

On Therapy
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This thought is about talk therapy. You go once week, or maybe more often, and tell someone about your problems. He/she has a degree in counseling of some sort. (I'll use masculine pronouns in this to stay clear of cumbersome "he or she" sentence constructions.) I'm not thinking of an MD psychiatrist, who would be prone to prescribe drugs, and I'm not thinking of a hardcore Freudian or Adlerian or Albert Ellis type, something specific like that. I'm thinking of a counselor of the sort I have personally have had experience with over the years. Friendly, somewhat detached, you make an appointment, do most of the talking, fifty minutes and you're out the door armed with an appointment for the next visit.

Insurance has paid for these encounters, so I haven't been out anything financially, but they never did me any good, and as I sit here thinking about it, they actually made me worse off. This is a chance for me to work through why that might have been and why I'm committed to never do therapy again. I hope this is of some help to you, or at least gets you thinking--which is my first point here. A tacit message of therapy is, don't think, just show up at the scheduled time.

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The first thought that comes up is about me not paying for it. (Strictly speaking, it's the second thought; the first was think about what's going on with the therapy, don't just turn up at the appointed times and hope something good comes out of it.) It's hitting me that while I didn't pay for it, somebody did. The insurance company got the money from people paying their premiums, which included me, so, really, I did pay for it, though along with a lot of other people. I

need to keep that in mind when I run up any insurance cost. Taking other people's money to line the pockets of therapists has been irresponsible of me.

I flash on an idea of Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian communication theorist in the 1960's who became famous for the phrase, "The medium is the message." McLuhan's point was that the forms of media--television, books, now the internet--have a great impact on the content and impact of communication. Though not electronic, therapy is a medium of communication, and McLuhan's idea helps make sense of it. That is to say, to understand what goes on in therapy, we need to get beyond the particulars of the exchange between therapist and client--what the therapist is like, the therapeutic approach he's using (if any), and what's being talked about during the sessions--to the therapy itself.

See if this digression helps explain what I'm getting at. I get a lot of emails from people who have read my writings. Over the last fifteen years or so, the emails have changed greatly. Correspondents used to write me in crafted sentences and paragraphs which spelled out what they took from what I wrote and what thoughts and ideas it brought up for them, and they asked me to expand upon or clarify something in the writing.

No more. Now it is an apparently dashed-off sentence or two that says something about them, not what I wrote. I recently wrote a thought about the old-time movie and television cowboy Roy Rogers. A typical response has been, "I met Roy one time when I was a kid." Period.

I speculate that these communications, and the level of thinking behind them, have been conditioned, shaped, by texting and social media posts. Quick and casual and self-presentational--this is what I'm like, this is my favorite kind of music, here's a picture of me and my friends, etc. Fast, on the run, from my phone. The media have shaped the content of messages, kept it at a very superficial level--impressions, assessments ("I like Roy")--and more importantly, has significantly affected the basis from which communication and expression are derived, self-perceptions,

thoughts, and preferences; it has made it shallower, simpler, obvious, immature, trite.

Back to therapy, the generalization: therapy as a medium serves to keep the client stuck in a rut and keeps him coming back for more therapy at the expense of other things he could be doing to deal with his issues.

Therapy isn't a relationship between equals. The therapy may be aimed at getting you to be more powerful and assertive and to look the world straight in the eye, but in one key relationship in your life—with your therapist—you are one-down, subordinate, less. You have a problem, the therapist doesn't. You made an appointment to see him, he didn't make an appointment to see you.

Also, therapy involves revealing your deepest, darkest secrets and failings to a stranger. A central feature of the so-called brainwashing used with scary effectiveness by the Chinese with American POWs during the Korean War was getting the POWs to engage in negative public self-disclosure, to reveal their heretofore private transgressions. Doing this brings attention and relief and it thus rewarding, but it brings you down, makes you feel less than the other(s), softens you up, immobilizes you, makes you passive and deferring and dependent and malleable. It doesn't make you stronger, more self-reliant, more autonomous, more self-directed. It does just the opposite, which if you think about it, benefits the therapist. It provides an ego boost for him—you are less, he is more—and even more importantly, keeps the therapy, and the insurance payments, going. If there is one thing certain about therapy it's that you need more of it. The message inherent in the process—in the medium—is that you are better than you were before, but, as the therapist puts it, “We've got more work to do; will this time next week work for you?”

Therapy is about talk . . . and more talk, and more talk, and more talk. Indeed, talking about yourself to what seems like an interested listener is rewarding, but it's a dead end. The conclusion I've come to is that getting your life together is about *action*: doing things, right here and now, whatever seems to have the most promise

of making you happier and more productive and more yourself, more who you really are. You see how that goes and modify your actions accordingly.

