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HOW I RETIRED FROM MY PSYCHOANALYTIC PRACTICE ¹

BY ALMA H. BOND, Ph.D.

After I retired from 37 years of private practice as a psychoanalyst, I received a letter from Alicia Adams, a former patient, which said, among many other things, “I am aware that when one mourns a loved one, a void is created which, in time, will be filled. It is apparent to me that the intense relationship with my analyst will serve as a preparation for other meaningful relationships which will continue to enrich my life. But I must confess to a curiosity about the effect that my termination of analysis has had on my analyst. While she was many different people to me over the years, I was always a real person to her. And real people miss each other when they part.

With deep love and gratitude always,

Alicia².

Now that my life as an analyst has ended, I no longer see any need to hold on to analytic neutrality. So I decided to answer Alicia about the effect of the patient’s termination on one psychoanalyst.

I believe, Alicia, that it is always painful as well as heartwarming for an analyst to

¹This article, in slightly different form, is an excerpt from the author’s book, “Is There Life After Analysis?” Baker Book House, 1993.

²Not her real name.

terminate a case. The deeper and stronger the feelings the patient has for the analyst, the more profound will be the feelings of loss the analyst will experience. Together patient and analyst have gone through many of the most intimate, demanding, painful, joyous, shameful, significant moments it is possible for human beings to share. Together we have felt great hate, overwhelming love, pathos, amusement, loss, and grief. If we were lucky, we also have rediscovered what Freud called some of the “great truths of human nature.” And now that the party is over, it is the analyst’s loss as well as the patient’s. It always hurts to say good-bye to people we love, but usually we know that some time, some day, they will return. Each termination of analysis is like the death of a loved one in that we must prepare to say good-bye to someone forever.

It is not only the patients themselves who are lost to retiring analysts. For most of us the remaining span is all too fleeting. We have invested our time, our thoughts, our emotions in patients for many decades. We have given them a most important part of ourselves. When they walk out the door for the last time, they take a piece of our lives with them. Regardless of the joys we envision finding in our new freedom, each closing door is the end of an era that will never return.

Imagine, then, what it is like to terminate an entire practice, to say good-bye within a week to many people who have been highly significant in one’s life. For me, it was excruciating. Some analysts say that no one should discontinue a practice without returning to therapy. I know what they mean. But for reasons of pride, or perhaps megalomania, or maybe even reality, I felt I could handle it myself.

Why is the process so difficult? First of all, termination means that each patient, at least for a while, will appear at his worst, her most neurotic, his most demanding, her most unpleasant. For each one experiences the impending separation as a repetition of all previous losses. And each person tends to regress to the same nonadaptive ways s/he learned as a child, with all the lies and self-deception that help human beings to accept unbearable truths. So it is necessary that the termination analyst help each patient tolerate without symptoms the worst pain he or she has ever endured. Freud said, "The person who doesn't remember is doomed to repeat." We try to help our patients remember the pain they would rather forget. All this at a time when the analyst is also in a state of mourning.

What it meant for me as well as my patients was that I, too, had to recapture the grief experienced at every significant loss in my life. This included mourning all over again lost infancy, parents, analyst, children who have left home, dear departed friends and lovers, as well as unfulfilled dreams. Giving up the work of a lifetime also means handing over the reins to younger, fresher rivals, who perhaps will succeed in a manner we cannot imagine. While this is what we desire intensely with all of our better selves, who among us can turn over the throne without at least a twinge of resentment? How understandable is Queen Elizabeth's unwillingness to turn over her power to the aging Prince Charles! Relinquishing the crown or terminating a practice means facing the fact of aging, as well as our imminent mortality. Winding up the work of a lifetime brings us that much closer to death.

How did I handle this? I grieved. For each and every significant patient. At the death of a beloved person, the mourner must reexperience every important moment of the relationship, in

order to integrate the loss. This is called the working-through process. I had to work through the loss of my patients and the ending of a wonderful practice.

The process ostensibly began with a dream a year before I officially retired. In the dream I am looking at the record book where I keep track of the amount of money patients owe and pay me. The entries are all there, but there are no numbers for the amounts of the checks. The dream informed me that while I knew all the facets of my analytic career, I did not yet know the relative importance of each aspect of it. In a few months I would begin the task of finding out. To do so, it was necessary to relive the history of each patient in the attempt to understand his and her importance to me, as well as the course of the treatment. What went well? What failed to help? Why? Am I satisfied with the results? Well, good. But what about the patient who died of cancer 15 years after her treatment was over? Was it my “fault?” Was her illness triggered by a psychosomatic conflict I didn’t recognize? If so, could it have been avoided? Freud thought not, that certain problems couldn’t be stirred up unless they were active at the time. Could I have done anything more for patient A? Should I have referred patient B to another analyst? Should I have sought further supervision, or even another analysis? What would I handle differently now? Would I do it all over again if I could? All these questions had to be answered and my ‘working through’ continued back to the beginning of my professional life. The process, like grieving over a death of a loved one, took well over a year. Only then could I truly retire and get on with the rest of my life.

A curious phenomena occurred a few months after I actually retired that helped me with the procedure. The patients weren’t the only ones who had to “come back” to their analysis; to

my surprise, I found that I did too. Just as some of them had to return to me to conclude the work of their analyses when they found out I was retiring from practice, I had to return to some of them to complete matters that had left me dissatisfied. But the avenue that was open to patients to “finish up” by reopening contact was not available to me. For it is extremely important that analysands learn that their analysts will let them go. For some, this is the only experience of its kind they will ever know. In addition, I do not believe it is wise to interfere with the manner in which people choose to deal with the loss of their analyst. This provided a dilemma for me; I needed to “drop the other shoe” of my career of 37 years, but the only people who could supply the “shoe” were unavailable to me. So I took the only route open to me; I began dreaming about those patients with whom I had unfinished business.

