Existential Child Therapy

Therapy as a Living Experience

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Frederick H. Allen, who died January 15, 1964, was a child psychoanalyst at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic and a pioneer and innovator of clinical theory and practice in psychotherapy with children.

Therapy as a Living Experience

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My work with children is based on a basic premise: Therapy exists in its highest form and maintains its value to the extent that it is a meaningful and unique life experience. Therapy involves the creation of a special structure in which a troubled child meets with a therapist in such a way that the child's inner life is revealed, in such a way that the child participates directly and actively in the resolution of his own conflicts and problems.

I have chosen to present my experience with Betty Lou as a particularly relevant example of child therapy, consistent with my conviction that the therapist symbolizes life to the disturbed child, symbolizes health in a fundamental way, inviting the child to participate in new experiences centered in self-awareness and self-direction.

Ten-year-old Betty Lou came to me as quite a totalist. In every sense, she was caught up in an extremist position, in an "all or nothing" proposition. She saw life as filled with "shoulds," pushing her in absolute directions. For her, the only possibilities were extremes: Either she must live or die, be safe or daring, win or lose, be cautious or courageous. She could not conceive that life required different solutions at different times. She did not consider the

reality of integration, of variation, of between. In her own mind, Betty Lou felt that she was doomed to accept the negative side as the only choice. She felt that there was no alternative but to accept the death forces within her as her fate. Defeat, failure, passivity, hopelessness, fear, and loss were the key themes in Betty Lou's world, the key experiences that predisposed her to view life as a tragedy.

The Family Setting

Betty Lou's family consisted of an older brother and her mother and father. The parents had been married a long time before having their first child. In their relationship, the mother and father had built a life that excluded others. The arrival of the children did not alter this pattern; the parents increasingly encased themselves in their own private world and isolated their children from this world. According to the parents, the children accepted the reality of this world and, up to the time of the onset of Betty Lou's illness, had made satisfactory progress in the home, the neighborhood, and the school.

Increasingly, it became clear that Betty Lou was not evolving in a healthy, productive way in this family atmosphere. In a sense, there was no family at all. There was no unity or wholeness in the family setting. There were two parents exclusively attached to each other, meeting the external needs of their children but rarely joining them in activities, as a unified family.

Increasingly, Betty Lou experienced a feeling of separation and rejection and a feeling of threat that reached a peak in the onset of a school phobia, accompanied by nausea and physical illness. She became extremely resistant to the idea of attending school. The fear became so severe that she felt that, if she were forced to return to school, she would become very sick, and, perhaps, die. The school phobia soon required attention from the parents. They had to face the reality of Betty Lou in an entirely different way. Their world of oblivion to others was shattered; the all-encompassing compact between them was broken.

Betty Lou's mother was immediately caught up in the school phobia, and, reversing her attitude toward Betty Lou, she became fully aware of the child as her daughter. Being unable to contribute positive resources and convictions that would enable Betty Lou to come to grips with the problem, she became extremely anxious and over-protective. The father, resenting the threat to his own relationship with his wife, at first was stern and critical of both mother and child. When condemnation did not have the desired results, he withdrew from active involvement in the problem. Another dimension of the crisis emerged when Betty Lou began to project her fears onto her mother. She began to feel that her mother was in jeopardy, that "something" would happen to her mother unless she was constantly at her side. The mother, herself, became caught up in the tremendous concern and promised her daughter that she would never leave the house while Betty Lou was away.

Trapped in this way, the mother's anxiety grew until, in desperation, she sought out therapy for her daughter. Angry over Betty Lou's control of her mother, the father permitted his wife to take this step toward therapy, even though it violated his belief that he could manage any problem by himself.

The clinic required the parents to participate in two exploratory interviews before a plan was created to work with Betty Lou. In the first meeting, however, Betty Lou accompanied her parents, and made it extremely difficult for the adults to talk together. For the second meeting, the parents were told firmly that they could not bring their daughter. This initiated another crisis. The mother was certain that Betty Lou would totally collapse if they left her at home. But, the limit was held, and the parents for the first time began to see that indulging Betty Lou and allowing her to control her mother would further aggravate the problem and entangle the lives of everyone in the family. The parents understood that realistic limits were necessary and that Betty Lou would not perish. With this firm stand, the parents appeared without Betty Lou, and a plan of treatment was established that would involve the parents.

