

CHAPTER 14

I've been telling you all throughout this narrative of the conditions that I grew up with, and under, and how I was shaped and mis-shaped by them. I've also told you that I learned early on to project being normal, so as to seem normal. I never revealed that I *didn't feel that I was anything or anyone*. The foundation for such a thing is parents sitting down with their kids and telling them something about earlier family life. I didn't have that. Neither one of my parents ever told me any stories about their families, early lives, and childhoods. And I've told you that I've had a lot of psychotherapy . . . which word, frankly, I don't like. It sounds too stiff, clinical, impersonal, academic, and professional, and it just doesn't work for me. At least, that's my reaction. When therapy works well it is deep and personal – and it doesn't use language in the way one has learned in school. Not with the patient. Outside of that, of course, life and language are "normal".

My therapist from long ago of course took notes about our meetings, and when this project of my autobiography came up she offered to look up her old notes that tell my story as she experienced it, and share them with me. What she wrote follows below. I've mentioned that I'm different from others in that I can feel a sense of vastness and emptiness inside of me. Well, what she wrote touches on that:

"To have been invited by Ervin to share in his journey toward a positive healthful psychological integration will always be considered by me an honor and one that ultimately challenged and benefitted each of us on our life journeys.

In 1985, my life as a psychotherapist took a turn, a very important turn that was greatly influenced by my relationship with Ervin Somogyi. Ervin had been referred to me by a colleague and when I arrived in the waiting room, I found a man in his 40's, sitting, staring. I introduced myself and asked him to follow me to the consulting room. Very slowly he rose up, neither removing his gaze from mine nor relaxing his facial expression. As we climbed the stairs, he stopped and pointed to what appeared to be a camera, mounted on a stand close to the ceiling and asked what that might be. Having never noticed this device, I really wasn't sure and yet, it was clear that this unknown device had triggered his vigilance. He didn't know what it was, and it was potentially threatening.

We entered the treatment room and took our respective seats. His stare was formidable and after what seemed like days, he finally spoke. "Are you Jewish?" I pondered this question as I remembered being a child growing up in Miami where most of my friends were Jewish and I often lied to people, claiming I was Jewish. My inner voice told me to just answer his question. "No, I am not Jewish."

His second question was whether I believed in the Holocaust. Again, instead of providing him with a long explanation, I answered a simple YES. I didn't know at the time about how much Holocaust denial there is. He questioned how, without being Jewish, was I able to understand the experience of a Holocaust survivor. I wanted to respond that as a lesbian, as a member of a fringe group who was also persecuted during the Holocaust, I understood, but, instead, I simply responded, "I am human." We then sat silently in the room until the end of the hour. After a few more meetings

Ervin chose to go forward in a relationship with me as his therapist. I embraced him as a patient and we began a journey of many years that would alter the course of the rest of our lives.

We sat together a lot, without touch or words spoken, in the first months of our relationship. We met three times a week and Ervin would stare, unblinking, into my eyes, and while I was able to hold his gaze, quietly, inside myself, I would question whether I was doing the best thing for him by remaining quiet or whether I should interrupt this silence. Like an infant studying his mother's face, Ervin watched my every gesture and move. I remained present, attentive and quiet. He looked at my face and I didn't look away. I met his gaze.

I was able to trust my intuition, that internal voice that said NO to words and supported our just being with one another in silence. Fifty-minute hours were spent together without either one of us saying a word. Ervin once asked, in that early period, if he could touch my face. He said that he had been able to memorize my face and wanted to touch it, as to touch something that he had a deep connection to. I said yes, knowing it was the next phase – in effect, the infant reaching out to touch the caregiver's face as they looked at each other. It's a necessary next phase. He placed his hands on each side of my face and held that position for about 20 seconds. It was a sweet moment.

Over time, in line with what I perceived to be the developmental trajectory, words were slowly introduced. I learned to only speak when he asked to hear my words. Otherwise, my words were felt by Ervin to be a violation, an intrusion, an annihilation of his self. I understood and honored his need state, providing as best I could the necessary quiet and attunement of an environment where he could exist and heal. He most needed *somewhere*, some space, to just *be* in. Just to *be* in and feel safe.

