

COUNSELOR TO A HEALER

by Lisa Raphael

I was well into a busy private practice when I first read we teach best what we most need to learn. I was sure it did not apply to me. I had become a counselor to help others, not myself, and was trained to be objective in my work. If a disproportionate number of patients seemed to have issues with anger during a week that I was upset with my husband, it was attributed to coincidence or something in the air, or the cycle of the moon. What could my personal issues possibly have to do with the content of my clients' counseling sessions?

Twenty five years later, I see how my personal issues, the development of counseling skills and trends in the field of psychotherapy have all run parallel. Ongoing training has served as much to resolve my personal problems as to further my career.

In the sixties, I was enthusiastically humanistic. Unconditional positive regard and intensive group experiences were in fashion and I counseled accordingly. Identified with the disenfranchised of society both as an older single woman and a foreigner, I provided nurturing, acceptance and encouragement to my individual clients, and a supportive environment for my groups at an inner city community mental health center. After professional training in group process helped resolve my issues with intimacy and belonging, I married and joined a real life family group.

Marriage and family therapy were coming into vogue when I began my practice, so I saw couples and families together in the office. My clients' problems with boundaries, enmeshment and power struggles were echoed in my personal life, where there were aging parents and adolescent stepchildren to deal with in addition to my spouse. It was hard to maintain a balance at home when my husband and I rarely saw one another except at mealtimes.

Victims of eating disorders who mirrored my identity issues appeared in my office as I struggled with a confusion of role expectations. I counseled hundreds of bright, accomplished women who were extraordinarily successful in the outside world while starving for a wholesome definition of themselves. "Take time for yourself," I urged them, "learn to say no to the demands of others"—all the time caring for clients, parents, family and friends with barely time to breathe.

Eating disorders and compulsive overwork were redefined as addictions when recovery programs became fashionable. The success of twelve step programs and the popularity of Scott Peck's "A Road Less Traveled" spearheaded the recognition of spiritual issues in psychotherapy, so the concept of unconditional positive regard was expanded to include a Higher Power. In the office, guided imagery and meditative techniques helped clients access an inner source through which to heal their wounds, decreasing their dependency. At home, discovery of my spiritual Self made me less dependent on my husband and I left the marriage.

Formerly disassociated memories of childhood sexual abuse surfaced after my divorce. I had been treating victims of sexual abuse for years without a clue that I was a survivor myself. Sexual abuse and recovered memories were now a “hot” topic in the field. Was it coincidence that my memories surfaced at a time when there was so much public and professional attention to the issue?

In a vivid dream:

Everything familiar has been destroyed in an earthquake and I am wandering alone in the rubble. I will have to start all over again, but I know that I can do it. I know that I am a Healer.

What is the difference between a counselor and a healer?

A counselor is someone who teaches what he or she most needs to learn—a healer is someone who has learned what he or she has been teaching.

As a healer, I recognize that everyone, inside and outside the office is both teacher and student.

I was wrong about the reason I became a counselor. I became a counselor to heal ME.