

Clark Moustakas

**Individual Psychotherapy
as an
Obstacle to Growth**



Existential Child Therapy

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Individual Psychotherapy as an Obstacle to Growth

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In experiences with children, the element of surprise is always present. Call it an unpredictable mood, a sudden, capricious impulse to change, an ability to choose a new direction in a moment of decision, a deliberate effort toward a new life, or the sudden spontaneous awakening of a mysterious substance or dimension of the self. I am pointing to an event in which a child unexpectedly and suddenly transforms himself from a passive, frightened, undirected, defeated individual to a person in control of his life, with a sense of purpose and direction, with a new sense of determination and freedom to be.

The kind of change I am describing occurred in Tom, a nine-year-old boy, who was referred for therapy by his elementary school principal because of poor grades, social ineptitude, withdrawal patterns, and general immaturity. Tom was placed in group therapy because he seemed first and foremost to need to establish affirmative contacts and friendships with other boys. Initially, he provided a benevolent, imaginative leadership, not only suggesting activities, but assigning duties and roles. These activities were

generally war games that started in a rather mild and somewhat peaceful way, but soon became intense and vehement. As the attacks became more violent, Tom tried to reprimand and control the others. He would preach and moralize. But, once the other boys were aroused in battle, they ignored him and carried on intense campaigns against each other. When the wars stopped being peaceful, when they became wild and destructive, Tom stopped being a leader and temporarily withdrew to a corner of the room out of the range of “fire.” However, he would usually recover before the hour ended, and, through a forceful flow of ideas, he would influence the action of the group in a more tranquil direction.

Throughout the year, Tom continued to be the leader in the group, but he was able to direct the others only as long as their aggressions remained within proper bounds. On one occasion, Tom suggested that they destroy all the books in the playroom (*two boys in addition to Tom were failing in school*). Once this activity got under way, however, and the boys proceeded to scribble in the books and cut pages in them, Tom felt ashamed and withdrew. When the intensity of emotions reached an explosive peak, when the group became really destructive, even if he had initiated the sequence of activity, Tom would withdraw to an isolated place in the playroom.

When I attempted to interpret to Tom this pattern of manipulation and withdrawal, he would become visibly agitated, run around the room, start a

raucous conversation with another boy, or initiate a noisy game. It soon became clear to me that he was afraid to face himself, afraid to recognize his own feelings of hostility, afraid to be responsible for his influence and his actions. Occasionally he would begin to express his real feelings, but if I encouraged him in this, or attempted to clarify his feelings, he quickly changed the subject. When it seemed that I was on the verge of breaking through the tight pattern of our relationship, one of the boys would always interrupt us, and the moment was lost. With one frustration after another, with one failure after another, unable to meet Tom on a meaningful and genuine basis, I decided to see him alone, in individual therapy.

Just before his summer vacation, an urgent call came from Tom's home. His parents were deeply upset that his teacher had decided to fail Tom. They were opposed to the idea that he must repeat the grade. Accordingly, a conference was scheduled with the principal of Tom's school and the parents. At this meeting, it was decided that Tom would be probationally promoted in the light of his superior intellectual capacity, his strong opposition to being failed, and his own resolution to study in earnest during the summer. The school crisis was a real shock to Tom, and he was manifestly disturbed by it.

One other decision was made in the conference. Tom was to be promoted to a teacher in the fourth grade who was a relaxed, sensitive person, who regarded children as individuals, and who respected their

interests and unique differences.

With this background of tension and drama, Tom departed from group therapy and plunged into his summer program of study, tutoring, and camp.

I was completely unprepared for the change in Tom the following October when he walked into the playroom for his first interview. He came into the room with a distinctly different sense of confidence and spoke to me in a clear, direct, and articulate way. Immediately, he began to tell me of the tremendous strides he had made over the summer and during the first six weeks of school. The following is a verbatim account of our first talk.

(Holding a stack of books.) I want to show you what I'm doing in school. (One by one Tom discusses each of his classes, explaining his assignments in detail and commenting on his progress. He illustrates the progress by working out problems from each of his textbooks.)

Life in school is certainly different from last year.

My work has been coming along real, real well. I've been getting lots of A's in arithmetic, spelling, and in all my other subjects.

You seem to be excited about what you are learning this year.

I have a real nice teacher. *(Pause.)*

Did the tutoring help?

I think it really helped.

And are you continuing?

Yeah. Every Monday night Mr. Barrett comes. It helps a lot. *(For the next ten minutes Tom explained concepts and aids he had learned from his tutor. He illustrated a number of arithmetic methods on the blackboard. Then he continued with other matters.)*

My spelling is coming along too, also my social studies and my language.

No problems at all in school this year.

No trouble at all. Our teacher makes work enjoyable.