One day, early on in our therapy, we could hear laughter emanating from the consulting room across the hall. He stared at me for many minutes. Finally he said, "*I hope I can laugh one day.*" As I sat with these words, feeling their profound impact, I finally answered, "*I hope so, too.*" I remember that from the first time I met Ervin I'd sensed that he was someone who needed somewhere to just *be*. My intuition proved to be right.

As psychotherapists, we are taught that "talking" is critical to the exploration of the unconscious. Employing words to question and words to understand and interpret are most commonly means to an end for psychotherapy and yet, early on, I learned from Ervin Somogyi that silence — SILENCE — is equally if not more important than words in the healing process.

Like Ervin who stepped beyond and outside what was considered traditional guitar making to embrace the concept that transcended the factory-made guitar, I, too, began to recognize that the more traditional psychoanalytic training where the therapist positions himself as a blank slate onto which patients project their thoughts and fantasies, or a distant expert interpreting the patient from behind an inscrutable façade, felt entirely unproductive and disconnected. In following Ervin's lead and trusting my inner voice, I quickly held our relationship as critical to the healing process and moved it forward into center stage, a place where his voice and my voice or our silence created a unique and impenetrable resonance. I knew intuitively and early on that Ervin was just looking for something he'd never had: someone whom he could trust, who wouldn't lie to him, who wouldn't

overpower him, who wouldn't lose interest in him, who wouldn't be self-serving and discard him later. Essentially, someone who simply cared about him.

One day I said that something Ervin had just told me about must have been excruciating. Ervin said no, that that word came from the Latin for being nailed to a cross. But being crucified was something done out in the open, in the fresh air. He felt like he was buried underground and suffocating.

When Ervin spoke, I would listen with every ounce of my being. Our developing relationship forced me to be all I was and more, to speak from my heart and brain in combination with one another and in so doing, in time, to model honesty and trust as a foundation for a relationship that would guide each of us into these unknown chapters.

One day, Ervin laughed aloud. We both startled and then joined together in laughter, recognizing the dead parts of him were coming alive. His humor was breaking out from the locked and impenetrable dungeon that defined his life. I caught him when he jumped, laughed, smiled, shared. I saw him. I saw *him*. Therapy was becoming Ervin's safe space. Over the years, he slowly claimed himself and found his voice.

Days turned into months and months into years while Ervin and I created a relationship that profoundly impacted each of our worlds. A child born during the holocaust, hidden in a basement with tea as a primary food source and whose father eventually escaped on his way to a death camp only to return to his family an angry and troubled man, and mother who was unable to protect herself or her children from the demoralized aggression, who were too damaged to inspire or model love and trust and safety; I'd never before worked with anyone who had been so deprived.

Therapy was Ervin's safe place. There, over the years, Ervin slowly claimed himself and found his voice. He once told me that trees were his family. They are live beings that he respected and loved. They were his only connection to reliability and permanence. And he and I, together, in our work, were over time able to see the connection between his voice and the voicing of his guitars. I've respected this person, his essence, and was able to hold him in his complexity and listen to and respect his voice, and help him bend toward the light.

One of the more challenging moments in our work together was when I became pregnant. When pregnancy asserts itself into the consulting room, a 3rd entity enters causing a change in the therapeutic dynamic. For Ervin, my pregnancy stimulated many fears and questions, particularly that of our relationship would change, that the attention and caring he was beginning to trust in and rely upon was going to disappear, as it would be directed at the new child. Three is always a crowd. And the thoughts and feelings that arise out of that need to be talked out if the therapy is to continue.

Ervin and I didn't talk this out. Not really. He thought about it. And he woke up one morning about two weeks after my pregnancy announcement, with a solution that had come to him during the night. He showed up at our next scheduled appointment and told me that since I was going to give birth to something, he wanted to give birth to something too. In effect, he joined me in the pregnancy. And two days after that announcement he began to give birth to a new art form:

designs in wood that were inspired by the aesthetics of guitar and lute inlays and carved designs; and this artwork eventually took on a life of its own. At this point in his journey toward psychological integration, Ervin was beginning to trust his creative genius could save him from the depression and hopelessness that had been his lifelong companion. It worked and after my daughter was born, our relationship was stronger than ever.

