

*Beyond Blame*

**Committing  
Yourself to Act  
Differently**

Jeffrey A. Kottler

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e-Book 2017 International Psychotherapy Institute

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## Committing Yourself to Act Differently

Now that you have some idea about the patterns of conflict that have existed in your life, the big question is what do you intend to do about them?

Changing any lifelong pattern, especially one that is so ingrained in your interpersonal style, is a formidable task indeed. Before you can even begin to move into the realm of action, you must first decide that you are willing to invest the necessary time and energy and to take the risks that are involved in changing. I suggest you think long and hard about this choice before you make it—the consequences will be quite profound.

As much as you might not enjoy the discomfort that accompanies the ways you usually deal with conflict, I have mentioned that it is a kind of pain that is familiar to you. If you have become used to tolerating a certain amount of discord, humiliation, tension, and abuse, they become like old compatriots that you have learned to live with. That is the paradox of making personal changes: as much as you may want things to be different, you also like things the way they are. You have settled into a routine in which you know what to expect and you don't experience tremendous disappointment.

Imagine that things were different. At first, you might believe that all is well and you will live happily ever after. No longer do you respond in the same maladaptive ways, nor do you beat yourself up over mistakes and misjudgments. But think again. You also have to learn a whole new repertoire of skills in order to act differently. That takes a lot of work. When it comes right down to it, and people realize how much energy and commitment it takes to become more fully functioning, many prefer the familiar pain they are used to.

As you have already learned, the one thing that you have going for you the most is your own pain. One of the consequences of true insight is that you can no longer do the same things the same way without feeling even worse. If you *know* that the reason you have become unreasonable and rigid during an interaction is because it feels like your feelings were hurt, it is harder to get away with pouting—your games have become more explicit.

The key, then, to putting your insights to work and committing yourself to act differently is allowing your discomfort to help motivate you to take charge of the way your relationships are going. When you cannot change the interactions themselves, the next best choice is at least to take control of your own internal reactions. If in the future you start to feel bad every time you resort to previous patterns, you will no longer stay the same. You will change because you have no choice.

## Moving Closer to Commitment

As with every component of the program described in this book, the stage of the process dealing with commitment to act differently involves a series of sequential steps, each naturally leading to the next. You will observe this process in action in the following vignette. As we follow this case through the process' of commitment to action, you may find it instructive to apply what we are doing to your own conflicted relationships.

Daniel feels ambivalent about changing a few of his relationships—with his father, to whom he relates on a superficial level; with his wife, with whom he has negotiated a kind of truce in which they live together more as friends than as lovers; and with his mentor at work, with whom he is so deferential that he has lost his own identity. Sure, Daniel would like it if he and his father became closer, if he and his wife became more intimate, and if he and his mentor developed a more equal relationship. It is not the outcome that Daniel feels uncertain about: it is what he would have to do to initiate the changes that would make a difference. He has been through this process before, and he knows that the journey he would have to take involves uncovering and dealing with some of his unresolved issues from the past, with all the accompanying pain. “Maybe things aren’t so bad after all,” Daniel tells himself. He realizes all too well that in order to improve his relationships he would have to reach deep inside himself for the courage to not only commit himself to act differently but

also follow through on his resolve.

Daniel's vacillation about whether to take the leap to confront the emptiness in his life or leave well enough alone eventually landed him in my office. He was confused, inconsistent from one moment to the next, and unable to commit himself to do much of anything. He even left it up to me to decide whether he would attend therapy to work his problems through: "What do *you* think?" he asked me in a tiny voice filled with uncertainty. "What should I do?"

I shrugged. Heck if I was going to bail him out. When I asked him whether he wanted to return for another session to begin working on his fear of commitment, he shrugged back at me, unwilling to commit himself to even that decision. Finally, after a silence that seemed to go on for several hours but probably lasted only a few long minutes, Daniel sighed with resignation. "Okay. Where do we begin?"

### **Creating an Image of What You Want**

Given the anguish, the disappointment, the setbacks that are an integral part of making any significant life change, you will need a place you can go for recuperation and inspiration. That place does not exist in your neighborhood, or even on this planet; it is an image inside your own mind. This is the picture you create of the future, a time in which you no longer resort to ineffectual responses or torturous, self-demeaning acts. You can imagine yourself at a time

in the not-too-distant future in which you are no longer perturbed by what a few others are doing. Likewise, you can picture yourself, really *see* yourself, responding differently to crisis situations that ordinarily might have sent you into a frenzy. You appear more in control, more self-assured and in charge of what you are doing, what you are thinking, and what you are feeling inside.

