

THE PASSION OF THERAPY

Healer and Lover

by Shan Jayran

Shan is a Pagan Priestess and therapist who discusses how to make it OK to have sex with someone you meet as therapist and client.

There's a very strong ideology about sex between therapist and client, along the lines of it isn't right, natural or proper, and it shouldn't be allowed. A few practitioners have challenged this entrenched system of belief and openly or discreetly allowed sex to be a part of the therapy relationship. Others find it happening and make an effort to prevent it with varying success. Tales of sexual abuse by therapists frighten virtuous therapists and nervous clients alike, and titillate the tougher individuals on each side of the divide.

Defensive Vocabulary

I have very rarely been able to get a clear open discussion going on the subject because most therapists retreat behind defensive words such as 'transference' and 'projection' as if naming is a sufficient understanding; clients naturally enough tend mainly to express indignation about their vulnerable position with a predatory therapist. Occasionally a therapist or client will refer openly to the fact that people do get sexual feelings about their therapists and that these feelings can be intense, last a long time, and affect what happens between the two quite a bit. So either party can find it all a real problem.

Even this much is revealed only under conditions of relative safety, such as to known associates, and I get the impression that we would be unwise to let it be generally known, as the undoubted sexual dangers implied might put people off a help agency which has only just won a place in the sun of mainstream society. As for sexual feelings about our clients - ssssh!

I think the time has come for more openness. We have been collectively dumped in efforts to cope more effectively with far higher rates of incest, rape and sexual abuse than previous decades suspected even existed. We are learning as citizens to slowly and painfully accept the uglier side of our sex lives. We need now to have more resources to hand to deal with the problem of sex between therapist and client. And first we need good solid pieces of evidence as to what is really going on, and that means mouths opening on both sides.

Sex With Two Clients

So here's my contribution. I speak as a forty-two year old woman therapist, in practice for eleven years in South London with a wide range of clients, mostly one to one. My experience of group work, after some groups in my earlier years of practice, comes from the teaching groups I run focused on meditation, ritual etc. which often plunge into extremely personal and therapeutic areas. I work generally in a down to earth, instinctive fashion, mediated by some pieces of theory I have shaped for myself over the years, and a few classic counselling principles.

I have two actual experiences of sex with a client, one short in the past, one of long standing and on going. Both have been highly instructive, of which more anon.

I have noticed various clients behaving towards me sometimes as an idealised subject for passion. Sometimes, both with these, and with those who do not seem to react to me sexually, I might speak openly of the potential between us: 'If I were a woman you were interested in I think I would find out what you said to her rather embarrassing to handle.' It's important to me to recognise myself and my client as utterly human, and therefore sexual.

As I do not think of myself as very sexy I probably don't always see it when one of my clients has sexual feelings about me. This worries me in case it blinds me to a key understanding of the person I am observing.

On the other side, concerning my own sexual feelings for clients, I have been fascinated by how frequently this happens. Now it's not that I attract particularly glamorous, sexy clients! Nor do I transfer a sexually frustrated private life into my work. My personal life is usually sexually satisfying, whether I'm alone or in a couple. The only difference I've noticed my status makes is that my responses to my clients are a little stronger if I'm alone, which I assume reflects my lonely dislike of being single together with my animal self alertly examining possibilities even when I am not aware of it.

Intimacy And Mimicry

When I was in my inexperienced stage as a therapist I was very puzzled by these waves of strong sex which gripped me in sessions with my clients. As often I reflected hours later that the person concerned was decidedly unattractive to me, in fact sometimes downright distasteful!, I was even more puzzled, and my fascination arose. Now and then, either unaided or with the help of supervision, I could see how the client concerned evoked a previous lover, my mother, my father and so on. But this only accounted for a fraction of it.

One very powerful reason for both my sexual reactions, and theirs, I think is far too easily taken for granted. It is intimacy. Intimacy is a rare and precious thing, normally found within very few types of relationship. In its aspect of problem sharing and solving, we find it (if we're lucky) with parents or close family; with very good friends where trust has built solid; in a brief encounter with a stranger

who offers the safety of no future; or with a lover. Now comparing these four with the therapy relationship, clearly therapy can mimic parent, trusted friend, and safe stranger extremely closely. Why then should it not arouse the intimacy of the lover as well, - as one of those gentler, unguarded times when hurt or confusion is permitted to come out?