The First Hours with Betty Lou

From the beginning, Betty Lou was eager to come for therapy. In the first hour, she sat somewhat apprehensively in the waiting room; but when it

was time to begin, she entered the office with little outward evidence of anxiety. Immediately, she began to describe her illness in school and her fear that something terrible would happen to her if she attended. Then, in explaining why she thought coming to the clinic would help her, she said: "I want to come here to get over being afraid." She agreed with my comment that she felt some of the fear right at the moment with me and that coming was a first step in finding out what she could do about it. This pointed conversation between us paved the way for the main theme of our first two meetings.

Betty Lou's fear centered in the imminent danger that surrounded her mother. She expressed this fear in her questions: "What will happen to my mother if I am not with her?" And, 'What will happen to me if something happens to her?" In defense of her own insistence that her mother stay home, Betty Lou explained that her chief motive in remaining out of school was to protect her mother. She felt that she had to build up an elaborate scheme of control which would keep her mother safe. But, she qualified her position by adding, "I could return to school if my mother would promise not to leave the house while I am away." I suggested that perhaps she was also afraid of what might happen to her, that at the center of her own world was a fear of life. As she was not ready to own this fear, she immediately rejected the idea.

She recounted many incidents in the home; each reflected a tremendous

concern for her mother and her mother's reactions. At one point, she remarked, "This morning I ate a cookie, and I wondered if I had hurt my mother." In many ways she conveyed the image of herself as undifferentiated from her mother. She expressed the idea that her mother was not actually her mother, that perhaps she was a twin sister. She doubted too that her mother had given her birth and stated quite emphatically, "At times I have the feeling I am an adopted child." As we explored these feelings further, it was clear that she did not really believe in them, but she was playing an imaginative game, letting her fantasy mingle freely and go astray. Rejecting the notion that her mother was in reality her twin, she re-created a twin fantasy, saying that she herself was both twins. I said that I could understand these feelings. One twin in her wanted to grow up, go to school, and enjoy life as other girls her age did; the other wanted to remain a little girl and be cared for and protected by her mother. Betty Lou seemed intrigued with my interpretation but made no comment. To me, it seemed clear that undifferentiated from her mother Betty Lou felt herself to be a person of value, recognized and confirmed. The feeling of separation aroused a feeling of being nobody, at best a twin, but with no adequate confidence of being a unique and distinct person. At the same time, because of its restrictions in her own self growth, she rebelled against the attachment to her mother and retaliated by attempting to control her mother and by trying to keep her mother from being a person in her own right.

At the end of my second meeting with Betty Lou, I told her of the plan to

have another conference with her mother and father and pointedly added, “And you will not be there.” To my surprise she did not express fear or resentment at being left at home. Instead, she made only one significant comment, “What does my father have to do with this?” I suggested that she had two parents, that they were both worried about her, that they both had a real part in helping her to overcome her fears, in helping her to become a happy person.

At the end of each of the two first hours with Betty Lou, she became openly anxious. She feared that her mother would not be waiting for her. She wanted to stand outside the door of the room where her mother was being interviewed. But, I insisted that she wait in the reception room, conveying, at the same time, my confidence that she could wait alone. Here she made use of my conviction that she could manage on her own, that she could behave in a responsible way.

Conference with the Parents

After two hours of therapy with Betty Lou, a third conference was scheduled with the parents. Although fraught with ambivalence, conflict, and doubt, right up to the last moment, the meeting with the parents came off as planned; Betty Lou remained at home. Thus for the second time, her mother saw that she could stand up to Betty Lou’s powers, and in holding firm, she

conveyed to her husband that there was a new strength and feeling of hope within her. Again, the mother expressed the fear that Betty Lou would collapse completely if she became firm with her and broke out of the box she was in. But she saw that this did not happen. On the contrary, in spite of the crying and screaming, she sensed that Betty Lou really wanted her to hold to the limits, that Betty Lou really felt her mother's presence in a reassuring way. With these two separations as a beginning, her mother left Betty Lou for increasingly longer periods.