Unbeknownst to Ervin, I was a devout guitar lover and had taught myself to play guitar at 16 years of age. Secretly, I had coveted a Somogyi guitar and one day, when the time felt right, I shared these feelings. I hoped my wish to own a Somogyi guitar would be experienced by Ervin as a complement, as an extension of our connection but instead, he felt angry and scared that I might have been using him in order to get a guitar. By this time in the treatment, our relationship was strong enough to carry us in all configurations and together we explored the hows and whys of what had occurred and he was able to hear my words as truth and recognize them as a truth delivered directly from my heart and soul. His fear that I had thrown out this desire in an attempt to take care of myself, or to get power or dominance, was discarded. I eventually got a guitar from him, which was and remains one of my treasures.

Seventeen years went by, and it was time for Ervin to leave his relationship with me and forge ahead. He was enjoying a healthy vibrant relationship with a woman who matched him in wit and intelligence. And his brilliance, expertise, and skill were being discovered and his reputation was growing internationally. I have enjoyed Ervin's humor, loved his cynicism, and smiled at his wit. And I had accompanied a smart, interesting, and broken man along his journey to find his way back home to himself.

In our final therapy session, Ervin brought his guitar and played flamenco. I sat quietly mesmerized by the brilliance of this man and I felt tears well inside at our leave taking. I knew it would never be good-bye. Our relationship meant too much to each of us to warrant a good-bye. Years later he wrote, "You were, for me, if I might put it so metaphorically, the key that opened a padlock that had been rusted shut and forgotten about for years. The journey has been awesome."

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What Diane Wilson, my therapist, says is all true. Our journey as seen from ground-level was slow and arduous. Seen from higher up, from where the journey can be viewed from beginning to end, it really can be called awesome. But it's not quite like a fairy tale with a glorious ending; it's also somewhat like the story of an addict who has had a successful rehab. I don't know how others would describe their own therapeutic journeys, but I have never gotten completely free of the fears, terrors, insecurities, uncertainties, needing to shut up and hide, and panic attacks of my early life – the very things that drove me to therapy. I still have them all, in the same way that addicts never get completely over their addictions. That's why they identify themselves as "*recovering* alcoholics/*druggies*". Ditto "*recovering* Holocaust survivors". And survivors of Abuse. Any of them could relapse into their former war zones, if I can put it like that. Me, I am a recovering Holocaust survivor . . . with the added fact that those feelings and urges aren't the *only* things now in my repertoire. I've learned new skills, pathways, access to ideas and feelings, permissions, and ways of

thinking about things. I've expanded my options. I have a lot more leeway in my life than I used to have.



I've shared Diane's account of having worked with me, with a few friends. Despite their having already "known [something of] my story", they've all said "*my God! I had no idea what things had really been like for you*". No one did. I hid it well . . . in large part because I couldn't have found the words to talk about these things in the first place. Outside of this chapter the rest of my story is mostly cognitive narrative; you know, things that happened. This chapter is more about how life felt to me when I was young, and that is hard even today to find words for; what was underneath any words would have come out as silences, screams, and whimpers.

About the hour-long silences that Diane and I went through: I've told you that I grew up in such a way that I had not much sense – not much idea – that "I" existed as a "real" being. However "normal" I looked and acted in real life, I had been trained down to my deepest roots to be *obedient*. And it's not just that I *behaved* obediently; I *was* obedience. I *lived* obedience. I "*existed*", without knowing it, to do what others wanted of me. So when I sat in silences with Diane I was just stuck. I didn't know what to do or say. I was waiting for her to give me some sort of a "go" signal – without being aware of it then. I'd hardly ever done anything without a "go" signal from someone. Schools, which I went to for many years, are full of "go" and "stop" signals. And those school signals, while benign, are nothing other than instructions to do something, or stop doing something, or to do something in a certain way. It's a benign regimentation. If you don't quite know what I mean by this, do please read up on Summerhill School. Diane, though, was able to wait until I was able to start to look out of the cave and slowly, and timidly, stick my head out of it by myself.