As you imagine your nemesis engaging in the usual manipulative ploys, deceitful actions, and insensitive behaviors, rather than becoming defensive or irritated as you normally would, you have at your disposal a wide-ranging assortment of strategies that you can employ effectively to keep the other person off your case. More importantly, you note that you have the power and the ability to keep yourself calm and in control.

As the preceding description made obvious, Daniel was most reluctant to take a stand on any aspect of his present, much less the future. Nevertheless, with some gentle prodding and encouragement on my part (yes, a bit of vigorous confrontation of his passivity as well), Daniel found that he was able to conjure an image of the way he would like his relationships to be. This was not easy for him because, on some level, he did not feel deserving of a life relatively free of significant conflict. His resistance to making changes came, in part, from never having experienced an existence that was conflict free. It was difficult for him to even fantasize a time in which things could be different from the way they were. It was all he had ever known.

It took several weeks for Daniel to give himself permission to complete this assignment. Every time he attempted to create an image of what he wanted, some scolding voice would interrupt or interference like that of fuzzy television reception would block his view. He stuck with the task, however, realizing that his relationships would never change unless he could first imagine that such progress was possible.

“I see myself at work. There is some pressure project that I am working on. There I am in my office. The door is shut. My feet are propped on the desk. I am staring out the window, utterly stuck as to what I will do. I reach for the phone. I am about to call Sandy, my mentor, to see if I can talk to him for a few minutes to run something by him. I know how this usually goes: I tell Sandy what I want to do. He tells me to do something else. I trust his judgment more than my own. I end up resenting him for that. We usually end up arguing and I always lose. He prevails on me to defer to his greater experience.

“This time, though, I don’t call him. Instead I make a decision, *any* decision; it really doesn’t matter what I decide, just so long as I am the one who makes the choice. I feel good about taking a stand on my own. Only afterward do I tell Sandy. He, of course, cuts me down for not consulting him. I don’t blame him for that—he believes that he is just trying to help me. I am the one who relinquished my power and lost my identity to him.

“This time I don’t become defensive when he attacks me. Neither do I become angry. I just calmly listen to him and tell him that I appreciate his help, but that I am trying to do more things on my own. He, of course, does not understand. *The important thing in this image is that I don’t need him to understand in order for me to feel good about what I did.*

“I come home from work later that day. My wife asks me in a perfunctory way how my day was. This time, instead of giving her an answer just to put her off, I ask her if she will sit down with me for a few minutes as I want to tell her all the things that I am feeling and thinking. She is shocked and so complies with my request out of curiosity. This has never happened before. But in this image I can actually picture myself telling her about what happened, what I am trying to do, what I am feeling and thinking, the changes I am planning for the future.

“Since I am trying to make this as realistic as possible, she does not hug me with joy. How can I expect that after all these years of mutual neglect? So she picks a fight. Maybe she is afraid of getting close to me, too. Anyway, she ignores what I told her and tells me that I am stupid to jeopardize my relationship with Sandy just to exercise my macho need for control.

“Amazingly, I don’t respond. I just nod calmly. Actually, I kind of used a few of the things that you do with me: you know— where you feed back to me what you heard me say? Rather than fighting back, I just reflect back to her the

feelings of neglect and hurt that I can sense she is feeling. I suppose I have always been aware of these feelings, but I was unable to acknowledge them. Except in this image, I have just been too scared to let myself think about responding any differently.”

Daniel was jubilant over his ability to picture himself responding differently to his mentor and to his wife. At this point, he could not yet bring himself to include his father, a figure in his life who was even more threatening. That is just fine, I told him. Let’s start with these relationships. Later he could apply what he learned to others that seemed more challenging.

Daniel rehearsed this image several times a day. He would play with the scenarios, changing a few details here and there but staying with the same basic plot. In each case, he would imagine himself feeling and acting differently in response to what others would do to incite him. When he was feeling particularly good, he would further imagine himself initiating more in these relationships rather than only responding to what they offered to him. Pretty soon, he was able to incorporate this picture of himself as a decision maker and risk taker into his previous self-image, which was now in the process of becoming obsolete.