The mother and father began the process of unraveling their own involvement in their daughter's development. It was clear that the independence they had sought was an escape from responsibility, that it had little genuineness or substance. Betty Lou's fear and need to control them had shattered the parents' relationship with each other and had jarred the mother into an awareness of her failure to give her daughter what she needed most—a real mother quality. So, out of guilt, she handed herself over to Betty Lou and allowed her to control her daily life, but with a great deal of latent hostility that she could not express at this point in the therapeutic process.

The Next Seven Meetings with Betty Lou

Betty Lou started off these meetings with a surface gaiety that did not successfully cover up her obvious tension. She said she was glad to be back

and immediately plunged into a discussion of the problems she faced in growing up. She said she did not want to get any older because "to get older is to die." Thus she did not want to grow up. And since going to school meant growing up, she did not want to go to school. She did not want to become "big." She wanted to stay at home and be near her mother always because this meant being little, not growing older, not dying. She said, "I may be ten years old in my body, but I am still a little girl in my mind."

At the same time, Betty Lou was not happy to be little. There were times when she yearned to return to school. She told me how she watched from the window as children in her neighborhood hurried off to school. In a wistful voice, she added, "I really want to join them." I accepted these feelings without in any way attempting to alter them or influence her.

Betty Lou held tenaciously to the obsession that something terrible would happen to her mother if she went off to school. She was not ready to see this as a fear of her own separation or to see herself as a separate person in any way. It hurt too deeply to be a person. She did not deny life, but she found it extremely painful to come into it on her own. In addition, she felt that, to be a person in her own right, she must steal life from her mother. She began to reveal her own guilt over being alive. She knew her mother had had three miscarriages before she was born. As she put it one day, "Maybe I shouldn't be here. Maybe I am an accident." She suggested that perhaps she

was a substitute for the unborn children of her mother.

As I have mentioned, for Betty Lou growing up really meant to die. To be brighter, keener, more aware, more in touch with life was a frightening thought for Betty Lou, frightening partly because it meant competing with her mother, surpassing her mother, being smarter, more alive than her mother. And the thought of going beyond her mother created a feeling fraught with pain and guilt. For Betty Lou, to transcend her mother was equivalent to killing her.

Thus Betty Lou was caught up in a terrible conflict with her mother, loving her and hating her, wanting her to live yet wishing she were dead. At the same time, she thought that her mother wished she had never been born. She experienced painful guilt in the thought of being an alive person.

In her contacts with me, I sharpened and clarified the split within her: the wish to be big and the wish to be little, the excitement of life and the inevitability of death, the wish to remain dependent and the desire to grow up. And in this process, in the relationship with me, I symbolized life for her. I represented a zest and vibrancy for living, a vital quality she was reaching for. Her previous psychiatrist had focused on the dying dimensions of Betty Lou, on her death wishes, on her withdrawal from life. He was technically right, but humanly and existentially wrong. He symbolized the death force, whereas

I represented the life force. My conversations with her kept the focus on what she experienced in the present, from within. I reflected the side of her that wanted to live, helping her to recognize her own fear of growing up, but, at the same time, her desire to be connected with life and to emerge as a distinct and independent person. From my comments to her, Betty Lou not only became increasingly aware of the split in herself but also of her wish to become connected with life. Once she remarked, "Sometimes I have the feeling I don't want to live any more, but when I come here I know I want to live."

Betty Lou knew in advance that, at the end of these seven meetings, there would be a lengthy summer break. Toward the end, she said she wanted to keep coming. She did not want to have to stop for the summer. She said, "I am still not cured of my fears." I told her she had grown much stronger and was more ready to return to an active life. I added that her mother was growing also. She looked surprised and asked, "What was wrong with her?" I indicated that there was a lot that was wrong in their relationship to each other. Betty Lou smiled in agreement. Even so, as the last hour drew near, her anxiety increased. She minimized her progress and said that she still felt frightened when her mother was away for a long time. And, she said she did not know whether she would be ready to return to school after the summer. Several times she repeated, "Maybe I shouldn't have been born. Maybe I should have been one of the other three. There wouldn't be any problems

then." At this point in our relationship, in spite of these feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, I felt that Betty Lou was more aware of her own identity, and more alive and engaged in activity, though still experiencing guilt over being herself. She asked me, "How do people know when they are going to die?" I responded, saying, "Most people are too busy living, just as you are now, and don't have to answer such a question."

