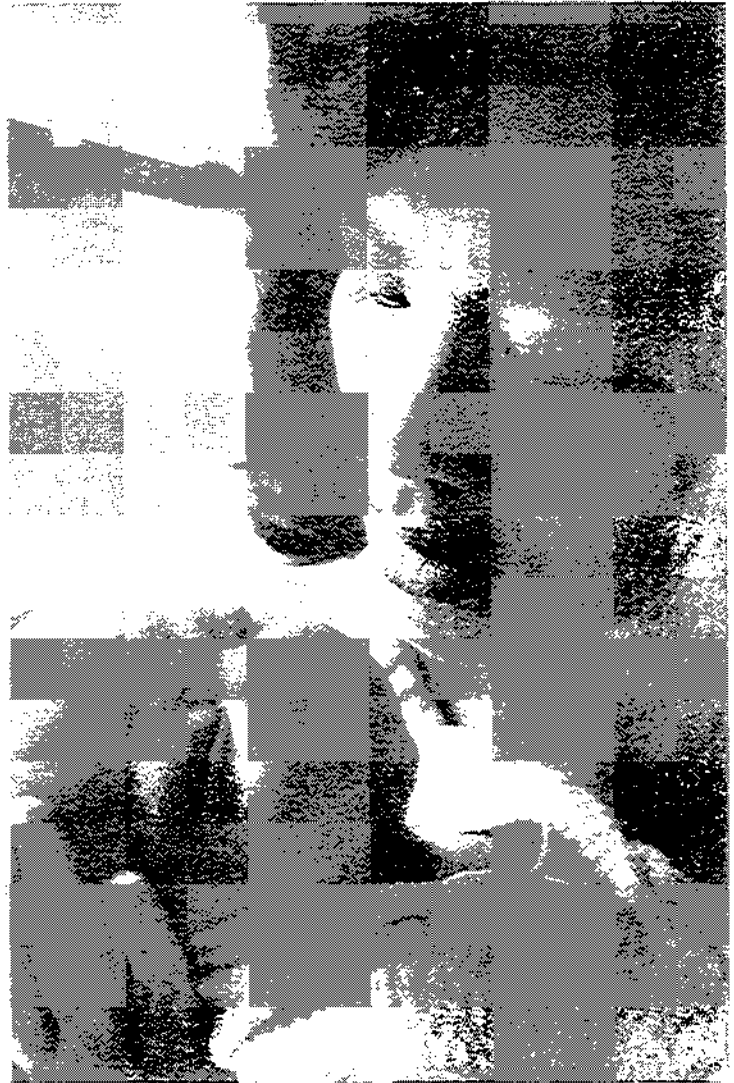




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Marilyn Neit

The Therapeutic Relationship as Human Connectedness:

Being held in another's mind

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This essay is excerpted from the opening plenary session of ZERO TO THREE's Ninth National Training Institute, held in Dallas, Texas, December 1-4, 1994.

A challenging, exceedingly demanding, and lovable woman with whom I worked as an infant/parent therapist over five years told me once that she would be happy to talk to others about what in our work had seemed important to her, what things had mattered. One morning, we videotaped an hour of conversation. Here are some of the things this young woman said:

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The Therapeutic Relationship as Human Connectedness

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I remember a lot of times when we came here, there was this doll that my daughter loved.

She named her Baby Lyn.

And every time we'd come, that doll was there.

I remember one particular day when we came, the doll wasn't there, and she was so broken-hearted that you were broken-hearted.

And it was like, "Let's find Baby Lyn. We have to find Baby Lyn!"

I was like, "Wow! — You're really going to look for a stupid doll for my daughter to make her feel good?"

I just thought it was really great.

You got into looking for this doll — seriously — asking everybody — "Have they seen this doll?" — everybody.

And you found her.

And I was like wow! All this for a doll?

And you let my daughter bring her home, and that doll was — the center of her world. Baby Lyn sat at the table and ate with us. She was just there, all the time, right up under her arm.

Walking around with her.

She was the show-and-tell doll — every Friday. "This is Baby Lyn."

And when Baby Lyn's face got a little smudge on it, I had to give Baby Lyn a bath. She was so excited about this doll that it was just like — I guess a part of here came home with us for her — and for me.

I saw a change in my child.

It was something good that came home, that I learned from my daughter and her doll.

Like if she hurt, she pointed to the doll's arm. Or if a tooth was coming in and hurt, Baby Lyn's mouth "hurt right here."

I thought it was so great — I was learning what's hurting on her, from her doll.

You came over and I was really surprised . . . You came in my neighborhood.

You weren't afraid.

On a day that I was really, really sick and missed an appointment, you were determined to keep our appointment, no matter what.

And it was — OK — that really felt good that somebody cared enough to come and see us.

Antricia was running up and down the stairs, excited, saying:

"Oh, Jeree's here, Jeree's here. She has a present! She has a present!"

I said, "Calm down, girl!"

