

Refinding the Object and Reclaiming the Self

# Changing Internal Object Relations in the Psychotherapy of an Adolescent

David E. Scharff M.D.

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# **CHANGING INTERNAL OBJECT RELATIONS IN THE PSYCHOTHERAPY OF AN ADOLESCENT**

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In this chapter, I outline the way in which alterations in the self are marked by and dependent on changes in the internal object during an adolescent therapy limited to once-weekly sessions during the course of one school year. During this relatively brief psychotherapy, the teenage girl, Tammy, found a new set of identifications, images of herself and, at the same time realized differences in her internal objects. Her parents, who had provided

the experiences that became the makings of these objects, did not themselves change in any substantial way during this year, although both mother and father had made therapeutic gains of their own through therapy and analysis during her pre-teen years. It was the changes in her self that enabled Tammy to see her objects differently, but things did not stop there. Once she saw her objects in these new ways, she in turn saw her self differently again. Self and object continued to alter in a mutually reinforcing cycle. We could then see how views of her objects had impinged on developments of her self throughout her previous development.

Incidentally, changes in Tammy paralleled changes in my own growth as a therapist, providing another level of interest for me in the growth of my own self and my therapeutic objects. I had treated her when she was younger and had received sporadic

reports about her from her mother over the ensuing ten years before I saw her again in therapy.

## **TAMMY'S TREATMENT AS A YOUNG CHILD**

I first met Tammy when she was 6 years old. Her mother, Miriam, brought Tammy in, saying, "We just can't get along. It's a terrible loss. We battle about everything. Tammy thinks I don't do anything right."

I saw Tammy in psychotherapy for two-and-a-half years. In the beginning, she was so anxious that she couldn't come into my office without one of her parents. Her parents had been divorced two years earlier when she was 4 and her brother, Russell, was 1½. It had been an angry divorce. Miriam said that John, the father, had been like a child, unable to think of her needs or the children's needs. Now Tammy, Russell, and Miriam were living without him in a small apartment. Miriam fought with John

over his inconsistent visitation and his sloppy care of the children. In many early sessions, Miriam had to come into the room with Tammy in order to get her to see me. When John brought her, he also had to come into the room with her. Although he was concerned about Tammy and Russell, John preferred to relinquish responsibility in many small ways. For instance, although he did pay a portion of the therapy bill, he left it to Miriam to deal with the insurance company, even though he held the policy.

Tammy never liked coming to see me, but with her parents there she would play nevertheless. I sat on one side of a table while she played with her father or mother. After a while, Miriam could sit in a chair across the room and Tammy would play with me. It was often difficult to discern from her play what the issues were. After a few months of therapy aimed at simply managing her insecurity and developing an alliance, Tammy made a collage of a

picture with a heart with a hat sitting on its head and with smiles all around it. (Figure 5-1.) This particular picture was especially interesting because she did it in a session with her father present, while she smiled coyly at him. Tammy then demonstrated to her father and me that the hat could be lifted away, showing us that the hat made a phallic insertion into the V of the heart. (See Figure 5-2.) Although I did not say so to them, I felt that this picture could be interpreted as representing Tammy's unconscious age-appropriate wish for intercourse with her father.



