

Maybe You Should Talk to Someone (Lori Gottlieb)

can't have change without loss, which is why so often people say they want change but nonetheless stay exactly the same.

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Ask about somebody's spouse while they're both still in love, then ask about that same spouse post-divorce, and each time, you'll get only half the story.

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There's a popular saying, a paraphrase of a Robert Frost poem: "The only way out is through." The only way to get to the other side of the tunnel is to go through it, not around it. But I can't even picture the entrance right now.

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I've always been drawn to stories—not just what happens, but how the story is told. When people come to therapy, I'm listening to their narratives but also for their flexibility with them. Do they consider what they're saying to be the only version of the story—the "accurate" version—or do they know that theirs is just one of many ways to tell it? Are they aware of what they're choosing to leave in or out, of how their motivation in sharing this story affects how the listener hears it?

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the early sessions, it's always more important for patients to feel heard and understood than it is for them to gain any insight or make any changes.

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Half my life is over.

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People often mistake numbness for nothingness, but numbness isn't the absence of feelings; it's a response to being overwhelmed by too many feelings.

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I once heard creativity described as being the ability to grasp the essence of one thing and the essence of some very different thing and smash them together to create some entirely new thing.

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Flannery O'Connor quote: "The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it."

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We need professional boundaries, but if they're too open, like an ocean, or too constricting, like a fishbowl, we run into trouble. An aquarium seems just right.

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The answer to an unasked question is always no,

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I flash on a thought I often have when seeing my own self-flagellating patients: You are not the best person to talk to you about you right now.

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therapy we aim for self-compassion (Am I human?) versus self-esteem (a judgment: Am I good or bad?).

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Honesty is stronger medicine than sympathy, which may console but often conceals. —Gretel Ehrlich

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Therapists use three sources of information when working with patients: What the patients say, what they do, and how we feel while we're sitting with them.

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The hardest patients aren't the ones like John, people who are changing but don't seem to realize it. The hardest patients are the ones, like Becca, who keep coming but don't change.

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What makes therapy challenging is that it requires people to see themselves in ways they normally choose not to.

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We are afraid to listen to what our hearts are telling us. We are afraid of being unhappy and we are afraid of being too happy (in these dreams, inevitably, we're punished for our joy). We are afraid of not having our parents' approval and we are afraid of accepting ourselves for who we really are. We are afraid of bad health and good fortune. We are afraid of our envy and of having too much. We are afraid to have hope for things that we might not get. We are afraid of change and we are afraid of not changing. We are afraid of something happening to our kids, our jobs. We are afraid of not having control and afraid of our own power. We are afraid of how briefly we are alive and how long we will be dead. (We are afraid that after we die, we won't have mattered.) We are afraid of being responsible for our own lives.

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Johann Wolfgang von Goethe succinctly summarized this sentiment: "Too many parents make life hard for their children by trying, too zealously, to make it easy for them."

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You can't go through psychotherapy training and not be changed in some way, not become, without even noticing, oriented toward the core.

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There's a magnet that somebody stuck on the refrigerator in our office's kitchen: PEACE. IT DOES NOT MEAN TO BE IN A PLACE WHERE THERE IS NO NOISE, TROUBLE, OR HARD WORK. IT MEANS TO BE IN THE MIDST OF THOSE THINGS AND STILL BE CALM IN YOUR HEART.

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"I'm reminded," he begins, "of a famous cartoon. It's of a prisoner, shaking the bars, desperately trying to get out—but to his right and left, it's open, no bars."

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“Insight is the booby prize of therapy” is my favorite maxim of the trade, meaning that you can have all the insight in the world, but if you don’t change when you’re out in the world, the insight—and the therapy—is worthless.

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planting seeds strategically along the way. As in nature, if you plant the seeds too early, they won’t sprout. If you plant too late, they might make progress, but you’ve missed the most fertile ground. If you plant at just the right time, though, they’ll soak up the nutrients and grow. Our work is an intricate dance between support and confrontation.

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Therapists tell their patients: Follow your envy—it shows you what you want.

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As Andrew Solomon wrote in *The Noonday Demon*: “The opposite of depression isn’t happiness, but vitality.”

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Years later, when I’ve done thousands of first sessions, and information-gathering has become second nature, I’ll use a different barometer to judge how it went: Did the patient feel understood? It always amazes me that someone can walk into a room as a stranger and then, after fifty minutes, leave feeling understood, but it happens nearly every time. When it doesn’t, the patient doesn’t return. And because Michelle did, something had gone right.

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can’t help anybody unless I’m authentic in that room.

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Taped up next to my files is the word *ultracrepidarianism*, which means “the habit of giving opinions and advice on matters outside of one’s knowledge or competence.” It’s a reminder to myself that as a therapist, I can come to understand people and help them sort out what they want to do, but I can’t make their life choices for them.

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Behind my questions lies the assumption that Wendell is a more competent human being than I am. Sometimes I wonder, Who am I to make the important decisions in my own life? Am I really qualified for this?

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Everyone wages this internal battle to some degree: Child or adult? Safety or freedom?

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But if her question in life had always been *Why?*, this time she asked herself, *Why not?*

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This was grief: You laugh. You cry. Repeat.

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It's hard enough in a marriage to do the give-and-take of putting one's wants and needs aside for another, but here the scales are tipped, the imbalance unrelenting.

