

Kindness as Foothold

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Anna held herself very still, knees together, elbows pressed close to her body, looking down at the floor. “When I was little, every day my dad would sit me in front of him and grill me on my homework. If I got an answer wrong, he would yell at me. That was my big fear. He was terrifying and physically violent.”

After almost a year of treatment, it was the first time Anna, 22, had spoken in any detail about her father. My original training as a psychiatrist had primed me to listen for and validate feelings of fear and pain, to be the compassionate presence that had been absent. It was easy for me to do that, and it was important. But as a narrative therapist, I knew it wasn’t enough. For Anna to heal, I also needed to help her discover her sources of strength and meaning and cultivate them into stories of cherished identity.

Asking about hope and strength in the midst of fear and pain is a delicate matter. Miss the mark, and the person feels invalidated and abandoned. But fail to ask about hope and strength, and trauma can imprint more deeply.

The story of how and why a person was able to survive childhood trauma and misery is not one I can know in advance. We must discover the story together, bit by bit, one moment at a time. Amid pain and terror, signs of strength and meaning can be elusive, tiny, implicit. It never fails to move me when I witness someone discover what helped them hold onto the thread of who they are.

For Anna, it was one hug at age seven.

When Anna first came to consult with me, she was oppressed by a tenacious depression and had daily impulses to kill herself by overdosing or jumping off a building. A junior in college, she felt distant from her parents, immigrants Anna felt did not understand her as a young Chinese-American. At her visits with me, she sat upright and compact on the very edge of my couch, knees pressed together, hands clasped, elbows tucked in, head bowed, occasionally darting glances up. Her moments of greatest animation were vehemence in expressing self-hatred.

“It’s my own fault that I’m depressed,” she said. “I know these thoughts and feelings are irrational. I blame myself.”

Anna’s depression followed her into the room and weighed on us both. It drained my energy and made my head thick. Yet every week, she arrived on time.

I understand the heart of psychotherapy as attunement. I wanted to be with Anna in her anguish *and* with her in her hope, however nascent. I wanted her to feel my awareness that I was white and was seeking to understand the cultural values that she found sustaining—both Chinese and American—and at the same time, to parse out experiences that were harmful. I felt her despair try to pull me in, yet in resisting, I needed to refrain from leaping too far toward hope and losing

her.

We moved slowly, prioritizing her safety. When she said that she was worthless because of not having a real job at twenty-three and therefore deserved to die, I asked how the depression's position that unemployed people should be killed off fit with her own moral stance.

At first she denied any worthy moral stance, but when I persisted, she said, "It's not okay to hurt others. I value being caring and generous, being kind."

Kindness. It was a foothold out of depression. Over the ensuing months, we spoke of giving and receiving kindness, and parlayed that into imagining what kindness toward herself might look like. She began to care for herself more tenderly, ate better, rested, joined a coping skills group, and persevered until she found an anti-depressant that was helpful. Her suicidal thoughts decreased, but self-condemnation persisted.

Anna felt she didn't measure up. Mortification about making a mistake made it hard for her to participate in class or even attend. "This feeling comes on, my face gets all hot and red, I am shaking, I feel uncentered. Once I make a mistake, I'm gun-shy about returning to class." She began to tell me about how her father had treated her when she was a little girl.

"Your father would grill you, and yell at you if you got something wrong," I gently repeated. "How did you respond in that situation?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"When your dad was yelling at you like that, what did you do in response?" I spoke softly, clearly, hoping my face, posture and tone conveyed how I was feeling her fear, how I was there with her as that little girl trying to survive. Anna turned her head and looked at a new spot on the rug.

"I told myself to calm down. I wanted to have no reaction at all. I remember as a kid, I was really scared. When I got a question wrong he would storm out of the room. He scared me."

I gently asked, in the face of that fear, what she might have been doing to care for herself.

"It was hard because I had no privacy. I couldn't run to the bathroom and cry and compose myself. Crying just made him angrier."

"What were your strategies to compose yourself?"

"I just had to sit there and take it." Anna glanced up at me and back down to the rug.

"How did you manage to do that?"

"I tried everything. I would recite the ABC's or think of the ocean. But I couldn't block him out. It didn't work. I was trying to calm myself down. I wanted to be stronger. I wanted to not

cry and not give in. I wanted to be able to take it and not feel so awful. I did not agree with that kind of parenting.”

“What kind of parenting would you agree with?”

“Not verbally, emotionally and physically abusive,” she said vehemently.

“Not abusive. Would you say that you would be in favor of parenting that was verbally, emotionally and physically kind?”

“Yes,” Anna said firmly. She looked up and held my eyes. There it was, a filament of the self she had held onto.

I asked, “How did you know that that kind of parenting wasn’t ok?”

“Because it felt so awful. Why would anyone do that?”

“Because it felt so awful, you knew it wasn’t ok. Did you have some experience that let you know that?”

“From school. My teachers were way more patient, they didn’t curse at me.”

“Is there a particular teacher that stands out?”

“Second grade. Miss Lee. She was beautiful and young.” Anna paused. “She gave me my first hug.”

Warmth rushed into my chest and face. “She gave you your first hug,” I repeated, my heart and belly squeezing, tears rising in my eyes. I took a steady breath and looked at Anna with love. “Tell me about that.”

“I fell down and she helped me up and gave me a hug.”

“What did that hug feel like?”

Anna gazed back at me. “It felt good. Comforting, and kind.”

“It felt comforting and kind. Can we hang out for a bit with remembering the feeling of that hug?”

Anna and I sat, our shoulders more relaxed, swaying very slightly. “Miss Lee,” I murmured.

“Yes, Miss Lee,” said Anna. “I agreed with her kind of teaching. Not my parents’—always my parents hit me, never would they kiss me or hold my hand.”

From then on, Miss Lee—as we imagined her, for Anna did not (yet) wish to contact her

directly—became a great support to our work. If depressive thoughts showed up, we could turn to Miss Lee for perspective and advice. Gradually, Anna cultivated real-life friendships, attended and spoke up in class, and dropped a course when a professor humiliated a student. The depression subsided. Last year, she graduated from the university, and from treatment with me, giving me permission to write about our work together.

When at our last visit, I asked what had been most helpful in her recovery, she said, “Focusing on my values.”

Six months later, I emailed Anna to ask if she wanted to read this essay and possibly offer a reflection. She did.

Anna:

I'm doing really great! I'm working in a super hip office and I met a great guy. He's kind and unwaveringly supportive.

It's been a little hard to confront my past self.... but I've come to appreciate how hard that person fought so I could get where I am today.

Thank you soooo so much for getting me to the other side. I'm happier than I ever thought possible.