I was really surprised and taken aback that, you know, you came to my neighborhood and to see me.



Marilyn Noll

And the walls started tumbling down, and I could trust a little bit more.

I was surprised at everything that you did. Because growing up, for me, nobody was ever there, and — as I said before — I never trusted anybody.

Everything was the opposite of what I thought.

Like when you came over in my neighborhood, it was just — I never thought you would do that.

When you let my daughter have Baby Lyn from the program, I was like, "She would never give this doll away."

And I was like, "Take good care of this doll, you know, we can't get her dirty."

I learned something from my daughter — that it's ok to take what people are giving you, if it is in a good way.

And it's ok if you mess up. It was different . . .

When you stepped in, it was like, ok, this is

something that I really did need.

You were just yourself.

You weren't afraid to speak up and let me know that there are things that I shouldn't be doing.

Most people are afraid to let people know those things. You can't be hitting, you can't be doing this.

Right off the bat — you didn't hold back.

So it was really great that you were honest and you were there.

You had feelings.

It was like a handshake.

It was a strong handshake.

It was real.

I told you once when I was upset and hit my daughter and you just came right out and said, "We can't have that. I won't have that."

And I thought, "What? Excuse me? This is my child. You can't tell me what to do."

(This is all in my mind —like, “No!”, you know.)

I was just blown away, it just tickled me.

Wow! She’s yelling at me.

It was so cute — it really struck me as funny.

Because you didn’t hold your tongue.

Most people — I feel that they’re afraid of the consequences . . . they’ll stop, and then there will be, “Well, I’m just going to have to take your child from you.”

That’s not the way to go about it.

It’s . . . not helpful.

When you said, “You just can’t do that, you know, I won’t have it,” it was like “OK, wow.”

I felt like a three-year-old, but it just felt really good that you weren’t afraid to say that to me.

And it was easy to say, “OK, I won’t hit her no more.”

And I haven’t.

Which is good.

Sometimes I really want to just tear her up.

But I’ve learned — and she’s learned — that hitting isn’t the way to raise a child.

Now when she’s sixteen and wants to do something wrong, I’m going to bring her here and say, “OK, I never hit her. Take care of this situation!”

At first, I couldn’t read you.

I couldn’t crack you.

No matter what I did, you were there.

You were just hanging on.

And because I didn’t trust, I didn’t think you liked me.

But once I started to trust in something, it felt comfortable . . .

I did feel that you liked me . . .

It was just me, and the way I was feeling anyway.

It’s not what you do, it’s how you do it that made a difference.

And I think if you’re one of those people that smile in people’s faces and then aren’t really there for them, no matter how much

you smile, you can see under that, no matter how bad you’re feeling.

And with you, it wasn’t like that.

Everything was real.

I remember one night you took my daughter and me out to dinner, and I was totally blown away.

It was my birthday, too, and I never had a party.

I never celebrated my birthday; it was like just another day.

And here we were going out this night, and it was the day I was born.

It was like a little birthday celebration, and my daughter was there.

She was surprised that a birthday can be so intimate and small.

This birthday made me feel good inside.

I liked it.

That day, you were there after five.

It was like, “Wow, I’m so special!”

It was great . . . it was something I know that you didn’t have to do, and I didn’t feel that you were making yourself sit here and have dinner, and it just made me feel really special.

Another time I was having a real hard time. You had come over.

I had called you.

You had given me your home phone number.

I was, like, “OK, she gave me her home phone number. I’m going to use it!”

I was feeling really, really down, and I called you and you came over, even though I knew by your voice that you were —you have your own life, and everything, but you came over, and it was like, “Oh, wow, she’s here, she’s actually here.”

I was basically testing the waters.

I needed somebody with me that day.

You were there.

You really didn’t have to be, but you were.

I’ve been through a lot of programs, and ran into a lot of people on the mental health highway, and you run into a lot of people that

are just there for the money, if it’s money, or whatever it is.

They’re not there because they want to be there to help people.

And they’re really rude, and nasty.

They don’t give a damn about you . . .

They can really build a . . . plexiglass thing between you . . .

It’s like . . . they’re at this high desk, and you’re at this low desk and chair, and they’re looking down on you, and they really make you feel bad.

And it’s like — yuck. I don’t know if I can trust this person with my life, because they’re not really there.

Well, actually I just feel that they should be on the other side of this plexiglass — with me.

You and my other therapist were mother figures for me.

I really didn’t know how to raise this little, tiny baby.

I didn’t know what to do aside from changing diapers and feeding and burping.

That’s not all there’s to it.

I didn’t know.

With your help . . . for me it felt like having two mother figures help me along with my child.

Not having that from my own family . . .

I feel that if I can raise my child properly, then maybe she’ll be a better person to her kid.

It’s like breaking the cycle.

I wasn’t raised properly, and learning something from you and my therapist helped me to raise my child properly.

Even though I was like 27, 26, hey, I was being raised . . .

You can be raised over, no matter how old you are.