### **Facing the Consequences of Action**

Creating images of the way you would like your relationships to be is not

only cause for celebration—there are also consequences to getting this ball rolling. That is why Daniel was so reluctant to entertain fantasies of the future. He knew that once he started thinking about a different life, he would be spoiled forever. No longer could he pretend that being in conflict was acceptable once he had a taste, albeit in fantasy, of a different alternative.

If you let yourself imagine that in your primary conflicted relationship you no longer act the way you usually do, you will have little choice but to face the consequences of this rehearsed image. Like Daniel, now that you can imagine that you have other alternatives in how you respond to conflict, both internally and externally, you will feel even more uneasy at the prospect of staying vulnerable and dissatisfied. The image you have created of yourself as a more powerful being becomes like a cancer. It grows. It infects your whole spirit. It whispers to you constantly as you engage in the same old arguments: “You don’t have to act this way. You do have other choices. Remember me, your image of the way you would like to be? What is stopping you from making that fantasy a reality?”

The only thing that stops you from putting your plan into action is your own inertia. This is the point at which Daniel encountered the most trouble of all. It was one thing for him to imagine himself acting differently; it was quite another to actually follow through on this commitment.

“Do you have any idea of what would happen if I actually said some of these things to Sandy or my wife? They would think I am nuts. Even worse, they would probably just write me off completely. I just can’t risk it.”

I pressed him further. “So let’s follow through on what would happen if you were to act as you do in your fantasy. Don’t be kind. Picture the worst possible scenario.”

He needed less than a few seconds to answer. “Simple. Sandy gets me fired for insubordination. The truce with my wife falls apart and we get a divorce. When I try to deal with my father on anything but a superficial level, he becomes indignant and won’t speak to me anymore.” He smiled smugly as if to say to me: “Ok, smartass, see if you can talk me into it now.”

I refused to take the bait. “Okay, you win. You get to stay in these mediocre relationships in which conflict prevails. Now what do you want to do?” I smiled right back at him, knowing that he was already hooked on his image of a different way of being. He could never go back to the way he was.

“I just don’t know what to do. I can’t let things stay the way they are, but I can’t risk letting things get out of hand.” His pain was so palpable I was unwilling to just let him blow in the wind.

“Daniel, you have created the worst possible scenario. Your mentor fires

you. Your wife leaves you. Your father never speaks to you. What you seem to be saying is that the only way people will stay involved with you is if you live up to what you believe are their expectations. If Sandy is really so intolerant of your need for independence, then I guess he isn't much of a mentor—whose role, by definition, is to help you find your own way. If the only way you can keep your marriage together is to avoid any semblance of intimacy, then you don't really have a marital partner; you have a roommate. If that is the case, I am certain you could find another roommate with whom you don't fight so much. As for your father, if he cannot sustain a relationship with you in which real feelings are expressed, in which you make contact on a personal level, and if he is unwilling to speak with you except on his terms, then perhaps it is best that you spend some time apart.”

I could tell that he remained unconvinced. But at least now he was examining the extent to which his predicted consequences were reasonable. He finally understood that perhaps the results he imagined were not so awful after all. Certainly, things would be terribly stressful in the short run—he would have to find a new job, recruit a new mentor, go through a divorce, be cut off from his father—but in the long run taking action was the only way he could ever extricate himself from the conflicts that were wearing him down.

### **Increasing Your Personal Resolve**

You know what you need to do, but you feel this choking sensation at the prospect of doing it. Every time you bring to mind this picture of the new way you manage conflict, another more morbid image engulfs both it and you like a voracious shark. How dare you even imagine that you can break years of habituated action? Who are you kidding?

Even the best intentions toward commitment to action melt away when you anticipate that things could be worse than they presently are. This was the most inhibiting force within Daniel, and it stymied his efforts to change long-standing patterns. In an effort to help him increase his resolve, several strategies were implemented that proved helpful.