Simply, you *do* your way to a better life. The level of your personal wellbeing is not a function of what you say or what you know; rather, it is a function of what you do. And I mean *you*. If you are going to live better, you'll make that happen. Not somebody on your behalf, the therapist or a social worker or your wife or your sister, *you*.

Despite the message of therapy, you don't need three more months of it to be able to get on with your personal work. You can do it *now*, and you do it go *all out*, no tiptoeing forward. It's called volition, will, self-determination, self-affirmation, self-becoming. You don't need somebody to give it to you, you were born with the capacity to act. So act! Do something positive. Anything. Quit talking, quit navel-gazing, quit blaming, quit whining, quit holding other people responsible for your lot in life. And for god's sake, get on with it, today, now. A message inherent in therapy is "for you, not quite yet"—we need to talk some more, figure it out some more, have some more catharses. F---k that. Life is short. Move it!

A message of the therapy medium is that your problems are really complex. They take hours upon hours, months and months, even years, to understand. If you buy that, I'll say it, bullshit, it's a good deal for the therapist. It keeps the process going and the dollars flowing. Meanwhile, you are still wallowing around in a trough, albeit, so you think anyway, a bit less wet and muddy than before—which shows that therapy is working and should continue—but things still aren't right.

My take on it is that your and my problems aren't all that tricky to understand. It's not that we don't know what to do to get out of the fix we are in. Deep down, we know what to do, or at least something that is worth trying. Right now, think of two things that you are capable of doing that you could do this week that will move you in a positive direction. Got the two? My bet is that you are right. I just thought of two for myself, and I bet I'm right.

The big problem is that while we could do those two things, there's a very good chance that we won't do either one of them. Why won't we do them? Because whatever we need to do involves giving up the satisfactions and pleasures we get out of doing what, in the long run, makes us unhappy if not miserable and keeps us stuck.

We may be sloppy fat but the chocolate éclair sure does taste good, and it gives us a respite from the grief/fear/emptiness, whatever it is we live with, for ten minutes, and three éclairs will stretch it to a half hour. Facing down short-run payoffs for long run gain is the existential challenge, call it that, in getting our lives together. But there's good news: we are capable of successfully taking on that challenge. We have the power of choice, it's a part of our being. "I was compelled to do it" "I am addicted to food"--more bullshit. If we eat the éclair, or two or three or four (or have the fourth and fifth drink), the least we can do is accept the inevitable consequences—flab, logginess, inertia, self-disdain, depression and the fact that it didn't have to be that way.

If action and accomplishment is what it's about and not the talking game, your and my challenge is to make ourselves into the best possible get-it-doners possible. That takes more than getting good at talk and figuring things out and emoting and waiting for the therapist to work his magic. It involves honing the instrument that gets us through our life—our mind and body. It involves doing the work it takes to get healthy—nutrition, chucking substances that are getting in our way, developing our body, becoming lean and mean, like a panther or puma in nature, not a domestic cat. It involves developing our character—responsibility, resolve, control, diligence, persistence, courage. It involves exiting from the things in our world that get in our way—harmful, debilitating, poisonous people and circumstances. All this takes *hard work*. What makes therapy such an attractive come-on is how easy it is. Show up Thursday at 2:00 and talk about yourself. No heavy lifting in that. Getting your life, my life, together takes heavy lifting, but when we take it on, we'll discover how good it feels to do it.

Something to test out: Take three months to get in the best possible physical and mental shape you can get in and see if that helps your mental state. Lose weight, good food, tone up, get some exercise every day, a walk, a rowing machine, a yoga set, whatever. No alcohol or drugs, including over-the-counter sleep medications. Just one mental thing—work on self-control. When you decide to do something, big or small, you do it, no exceptions. No therapy, no stewing over your problems, benign neglect of your problems. At the end of the three months take stock of how you are doing in your life--mental outlook, productivity, hopefulness, satisfaction, happiness level.

My bet is that life will be better, even though there were no therapy sessions. But check it out. And also reflect on the fact that a therapist isn't going to say, "Take a break from me and nurture yourself for the next three months--swim a half hour a day and only put good things in your body, drop ten pounds and tone up, and expel some of the crap from your life and practice self-control--and I'll see you in at the end of end of that time and we'll go over how it went." In a recent thought on doctors I use the old saying that to a carpenter everything looks like a nail to make the point that to a doctor everything looks like a drug; take this pill once a day. The same idea holds true for therapists—everything looks like two people sitting and talking, with one of them making money off it.

Is there any kind of therapeutic talk that looks to have promise to me? Yes. With yourself in a journal you write in daily. With a friend once a week over breakfast. Recently, I had a useful experience with a social worker whom I spoke with for an hour every couple of weeks. The focus in all of them is/was on deciding on good things to do—keeping it terse, not going on about it--and keeping track on how it's going doing them. This approach comes out of the belief that life comes down to thinking up good things to do and getting them done. And shutting the hell up.