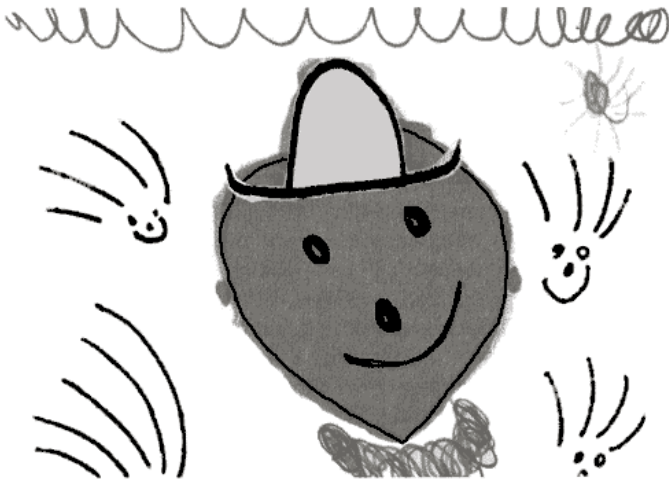


Figure 5-1. Tammy's "Heart with a Hat," age 6

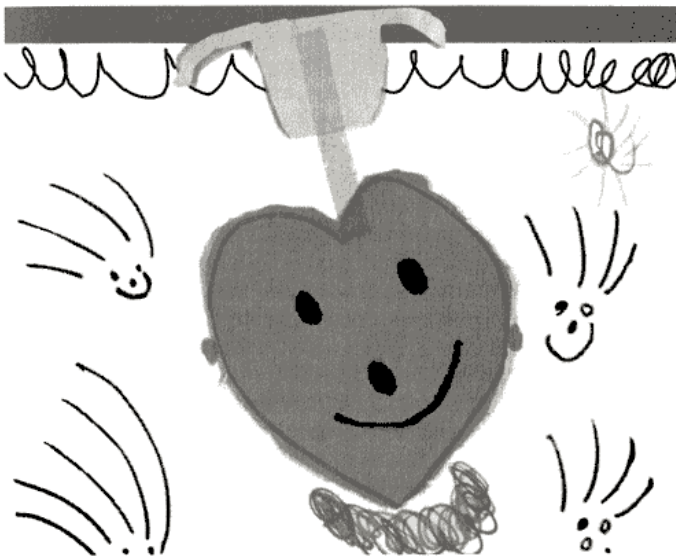


Figure 5-2. Tammy's picture with hat removed

Tammy's collage suggested that her oedipal longing for the father that her mother had let go was at the base of Tammy's battling with her mother. Miriam told the story of John's neglect during their marriage. She thought he took Miriam for granted, erupting angrily at her whenever she did not carry out his wishes or meet his needs. Engrossed in other aspects of his life, he had no sense, she felt, of the needs of his wife and children. He had the same lack of thought when it came to taking care of the children. After the divorce, he showed up late for his visits and kept an old, hard-to-clean house that was so dusty and full of dog hair that Tammy, who had allergies and asthma, was constantly at risk for bronchial attacks while visiting her father.

After the session in which her oedipal longing was revealed, Tammy could tolerate seeing me alone without her parents. Now her underlying insecurity

became the focus of our work. As she worked on separating from her mother, she learned that she had unconsciously blamed her mother for her anxious attachment. Now Tammy felt closer to her mother — and went sour on her father. During the therapy she struggled with her reluctance about going to his house. Miriam reported that John didn't seem to take Tammy's interests to heart. He refused to remove the physical irritants that Tammy was phobic about. So her mother, who was upset about his failure to comply with medical instructions, found it hard to send Tammy to see him. Tammy also found it more and more difficult to go there.

In a session toward the end of therapy, Tammy built a village compound out of blocks. It held many members of a family who got along well together. Tammy told me that none of them was ever allowed to leave. The underlying issues about separation bound her closely to her mother, although she was

able to do well in school and now had friends whom she could also visit. On most fronts, she seemed to be doing well. In retrospect, the anxieties in her attachment were handled by a split: good mother and bad father. I was unaware of the way Tammy unconsciously constructed this split because I believed Miriam's account that John was extremely difficult, and I agreed with Tammy's reservations about her father. Their accounts of him echoed my own experiences with him of his inaccessibility and unreliability.

In any event, there wasn't much I could do about this split. Now that she had after-school activities, homework, and friends to visit, therapy was even less appealing. As she approached her ninth birthday, Tammy grew hardened against it. Her feelings about her father had the transference effect that she was more reluctant to see me. She seemed to be doing too well generally for me to insist on

continuing therapy. By the time we terminated when Tammy was 9, her presenting symptom was resolved. She was getting along well with her mother and had no difficulty with school or friends, but she was still kicking up a fuss about going to her father's house, partly for good reason and partly out of reaction to her repressed longing.

I did not see Tammy again for many years. I did see her brother Russell a year after Tammy stopped therapy. Miriam brought him because he was isolated and friendless, doing poorly in school. He was 6½. He didn't get along very well with his father either, and he was unenthusiastic but not phobic about visiting him. But he got along well with Miriam. I concluded that Russell had a childhood obsessional neurosis, and I referred him for analysis. He had an interesting and largely successful analysis, but that is not part of this story. Now, as the parent worker for my colleague who was Russell's

analyst, I resumed working with Miriam. The child analyst periodically saw the father, John, and his second wife.

In my work with Miriam, I was able to deal with her continuing difficulties in forming intimate relationships. I urged her to think about more intensive treatment. Reluctant at first, she finally decided that she was stuck, unable to form a permanent, satisfying relationship. She asked for referral for analysis herself. With analysis, she was able to move relatively quickly into a steady, caring relationship with a man whom the children also liked. They married soon after Russell finished analysis. Tammy was still doing well in school and in friendships and Miriam reported that the children related to their natural father about as well as could be expected, given his arbitrary and difficult personality.

Incidentally, during the period of Russell's analysis, his father and his new wife asked Russell's analyst for a referral for their marriage. They began marital therapy with another colleague, who later told me that there had been considerable improvement in their marriage and maturation for both of them individually.

