

# **Psychotherapy of Relational Withdrawal: Perspectives from a Client and Therapist**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents a unique form of psychotherapy research. Rather than using a parametric research design involving several participants, the single-person research format presented here makes use of three significant components: a verbatim transcript of a recorded psychotherapy session; a detailed description of the client's internal experience during and after the psychotherapy session; and the psychotherapist's reflections on what he was feeling and thinking. Additionally, this article describes how to engage in an in-depth psychotherapy for the client who is emotionally sequestered and relationally withdrawn. It emphasizes how relationally withdrawn clients have a particular need for a sensitive psychotherapist who is responsive to their fear laden and non-verbal affect states—a state of being that may be present but often overlooked in a verbal psychotherapy.

## **Keywords**

Psychotherapy research, single-person research, relational withdrawal, schizoid process, relational psychotherapy, integrative psychotherapy, sequestered self

## **Christine's Preface**

I am writing this article to share my therapeutic experience so that we, as professional psychotherapists, can refine our methods for clients who are silent about their internal process; I am referring to people who engage in a schizoid process by withdrawing from interpersonal contact, who are sequestered in an inner world of loneliness.

I have always felt a sense of aloneness deep inside. Even though I was surrounded by people, I felt empty, lost, and alone. From the outside, no one ever suspected that I always felt a vast distance between me and other people. My efforts to form some semblance of a social life focused on doing what I thought was expected of me. I masked the intensity of my emotions, a process that was exhausting me. So, I regularly felt like withdrawing, isolating myself, just to rest. But in those moments, I missed interpersonal contact; I lived a real paradox. For me, relating to others was either too intense and invasive, or not enough and boring. This inner conflict caused me to suffer. I was frequently overcome with shame and struggled with harsh criticism of myself, as if I was the one who didn't know how to relate to others. And that was true! I didn't know how to communicate my internal turmoil. But what I hadn't realized was that my internal struggle was an attempt to restore my integrity, damaged by the failure of the significant people in my early environment to respond to my needs.

I often tried to gain some relief from this emotional paradox during my psychotherapy. But talking didn't help. I masked my vulnerability with words. Thinking about myself was easy, much easier than truly feeling my internal sensations. Therefore, I talked about myself, often in a socially-appropriate first-person voice, but inside it was as if I were talking about someone else. I was internally split off from my own liveliness.

In my previous psychotherapy sessions with Richard during a series of five-day professional workshops, I tried to accept his invitations to create real interpersonal contact. Sometimes I was able to have an authentic connection with him. But most of the time my internal sense of fear was stronger; I held back from being fully present. Moreover, my on-

going therapist “fell into the trap” of accepting my false social-self because what I showed them was just a façade, far from who I really am.

When I started this particular workshop, I had no idea that I would work on my tendency to withdraw from intimate interpersonal contact. I'd been stimulated when reading Richard's book *Withdrawal, Silence, Loneliness* (2023) and I was excited by the opportunity to work with him. However, I was unaware that I was about to uncover a wounded, silent, lonely, curled-up part of myself.

The following verbatim transcript is interspersed with several descriptions of my internal experience and Richard's comments on the therapeutic process. In providing this unique form of research, we hope to provide our colleagues with a greater understanding of the importance of therapeutically focusing on the client's withdrawal into silence and their struggle with loneliness.

The psychotherapy with the sequestered self does not involve talking, thought or explanations, or any focus on behaviors. Rather the psychotherapy is focused on the client's internal body experience and dormant affect; a quality of interpersonal contact that heals early traumas. In the psychotherapy of the schizoid process words are of little importance, the quality of the relationship is central. It is the rhythm and the texture of the voice that guide the patient to discover his hidden place, to once again feel their dormant affects, and to “bring my vital self into the world.” The vulnerable, ashamed, and lonely part of the patient experiences the harmonious respect of their boundaries through affect and rhythmic attunement, validation, and the unconditional acceptance. The following describes my personal journey into the psychotherapy of the schizoid process.