After reaching a real low point last year, you're beginning to soar now.

I enjoy reading too.

Remember the day you heaped all the books in a pile and said you'd like to bum them?

Not any more. I like books. I've also learned to use the dictionary, and let me tell you that book comes in real handy. *(Pause.)* When we have quizzes, I score points for our row now.

You save the day instead of making blunders.

(Emphatically.) Uh-huh. *(Tom then talked about his camp experiences, his pleasant association with other children, and his close relationship with his cabin counselor.)*

Now I've told you about my summer. It was fun. It was just perfect. *(Long pause.)* I heard some real good jokes at camp. Would you like me to tell you? *(Tom relates jokes during the next -fifteen minutes. Then he discusses two exciting boat trips he took with his father.)*

It's time for us to stop now.

My gosh, is it? I've talked the whole hour.

In our second talk, Tom continued to speak about his school experiences with the same heightened enthusiasm. The last half of the hour, we threw darts together. He was not particularly concerned about winning or losing. Up to this time, he had assiduously avoided any game which involved competitive behavior. Yet he was now throwing darts without being concerned over his own self-adequacy, without concern with success or failure, but thoroughly enjoying the game.

It was evident during these first talks that Tom's involvement and commitment were with school and not in his contacts with me. His underlying resentment in being forced to come for therapy flared out openly midway in our third session. Since this half-hour represents the substance of the existential encounter between us, I have quoted extensively from the verbatim transcript. I initiated the conversation.

School is enjoyable when you are successful in your work.

It's fun. Especially, if you have a real nice teacher.

A lot depends on the teacher.

Yeah. A good teacher can make learning interesting and fun.

But, Mrs. Stewart (*speaks the name contemptuously*) last year! Boy! That was awful!

You didn't like her, and she didn't like you.

She didn't like me at all!

Is that why you destroyed your arithmetic book?

I scribbled in it and ripped pages out of it. I *hated* arithmetic. BR-R-R-R-R!

You hated it so much you wanted to destroy it and forget about your bad experience.

I felt like burning it but then I decided to mark it up. *(Long pause.)*

Now you don't feel like destroying your arithmetic book or any of your books.

Books are helpful now. They come in handy when you have a nice teacher. . . . I'm having *so* much fun in arithmetic. *(Long pause.)* I still think it's a waste of time. *(Pause.) A big waste* of time.

You mean coming here?

Yes. I'd rather be in school.

Do you really resent coming here?

That's about it. *(As Tom talks he is kicking against a wood cabinet, banging with the back of his heels. As his voice rises in anger, the banging becomes louder.)*

You'd like to stop coming here.

The sooner the better . . . coming here IS JUST A WASTE OF MY TIME!

Then why do you come, Tom?

Because you guys said so.

Who said so?

You, my mother, my dad. *(Pause. Disgustedly.)* Oh, I don't know who.

Do you know why your parents decided, together with me, that you needed to come here this year?

(Tom is really exasperated now. He screams in anger.) Why? I don't know why. It's just a waste of my time!

And you think your parents want to waste your time?

NO! NO! But I don't learn anything here, and I can be learning in school.

Yes, I understand that you would rather ...

(Interrupting.) C-o-r-RECT!

But why do your parents bring you here?

(Tom bangs with considerable vehemence.) Why! I can't see any reason at all for having to come here. Look what I'm doing— sitting and banging and rocking.

Maybe the banging is helping you express your anger.

(Shouting.) I admit it! I am angry. I don't want to come here any more. *(Tom gestures in desperation.)* Boy! Last year, it was different. I hated school last year. I wanted to come here all the time. But this year, I like school. I hate coming here. I hate this place. Honestly *(with tears in his eyes)*, I really could be in school right now. I could be learning. I could be with my friends.

Instead of wasting your time here.

YES!

What is it you really want, Tom?

To learn, to be like the other kids, to study with them. I'm not putting on an act. I really mean what I'm saying.

I know you do, Tom.

Coming here is a waste of time. I have important things to do in school. In other words, I want to stop coming here completely. *(Pause.)*

Well, Tom, I think we can arrange that.

Like when?

After I talk with your parents.

Okay. But not in six months.

No. Not in six months. Very soon. *(Long pause.)* You say your parents have not told you why you're coming here. Would you like to know?

Yes, I would.

You remember last year, you were failing in school. The picture was pretty grim for you. Your teacher had decided not to pass you. You were upset. We decided it might help you to talk things over with someone. You had gotten behind in school. You yourself wanted tutoring.

She never helped me. I *hated* her. She made fun of me.

I know that's how you feel, Tom, but from her point of view, she tried. She felt that she tried to help you but that you rejected her help.

She didn't try. She never cared about me. I found out: *Stay out of her way.* And I did.