1. *Stop focusing on the negative.* As long as you attend to everything that can go wrong rather than focusing on what can go quite smoothly, you will continue to frighten yourself into avoiding action. Daniel came into each session obsessed with the possibilities of disaster. He spent most of his time talking about what it would mean if bad things happened. We broke this cycle by instituting a rule that in subsequent meetings we would only talk about the positive implications of his decisions. Likewise, you will find it much more inspiring if you force yourself to consider what could go wrong but then concentrate on the positive image of the future you created earlier.

2. *Remind yourself what you are doing and why.* Do not let yourself forget what is at stake. The fear that accompanies venturing into the unknown is a lot more tolerable when you firmly believe that

the discomfort you are suffering is only part of the journey. AH adventures have their inconveniences, trials, and tribulations.

3. *Putting a support system in place.* Your efforts to make significant changes in the ways you relate to others and yourself do not seem quite so overwhelming when you have surrounded yourself with people in whom you can trust. Especially when attempting to resolve conflicts, with all the emotional turmoil that is likely, it is much easier if you are not alone. You need people to confide in, to test out your plans, to help you live through the tough times when all does not go as you had anticipated.

### **Making a Public Commitment**

A support system is useful not only to bounce ideas off of but, more simply, to hear out loud your commitment to act differently. It is much more difficult to back out of a promise when others have heard what you intend to do. It is one thing to tell yourself what you want to do; it is quite another to tell others who you know will monitor your progress. That is the appeal of weight loss programs such as Weight Watchers and substance abuse programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous: tell somebody else that you plan to act differently, and you disappoint more than yourself if you change your mind. You also have to face the inquiries of those who have heard your commitment.

One of the simplest strategies I have used in my graduate classes when

introducing the importance of public commitment in helping people change lifelong patterns is to ask the students to think of some relationship in their lives that they would wish to alter. Then I ask them to think of something that they might do differently in the future that would be a small step toward reducing the tension in that relationship. The next—and most important—step (besides actually making the change) is to tell their peers exactly what they will do in the coming week. What will they do? When will they do it? What will they do if they find themselves avoiding action?

It is understood that the next week each person will report to the rest of the students what they accomplished. The victory is not defined in terms of producing a positive outcome or a happy ending in which everything went as planned. Rather, the success comes from trying, from doing what they committed themselves to do.

I learned this lesson early in life. Actually, I was nineteen. I had spent most of adolescence roaming the shopping mall with my best friend, ostensibly to pick up girls. At one point, we had gone over forty Saturday afternoons in a row without missing a single opportunity. The amazing thing is that in all those hundreds of hours, we never once even approached girls, much less ever asked them out. We had our routine down to a science. Whenever two girls would walk within our range, we would argue furiously about which one of us would get the short one, which the tall one, or which the blonde and which the

brunette. We would argue just long enough so that by the time we had made a decision, the girls would be nowhere to be found. I wasted my whole adolescence wanting to take risks but never doing so.

So there I was, nineteen years old, sitting with my family in a restaurant. It had always been my life's ambition to be old enough to ask out a waitress. Waitresses were goddesses to me. They were tall, or at least they always looked statuesque from where I sat. They seemed in charge of their turf, bubbly, high spirited. And they brought food!

I resolved then and there to ask one out. There wasn't that much to be afraid of. After all, nobody could hurt me as much as I did when I beat myself up over my refusal to take a risk. I told my family what I intended to do. There was no way I could back out now. I approached the first waitress, asked her out, and was unceremoniously refused. Hey, no problem. I went up to the next waitress and asked her out, too. She also turned me down. Strangely, rather than feeling rejected, I was feeling exhilarated with the power of knowing that nobody could ever reject me again. They could turn down the opportunity to be with me, but only I could decide to feel rejected. I therefore approached a third waitress, who was kind and told me she had a boyfriend. No matter. I had followed through on what I had said I would do. My victory was in the effort, not in the result.

Committing myself aloud to others helped bolster my resolve. I had

wanted to crawl back into my shell, to think about how much I wished things could be different, to blame my inaction on circumstances outside of my control. But I would have to face them all afterwards, these people who knew. I felt that I had no choice but to follow through on what I had said I would do.

I have never forgotten that day. I learned during my encounter with the three waitresses that I did have the courage to change. Nobody could hurt me as much as I hurt myself when I don't do what I say I will.

What about you? What have *you* been putting off? What excuses have you given yourself for accepting conflict in your relationships without changing the ways you deal with them? Who could you make a commitment to who could monitor your progress? Take some time out and make a plan.