The main thing about being obedient is that that, by itself, is not really an existence; there's no "I" in it; there's only "them". My parents believed that making me obedient had helped me on the road to become a respected, successful, and happy professional whom they could brag about to everyone. As they'd been trained to do by their own parents. And also by the Nazis and the Fascists, who had been brought up in exactly the same ways by *their* parents. I lived in that kind of world for years, without being aware of it. Just like most people live their lives. This culture does not value pausing for instances of introspection or reflection; its focus is on "moving on" without seeing the rubble we've created. I had a friend who, when something didn't work or ended badly, just "moved on" without making any effort to understand what had happened. Yeah. Right.

And two other things about my work with Diane. First, while I "knew" I needed some kind of help . . . I had no idea of how to talk about anything like that. Of what to say that my mind could make sense of. As I spent those hour-long silences with Diane, I was certainly waiting for her to tell me what she wanted or needed from me or at least what I should do. At the same time, I tried to detect any sign of discomfort, tension, or impatience that would suggest that her mind was wandering or daydreaming or plotting, or whether I should/ could trust her or not. I didn't know that I was using a survival instinct, but I'm sure this is what I expected from her. I was trying to find

hints about what kind of authority structure I'd be needing to cope with . . . since I felt I had none of my own.

I paid attention to Diane's breathing. It was easy and regular, not tight. I'd learned from my parents to be on alert for the slightest hint, from body language and tone of voice, of their moods; and I got good at spotting those hints because there was always some repercussion to either one of my parents not getting something that they needed. With Diane, I was unable to find any body language that hinted at inner discomfort . . . although, as I said, I was doing this without knowing at the time that I was doing it.

As an example of what I'm telling you: I'd gone to a previous therapist who liked to tape his sessions; but cassette tapes were going out of style then and he remarked, in one of our very early sessions, that he was having trouble finding any. I showed up at my next appointment with some cassette tapes that I'd bought for him. He said thank you. Had he been competent he would have asked something about why I had done that. As I said above, I was *obedient*. It was what I was there for. I don't know how Diane managed to hang in there with me as she did, through those silences, but I'll always be grateful to her. And about this other fellow: we weren't friends; we'd known each other for only a short time. He should have known that my *getting him something (that he needed)* MEANT SOMETHING. And what that was, I now know, was my suspicion that he'd be unhappy with me if I *didn't* give him the things he needed. I was, of course, in the dark about that. But he was blind to that too. We weren't friends and I was paying him to be doing something for me that required his paying attention to me. His job was to inquire into me. I wish I'd known early on that he was a fraud.

This guy did a few other things that were weird. But I only understood how much of a fraud he was quite a bit later, when he did something so unforgivably shitty, unprofessional, and unacceptable that I understood who and what a fraud he really was. I was in the middle of a decaying marriage at that time. I was feeling low and demoralized. I'd shown up for a couples-counseling session with this fellow, with the woman I was still married to. Well, he and my wife wound up in a screaming match with each other that made me feel like I was right back home again with my fighting parents. She wasn't going to back down and he wasn't going to back down either. My soon-to-be ex-wife huffed off in a rage, slamming the door behind her and never went back. I was not savvy enough to recognize a clue in any of this.

But, headed toward a divorce, I was overall feeling more and more like a dried-out prune. I met a woman at that time; we developed a friendship that eventually became a relationship. Even just getting to know her made me feel like I was expanding into a plum again. This was a BIG new development in my life. And when I showed up to this guy's office for a next appointment I told him that I had something important to talk to him about and I wanted him to listen to what I said. I sat down and told him of these recent developments in my life. They were significant. He didn't say anything. When I got up at the end of the hour to leave I saw that the fucker had fallen asleep on me.

I was shocked beyond words.