After Miriam's marriage, she and her new husband, along with Tammy and Russell, moved away from Washington, a business move that they had anticipated. But a year after that, I got a phone call from Tammy's father, John, asking that Russell's analyst and I evaluate the two children for school placement. Tammy and Russell were now living in an isolated, rural area with Miriam. The school year had been difficult for them. They wanted to move back with John and go to their old school. Miriam was in agreement with their wishes because she agreed that the school where she lived was

inadequate and she felt that John had matured and was now living in a suitable new house without any animals. She told me that she did not want the happiness of her life to interfere with the children's education. However, because John's new house was not in the children's old school district, they would require a special exception to return to their old school. John and Miriam both hoped that a psychiatric report might help with that request.

So I saw Tammy, who had been so wary of seeing me in the many years since treatment as a child. She was now almost 16. She looked like a little girl with braces and a broad but shy smile. She told me that she was getting along beautifully with her mother and stepfather, as was Russell. But the small town they lived in was isolated. There were few resources. There were no kids she or Russell felt comfortable with, and both found the school situation painful. Although she would miss her



mother a great deal, she felt it made sense for her to spend the last two years of high school living with her father and returning to the school she missed.

I asked Tammy if she thought this move would also give her a chance to know her father better. She said that would be worth doing, although she was nervous about it. Russell's analyst and I agreed to recommend that the children be permitted to return to their old school. The request was granted, and they moved in with their father.

## **THE COURSE OF ADOLESCENT TREATMENT**

It was in the summer of the following year that Tammy called me. There were some things she would like to think about. Her father and mother had agreed that she could have some psychotherapy.

Would I be willing to see her? We agreed over the phone to meet as soon as school resumed in the fall.

On the 4th of September, Tammy was in my waiting room. Although she was 17, she still looked like an immature 14-year-old. It wasn't just her prominent braces and her little-girl curly hair, or her shy tentative smile. She was small and dressed in young clothes. Her grin seemed characteristic of the happy 9-year-old I had known when she had not been annoyed at me for making her come to therapy eight years before. This and her frilly short dress reminded me that her mother usually looked like a little girl too.

Tammy said she was glad to be here now, but when she was 6, she had thought I was the enemy. She hadn't wanted to see me then at all, but her mother had said, "You're going! That's all." She remembered telling her mother then that she was afraid that I would do something to her that would

make her a different person so she wouldn't be herself when she grew up. It had helped in the interval to see that her mother had gone to analysis and found it so helpful. She could see how much her mother had grown and changed. So coming to see me now ought to be a good thing.

The impetus this time was that Tammy's boyfriend was going to a counselor and had said to her that she ought to go to therapy, too. She thought he was right, but she still wasn't sure why she was here. She felt that she really didn't have a good enough reason. That made her feel badly, because she didn't want to waste my time.

Quickly, this confusion became the theme of our first interview. Tammy said she never knew what she wanted because she wasn't sure who she was or what she should want for herself. She said that when she had a decision to make, she called her mother who gave good advice. Sometimes, Tammy said, she

objected to what her mother said, but her mother always turned out to be right. She would say to her mother, "Is that what I should do? Is that the right thing?" And her mom would say, "If it's the right thing for you." Then Tammy would feel that she must do what her mother said because her mother was always right. But she would be left with the feeling that she wasn't quite sure herself.

Tammy said she was glad that she had come to live with her father. She liked his brand-new home. She didn't get sick around him. She didn't fight with him. It was going well. On the other hand, she hadn't really been able to talk to him. However, on a recent trip to see his family in New England, she was upset about something and her dad was able to talk it through with her. This confirmed something she remembered I had said to her when I had met with her a year earlier—that if she lived with her father, she might get to know him better.

Tammy went on to tell me about the boyfriend, Ed, who had recommended therapy for her. I was interested to note how she would treat her boyfriends as an externalization of her internal object status. In this report, I want to demonstrate how her way of dealing with her self and the objects who were her peers also changed over the course of the treatment. Although I was predisposed to like Ed on the basis of his support of psychotherapy, Tammy was wary of him. Ed was the first boy that she had dated in a long time. He came from a disturbed background. He was an orphan and had been on drugs. But most alarmingly, he neglected and verbally abused Tammy. As she got to know Ed, she found that she didn't like him. When Tammy went on the recent trip with her father, Ed got furious. That ended her interest in him. When she finally broke up with him, Ed begged to get back together.

Tammy seemed confused. She looked immature, yet in some ways she was curiously mature. She had seen by herself that Ed was abusive and had been able to break up with him rather promptly. Yet, she did not know who she was or what she wanted. I found myself remembering her play from eight years before when she had built a whole family being reined into a compound that nobody could leave. Having left her mother, Tammy was being confronted with not knowing who she herself was. I said that these questions—not knowing what she wanted or who she was—were important reasons for therapy.

