

# The Search for Clues

*Landy Gobes*

**Abstract:**

**This article is the keynote address given at the 4th International Integrative Psychotherapy Association Conference in Lake Bled, Slovenia. The author describes her journey in therapy and her experiences as a client searching for clues and unraveling what was “missing”.**

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Detectives and Psychotherapists have a lot in common. They both use keen observation and acute listening skills. They are both experts at understanding human nature. They study the history, relationships, and life experiences of their subjects, seeking the truth by trying to understand the forces acting on them and their motives for behavior.

I've been a detective for as long as I can remember. When I was a teenager, I read Sherlock Holmes and Edgar Allen Poe and I collected Nancy Drew books in the same way that I read and collect Mystery Novels now. I am fascinated by the search for clues, and I enjoy that searching with each of my psychotherapy clients. I experience the thrill of the chase as we discover together what has happened in the client's life, how those experiences have affected him, and what it all means for him today. The cognitive work is seldom enough by itself, but it enhances and gives meaning to the physiological, affective, and behavioral aspects of the psychotherapy that we do together.

As is true for many of us, I believe that I was drawn to be a psychotherapist in order to solve the mystery of my own life. I had what seemed to be an ideal middle-class childhood. I was an only child of parents who allowed reasonable privileges and set reasonable limits. I had a bicycle when I was 8, a horse to ride at 11, and a car to drive at 16. What more could any kid want? Both at home and at school, I worked hard to be perfect in everything. I was a good kid, I made good grades, and I was praised by my parents and my teachers. The mystery? I had a vague sense that something was missing, and I always seemed to be waiting for something.

When I was in my 40's, managing a husband, a house, and 6 children, I read about Transactional Analysis. I could immediately feel the shifting of the Ego States inside me, and some of the cognitive mysteries began to be solved. I went to graduate school, and I got Transactional Analysis Training, and had some TA therapy. I learned that abandonment by my parents was my deepest fear, but that didn't make sense to me. I knew I had been a wanted, only child of two people who took good parenting very seriously.

Until this point I had been searching for clues in my *remembered* childhood, unable to get back beyond my own adaptive defensive systems to the earliest years of my life. Although I didn't remember my infancy, I had heard the family stories about it. They said I was born with infantile eczema in the days before there was any medication for it. They pinned my sleeves to the mattress, and later, they put splints on my arms, so that I would not scratch my face. The doctor had told my parents not to hold me close to them. He did not want me to scrape the eczema scabs off my face. My parents recounted with pride that I had learned to hold my bottle with my feet. But these were just stories to me; I had no memories of the events. My eczema was gone by the time I was one year old.

In my 50's I went into individual therapy – this time in Integrative Psychotherapy. I prepared myself, as always, to do whatever unpleasant thing was expected of me. To my surprise, I felt understood and appreciated and respected. Looking back I see that I had been expecting to be shamed. Instead, my therapist listened to me with interest, asked questions, and accepted whatever I told him with no demands for behavior change. My childhood and lifetime experiences had left me convinced that I could only have a relationship with someone if I perfectly met their needs and requirements. This therapy relationship was different!

I know now that what my therapist did was attune to me, inquire about me, and involve himself in our therapeutic relationship in such a way that I did not feel alone. I realized, for the first time, that my parents had shamed me for wanting physical contact with them. Their misattunements, their lack of inquiry into my thoughts and feelings, and their over-involvement with my successful adaptations to them had left me feeling very lonely, even though I had not been alone.

When I experienced a connection with my therapist during a therapy session, my defenses would melt, and I would feel the terror of the aloneness that I had been successfully not feeling for many years. These sessions were painful; but solving the mystery, understanding what had happened, was rewarding. The energy I had used to defend against that painful loneliness could now be used in internal integration.

Another aspect of my therapy involved transference. I will try to describe this from my point of view from within the therapy. My memories of my early childhood were not visual memories. And yet, during the therapy, when my

therapist inquired about my experience of my relationship with him, I would see my mother in the back of my mind. For example, if my therapist had been away, he would ask me if I had missed our sessions. Even while I was saying “no,” I would see my mother walking away from my crib. Once, I “saw” my mother standing out in the hall listening to me as an infant crying alone in my room. I realized that before I could talk I had had to learn NOT to cry in order to get her to come in to me.

Since I could not have actually seen my mother from that perspective, I assume that these were pictures my mind made to illustrate my early relationship with my mother – answers to the mystery I had been trying to solve. Now I know why I felt so terrified of abandonment. I had experienced it as a baby! I was alone and scared and no one was picking me up or holding me close. Recovering this memory and solving this mystery changed my life. I was no longer lonely, no longer waiting for my mother to come pick me up, and best of all, I stopped waiting for any of my transference versions of that early longing for my mother.

To understand the theory and methods of bringing unremembered events and feelings into a client’s awareness, I recommend you read Richard Erskine’s articles on Script that are posted on his website. He has broadened Eric Berne’s definition of Script to include pre-verbal experiences, early attachment patterns, and implicit experiential conclusions. I also recommend the chapter on Inquiry in his book, *Beyond Empathy*. Each time I re-read that chapter I become a better therapist.

I am very grateful that my Search for Clues led me to Richard and to this organization and to all of you here today.

Thank You.

**Author:**

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