After a few days had passed I realized that I'd been insulted and professionally betrayed. And I got really pissed – which is rare for me. I threatened to report him and the fellow under whose license he had been practicing to the State Licensing Board, and to sue both of them. I got in touch with several lawyers and explained my situation to them; none of them were all that excited, and one of them talked to me about *buying justice*. I was very unimpressed. It helps me to appreciate the line about how 90% of all lawyers give the other 10% a bad name.

The fellows I threatened got scared and I got repaid 50% the money I'd paid for these "therapies". A competent professional therapist's job is to inquire about all sorts of little things that come up in the therapy session . . . because *they don't come out of nowhere. They ALL come from somewhere. And they all signify something that's invisible at the moment.* Well, as I said, blowing up like that was uncharacteristic of me, but I did it. He'd actually crossed one of the few lines I had. So: **the bad guys: 39,478. Ervin: 1.** I still had a long way to go. As for my work with Diane, the long and the short of it is that she let me learn, over time, for the first time in my life, what it felt like to trust someone. Even myself. I owe her. If you ever need to find a therapist try to find a good one. You'll want one who LISTENS to you. Any therapist's helpfulness to you *depends on exactly that.*

I was meeting with Diane early on, and not finding much to say; I wasn't relaxed. I was waiting for something to happen. I was waiting for her to tell me what she wanted. I'd never, when with another person, done anything without a "go" signal. I had a friend a long time ago who'd been in the army, doing special ops and things like that. He told me that he and his team would sit around antsy and semi-impatiently waiting for the "go" signal to go do something. They didn't know what to do with down-time. It was like that for me. In therapies, other therapists always provided that by starting with "*what do you want to talk about?*" – which came across as a directive from The Boss to come up with . . . *something* to make them happy, entertained, or interested. The message I'd pick up since long ago was that *the boss needed that something*. And I was at that time unable to tell the difference between ordinary talk and directives/ requests/ hinted needs and disguised commands.

I'd had another session with yet another therapist – the one under whose license this fraud I'd just described had been practicing and whom I later threatened to sue – that didn't go well. I showed up in a really black mood. I was tied up in knots -- not raging or angry, but just deeply withdrawn. I didn't know why. I was just in a black funk. I sat there, frozen, without saying a word. And the guy looked at me and said: "*it really pisses me off that you're just sitting there and not saying anything. I'm going to go read this book until you decide to talk*". And he picked up a book and started reading. Really. I wish I'd had the guts to attack him physically. It was explained to me years later that that approach was one that had been taught and used by Fritz Perls – a prominent and influential pioneer in the early stages of American psychoanalysis. He invented this technique, of "jarring people out of whatever they were stuck in", by attacking them. When I later read up about him it became apparent to me that he was an insensitive and bullying monster. His reputation took a nosedive when he was kicked out of whatever big institution he had been working in – for criticizing and demeaning one of his subjects (in a workshop or class that he was giving, so it was in public) so brutally that the fellow

killed himself . . . and then Perls criticized the fellow -- and defended himself, of course -- saying that this poor guy had been such a wimp. No one really liked Perls and as soon as his reputation ended so did he. As for me, with my background, I find it significant that Perls was German.

In any event, the message I'd pick up since long ago was that *the boss needs something*. But with Diane, she didn't give out any signals that I recognized, about what she wanted from me. I couldn't imagine that she *might not have wanted* something from me; I'd never known such a thing. Every teacher I ever had provided a steady stream of instructions and requests, although all benign. They weren't friends; they were authority figures. So I had therefore been on autopilot-alert for what Diane secretly wanted of me. I was unable to imagine that she intended to simply be a supportive presence for me. That was a behavior I'd not had experience of nor a category for. That was pretty pathetic. I was pretty pathetic. And sad. "Pathetic" is usually taken as a derogatory comment, but I'm not being derogatory here. It's a neutral, if sad, description of an area of great inner barrenness. I was pathetic.



Did I say pathetic? I did say that. I may have meant "out of touch with myself". The matter has indeed been a complicated one.