The theme of this first interview was how much Tammy did not know who she was or what was right for her. Questions about her self would be the main concern of therapy. Her uncertainty about her identity showed up in the need to have her mother make major decisions for her and in her turning to

her mother and then to Ed to define her self. It showed up in her transference to me as a person who might dismiss her needs or else tell her what to do instead of discussing her doubt as to whether she deserved therapy or was wasting my time when she did not know why she wanted to see me. Although she knew she wanted to see me without knowing why, she felt sheepish baring her confusion to me. Her identity diffusion and her consequent overreliance on her external objects were continuations of herself as a young child who literally could not let her parents leave the therapy office, and later who symbolically placed her family in a compound that no one could leave. Now in adolescence she was struggling with the same issues in her internal world, with resulting depression and confusion that left her feeling badly in my presence and in the presence of her wish to know her own mind and direction.

Over the early weeks of the therapy, Tammy worked in the way that adolescents do, mostly through talking about her own issues as they are displaced onto others. Having broken up with Ed, she distanced herself from him further by examining the way that Ed had passed on the abuse to her that he had learned in his own orphaned upbringing. Ed lived in a home for parentless children. A foster parent was demanding of him. On one occasion when Tammy and Ed had scheduled a date, the foster parent grounded Ed, who did not call Tammy. Ed had not bothered to consider the consequences to Tammy of his failure to let her know he could not meet her. She realized that she didn't want to be treated like that. Although she didn't think well of herself, she didn't want to feel *that* badly.

She now moved on to a new boyfriend, Pete, who was in the process of going off to college. She was infatuated with the idea of an older, college-



bound boyfriend. I noticed that Pete also provided her with a safer distance in the wake of her feeling abused by Ed, but I did not say so to Tammy.

Tammy also examined herself through contrast to a girlfriend, Mary Lou. This relationship provided a second area of interest in external object relations over the course of Tammy's therapy. Mary Lou was an overweight girl who accompanied Tammy to her second appointment with me. Over the next weeks, Mary Lou became an object of Tammy's study. Tammy felt loyal to Mary Lou but came to see her as a foil for herself. Mary Lou clung to Tammy, expected Tammy to accompany her wherever and whenever Mary Lou was anxious, and expected to be included in every aspect of Tammy's life, just as the young Tammy had used Miriam. Mary Lou's father was a teacher at their high school, and Tammy felt that he often appeared to be a "jerk" in class. This word was particularly interesting because it is

also the word she had begun to use to describe her father's behavior when he was self-centered or not particularly attuned to Tammy. But Mary Lou's father seemed to care about Mary Lou, even though he did jerky things.

Finally, Tammy began to consider her life with her father and stepmother. In a session after two months of therapy, she told me about her stepmother, Faye. Faye was somebody who wasn't used to children, having none of her own, and Faye felt displaced now with the two new adolescents in the house. On one occasion, Tammy asked Faye if she could have several friends sleep over. Faye had been distressed, saying, "Well, okay, if they don't use the telephone, because I need it. If I don't have to clean up, it's all right. But on the other hand, they might eat a whole box of cereal and drink a whole gallon of milk." Tammy had said angrily, "So I'll buy the cereal and the milk!" Faye lost her cool. Her father

had taken Tammy aside and told her not to argue with Faye because, he said, "You and I and Russell are on a team, and she feels on the outside." Tammy said that Russell intentionally provoked Faye, but that she, Tammy, tried —and usually succeeded—to consider Faye's point of view. "It must be hard for her," she conceded.

Tammy now turned to a conversation she had had with her mother about Pete, the new college boyfriend. Her mother had said to her, "You understand that he won't really write you back when you write him. He'll find people in college he's interested in." Tammy had said, "Mom, don't tell me that. I know that it's true, but I don't really want you to tell me that."

I said to Tammy that she wanted her fantasy left intact for a while to enjoy, and she agreed.

A month later, Tammy was talking about another new boy that she wanted to date, one who was closer to home. She compared him to Ed, the orphan whose rudeness and self-centeredness she now said reminded her of her father. In the middle of this discussion, I asked her about sexual issues. She grew silent and embarrassed. Finally, she spoke about something else. A teacher in school had said to her, "You know, you look terribly sad." She related her sadness to being away from her mother. When she went to this school in ninth grade, her mother had been around. She had a wonderful year. This year was so much harder without her mother.

Thoughts of loneliness and sadness had been triggered by my question about sexuality. Perhaps she wanted me to know that she wished to have her mother with her during the threatening transition to adult female sexuality. She acknowledged that she talked about sex with girlfriends, but she remained

too uncomfortable to talk about it with me. I got the impression that she wasn't sexually active beyond mild physical interaction with the boys. It was never possible to discuss this directly.