During her period of absence from school, Betty Lou was being tutored at home. One day she reported excitedly that she had passed all of her examinations and would be promoted. She enthusiastically told about the summer plans of the family: "The whole family is taking a trip together for the first time that I can remember." The change in the direction of family unity and solidarity, which began when the parents first became aware of the importance of real family life, was reflected in the plans for a joint family vacation. Each member of the family took an active part in planning the trip.

During the seven-week period of therapy with Betty Lou, her mother was becoming increasingly free to leave the home, and to do more on her own, in a natural way. While Betty Lou continued to struggle and battle with her mother when her mother wanted to go her own way, the intensity of her reaction lessened and she was becoming more able to accept separation from her mother. At the same time, her mother was finding new courage to permit Betty Lou to express fear and anger without herself becoming enmeshed in

these feelings. A much more favorable climate for healthy growth had been created, so that Betty Lou could use family resources in solving the dilemma of being an individual and, at the same time, a member of her family. Both parents were finding new qualities in themselves that supported the growing up of their daughter. Therapy was providing her with a differentiating experience, where she could reveal herself as a genuine and distinct person.

The summer proved to be an enriching experience for each member of the family. The parents renewed their relationship with each other, but without the isolating and exclusive components. The family shared many activities, including a Florida vacation. In the fall, Betty Lou indicated a readiness to return to school. On the first day, she was filled with anxiety but was determined to go ahead with the plan. She said to her mother, "I'm scared to go but I'm going anyway." However, before she departed, she exacted a promise from her mother to stay near the house while she was in school. Thus, the mother was once more caught up in the old trap. But, at the same time, even while making the commitment, she became angry that she had permitted herself once again to make an unhealthy contract with her daughter. Betty Lou tried to get her mother to work out an arrangement with the school whereby she would have to attend only half-day sessions or just on her own terms, as she felt able to attend. The principal, however, refused to accept this arrangement and insisted on full-day attendance. He pointed out to Betty Lou and her mother that, if Betty Lou expected to attend school, she

would have to meet the same requirements as other children, or not come at all. Through conferences with the clinic, the principal could see that the school was a battleground but not the real situation of stress. He could understand that the struggle was between two determined and anxious people, between Betty Lou and her mother, and that the issue between them had to be settled in the family. In the light of the principal's firm insistence, in contrast to Betty Lou's determination to attend school on her own terms, it was decided that Betty Lou would remain at home until she was ready to be responsible for full-day attendance. At the same time, she was told that she was expected to return to school and that it was her responsibility to do so as soon as she felt able. In consultation with the school and the family, the tutoring was discontinued because it was felt that this would heighten Betty Lou's need to return to school and keep the challenge of school constantly before her as an imperative. I did not support Betty Lou's decision to remain at home. I did not excuse her from school attendance. My attitude was not a vital issue or theme in our meetings. It was a matter that she herself had to work out. The school was a central concern in her world, but I did not get involved in the struggle as to whether or not she should return; the issue did not become a significant theme in her hours with me.

Twenty-six More Meetings with Betty Lou

My first meeting with Betty Lou in the fall came just after her

confrontation with the school principal. She told me she would return to school all day if she could be assured that her mother would remain at home the entire time. I pointed out to her that her mother was no longer willing to make such an arrangement, that when she had agreed earlier she felt extremely angry; she felt trapped; she felt it was an unfair and intolerable plan. But, Betty Lou protested, "As long as I am afraid, I cannot leave my mother. I cannot go to school. Something terrible will happen to her." Eventually I broke through these fixed ideas by pointing out that she was using her own fears as a justification for controlling her mother, not because something might happen to her mother, but because once she had felt left out by her parents and now she didn't want her mother to have a life of her own. I explained that I thought she was testing her mother, that I thought she was trying to find out how far she could push her mother. I told her that, in reality, I thought she wanted her mother to show her strength, to be firm with her, to express her love by insisting that she grow up and be responsible as a ten-year-old girl. In these discussions, Betty Lou listened, accepted, and understood the underlying dynamics of her relationship with her mother. She came to understand that controlling dependence was a form of death, that life was a movement forward toward responsibility and happiness, that I would not support the regressive, backward forces in her; but that, on the contrary, I would support the vital forces of life in her, the side of her that wished to go out into the world as a distinctive person. Gradually, she came to respond to

me. Increasingly, she emerged as a spontaneous individual and came to value the alive and positive dimensions of the self.