An example is the case of Marilyn Moyers, a young woman who was terribly disappointed in the results of her analysis. While the work itself seemed to proceed quite well, and she gained much insight into the causes of her illness, she never achieved the life goals she had set for herself. She wanted to be an actress, and after one mildly successful part on Broadway when she was very young, had never worked in the profession again. She had made what seemed to me a good compromise in the opening of an acting school which was quite successful. As a talented teacher, she helped many young people on the road she herself never was able to travel, and earned an excellent living. But she never could accept her “failure” in a business where perhaps two percent of Actors’ Equity members can support themselves at their trade. As a result, she blamed the analysis. If she had gone to a better analyst, she reasoned, it would have made her successful in her chosen career. Interpretations as to what success meant to

her on an unconscious level were rejected with scorn, and she left the analysis furious with the treatment and me. I was not happy about the manner in which she left, and felt that Marilyn was right in her criticism to the extent that this problem had never been resolved. Whether another analyst could have helped her achieve success in the theatre, I'll never know. But I regretted that I could not help her attain her life goals. I understood very well that she was succeeding in frustrating my therapeutic ambitions, just as her own were thwarted. It was very painful, as she meant it to be. She wanted to show me how it felt to fail. and, like Marilyn herself, there was nothing I could do but bear it.

One night I went to sleep thinking about Marilyn, and in the midst of a restless night dreamed that she came back to analysis for a month. She has grown. I look up at her and am surprised to see that she is much taller than I.. Unlike her customary footwear, she is wearing high heels. During the long night, I somehow came to terms with the fact that in addition to her anger, there are many warm feelings between us. We have shared many profound experiences and at times cared deeply about each other. In real life, I seemed to have forgotten this as much as she, as feelings of frustration took over. After the dream I felt much better about her analysis because I realized that our anger was not the whole story. In the dream I tell her she needs to bring the two kinds of feelings together; that if she allows them to merge, her love for me eventually will temper her hate and disappointment.

The fact that Marilyn is wearing heels in the dream suggests that her own shortcomings - for example that she never dressed properly when looking for a job - contributed to the lack of success in her chosen field. That she "grows taller" than I expresses my wish that she be able to

continue the work beyond the point to which the analysis has brought her. I would like her to achieve the insight that she really cares about me as well as wanting to spite me. That will help her accept that we cannot get everything we want in life, and that half a loaf is better than no bread at all.

I cannot answer for Marilyn, but somehow the dream work of the night solved my anxiety about her analysis. It taught me to forgive her for thwarting my therapeutic ambitions. I can't have everything I want in life, either, including curing all my patients. I also realized that I did the best I could, and that while the analysis did not give her her heart's desire, it was far from an absolute failure. Thus I put to rest the case of Marilyn Moyers.

At about the same time, I dreamed I was riding in the back seat of a car with my former patient, Gina Gifford, and her first husband, Larry. He is driving, and is very silent. She is asleep. He doesn't say a word until I begin to eat a bran muffin. I ask him if he is hungry, and he says he is and begins to eat. He then begins to talk, and talks his head off.

Gina divorced Larry shortly after her analysis ended. Although she has had a wonderful, successful life in many ways, including a fine second marriage, I suppose I am questioning whether her marriage to Larry could have been saved. Perhaps she and I were "asleep" to the possibilities. For after I "fed" Larry, he opens up and begins to talk.

The dream has a personal meaning for me, as well. My father was a remote and silent man. I always knew he loved me but felt he wasn't interested in what I had to say. To spare myself pain, I withdrew from him, too. If I had "fed" him as I did Larry in the dream, if I had given him more, perhaps he would have opened up and become the father I needed. I never took

the opportunity to talk to my dad about himself, to ask about his background, his parents, his hopes, his dreams. Now it is too late. I suddenly find myself sobbing.

In another dream of this working-through period, I am in bed with Jona Johnson³, who is an analyst-in-training, and an unknown man. The woman moves over to the center of the bed, so there is no room for me. I begin to whimper, saying, "I know there is no room for me in this bed." Jona, who is probably my most talented disciple, answers, "No, you don't know. You don't know the whole story. You don't know that you were put here, or why you were put here." I wake up in profound shock.

This gifted patient will take over my career where I leave off. Now is the time for me to give up the throne. Just as every little girl must accept that her mother is queen of the household, so people of a certain age must recognize that our ruling days are over. This makes me terribly sad, for I am afraid it signals the end of a meaningful life. But the wise young analyst in my dream brings hope. She says I am here for a purpose, a purpose I do not yet understand.

I suddenly am choked up with feeling for what I have always known in my head. My life will not be over, as there is much I have yet to accomplish. For example, there are many books in my head yet to be written. I have to be there for my children, my grandchildren, and my friends. It is true that I don't know the whole story. But I trust my unconscious mind, which says I am truly here for a purpose.

So, Alicia, I hope I have answered your question about the effect of patient's termination on the analyst. But I sincerely doubt that it does. I suspect that what you really wanted to ask but

³Not her real name.

didn't have the courage was, "Do you miss me?" The answer to your question, Alicia, is an unequivocal yes.