So you felt that she was completely at fault.

No, not completely. But she made it worse. Gol, everything I did was wrong. She

made me feel I didn't know how to do anything.

I understand that, Tom. But you wanted to know why your parents bring you here.
And one of the main reasons is that you were unhappy in school and failing.

Yeah. That was last year but not any more. (*Long pause.*) You will talk with them?

Yes. I will. Just remember you've thought this all out and know what you want to do. They may need a little time.

I couldn't get it into their heads.

Have you tried? Have you discussed this with them?

Not exactly.

Then how do you know they wouldn't listen? How do you know they would be against your decision not to come any more?

Because they think this is a big pleasure.

But you haven't even talked with them.

They'd try to brainwash me.

Tom, you feel too strongly about not coming here; I don't think anyone could brainwash you. But remember their problem was this: *How could a boy with your ability be failing in school?* They knew it was partly that your teacher didn't or couldn't give you what you needed but they also believed that something was wrong inside you, that you didn't believe in yourself, that you had the feeling that you didn't measure up to other kids.

I don't feel that way any more.

No, you don't. You have changed. You're sailing ahead now. I think your parents will listen to you.

I don't want anyone putting the brakes on me.

No. And your parents don't and I don't (*Pause.*) want that either.

I really miss school. I bet the kids are having a blast. Everything is fun this year.

I'm sorry, Tom. I don't like depriving you of all that joy. I'm sure your parents and I will work it out. In the meantime, I plan to visit your teacher. Perhaps you could talk with your parents before we meet again.

Okay. I'll try.

In this dramatic hour, Tom revealed his growing openness and directness. He faced up to the issues involved, conveying his real feelings, and standing his ground with courage and forcefulness, in his confrontation with me. At the same time, he is able to recognize that he was partly responsible for the problems that occurred in his relationship with his previous teacher. Tom himself explained the change in his attitude and behavior in terms of self-determination, self exertion, and a positive relationship with his present teacher. Obviously school has a new meaning; it has become an exciting place for the first time in his life. In short, for Tom therapy has become an obstacle in this new life, and he is frustrated and resentful about being forced to continue.

The next time Tom and I met, we continued in a similar way. First, I told him that his teacher had reported marked improvement in his school achievement. Then we discussed my conversation with his parents.

Now I want to tell you about my talk with your parents. They were in full agreement with your decision to discontinue your meetings with me. We thought you might come one more time after today and then stop altogether. Is that all right?

Yes. I talked with them too. This time they listened and didn't try to change my mind.

You see, Tom. Your teacher listened, your parents listened, and I have listened to you too. We all want to do what is right for you, what you really want for yourself.

Yeah. I couldn't believe it.

That's understandable after what you've been through. Of course, you know I'm not just saying good-bye once and for all. I hope you will come and visit me from time to time. *(Long pause.)* Tom, I would like to share something with you that has been on my mind for some time. I tried to talk with you about this last year. There were many times when you started to talk about your family or about your teacher or about yourself, but, when I encouraged you to express your feelings, you got upset. You changed the subject. You used the other boys to escape facing me. I felt you were afraid to look into your problems.

Uh-huh.

In short, I felt you were running away from yourself. You weren't being honest with yourself or with others.

I told you I couldn't talk to my parents. They didn't listen. They always wanted to change my mind. And my teacher made me feel I . . . *(Pause.)*

Was no good.

Yeah.

But, Tom, I didn't feel that way. I really wanted to listen to you, to know you. You were unhappy, and I was concerned about you.

But I didn't trust you. I couldn't talk with you then. I felt I had to do it myself and not lean on anybody.

I see.

All the teachers I had until this year made me feel I was stupid or something. They weren't interested in me. *(Pause.)* I couldn't talk to you. Not then.

I know that, Tom, and that's what impresses me now. You talk to me so freely. You have opened up with your feelings. I don't think you're running away from yourself any more.

Uh-huh.

I think you're able to face up to your problems. There may be times when you will want to talk with your teacher if you run into difficulty in school or with your parents when there are problems at home, but I don't think you'll get into the kind of jam you were in last year. *(Pause.)*

Yeah. She's interested in my ideas. But I couldn't talk with Mrs. Stewart.

I understand how you felt with her, Tom. But can you in any way realize how she must have felt when you, a person with abilities, were not learning, when she was not getting results with you.

It was a miserable mess.

Yes, for both of you.

Uh-huh.

Mrs. Stewart must have felt as much a failure with herself as she did with you.

Uh-huh. *(Long pause.)* I don't know what else to say.

Perhaps it has all been said, Tom. *(Pause.)* We have about seventeen minutes. Would you like to play a game?