## Richard's Preface

This article presents a unique form of psychotherapy research. Rather than using a parametric research design involving several participants, the single-person research format presented here makes use of three significant components: a verbatim transcript of a recorded psychotherapy session; a detailed description of the client's internal experience during and after the psychotherapy session; and the psychotherapist's reflections on what he was feeling and thinking. When we assemble a significant number of single-person research reports we will have the further information to distinguish what constitutes an effective or ineffective psychotherapy for psychotherapy clients who are lonely, silent about their internal experience, and who self-stabilize by relying on relational withdrawal.<sup>1</sup>

This article also provides an example of psychotherapy with a client who engages in relational withdrawal. The one-hour psychotherapy session occurred in a 5-day psychotherapy workshop for professional psychotherapists. The workshop includes teaching about psychotherapy theory and methods, demonstration of the methods with participants, and an exploration of what is effective and what is ineffective in the psychotherapy. Christine, the client in this verbatim transcript, has attended several previous workshops.

## Session Transcript

The setting for this series of five-day residential professional training workshops is in a rural retreat center in France. The room is spacious, with 24 participants sitting in a circle. Christine chooses to sit on a large mattress in the center of the room, just in front of Richard's chair.

R: *[with a soft voice]* So what did you have in mind when you sat down here?

C: *[with a cheerful voice]* What came to my mind was my very first marathon with you, and the first words I said when we were doing the round were: “I don't have the words.” *[laughing]*

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<sup>1</sup> For two other client reports, see chapters 14 and 15 in *Withdrawal, Silence, Loneliness: Psychotherapy of the Schizoid Process* (Erskine, 2023).

And... I have your book in mind that I am reading now, and I was wondering whether this time I would sort of be taking refuge in silence or whether I would be in another place.

*[6 seconds silence]*

*R: During this pause I am wondering if Christine is describing age regression to a preverbal level or if she is indicating that she withdraws to an inner place without words. Or both. I want her to feel secure in our relationship so that she can explore her inner world. I realize that she has attended other workshops in which she has alluded to using withdrawal to manage interpersonal relationships. Perhaps our relationship is sufficiently secure that this may be a good time for her to fully experience her private place with someone who is protectively present.*

R: *[with a softer voice]* What if we made it OK to take refuge in silence? And that I just accompany you... without... interfering? *[9 seconds silence]* You just close your eyes. And let's see if you can go... to that private place. And I am going to stay right here. I am not ... doing anything fast or move to you, but I am going to keep my eye on you and listen. Even if you are silent, I'll listen.

*[12 seconds silence]*

*R: I know from past experience with clients who engage in relational withdrawal that patience and tenderness are essential in providing the security that is necessary to appreciate and explore their inner world. Many clients who rely on relational withdrawal have lost touch with their own emotional rhythm. I want to provide a secure relationship that allows them to process their internal affect at their natural pace. This often requires "pregnant pauses" so that the client's affect-laden experiences can be expressed and integrated.*

C: *[with sadness in her voice]* I am hearing you from far away.

*C: My sensations change. My metabolism slows down: I breathe more slowly; my chest seems lighter. The silence in the room seems very present. I go inside of myself. Richard's voice now seems like it's far away. I barely hear him. I am withdrawing, but I don't know why.*

R: Yes, I am breathing, and move, and scratch a little bit, but I am listening to you, so there is no rush. *[6 seconds silence]* You can take all the time you need.

*R: I alert Christine that I might be rustling about. I don't want to startle her or distract her from her private place, so I give her a warning that I may make some sounds. It seems essential that I adjust myself to her natural rhythm.*

*[5 seconds silence]*

*C: The urge I feel in my body vanishes when I get permission to slow down. I no longer need to adapt or to submit myself to the rhythm of the world. Softness in Richard's voice pushes me to relax. As my defenses dissolve, I feel vulnerable, but I don't want to. A part of me tries to resist, but I need so much calm.*

C: *[with more energy in her voice]* I feel as if I'm in space, but there is no planet. And the space is thick.

*C: This silence becomes a friend, an envelope, a protection. I feel contained, safe, far from the outside world. Nothing seems important anymore. There is only me and Richard's distant voice. I sense my skin and my breathing. It is a relief to be only with myself without worrying about anything else.*

*[2 seconds silence]*

R: Just go ahead! Go into your space.

C: I am moving my arms. I am playing with that thick texture. I am playing all alone.

*C: Because nothing else but me exists at this point, I distract myself with my own body. It's funny. I feel free. This is an unusual feeling.*

*[2 seconds silence]*

R: *[with a sad voice]* All ... alone...

*R: I repeat her words "all alone" and emphasize the sadness that I think her words convey. I do not want to make any explanation or ask any question that may distract her from her internal experience.*

*[19 seconds silence]*

C: *[with sadness]* There are no living beings around me. I don't even know they exist.