Tammy treasured the psychotherapy. She came on time reliably despite the long commute to my office, and she was a steady, enthusiastic participant. I found myself looking forward to the hours with her, feeling the work to be collaborative and valued. The contrast to the feel of the sessions when she was little was an unceasing source of amazement. Her experience of me as an external object was now totally different, colored by shifts in her internal object representation of the rejecting object linked mainly to her father.

Increasingly, Tammy talked of needing to separate from her friend Mary Lou in order to branch out to more adventurous and varied friends, yet she felt a loyalty conflict because Mary Lou

needed her. Boys came on the scene and then disappeared, but without urgency. Steadily, the peers seemed to be more mature and more capable of mutual regard for individual needs. Yet Tammy did not, as do many teenagers who change in therapy, easily and heartlessly discard her old friends. Whereas Mary Lou or an old boyfriend still had a place in her life, they were no longer the external objects against whom she defined her emerging self. They were old and valued relationships, worthy of regard, but no longer in the center of the object relations action.

Tammy now began to talk a good deal about her father and the arbitrary things he did. When she asked permission to go out for an evening, her father assessed it in terms of whether or not Russell had to be taken care of, since her father was intent on going to a concert. As she presented it, the decision seemed to ride on her father's convenience. He made

quirky demands on her, Russell, and Faye. He would insist, for instance, that the entire family clean up after dinner, but he would take a quick swipe at the table with a sponge and then sit and read the newspaper while Faye and the children cleaned up. It didn't even matter if they had homework.

Tammy found herself a college counselor to work with about her choice of college. She did all the work herself, getting the information and doing the applications without prompting. Her father was uninvolved. He was vague about whether he would underwrite the effort to visit colleges. In the end he did so willingly, and they had a close and pleasant trip together.

Through the years I had shared the view that John was irresponsible. Tammy's description of him as a "jerk" might not have been far from my more technical description of him. For instance, in the past he had almost always been late paying my bill, and

during this year he continued to leave it to me to collect her share from his ex-wife —not an arrangement I liked or would usually accept. So I had considerable sympathy with Tammy's description of him.

In retrospect, I am somewhat chagrined to think of how much I accepted Tammy's description of her father as fact instead of seeing it as a projective identification born of her internal object relations. Partly, I suffered from the same situation growing children do who treat their parents as though they were still the same as they were in the children's earlier internalized memories. I remembered John from my contacts with him, which came soon after his divorce and before his therapeutic growth. It was only in the last few months of Tammy's therapy, scheduled to continue until shortly before she would go off to college, that this became clear in the therapy. Only then did I become convinced that the



view I had all these years was structured from Tammy's internal object of a rejecting and persecuting father—grafted to be sure on a valency John had to fit with this description. In turn, we could see that Tammy's view of her father as so negligent and rejecting had its origin in her mother's view of John, which was modeled in turn on her mother's relationship to her own rejecting and arbitrary father.

### **TAMMY REFINDS HER FATHER**

In early March, we had a landmark session. Tammy began with a question. Had she been unfairly taking her mother's side against her father? She had been thinking about it clearly since the previous session when I had raised the question of her anger at him. I had done that more out of a sense of duty to be fair, or guilt over my own unbalanced

picture, than out of any conviction myself that John was other than Tammy painted him.

But Tammy had been working on things. She said she could see the idea that she might have taken her mother's side out of a sense of loyalty after the divorce. That would make sense to her. She didn't feel it, but it made sense to her that she might have sided with her mother because she was living with her during her growing up years. Mother would say from time to time, "You really ought to get along with your father. He loves you too." It made sense to Tammy that she did not feel it, because he overlooked her needs. His old house was dirty and it triggered her asthma, and he seemed to be more centered on his own needs than hers. She also felt that he took Russell's side; he seemed to care about him more.

But, said Tammy, she could see that Mary Lou loved her father, even though he did jerky things.

She noticed that she got quite exercised about Mary Lou's father, more than Mary Lou did herself. Tammy talked about feeling that she did not love her father as much as she did her mother. I said I had wondered if, strangely enough, she couldn't admit hating her father as much as she could her mother either. She said there were two kinds of hate. There was the kind when you wanted to get rid of somebody. There was another kind that just sort of erupted and then was gone. I said that the second kind happened when you were free to hate someone because you really loved them, so being angry had no major implications. For instance, I had the impression that Tammy could be angry with her mother—hate her—and not expect anything awful would happen between them.

Tammy jumped on this idea enthusiastically.  
"That's true. If I'm mad at Mom, I can tell her to

drop dead without thinking it means anything. But with Dad, I do mean it, so it really bothers me."

Tammy now moved rapidly. Perhaps she had never given her father a chance. She recalled that when she was small and said to her mother, "I don't want to go with my father this weekend, I don't want to be with him," her mother would say, "He loves you and you love him. I can see the gleam in your eye when he gets ready to pick you up." Tammy said that she couldn't remember feeling that way.