Okay. Let's throw some darts. *(This activity continues to the end of the hour. Tom is relaxed and thoroughly enjoys the game.)*

We met one more time during this sequence of interviews. In the final session, Tom initiated a series of games that we played with much delight.

At the request of his principal, I made a follow-up visit to Tom's school at the end of the semester. He had continued in the same direction, strengthening his achievement background and his relations with other children. In the next two years, Tom called me four times for appointments. In every respect, he had continued to grow as a real self. He spoke with enjoyment of his experiences in school, his friends in the neighborhood, and his interests in science, shipbuilding, and the Civil War. His mother called me from time to time and spoke with great pride and enthusiasm over the wonderful life Tom was creating for himself, in school and at home. As Tom was completing the sixth grade, his principal called to say that he had achieved a place of real leadership in his class; his principal described him as "a boy fired-up with ideas and filled with imaginative projects." He was exerting himself toward his goals and achieving at a high level. Obviously, Tom had found himself and was proceeding in a consistent way toward increasing self-realization.

Who can say what brought about the transformation in Tom. His family and school did not simply fashion and mold him toward a new destiny. Certainly, the individual therapy did not bring about the sudden, dramatic change. Perhaps there is no full answer or explanation. Perhaps what happened to Tom is outside the realm of theory and therapeutic process. Somehow, he stopped letting life control him, and he began to shape and determine his life, to meet it on his own terms. He realized that his life need not be formed by pressures and threats of defeat and failure, but rather that it could emerge and be determined by his own sense of value and interest and positive commitment. Tom took hold of himself. He began connecting with life and its requirements. He began making decisions for himself and seeing them through. Tom knew what he wanted from life, and he proceeded to actualize his wishes and interests in his own way. As he once remarked to me, "I felt I had to do it myself and not lean on anybody." Well, Tom did it himself and he was unwilling to let anyone get in his way. He was unwilling to let either therapy or his parents impede his growth.

While Tom was living in the present and seeing achievement and success in the horizons of the near future, his therapist and his parents were living in the past, seeing the isolated, thwarted child, afraid to express himself and feeling somewhat less than others; they were seeing the Tom who was a failure in school and who, having reached a point of total futility, began to deface and destroy his books. They were worried, and the therapy provided a

security and safeguard for them. But not for Tom; he proved in his own way that for him therapy was an obstacle to growth—a waste of time, a big waste of time. Perhaps, at best, it initiated a process of self-discovery, but Tom had to continue the process on his own.

My delay in seeing Tom as a new person was fostered by the commitment I had made to therapy. I was waiting for Tom, waiting for the therapeutic process to unfold, to take its course and bring about a spontaneity and an integration that would enable Tom to live in accordance with his real self. I looked for a unique process with Tom as I do with every child, but it simply did not happen. There was no therapeutic process, unique or otherwise, which could account for the changes in his social and personal behavior.

Sometime between the day Tom left me at the beginning of the summer and our first meeting in the fall, he became a self-emerging, autonomous individual, who was meeting the requirements of life in his family and in his school through self-exertion and self-involvement. Somehow, Tom made a commitment to himself to meet life directly and openly and to master the problems of living without outside intervention or help. Possibly the group therapy enabled him to make this commitment. Certainly, the shock of school failure and the realization that he was floundering precipitated his decision to take hold of himself and meet his responsibilities to home and school.

Undoubtedly, his tutor and his teacher made available resources by which he could learn and grow in situations that had suddenly become meaningful to him. The rest is all Tom's story, a story connected to his own self, the work of a core of inner resources, aptitudes, and potentialities meeting the challenges of life and achieving harmony in the world, making academic gains in knowledge and skill, growing new feelings of self-confidence, and developing a sense of direction and purpose. Once this happened, Tom was soaring and, as he put it, he did not want anyone putting the brakes on him. He could speak openly and listen carefully, but he stood by his own wishes and decisions, his own perceptions and ways of viewing life. At the same time, he recognized the part he played in contributing to the self-defeating experiences of the past. For him, the nadir was reached at the end of three years of constant frustration and failure in school. There was only one way to go, and that was forward. Once he made the decision to straighten himself out, to do what was right and necessary for himself, once he realized what kind of restrictive and damaging world he was creating, he simply decided to call halt. He brought his resources to bear in conquering his fears and self-doubts. In brief, he became a different Tom with a strength of determination that would not be denied. Thus, reluctant as I am to admit that the therapy was not the primary ingredient in bringing about the personal and social changes in Tom, reluctant as I am to say that a therapeutic process did not actually facilitate his self-growth, this seems to be the only valid conclusion. Tom grew himself,

and he was his own catalyst in that growth. He simply stopped being determined by life, by the pressures and threats of his school and his home. He began to determine his own being in the world and to shape this being in accordance with his own beliefs and wishes and convictions.

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