In these hours she often spoke of death, of living and dying, of birth and ageing. She was trying to solve the riddle of living. The underlying formula seemed to be, “If you remain little, if you stay dependent, if you keep unalive then life is eternal; but each time you go out into the world and live, a piece of you is dying.” She asked, “Why should I go to school? Every day I would learn a little more, and grow up a little more, and die a little more.” Often she said, “I wish I had never been born, like one of my sisters who died in my mummy’s tummy. Then I would never have to worry.” And, sometimes sadly, she would say, “If you have to die sometime, why not now and get it over with?” I spoke reassuringly to Betty Lou, “You are beginning to answer this question for yourself, not by words but in coming here. The fact that you come is a sign that you want to live. You want to do things. You want to enjoy fife.”

During the latter phase of our work together, I told her we had only a couple of months to work together, only a short time to help her to become a ten-year-old girl. Though, in fact, it was necessary to expand this limit to twenty-six meetings, when the time limit was first set, Betty Lou became obviously anxious, but the limit also enabled her to become more centered in the real issues and concerns, more focused in our discussions. Sometime later she remarked to me, “You know when I started to get better was when you

told me we had only a couple of months for me to learn to be a ten-year-old girl. You said I had to learn to help myself. I learned when I came to see you that I would have something to do. That it was up to me to start." I responded with full acceptance and added, "Yes, and you learned to be yourself, Betty Lou, a ten-year-old girl, and not a baby nor an adult." Although my time limit was arbitrary, it proved to be a turning point in my work with Betty Lou.

Betty Lou clearly realized that she herself must participate actively in life. She must utilize her own resources in the resolution of her fears. Even so, at times, the responsibility was too much for her. She wanted to give up. She wanted to end the struggle. She began to relate her dreams. In them one idea appeared consistently: that she could eliminate all her fears through magic. Suddenly, all of her problems would vanish; suddenly, she would become a confident, free, outgoing person, mature in her behavior, successful in school, loved by her parents. She wondered too whether I did not possess magical powers by which I could cure her, by which I could bring about the desired changes in her. I made it clear that I did not have such powers but that I believed in her. I believed in her talents and capacities to make a good life for herself. I told her that in fact she herself possessed a kind of magic, that she had the capacity to choose to grow up and be a distinct and responsible person. She said I had already helped her solve some of the riddles, and, besides, she asked, "Why is it that I feel good when I come here? I am not afraid any more. But all we do is talk." I indicated that I could understand how

it must seem like magic to her, but I emphasized that what made our meetings so special was that she shared with me her feelings and her ideas and that it was both the talking and the sharing that helped. I stressed that she was discovering that she was more ready to be a real person in her own right and less needing to keep her mother imprisoned. In short, our discussions revolved around Betty Lou's growth dilemma and her movement from a frightened, disabled individual into a person with interests and activities that challenged and compelled her.

At the end of the two-month time limit, Betty Lou announced that she had decided to return to school. For several weeks prior to this time, she had discussed with her parents the idea of going back to school. Throughout one hour with me, she kept repeating, with a mixture of conviction and anxiety, "I am going to school Monday." "I am going." "I am going." Obviously, she was attempting to gain more confidence to carry out her decision. She talked about possible harm that would come to her when she returned to school. I sympathized that it was a difficult decision to make, that return would be painful at first, but that I felt that she had gained in confidence and courage and that I believed she was ready to take this important step toward growing up. I also pointed out that much of the hardship and danger she envisioned was a product of her own imagination, that she was a taskmaster in creating frightening ideas and images. None of the dangers she foresaw had ever occurred but her inventing of them was a way of avoiding life, avoiding

growing up, avoiding what she was ready to do and wanted to do. She asked that I repeat this idea. She said it to herself many times.