I now reminded Tammy of the session when she was 6. I told her that when she came in with her father, she had drawn a heart with a smile on it and the little hat on top of it. I told her that I remembered her warmth and her coyness. I did not speak to her about her sexual longing for her father in that phase of oedipal development, sensing that would have been provocative.

Tammy was struck by what I told her. She remembered the heart, which had come from a school project she had been doing. She paused and said, "It must have been hard for Dad. I can see he tried to do things for me. He wants me to love him. I don't think Russell and I give him a chance. It must have been terribly hard for him to know that I hated him! How could anybody not know that? He tries so hard to have us love him."

Now she began to cry. She didn't want to cry. But with some urging she talked about how she hated him all those years and never gave him a chance. And he had tried so hard to be close. How painful that must be for him.

I said she had reasons.

She said, "I needed to be on Mom's side. It was so hard for her to be alone during the divorce. I remember they would have these fights. Dad

wouldn't want me to be there during the fight. I can see his point about that. But my mother didn't say that I should go away, so then I would feel that it was him not wanting me. He was rejecting me and maybe I loved my mother too much."

I asked if perhaps she thought she needed to be a parent to her mother, to take care of her.

She said, "Yes, oh, sure! I had to take care of her. There wasn't anybody else to take care of her. Then I would feel it was her and me against Dad, and why didn't he take care of her?"

Tammy promptly went on to consider the relationship with her mother. The way her mother had clung to her was like the way Mary Lou clung to Tammy.

I said that this maternal clinging was the aspect of the relationship Tammy was trying to fend off at age 6, when her mother first came, saying that the

problem was the mutual hostility between Mother and Tammy. Tammy had seemed so oppositional, really pushing against her mother's attempt to rely on her after feeling so rejected and hurt. Tammy must have felt impinged on by her mother's neediness.

The session now ended. Tammy wiped away her tears. She said it was good to talk about this. I said that her hatred for her father had not fundamentally come from a wish to hurt him. We agreed there was more to investigate about why she had been in this position.

Over the next weeks, Tammy experienced a revelation in the way she saw her father, although he was behaving much the same. It now seemed clear that, although he had his limitations, they weren't particularly severe. He had had her interests in mind all along. During the next two months, she consolidated this new image of her father as

somebody who cared about her and did his best to express that care. Furthermore, she now saw that he had done so despite the considerable opposition that she had mounted for years.

A major piece of work had been done. Tammy's realignment of her view of her father constituted a revision of her internal object relations. Her image of the rejecting father had softened, bringing a significant advance in the sturdiness of her self image. It was now my turn to wonder why she was still coming.

Here is an example of the projection of part of the patient's self into the therapist while the patient now becomes identified with her object and heals her self. I was now identified with an aspect of her mother in which I began to wonder if I were clinging to Tammy for my own pleasure. But Tammy still had something to learn, and in turn to teach me. She did it by combining her memories of me as an internal



object with her current view of me as an object that provided therapeutic holding, to examine the way her overreliance on her mother had prevented her from metabolizing that aspect of her mother she had unconsciously experienced as rejecting.

### **A NEW SELF AND A NEW RELATIONSHIP TO HER MOTHER**

In a session in May, Tammy told me that she had enjoyed her senior prom with another boy, one with whom she only wanted to be friends. Going to the prom had been a big night for her. She had managed it in a balanced way that I admired. After some time in the hour, she began to tell me that she used to have a memory of the coffee pot in my office when she was little. She remembered that she used to take a whole lot of sugar in her coffee. When her mother said she shouldn't do that any longer, she didn't like the coffee. Then she began to remember her mother

being very critical and demeaning. When she had drawn pictures in therapy and showed them to her, her mother would criticize them or laugh. On one occasion, Tammy had copied a picture that another girl had drawn and showed both pictures to her mother. Her mother had said that she thought the other girl's was prettier. Tammy was devastated.

This was the first time that Tammy had ever been critical about her mother. She went on to say that somehow her mother hadn't understood. She remembered throwing herself on the floor and having a temper tantrum because of her mother's not understanding.

This screen memory of the kind I had thought about (Chapter 6) was of additional interest because I had known my patient at the time of the formation of the memory. I said, "This is not about something as small or inconsequential as a cup of coffee. That

memory about the coffee pot might stand for a whole set of feelings that you found painful."

Immediately, Tammy said, "Yes. It must have been about the divorce. I must not have wanted to go to my father's when she was critical of me."

I said, "This seems to be the first crack in the picture of your mother as perfect. You know how you've been able to see your father as more complete and complicated. Maybe you could look at your mother that way, too."