Further, how many times has sympathy and pain mingled a heady mix so that friendship fell into bed with challenging aftermath to all concerned? Then the power of the understanding stranger under seductive conditions is proverbial. Finally, there is evidence that incest often "triggers" where one party seeks comfort for distress. Over all, we are so wired up that sex, sympathy and intimacy are twined very close together, so that as therapy rapidly creates intimacy it can so easily generate sexuality too.

So far so good. A near parallel ties this one up neatly; medical patients who must show their nakedness to a practitioner means that both persons concerned need safeguards to indicate that this is not preliminary to sex e.g. white coats and chaperoning nurses. Emotional nakedness, too, needs clear safeguards to indicate where it is not meant as courtship; in the case of therapy, structured appointments and timing, caution about touch, sexual discussion, low lighting, lying down, erotic dress, etc. must replace chaperonage.

Client's Life Energy My Life Force

But there is another reason for my sexual 'waves' for my clients and an even more intriguing one. I am reminded of a stock joke in my household. My husband works at home, and often lets a client in and then sees them out later. He often remarks that I must do powerful magic 'in there' because the person arrives looking old, pinched and greyish, but emerges from a session younger and glowing. The joke then continues that I then crawl out looking very pale and in desperate need of a cup of tea!

Now what I began to notice years ago was a very powerful 'moment' in the healing relationship. At this 'moment' my client gains a kind of radiance, looking stronger and prettier, and usually making a striking impression on me. I learnt that this 'moment' was a sort of prophecy, and a client who showed it was about to change and grow, and would leave my care before very long. They themselves are often unaware of their coming debut, but very interested that I can see a familiar signal of success appearing in them. It's never been wrong so far as a sign. This 'moment' has an intensely erotic effect on me. Once I realised this I felt a lot safer because it seemed to me that it was the acute surge of life energy arising in my client which was stimulating my own life force, and not a personal connection at all. It was very important to hold onto this as the experience could be very intense and easily submerge my understanding for a tricky few minutes of discomfort during which time it seemed that this person before me was a totally desirable lover.

Is it worth asking why, after all, it's such an important forbidden thing to take a client as a lover? It seemed so to me, certainly, as I met the first of the situations when the client and lover become the same person. A young woman came to me for counselling, and in the very first session I knew I was powerfully attracted. At the second it was clear that it wasn't a fluke reaction and I fled to my supervisor in confusion. I felt unable to concentrate clearly on my client's needs as the great tides flooded my body and my emotions skidded about in fantasies of tenderness. My supervisor, bless her, very quickly pushed me to consider the question 'Do you want this young woman as your client, or as your lover?' The answer, surprisingly, was that the healer was uppermost, no kidding. So the therapy continued.

However, she appeared every time looking seductively stunning, and I continued very aware of her, keeping this detached but not suppressed. As the peak of her working with me arrived, she became even more beautiful to me - the 'moment' took its toll, and held me literally breathless with desire, until it passed.

Power - Protection - Enlightened Self Interest

As these patterns unfolded I considered the classic taboo with care. Obviously the power imbalance favoured the therapist, and handicapped the client. A client must be able to feel able to act freely, to be vulnerable and revealing, even seductive, and not get landed with yet another intensely complicated entanglement to muddle an already stressed life. But, my infatuated self whispered, this young woman is strong, she is exactly what and who I would be drawn to anyway, she is clearly an unusual personality who is well able to handle an unusually complex situation. Yet still she has the right to the safety of a client, argued my professional self, however strong she appears, she is entitled to protected status. Who are you kidding, answered the infatuation - aren't you the one who needs protecting from her? And indeed, I did feel besieged, by her passion as well as my own. Nothing was said, which made it all the more intense.

Moreover, I have always taught and tried to practise enlightened self interest. So why should I in my own interest refuse to accept this delight before me? This was a hard one. I finally decided that I had had plenty of unequal relationships with people who admired me but did not understand me, and another was unwelcome. But, whispered passion, she is truly unusual, and possibly capable of understanding you. Yet, I argued, she has got the habit of seeing me as help source, protector, and people rarely change a deep imprint made at the outset. Did I want a relationship where I was essentially therapist outside the therapy room? No I did not.

