dissolving barriers that have impeded her own creativity.

8) Return to the parent. In June of 1976, an incident occurred which was extremely significant for Molly. Her mother was talking about some bracelets she had bought recently, and Molly was reminded of some bracelets her mother wore when Molly was a child. She asked if her mother still had the bracelets. "They always had a kind of magical quality to me. I remember the sound of the bracelets tinkling as my mother moved around the house when I was a child, and that tinkle was my mother's sound. Well, I was so surprised when mother said, 'Those? Yes.' And she got them out of the drawer and put them on my arm. 'You can have them,' she said. I asked her where she had bought them, and she told me it was the local department store." Molly looked

at the bracelets on her arm beside her Timex watch, thinking the watch did not look right beside the "magical bracelets." She took off the watch and gave it to her mother. "My mother said, 'Oh.' It was like she was accepting a little bit of reality - you know, to have a watch and know what time it is. She didn't know how to set it or wind it and I showed her how and she thought I was quite clever to be able to do it."

Only when Molly had established considerable independence from her mother was this tender moment possible. Molly's mother gave her a token of the childhood years which she had usually refused to acknowledge and in effect made them real for Molly. In return, Molly offered a bit of symbolic parenting to her mother. Through this ritual mother and daughter seemed to be exchanging symbols of the past (the bracelets) and the present (the watch), and in doing so went beyond time-bound experience, establishing more firmly an evolving person-to-person relationship. The patient's involvement in therapy had not fractured the parent-child relationship, but had expanded its potential.

In her account of the therapy, Molly devotes surprisingly little attention to her relationship with Ed, saying only, "My problems with Ed just seemed to straighten themselves out. Aside from the binds we were in at the beginning of therapy, I don't remember anything dramatic." The decision to divorce seemed firm from the start; therapy became a way of making the agony bearable. Even the children seemed convinced that divorce was essential, as we see in an episode recounted by Ed and Linda:

Linda: "Carl made some joking reference to...he was saying

to me and Ed that we had better not start sleeping with each other because if we split up then Molly would have to take Ed back. And the kids, who usually, you know, rough-housed during the therapy session, hid under the sofa and they were crying - I'd never seen them so upset."

Ed: "And one of them said, 'I don't want to say; I don't want to talk about it.'"

Linda: "They wouldn't talk about it."

Ed: "Oh my God, Daddy's going to come home again...."

Though everyone seemed convinced that divorce was inevitable, in some respects this couple seemed to elect to keep their relationship, but to make it tolerable through the inclusion of others. One has the sense that though Ed and Linda's relationship is more "fun" than Ed and Molly's ever was, the major affective investment is between Ed and Molly - and will remain so. As in the situation where mother and adult son fight because of their anxiety about their Oedipal involvement, and are able to have a more loving relationship when son finally marries, this larger system allows the protagonists to expand their experience in a way that is more difficult for them in a dyadic relationship. Ed and Molly can love one another now that they are less dependent on one another, while the existence of this "old marriage" allows both Ed and Molly to be freer interpersonally with their new partners.

At one point the decision to divorce did seem to weaken. Molly's relationship with her lover had collapsed, and she and Ed moved closer together. But Linda protested anxiously, and

soon Molly met someone else. Molly's relationship with the lover occupied much of her conscious struggle during therapy, and he seemed to have represented "the bad mother" in her life. Breaking with him was a ritual liberation from the intimidation of this kind of relationship, and it was made possible largely through an internalization of the "good mother" - Whitaker and Keith.

I have chosen to focus on Molly's account of her experience in therapy because her involvement seemed more intense and because her growth in therapy seemed to catalyze others into action. Some further commentary from Ed and Linda's perspective should be useful, however. One of the dramatic changes in Ed's orientation came when he shifted out of his counter-schiz position, as revealed in this dialogue:

Molly: "At the beginning of therapy I was constantly afraid that I would lose control. I had had those fears early in my relationship with Ed, and he always reassured me and said that I would be all right. He was a good therapist. Carl's thumbnail diagnosis was that Ed married me so that he could go crazy and I married him so I could go sane - which was true."

(Questioner from seminar): Ed, did you fear Molly's craziness?

Ed: "Not the way she did. My mother went crazy, and to her everlasting credit, it has really helped her. She had a heart attack and she retired. Things just got a lot better between us. A lot of it comes from me now too, comes from the way I relate to her cause she's really mellowed and I've never had such personal talks with her before. And I think I got that from therapy,

too. Being able to go crazy a little bit myself and get into it or you know, feel like it's going to be all right."

Keith: "Wasn't there a time when you went through a crisis in therapy yourself, when Linda's brother-in-law was killed?"

Ed: "Yes. And I remember when Carl would talk afterwards about the time I went crazy. I don't remember the details, just the feelings..."

Molly: "I remember Carl's saying how great it was that you took yourself apart and put yourself together again."

It seems clear that Ed's "pseudo-therapist" relationship with Molly was one way of masking his own disturbance. Therapy allowed him to "go crazy," if only momentarily, and to see that part of himself as valuable. Being more in touch with his own craziness also allowed him to develop more rapport with his own mother, who had apparently been quite disturbed and for whom Molly was clearly a stand-in. Perhaps with Molly's model prompting him, Ed broke a long-established distance from his parents and began to move into closer relationship.

While she initially had more difficulty becoming part of the therapeutic process, Linda's peak moment in therapy came at the time when her mother was dying:

Linda: "One of the most significant sessions for me was when my mother was dying and my father was doing that number where he said, 'Oh, dear, there's nothing you can do; she's in a coma.' And I didn't know whether to obey my father or not. We all came to therapy, and I didn't know whether to go or not. Carl wouldn't advise me either way. But then he said, 'You and

your father are in a Mexican standoff, aren't you?' And, you know, great, one of those insights. I thought; 'Yeah.' I went right out afterwards and just got in an airplane without taking any clothing, or anything...."

All of the adults in the family seemed profoundly grateful for these moments of insight. The discoveries did not seem the result of bone-grinding intellectual machination, but were spontaneous gifts of the therapist's intuitive process. They also came peculiarly wrapped, the meaning often hidden deep inside, to be teased out at a later date. And they were delivered with a sort of liberating, impelling force.

All were grateful at finding their own craziness validated and enjoyed by the therapists.

All felt reassured when the therapists took firm charge of the arena of therapy, especially of the children.

They were grateful that the therapists did not tell them how to live.

Though they mentioned Carl's name more often in their statements, they all felt important positive contributions from Dave Keith, and from his and Carl's ability to team.

All felt that the most important part of therapy was that Dave and Carl cared about them. Ed seemed to speak for everyone when he said, "It was the first time anybody really cared about me, I think."