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“forever changed and paradoxically alive.”

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Speed is about time, but it's also closely related to endurance and effort.

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Patience, on the other hand, requires endurance and effort. It's defined as “the bearing of provocation, annoyance, misfortune, or pain without complaint, loss of temper, irritation, or the like.”

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But children, bound by parental rules, are really free only in one respect—emotionally. For a while, at least, they can cry or laugh or have tantrums unselfconsciously; they can have big dreams and unedited desires.

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we are asking forgiveness of others to avoid the harder work of forgiving ourselves.

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Safe inside her shell of pain, she doesn't have to face anything, nor does she have to emerge into the world, where she might get hurt again. Her inner critic serves her: I don't have to take any action because I'm worthless.

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Feeling deep in your cells that you matter is part of the alchemy that takes place in good therapy.

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When people delude themselves into believing they have all the time in the world, she's noticed, they get lazy.

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It turns out that sessions to which patients come with neither a crisis nor an agenda tend to be the most revelatory ones.

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I remember saying that there was a difference between examining and dwelling, and if we're cut off from our feelings, just skating on the surface, we don't get peace or joy—we get deadness.

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This may seem surprising, but when therapists are late, many patients are shaken. Though we try to avoid this, every therapist I know has let a patient down this way. And when we do, it can bring up old experiences of distrust or abandonment, leaving patients feeling anything from discombobulated to enraged.

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Sometimes people drop out of therapy because it makes them feel accountable when they don't want to be.

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What they forget is that therapy is one of the safest of all places to bring your shame.

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Wendell once put it this way: "What people do in therapy is like shooting baskets against a backboard. It's necessary. But what they need to then is go and play in an actual game."

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The inability to say no is largely about approval-seeking—people imagine that if they say no, they won't be loved by others. The inability to say yes, however—to intimacy, a job opportunity, an alcohol program—is more about lack of trust in oneself.

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one of the most important lessons from my training: There's no hierarchy of pain. Suffering shouldn't be ranked, because pain is not a contest.

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But Wendell told me that by diminishing my problems, I was judging myself and everyone else whose problems I had placed lower down on the hierarchy of pain.

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William Worden takes into account these questions by replacing stages with tasks of mourning. In his fourth task, the goal is to integrate the loss into your life and create an ongoing connection with the person who died while also finding a way to continue living.

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In couples therapy, therapists talk about the difference between privacy (spaces in people's psyches that everyone needs in healthy relationships) and secrecy (which stems from shame and tends to be corrosive).

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Still, the most important skill I've learned from Wendell is how to remain strategic while also bringing my personality into the room.

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had I not seen Wendell be so utterly himself with me.

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"She loved her job!" I was struck by his response: even a young child could tell.

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when we feel fragile, we're like raw eggs—we crack open and splatter if dropped. But when we develop more resilience, we're like hard-boiled eggs—we might get dinged up if dropped, but we won't crack completely and spill all over the place.

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“The nature of life is change and the nature of people is to resist change.”

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“The more you welcome your vulnerability,” Wendell had said, “the less afraid you’ll feel.”

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There are two main categories of people who are so depressed that they contemplate suicide. One type thinks, I had a nice life, and if I can just emerge from this terrible crisis—the death of a loved one; extended unemployment—I’ll have something to look forward to. But what if I can’t? The other type thinks, My life is barren, and there’s nothing to look forward to.

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I told Rita what I tell everyone who’s afraid of getting hurt in relationships—which is to say, everyone with a heartbeat. I explained to her that even in the best possible relationship, you’re going to get hurt sometimes, and no matter how much you love somebody, you will at times hurt that person, not because you want to, but because you’re human. You will inevitably hurt your partner, your parents, your children, your closest friend—and they will hurt you—because if you sign up for intimacy, getting hurt is part of the deal.

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But, I went on, what was so great about a loving intimacy was that there was room for repair.

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Sitting with Rita, I was reminded that the heart is just as fragile at seventy as it is at seventeen.

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I’ve told her about the many relationships I’ve seen implode simply because one person was terrified of being abandoned and so did everything in his or her power to push the other person away. She is starting to see that what makes self-sabotage so tricky is that it attempts to solve one problem (alleviate abandonment anxiety) by creating another (making her partner want to leave).

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“Every laugh and good time that comes my way feels ten times better than before I knew such sadness.”

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**FAILURE IS PART OF BEING HUMAN.**

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I thought about how many people avoid trying for things they really want in life because it’s more painful to get close to the goal but not achieve it than not to have taken the chance in the first place.

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wrote about holding on and letting go and how hard it is to walk around those prison bars even when freedom isn’t just right in front of us but literally inside of us, in our minds.

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Therapists take risks all the time on behalf of their patients, making split-second decisions on the presumption that these risks will do far more good than harm. Therapy isn’t a paint-by-numbers

business, and sometimes the only way to move patients beyond their stuckness is by taking a risk in the room, by going out of the therapist's own comfort zone to teach by example.

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The strangest thing about therapy is that it's structured around an ending. It begins with the knowledge that our time together is finite,

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We grow in connection with others. Everyone needs to hear that other person's voice saying, I believe in you. I can see possibilities that you might not see quite yet. I imagine that something different can happen, in some form or another. In therapy we say, Let's edit your story.

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