### **Getting Ready. Set. Go.**

Are you still here? You are not out there putting your plan into action? That's all right. In between commitment and action there is still a bit of planning to do. Now that you have said what you are going to do differently, you must figure out how you can best carry out your intentions.

Daniel spent considerable time with this step in the process, and not just to stall for time. He genuinely wanted to give himself the best possible shot at making his relationships work. He had prepared himself for the worst possible

scenario, was even ready to accept the consequences of disappointing results; but if there was anything he could do to make things work out, he wanted to try his hardest.

Daniel became a student not only of himself but also of the others with whom he was connected in conflict. What was it about Sandy, his mentor, that made him need to control Daniel so thoroughly? What was it about Daniel that Sandy found so threatening? As for his wife, why was she so reluctant about getting closer to him? There had been a time when she had begged for just this reaction in him. Had she given up? Was she punishing him? Maybe she was just as frightened as he was. Finally, Daniel mused about the behavior of his father. Perhaps he was asking something of him for which he was wholly unprepared. His father had always been this way, and not just with him—with everyone.

The questions that Daniel began asking himself about his relationships were not merely introspective dialogues. He began talking to others as a way to prepare himself for the action that was soon to come. At times, he even broached the subjects with the targets themselves: “Sandy, I notice that when I express my own opinion about something and it differs from yours, you try to get me to change my mind rather than listening to what I have to say.”

Daniel continued to test the water a bit, this time checking out his wife in a direct yet nonconfrontational manner: “Honey, just a moment ago I sat next to

you on the couch and you moved over and then left the room. What might I be doing to drive you away?"

And with his father, Daniel tried to expand the boundaries a bit during their next conversation: "Dad, if we could put the basketball game aside for a moment, there is something I want to ask you. When I told you a few minutes ago that I was excited about the changes that I was making, you acted like you didn't even hear me. I was wondering what you thought about what I said?"

Of course, in each of these encounters, the people did not exactly jump for joy at Daniel's changed behavior. If anything, they thought he was acting a little weird, and they told him so. At this juncture, that was fine with him. He had been preparing himself not to expect much in the beginning. It had taken a long time for these relationships to develop into conflicted, dysfunctional encounters; he would not be able to change things overnight. But he *had* demonstrated that he was indeed capable of pushing the limits of what had been established previously. He was ready to take some risks.

## Taking Risks

There is no way to skip this step. This is the part where your heart beats so hard it seems it will leap out of your chest, where when you even think about what you are going to do you can feel your resolve waver just as your knees buckle. All those excuses that you have so carefully formulated over the years

come back at the feeblest invitation. “Hey, it isn’t really so bad the way it is. You don’t have to do this. Nobody is making you. Why not just put all this change stuff aside and do something really fun?”

The strange thing is that with practice taking risks becomes fun, perhaps the greatest kick life has to offer. Have you ever wondered what is the appeal of gambling, or risking injury skiing or driving fast or skydiving? Have you considered what is so captivating about watching a horror movie in which you know you are going to be subjected to unimagined misery before the lights come on again? Have you thought about why you sometimes do stupid things for no other reason than that it seemed like a good idea at the time? In each of these examples, the intent is to speed up your heartbeat, to experience life more intently, to immerse yourself so completely in life that time stands still while you complete your ride.

Now think about the prospect of confronting your nemesis. Consider what it would be like to act differently in conflict situations. Picture yourself stubbornly refusing to do the same old things and instead doing something quite out of character. These are risks every bit as exhilarating as riding on a roller coaster, hurtling a rubber raft down a rapid, or riding your luck on the roll of the dice. Risk taking becomes fun when you recognize that what you are about to do is more exciting than frightening, that you have a safety net in place to protect yourself from becoming severely injured, and that you are about to

experience the ride of your life.

This is exactly what Daniel reminded himself of as he sat in Sandy's office, rehearsing in his head one more time what he wanted to say. As is sometimes the case, the conversation turned out so differently from what he had imagined. Rather than responding in his usual controlling, cynical way, Sandy became quiet and pensive. He did not react right away, and when he finally did speak, it was clear that he had not really heard what Daniel had said to him.

