

On a glorious day with gusting breezes I came to my therapist's office feeling "puny" —one of my grandmother's endearing words that in this instance held particular meaning for me. Something I had read caused me to feel small and my feelings insignificant. Though it was something others might sail past, I felt slighted. A writer with bi-polar disorder flatly stated she would rather have that than to be in treatment because she was "weak" and "neurotic." That would mean someone like me. While I could see that she fell short of understanding those of us who struggle with problems other than manic-depressive illness, still, the remark smarted. I knew before going in for my session that I would come out feeling that things inside me had been set right again.

Why, I wondered, can't I do this by myself? Why do I need a therapist to help me? Why can't I just bounce back? After a hurt I can feel myself brooding, like a small boat with its sail leaning out over the water. Just one session can lift my sail upright to fill with wind.

We talked briefly about my difficult mother, then about the recent death of a beloved great aunt. I wept at the memory. He nodded when I spoke of the long reach of kindness into a person's life. My great aunt was kind to me; visiting her was a joy, even when she was 98. My mother was hard; before each visit I girded myself against her stinging barbs. She was also hard to love.

He said, "She couldn't help you re-group when you were hurt." I remembered how she would brag to her friends that I never cried when I hurt myself. Now I understand that her own problems deprived her of the strength to help me.

I was reminded of a visit with my ten-month old grandson, watching him explore his world. He might bump his head, then look to his mother to help him figure out if he can recover by himself. Should I cry? his face seemed to ask. Her smile in reply said, "I know you hurt yourself a little, but I think you're okay. Do you think you can try again?" And he would re-group. Step by step she supported him.

Is that what he meant about a mother helping her child re-group? Yes. Exactly. Then where was my mother? I wondered, though I knew. She was too depressed to be present. I have friends whose mothers were absent in other ways, some from alcohol or self-preoccupation. Do they, like me, sometimes have trouble righting themselves?

The image of my grandson helped me understand the countless times a good parent supports a child, each time instilling the parent's strength in the child's growing sense of self. I imagine such a self as sturdy and able to withstand set-backs. My self grew to be no stronger than Tinker Toys, easily toppled and scared, ill-prepared to withstand the winds of a normal life.

Bit by bit (and year by year) talking in therapy helped me develop a sturdier self. We took apart my self like so many Tinker Toys, examining each one to build a new self—still vulnerable, but stronger. My therapist's support in time became my strength. I used to feel ashamed that I needed so much help. Mostly now I understand the reasons and am not so hard on myself. Sometimes with a boost in therapy (or increasingly on my own), I am able to be a nice mother to myself.

Parents, who are unaware of the strength they impart to their children by supporting them emotionally as they struggle to stand alone, might spend an hour in the office of a shrink as a patient is helped, ever so slowly, to become stronger. They might see how repeated failures to protect and support a child can play out in a person's adult life.

Perhaps they would begin to glimpse, too, the ways each act of kindness and reaches out across a lifetime. They might understand how such gestures help children develop an idea of themselves as someone who is strong and deserving of love.

If we grew up without this support the first time, or with some other form of emotional confinement, therapy gives us another chance if we are willing to work at it.

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