A Decontamination Period

Here I rested, until the final session. Glad for her, but distressed that I would not see her any more, I was unprepared for her firm initiative. I seemed like the kind of person who in other situations would be her choice for a friend, she said. Would I, after a suitable interval, care to have lunch with her. Faintly my voice agreed that, yes, I would.

After a few weeks decontamination period lunch occurred, passion was declared, and duly expressed on my hearthrug. It was however, a brief affair, as she had already a lover of years' standing, an ad hoc, partial relationship but an existent one. In her therapy she had definitely decided that this was not enough, that she wanted to go for a whole commitment. But, not quite yet. For me it was one more step towards deciding the same thing she already had, that I wanted to go for broke, and sharing someone even for the time being was not right for me.

Was either of us hurt? No. We have kept in touch and if anything it is I who has trouble digesting that item of our past. Would I therefore recommend such taboo breaking? Absolutely not. Clients as strong and clear as that young woman are few and far between. Also, it took great effort - from both of us - to overcome the image of me as healer, and for us to connect as equals; and it was a strain which would have given way under any extra stress. If anything, it was harder for me to give up the safety of my superior role, than it was for her to transcend the limits of hers.

The second example of my wickedness is John. I met him at a solstice celebration and he later came to me for counselling, expressly about intimacy and independence, which gave me enormous advantages in understanding and fighting him later! I remember thinking early on that he was an excellent person, exactly what I'd like in every way, except just not my type. The therapy took its course for a few months and concluded, with no challenges to my peace of mind. (He was an easy client, having been trained by the harsh Atlantis community in self awareness).

... his expertise then matched mine ...

On his part, he told me later, it was obvious I was not interested so he did not think of me like that either. In his last session he spoke with inspired enthusiasm of buying an antique yacht, and sailing to the Hebrides. Oh please, I found myself begging, I've always wanted to sail - please, please take me for a sail. He did. He later describes how he saw 'this formidable woman I'd respected as an authority in her field suddenly transform into a nervous, delighted kid of ten years old.' The power balance between us was thus realigned as his sphere of expertise matched mine, and the authority flowed both ways. But it wasn't until after nearly two years of close friendship that dear old sex explosively exploded our mutual understanding, and we married.

I find this sequence instructive, because: we did not encounter each other through therapy: the therapy was brief, and his skill considerable although not equalling mine: we moved on from therapist - client through an equalising experience where I was novice and he expert: we did not become lovers until a good length of friendship had virtually obliterated the counselling period, and he is of course an extremely powerful person in his own right. For all these reasons we can now enjoy a deeply rewarding partnership. How often can such a conjunction occur?

And so endeth my disclosures. I am aware that my experiences are radically affected by my femaleness which protects and helps me as a therapist. I do not have to contend with masculine inner programming that my sexual worth depends on being as sexually active as possible, especially with anyone who is at all interested. This therefore makes both the therapist's professional standing and others' vulnerability both depend on the weak bonds of self control. Neither do I have to contend with others seeing many of my petty movements, facial expressions, gestures, verbal implications, as sexual threats.

What do other therapists think about all this?

EARWIG

Man of the Shadows

I told John Major. "John" I said, "John, the only effect of so called mortgage relief is to put hive prices up by exactly the same amount. We are going to have to get in line with Europe on this one so why don't you tell people now?" I got a reply from the Chief Assistant to the Assistant Chief. "Don't say people" he said "Own it - you don't really want to hear that mortgage relief is useless do you? As a mortgaged Hive Owner?" I wrote back and said anyway hive prices are set to plummet some more over the next two years.

The effect was electric - literally. Not from Number 10 though. They sent the boys in white instead. Diagnosed chronic depression with psychotic effects and prescribed a course of ECT. They must have read the *Observer Magazine* who say it is perfectly safe - for those who hold you down presumably - and effective. I doubt if it will change my mind about mortgages. The *Observer* was right about one thing though. I did recover from taking tranquillisers. 2 out of 3 do.

Yours with sparks Earwig