You guys taught me how to love.

You taught me how to speak — speak softly — with a big voice.

You taught me how to care.

And those were things that weren’t inside of me.

I think Terry makes the point that certain things that I did and that her therapist did, and how we were, changed the way that she could feel about others and herself. However, let there be no mistake. Untangling and understanding the impact of her history was a job that Terry, her therapist, and I worked very hard at. Still, the impact of how we both were with her played its own vital role and allowed the other work we did to occur.

How had I been? I had tried to be nonjudgmental, respectful, interested, concerned, attentive, practical, reality-testing, and painstaking in building and articu-

lating what the parameters of our relationship were. I was aware of thinking about my own threshold for availability, of slavishly remembering what it was that I was told, and of trying to be honest. I knew that I was never confused about whose responsibility it was to keep the relationship working if it were at all possible. I attempted (but sometimes failed) not to promise more than I could deliver, and we talked about it when she wanted more.

In fact, as always, we developed a personal vocabulary. At the heart of it were two phrases that I said to her

that she came to know the meaning of: "I am always available when I am available" and "I will take care of myself, and I will always tell you if I feel that something is too much. It is not your responsibility to worry about; it is mine."

I met Terry when she was 26 and her daughter Antricia was 14 months old. I saw Terry weekly with her daughter and weekly alone. There were also contacts during crisis periods. Terry had been referred by her individual therapist, and our collaboration was crucially intense and wholly cooperative. In the course of our work, Terry sometimes frightened me and her therapist in regard to herself and her daughter and their safety. This demanded intense collaboration. Fortunately, Terry's therapist and I shared a high tolerance for meeting needs, concern for establishing clear boundaries but great flexibility for what they were. We were both comfortable with the need for the three of us to work together in whatever ways we needed to do so.

Terry now works, has friends, and takes excellent care of her daughter. Antricia is a very delightful child with many friends, doing well in school, and with high ambitions for the future.

Within six months of our beginning to work together, Terry began to speak in various metaphorical and then more direct ways of feeling as if she existed for me and for her therapist. This became an extremely important and overt theme. My major association to the meaning of much of what Terry says is to something I have observed in many, many parents whom I have seen. It relates to a basic understanding of human connectedness. This is singularly relevant, I think, to Terry's experience and inner world when I first saw her.

I recall saying to a young woman with whom I was working many years ago that since our last visit, I had been thinking about something she had said. I then delivered some comment that I blissfully no longer remember. It was totally clear at the time that it made absolutely no impression on her. What was apparent, however, was that she was totally startled that I had thought about her in her absence. She was visibly taken aback, and seemed confusedly pleased, though, after an expression of surprise, she could not really talk about it....not then. What is important about that, what was important about Terry as I first knew her, was that I was observing the absence in this young woman and in Terry of something that is vital to children.

Ten-month-olds — well-functioning, ordinary babies — remember the objects behind them with which they have been playing and, without looking, reach for them with confidence and skill. This concrete image, as well as the cognitive/affective functioning it suggests, always brings to my mind a crucial internal sense that I see develop in infants who receive reasonable care. Babies feel that they exist in their caregivers' minds. The mother who is out of sight behind them is simultaneously holding and organizing them. When a child is

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held in mind, the child feels it, and knows it. There is a sense of safety, of containment, and, most important, existence in that other, which has always seemed to me vital.

A two-month-old held facing outward will drop his head back to look at the holder from time to time, if he's well nurtured. By the time you are a sitting baby, with good enough ordinary experiences, your very back feels safe, held. You know you are watched — that is, that you exist, are held, in someone's mind. You feel secure, and secured.

But this only develops if you truly are consistently in the mind of someone, so that you are noted, noticed, spoken to over distance, rescued, protected, appreciated, and tethered across space and out of mutual sight. It is the caregiver that creates and confirms this, by her continual surveillance and by holding the child in continual existence in her mind. This becomes a crucial part of a child's internal sense and experience.

There are many children in differing circumstances who are not cared for in this way. Antricia was about to become one of them, and Terry was one of them.

These children are ones we worry about particularly. They are too often like little billiard balls, careening about from someone else's impetus, responding to that impetus, but left wholly on their own and feeling that until the next, unexpected external thrust. This will rarely have anything to do with what they want, or what they need. It is in that sense a nonorganic, episodic, lonely existence, and they are held in no one's mind.

One must worry deeply about this sense of human connectedness in children. It is truly a substrate of the development of mutual concern. Everyone deserves the experience of existing in someone's mind. If a parent cannot provide this, perhaps a special teacher can, a social worker, a great-grandmother. I believe that some potential to create that experience with a person continues to exist over a person's lifetime, though it grows increasingly arduous. I believe that this was created with Terry, and was crucial to her experience and to her growing ability to care, in positive ways, for her daughter and about herself.

It seems to me that one of life's greatest privileges is just that — the experience of being held in someone's mind. Possibly, though, there is one exception — and that is the privilege of holding another in one's own.