

Hopelessness in the Counter-transference

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Psychologists experience varied deep feelings in reaction to working with their patients – love, frustration, envy, jealousy, sadness. If we are attuned and engaged, the entire range of human emotions will flood over us. This column explores a specific and most difficult counter-transference emotion – hopelessness – using one recent case example.

I currently have two patients who are actively suicidal, having lost all meaning in their love and work lives. Lately I have noticed myself feeling more hopelessness in reaction to them. But there's another patient who has recently elicited this feeling in me even more deeply. He has descended into a hopelessness of a different nature. The loss that catalyzed it is more subtle – not a loss of job, of health, or of love, but the loss of control over another person in whom he had invested a great deal of his identity.

This patient, Thomas, has been almost solely in charge of rearing his granddaughter, Rachel. Her parents have such a laissez-faire attitude that he has stepped in increasingly, to teach her about life. His involvement began at her birth, and she recently turned sixteen. Thomas is a devout Catholic, and so his influence on Rachel has included exposing her to the various aspects of that religious tradition, including arranging for her baptism, her first communion, and her confirmation. He also attended Sunday mass with her whenever his circumstances allowed. Thomas also introduced her to every cultural experience imaginable, from the Getty Villa to the Nisei Japanese Festival, from concerts at the Hollywood Bowl to the Brewery Art Walk.

Just this last summer, Thomas was a chaperone for World Youth Day in Madrid, and Rachel was one of twenty local students under his care. The journey proved a grave disappointment for him. Rachel was openly oppositional and defiant. She completely renounced her faith, describing the priests as believing in an outdated myth. She flouted the dress code required at sacred sites. Beginning last fall, her parents allowed her to drop out of regular school and instead instituted a bare-bones type of home schooling. Rachel has, in fact, rejected formal education, has no plans to go to college, and her final career goal is to work as a Bartender. She is already adorned with the tattoos and piercings her parents vowed they would never permit till she turned eighteen.

For sixteen years, Thomas has striven to shape Rachel into a responsible, well-cultured, and spiritual young woman. According to him, he has “utterly failed” in that quest. He returned from the summer trip severely depressed. Because this “project” – Rachel's upbringing – had become central to his life, he reacted with extreme hopelessness. He viewed it not only as losing her to the worst elements of contemporary culture but as evidence of his own failure as a person. We had already been working on Thomas's identification as a “failure” in his life. He was a technical writer rather than the novelist he had striven to be; he'd struggled with a loveless marriage; he felt he'd neglected his own children when they were young because of his career.

Perhaps it was the suicidality of my other two patients, perhaps it was the intensity of Thomas's reaction, but I found myself mired in a pit of hopelessness with Thomas for weeks. Approaching 70, his other "projects" in self-styled ruins, Thomas viewed his ultimate lack of influence over Rachel as a near-lethal failure, leaving him little to live for.

As if a lens were slowly twisting back to a wider angle, the hopelessness began to fade into a broader landscape – quickly for me, more slowly for him – as we were gradually able to dismantle the organizational system of his personality that he'd come to label as "failure." Thomas actually had many successes – deep friendships, published works, the esteem of colleagues and students, an intact and close extended family, and more. Ironically, our acute despair served as a catalyst for the ultimate breakdown of this "failure complex."

Thomas is now involved in mourning his loss of influence over Rachel – and the loss of the woman he thought she could be. He is learning to keep on loving her as much as he always has, even though many of her choices and values are at odds with his own. He is beginning to explore his own narcissistic need to control her. He is rebuilding other, more meaningful and positive ways to view his life. And I, in close attunement with him, feel my own counter-transference turning towards hope.