Throughout the next several meetings, Betty Lou spoke about school, describing activities and indicating a general satisfaction and enjoyment. I pointed out to her that none of the problems she had envisioned had occurred; none of the fears had arisen. She still seemed perplexed as to why she was feeling so much better. Again, she asked, "How is it you can help me if we just talk?" But this time, she did not wait for an answer. For the first time in our many months together, she began to play, to use the play materials in a spontaneous, involved, excited, and active manner, as is natural for the healthy ten-year-old child.

At the same time, along with the obvious gains, there were episodes of regression. Within Betty Lou, there was ambivalence about getting well, even a feeling of not wanting to get better, not wanting to terminate the special experience of therapy, which increasingly had come to be a vital part of her life. On occasions, she would say to me, "I'm not much better than when I first came to you, am I?" At such times, I would comment, "You really are very much better, very much happier, but it seems risky for you to say so." Betty Lou would listen but often would assert her need to continue coming until she was eighteen *(she knew this to be the age limit of the clinic)*.

In spite of the shifting back and forth from illness to health, Betty Lou was clearly in the ending phase of therapy. Both Betty Lou and her mother, in her own therapy, were moving toward this goal. We had reached the beginning of the end of our life journey together. There were times when Betty Lou experienced considerable anxiety. Although she was feeling satisfaction in being more active, in moving ahead, in getting well, she was finding it difficult to yield to the fact that she was now being responsible for herself. She continued saying that, if she got completely well, she would become very ill again. She frequently commented that she might give up going to school. But, at the same time, I knew that school had come to have an important place in her life. I accepted her threats and suggested that whether she went to school or not was her choice but that I felt it would be a real loss to her if she stopped. Betty Lou would smile and we both knew it was part of the struggle to bring therapy to a close, part of the conflict in concluding an experience that had held such meaning in her life. Out of this process of affirming and denying her gains, we settled on a definite time for our last interview. This was also discussed with her mother, and we were in full accord. In one of our final meetings, Betty Lou described going to a class lunch. Up to this time, she had taken all of her lunches at home. On this occasion, she knew her mother would be away the entire day. Although she experienced considerable fear, she decided to attend the luncheon. It turned out to be an extremely important occasion in increasing Betty Lou's courage

in being on her own. I paved the way for other school activities, such as dances and parties. She was now fully ready to leave her mother and have an independent life of her own. Once more, she referred to the time limit and the nearing of the end, “Do you remember when you said I was ready to stop and we decided on a few more times? That’s when I knew I really had to get down to work and start doing what I wanted to do on my own.” I agreed, saying that I too had noticed the forward spurt. In so many ways, the mastery Betty Lou had achieved was quite obvious. She was in control of the earlier fears and constraints. She had learned to live with the normal anxieties engendered by the process of becoming a differentiated individual. When we parted she said she was a little fearful about leaving, but she knew there was no backing away from her new life.

Two follow-up interviews were arranged, one a month after ending and the other at the beginning of the new term, when she was entering junior high school. In both of these hours, she was relaxed and spoke in a natural, excited, spontaneous way about her summer experiences and her friends and activities in the new school. Clearly, the therapeutic experience was already receding in her conscious awareness, and it was becoming, as it should, an episode in her life journey toward becoming an adult.

Though I have given little detail of the mother’s part in therapy, her participation, through regular interviews with a skillful social worker, gave an

additional meaning to Betty Lou's hours with me. A truly differentiating quality, in Betty Lou's discovering herself as a separate but related person, and in the parents' recognition of themselves as separate, as related to each other, and as members of a family unit, gave this mother and father a livable sense of values. Both parents found that they could maintain a rich independent life alone and together, not as evasions and substitutes for their important commitment and responsibility to the family as a whole, but as expressions of interests and needs which were requirements of their own adult living. By discovering this healthy way to live individually and within the family, it became possible for Betty Lou to stop fighting for recognition and love in the home. It enabled her to become free and to use her resources and strengths in emerging as a separate and distinct person who, at the same time, could relate to her parents lovingly and with respect for their private world.

Years have gone by. Betty Lou completed a college education in her early twenties and is now happily married.

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