She said, "Yes. I can see that with Mom. Maybe I had better talk about her some more."

I said, "Do you know that your mom brought you in when you were 6 because you and she weren't getting along very well?"

Tammy said, "I don't remember that. All I remember was feeling misunderstood and criticized

by Mom. But I don't remember that I acted badly." She grinned and shook her head with humor at her presumptiveness. "Maybe I acted badly after I felt so upset and disappointed, and I must have blamed Mom."

Tammy's ease in talking about this and the comfort with which she admitted that she might have had a hand in the difficulty with her mother because she felt so misunderstood made me realize how far she had come in the therapy. It was one of those times I felt grateful to her for benefiting from my efforts.

We agreed that it might be of interest for Tammy to bring her mother in when Miriam was visiting Tammy for graduation. Tammy called her mother to invite her to join in a session. She was surprised when Miriam was hesitant. She would come if Tammy wanted her to, but she clearly had misgivings.

Without knowing why Miriam had these misgivings, Tammy began to talk about her difficulties being angry or disagreeing with her mother. She was afraid if she said something to her mother, especially if she said it in front of me, her mother would take it badly. It would do something destructive to their relationship. She remembered that previously she would think, "Oh, my mother must be right," whenever Miriam would have said something Tammy didn't agree with. Then Tammy would wait for her mother's opinion to be validated.

I was still struck with the difference between this idealizing attitude about her mother and the initial presentation some eleven years before when Tammy was pushing her mother away. Tammy had used idealization of her mother to cover over all those struggles, to repress them further in order to avoid the pain of facing this angry maternal internal object. Now, in the wake of the work Tammy had done to

rehabilitate the image of her father, this defensive mutually idealizing and dependent relationship was yielding, with reluctance on both sides. It did not unravel their central relationship, which was basically good—a relationship between central selves and good-enough objects. It was touching to see the loss both Tammy and her mother had to take in giving up their defensive idealizations, and it was gratifying to see the integration each of them was now capable of.

Tammy and I were now able to talk about how giving up her stereotyped denigration of her father led her to realize that idealizing her mother could not last either. She said that in the day-to-day relationship with him, she could see that he did care and that he had her best interests in mind a lot of the time, even if at other times he could be foolish. This also led her to feel closer to her stepmother. She was enjoying Faye more. Faye had given her a present of

a little china box with hearts and flowers on it, and Tammy said to Faye that she was glad they were getting along better now that she felt closer to her father.

Then Tammy returned to her feeling that any anger, displeasure, or disbelief would threaten her relationship with her mother—not that they wouldn't love each other, but that something precious would be damaged. For instance, Tammy said to her mother that she was going to keep coming to therapy through the summer, but that she didn't have a lot of problems. She wasn't sure what she was working on. Her mother had said, "Well, I hope you do keep coming. You have problems. You don't handle stress very well."

In the session with me, Tammy erupted at this statement by her mother. She said that her mother would call Tammy when it was earlier on the West Coast, where her mother lived, and therefore it was

late at night here in the East. Tammy would be tired, and if she had had a rough day, the call would be at the end of everything. So she would tell her mother things that were bothering her. On the occasion that her mother said she didn't handle stress, Tammy had actually been behaving very pleasantly, as she did in her demeanor toward her mother generally. Tammy thought that after a rather difficult day, she had been handling stress extremely well. So she didn't agree with her mother at all. She just thought that at times her mother didn't want to hear that she was doing well when she acknowledged and dealt with rough times.

With this minor outburst at mother came a stronger adolescent theme of differentiation than I had heard until now. Tammy was becoming a clearer person and was doing so without any fundamental erosion of her love for her mother. In fact, her love emerged more clearly and more durably the more



she could differentiate. I talked with her about the process of becoming her own person, carving out her own positions from those of her mother. I pointed out the difference between her previous way of handling things, of always saying, "Mom must be right," and the new way of thinking that sometimes her mother was right and sometimes she wasn't. Tammy then linked this to the way that Mary Lou, in her clinging, had insisted that everything Tammy said was right. That wasn't right either, and it hadn't even been especially reassuring. Tammy had known that she wasn't always right, so it would have been better if Mary Lou had disagreed with her some of the time.

Tammy also now talked about despairing of ever finding a boyfriend who wasn't "messed up," since she found that all her friends inevitably turned out to be messed up and confused, like Mary Lou and all the previous boyfriends, once she got to know them.

I said it might have to do with her previous fear that men were all made in the image of the way she had seen her father. They wouldn't care about her and they would have many problems of their own. We discussed the way that her friends reflected her own inner state.

She said, "I guess people always have problems. But maybe that's different from being messed up like Ed." She connected this to another statement her mother had made some time ago, that she might find different friends if she were in a different place herself. She resented that statement when her mother had made it originally. Now she began to understand.

