

One of the tough times in therapy is when nothing seems to be happening. There seems to be nothing left to talk about. Depression may still hover like sour air, but life without the expense and bother of therapy is attractive. Although issues are hanging around the back door, there seems not much to say, week after week. Regaining the money and time now spent on therapy starts to mean more than peace of mind or psychological freedom.

I could have lived on my own without therapy years ago, but the price would have been spending my life in emotional confinement, which is to say a life of disappointment. I chose instead to pay a monetary fee, for the chance to continue working to free myself from my demons.

### **Getting Organized**

Whenever therapy feels tiresome and the pace is slogging, giving it up shimmers with possibilities. We think maybe we've run the course. But maybe not. I've learned that silence doesn't mean nothing is going on; it's just, for the present, beyond conscious reach. Sometimes the quiet is a signal that we are getting some things from previous sessions better organized, which seems to happen in much the same way that our dreams help us deal with our waking life. Maybe we're gathering together what we've learned about ourselves and are filing it where it belongs in the structure of our self. Once given a chance to settle into place, what we have gained allows us a peaceful and tidy corner in our mind.

Sometimes the apparent quiet masks anxiety about something we don't want to face. It may feel like fuzzy channel reception: the picture of our inner world is blurred. We are free to leave therapy, yet we have doubts about leaving when we're depressed, sore about something, or inexplicably, urgently needing to leave.

Sometimes when I have "nothing to say" to my therapist it's because I'm angry with him, without realizing it. He is so acutely attuned to my emotional life that he can predictably infer when something we have touched upon in therapy has caused me to distance myself from him (and to feel emotionally adrift in my own life). He knows the defining events in my formative years that caused everything to go awry, knows the

topics in our discussions that impinge on those memories and cause me to disengage from the odd work we do together. It feels as if I've lost my way, lost my reason for being in therapy; but *he* isn't lost at all. He knows exactly where we are and what work remains. And why I'm trying to quit.

### **Having Nothing to Say**

Sometimes, when having "nothing to say" blocks the way, we are throwing up resistance to keep from knowing something about ourselves. For me, such resistance calls to mind soldiers on a battlefield facing an enemy they can't see. Perhaps they're huddled somewhere for safety without knowing where or when something will strike. They trust in the strategy of their commanding officer, but are nevertheless scared, lonely, and full of doubt.

A therapist, it seems to me, plays a similar role as we do battle with our demons. We place our trust in that person and wait out the long, cold night. We do it as many times (and for as many years) as we feel the need until the foe is—if not vanquished—beaten back.

In therapy certain memories and our feelings about them are our enemy. They cut us off from the direction we want to go, take advantage of us, corner and threaten us, keep us afraid of moving about freely in our lives, require us to act in self-destructive ways. They denounce us while holding us captive. The enemy is within us. Until we are free of "them" they can strike at any time. Just when we think they're gone, they return.

It's hard to stay in treatment when we seem to be talking about nothing and are frankly fed up with the process. Yet these quiet periods often yield something—usually some memory or insight into how things within us work. Not every therapist is skillful in bringing forth what we have resisted knowing about ourselves, but those with such know-how earn all their fee and more in the peace they confer on our lives. Perhaps there *are* times during therapy where nothing is happening, yet that's hard to imagine between two people engaged in close work.

In my therapy, when nothing seems to be happening, it's often because I am avoiding something on the table between us. By now, I should know the signs. In his office, I fall dismally into a chair, reach for something insignificant to talk about, then after about twenty minutes or so I blurt out, "I think I'd like to start cutting back on seeing you." "Oh?" he'll say, "Is it something you'd like to talk about?" I'll mutter no.

Then he offers to begin the process of winding down our relationship, and we'll make the plan to do so. It's up to me.

### **Going to New Zealand**

Next time, when I bring up once again my awareness of "nothing has arisen between us," he carefully reminds me that this nothingness seems to have begun some weeks (or months) earlier when we talked about a difficult issue in my life. Still, I have nothing to say. I seem to have gone to New Zealand. Still he waits. I begin to tiptoe towards it. He listens and watches as I come near it once more.

He seems to know what he is looking and listening for, knows what I need to do to put the matter to rest, knows whether or not I've accomplished the feat. At the next visit, or the next, or even after a long stretch of "nothing," finally it happens. Like a dam that's come apart, the pent-up feelings attached to miserable memories come pouring forth. It never fails to play out in this way, and the relief is always worth the long wait.

The work we do may never rid me of all my demons. It may be that it only helps to make them easier to live with—making it easier, in turn, for me to be in the world. Because of the delicate nature of the work—the tendency to approach, retreat, balk, then approach once more what is difficult to face—the decision to stay or leave therapy is worthy of the deepest thought and care.