That was fine, Daniel thought. Actually, he felt kind of sad. He had placed Sandy on a pedestal, deified him in such a way that he had refused to acknowledge his limitations. Daniel was later to go through a stage in which he blamed Sandy for misleading him, but the fact of the matter was that nobody was at fault. It was simply time for Daniel to move on; he had outgrown what Sandy had to offer him. There was no reason for them to stay in conflict once they established positions on a more equal footing. This interaction pattern changed not so much through actions that Daniel took in his encounters with Sandy as through his internal decision to no longer defer to him at the expense of his own identity. A change in behavior soon followed the internal resolve.

The situation with his wife proved to be somewhat more challenging, a not-unexpected situation considering how longstanding their conflicts had been. Daniel continued the plan he had begun during his preparation process.

At every opportunity, he attempted to engage his wife in honest dialogue. Since he could not control her moods or her willingness to reciprocate in kind, Daniel decided to commit himself to follow through only on that part of the interaction that was within his power— his own behavior. In his mind, he counseled himself to remain patient, to avoid blaming his wife since he, in fact, had “trained” her to be so self-protective. Likewise, he worked hard to avoid blaming himself for their stalemate.

On the outside, Daniel forced himself to keep attempting intimacy with his wife, even when she appeared to reject his efforts. I told him the story of my years at the mall and about my own realization that rejection was much more a state of mind than an actual circumstance. That seemed to fit quite well for him as well, for he started to feel proud of what he was doing even though his wife had responded minimally to his efforts. Again he reminded himself to be patient, to keep experimenting with different alternatives until he discovered a strategy that worked.

I would like to be able to tell you that this story has a happy ending. In a way, it does even though the marriage did not survive. It became apparent that both spouses had harbored resentments too long, had blamed one another so vigorously that the damage appeared irreparable. They moved in different directions after the divorce—his wife soon remarried, while Daniel spent some time alone before he was willing to risk again. The part he felt best about was

that finally he and his now ex-wife were able to relate to one another without conflict.

Daniel was able to take what he learned from this marriage and apply it to other relationships in his life, most notably with his father. Once he adjusted his expectations for his father according to what was most probable, Daniel found that he became more satisfied with even little gestures on both their parts to reach out to one another. They still fought with each other and argued about politics and sports, but there was no longer any bitterness in their conversations; if anything, it became a playful and affectionate way for them to express feelings without crossing a line that his father might consider unseemly for a man.

### **Evaluating the Results**

This final step represents a transition from this stage of making a decision to act differently to the action plan that follows in Chapter Six. This is where you consider whether you like the results of making a commitment. As Daniel looks back over what he lived through during his own transition from being indecisive to becoming a risk taker, he honestly wishes that there had been some way he could have avoided the pain he endured. Yet now he looks with pride at what he has accomplished. His mentor, his wife, and his father are no longer parts of his life that he thinks of as conflict. Ironically and predictably,

they have been replaced by new characters—a sibling who is threatened by his new closeness with their father, a girlfriend who expects things from him that he is unwilling to offer just yet, a competitor at work who has been trying to sabotage his rise up the corporate ladder.

Daniel now realizes that conflict is inevitable in relationships. It is unlikely that there will ever be a time in any of our lives in which we cannot identify at least a few conflicted interactions. These situations do not, however, have to be sources of excruciating anguish, as long as we realize that we do have other options. There is virtually an unlimited supply of alternative strategies with which we can experiment, each of which helps us move beyond blame and toward increased control over the ways we react to conflict.

## About the Author

Jeffrey A. Kottler is professor of counseling and educational psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has worked as a therapist in a variety of settings—including hospitals, mental health centers, schools, clinics, universities, corporations, and private practice. Jeffrey is an internationally recognized authority in the area of human relationships, having authored thirteen books on the subjects of teaching and therapy.

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Teacher as Counselor (1993, with Ellen Kottler)

Advanced Group Leadership (1993)

On Being a Teacher (1993, with Stan Zehm)

[Compassionate Therapy: Working with Difficult Clients](#) (1992)

Introduction to Therapeutic Counseling (1992, 2nd ed., with Robert Brown)

[The Compleat Therapist](#) (1991)

Private Moments, Secret Selves:

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[The Imperfect Therapist: Learning from Failure in Therapeutic Practice](#) (1989, with Diane Blau)

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