Tammy ended this session saying that she hated the idea of leaving therapy without all of this completely finished. But she was committed to going to college in September with her peers. She

wanted to go away knowing who she was and what was happening, with everything worked out.

I said that there would be time later to work out things if we couldn't get to them over the summer.

## **TERMINATION**

The work through July and August went on in this vein. Tammy worked at a concession stand and was praised as a reliable worker. At work, in conditions of modest adversity, she had the capacity of remaining cheerful. Now well into idealizing Tammy myself, I found the assessments of people she worked with, peers and supervisors, to be charming and insightful. I was defending against loss with a defensive idealization of her. I was introjectively identified with her characteristic defense. Once I recognized this countertransference, I was able to help her from inside my own experience of sharing the loss of therapy. We

discussed how termination now carried the echo of earlier losses.

A couple of weeks before we finished, Tammy said, "I just don't know what life would have been like if I hadn't had the chance to come here. I'm so pleased that I had the chance to learn about my relationship with my father. It is different with him now. I'm glad that I understand more about my mother and me, too. I feel I could smile so wide that my face might break." In my mind's eye, I suddenly saw the smiling heart again (Figure 5-1) and realized that Tammy would leave with an idealizing defense partly intact as a way of dealing with loss.

In the final session, she said, "I thought I was ready to finish therapy, but now I don't know if I am quite. I think I need another month. But then again, I *am* ready. It's just going off to school is coming on me, and I'm worried about what I don't know." She reviewed our work, from her initial confusion in

naming her problem, to defining it, then working on it, and getting over it. She had found out what she had come for: the work on Ed and Mary Lou, the rearranging of her relationship with her father and stepmother, and finally the chance to develop a sense of a realistic but good relationship with her mother. She hoped her brother wouldn't weaken and go back to live with her mother, who still lived in the isolated area that wouldn't be good for him academically or socially. Russell was still kind of difficult, as any 15-year-old would be, and he had become something of a loner. But she was still fond of him and hoped that he would come with her father and Faye to visit her at college in the fall. She was glad she had come for therapy. It had changed her impression of me from the age of 9 when she didn't like me. She thought that if she had a problem now, she could easily come back to me, or to therapy with someone else. On the other hand, she also felt she could solve things

herself. She was ready to face what was coming, and she seemed eager.

We talked about the sense of loss and the worry about the unknown, feelings anybody would have. I said, for the first time, that her not liking me was the split-off part of her father that she could not face at age 9. How nice for me it was that she had been able to come back and do that piece of work and so get to know me as a friendlier person. She smiled in agreement. We both acknowledged the pleasure it had been to meet again with this chance to finish our work. She left cheerfully.

At Christmas, five months after termination, Tammy sent me a card. It showed two very cozy critters with long ears and fur, one hugging the other with a smile a mile wide. The inside said, "Squeezin's Greetin's." She wrote, "Dear Dr. Scharff, I just finished my first semester of college and I wanted you to know how happy I am there. It's a

great place and I have made a lot of special friends. The main reason I wanted to write you was to say thank you for the self-confidence you gave me and the closer relationship you made possible between me and my father. You have been an important and special part of my life. Thanks. Love, Tammy."

The evolution of this treatment illustrates the reciprocal changes in a girl's self, in her identity formation, and her view of her objects. At certain points, shifts occurred directly in the transference, which, unlike the transference she had ten years earlier, was a warmly positive one not so invaded by the split-off rejecting images from both her mother and father.

This therapy went especially well because Tammy was ready for change and because her external objects—her parents—had had therapy and were now capable of different ways of relating than formerly. Previous role relationships had been kept

because of their familiarity and because Tammy was not ready to change her internal objects. This therapy came at a time of adolescent developmental fluidity and readiness for change. It built upon her previous therapy with me —work that she carried in her own psyche. And it also built on her parents' growth in therapy and analysis —changes in her external objects who could now support her change in ways they previously could not. As a result of these internal and external factors, Tammy could allow her internal object relations to be modified by current experience with external objects and by her own maturing perceptual abilities. In this way, she established a new intrapsychic constellation from which she also defined a matured self.

Another kind of exchange between self and object accompanied this therapy. Tammy was the kind of patient who is a gratifying object for her therapist. As such, she healed the doubting parts of



my therapist-self, at least momentarily. By her unconscious effect of improving me, she healed herself of uncertainty and became sure of herself as the kind of person who knows what she wants and can make others feel that they have it to offer. The repair offered to the therapist's ever-present doubts about his therapeutic effectiveness, about his power to promote healing, is like the relief experienced by parents whose children do well enough. Such children confirm the parents' selves against the continuing erosion of self doubt. Tammy became this kind of child and, in doing so, she was that kind of patient.

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