C: *Now, it gets uncomfortable. The loneliness that used to be pleasant is becoming unpleasant. I'm missing something, but I don't know what it is yet, so I prefer to stay alone. It is safer.*

R: *It seems important that Christine stay in her private place long enough to appreciate the functions of being sequestered. The relational withdrawal often provides a comfortable hiding place away from other peoples' potential invasion; it provides a pseudo sense of security. Relational withdrawal also provides a familiar lonely place—a place of desire for the other person's sensitive connection, yet simultaneously there is a fearful predictability that something will go wrong in the interpersonal contact, just as it has occurred in the past.*

R: *[in a higher tone]* Perhaps it is important... to have no one around.

*[11 seconds silence]*

C: Yes and no.

C: *The uncomfortable part of me grows. I feel split in two parts: one is seeking contact with others, and the other is frightened by them.*

R: *I am remembering Harry Guntrip's descriptive comment about how some clients are driven into hiding out of fear, and driven into personal contact out of loneliness. (Hazell, 1994, p. 164). This is the schizoid compromise: seeking contact with others and at the same time being frightened by them.*

*[15 seconds silence]*

R: *[with a low voice]* But it is so important to have a safe place.

R: *With this comment, I am validating the importance of her safe place.*

*[4 seconds silence]*

C: Calm.

*[8 seconds silence]*

R: Safe... calm.

*[6 seconds silence]*

C: *[with a softer voice]* You say "safe" but I can't even feel the fear or the danger even though I know they are there.

C: *Richard's words help me to clarify that it is fear that I am feeling. Emotions are stuck in my head, and I can't feel them in my body. I'm cut off. I have the impression that there's something wrong with me, that I should experience things differently. My situation now seems weird to me.*

R: *[in a low, barely audible voice]* How wonderful to have a place where you don't have to feel the fear, the danger. Just to float in thick space. Must be wonderful to have such a place.

R: *I am describing what I imagine a function of the withdrawal to be: a place without fear of danger.*

*[6 seconds silence]*

C: *[with a tremulous voice]* I feel touched that you said this, that you are joining me in there. I always had the impression that I had to choose to be there or on Earth with others... pretending. *[14 seconds silence]* I did not know that I had the right.

C: *I am close to crying. At this moment I start feeling ashamed, Richard makes it OK to feel that way. I feel like I am allowed to be who I really am. I start thinking that maybe I don't need to hide away from the world, that someone, at least Richard, wants to contact my genuine self, but I am still scared.*

R: I will accompany you. *[6 seconds silence]* But I don't want to invade your place.

C: I would like to invite you and to show you the somersaults I am doing in space. But I have the impression that if you are there, I won't be able to do it anymore.

C: *The presence of another freezes me. I can't be myself in the presence of someone else. I'm again cut into two parts, and it is painful.*

R: *[with a gentle and cheerful voice]* Yeah, so I want to sit right here, and listen to your description, and I will imagine it all with you.

R: *It seems essential that I not invade her private place, but that I am a witness to her sensations, affect, and images.*

[6 seconds silence]

C: [with a more energetic voice] So I am doing the starfish turning on itself... I am stretching... [voice gets sad] But it ends up being boring. I feel something is missing.

R: But it is so important in the beginning to amuse yourself... By stretching. [14 seconds silence]

R: *My words are meant to be validating of her experience because I am concerned that she may define her sensations as "something is wrong with me."*

C: Boring.

[20 seconds silence]

C: [her shoulders retract, with a sad voice] It is pulling in my belly... [voice gets lower, almost whispering] I have the impression that I am struggling with sadness.

C: *The top of my body stiffens. I stop moving. My breathing gets shorter. I can't think anymore. Sensations get more present, but I don't want them to.*

[12 seconds silence]

R: [with a deeper and steady voice] But the sadness is there. The loneliness. That you called boredom.

R: *I emphasize the sadness and loneliness that she previously said. I want her to feel the full sense of her sadness and loneliness and not transpose it to boredom. I reflect on Selma Fraiberg's (1983) description of how children will transpose their affect when a particular feeling does not elicit a contactful response from significant other, such as transposing anger to fear or loneliness to boredom.*

[22 seconds silence]

C: [starts crying] Now I don't find it so entertaining. I have the impression that I have no choice.

R: [with a low and soft voice] No choice... [11 seconds silence] No choice... [9 seconds silence] But so important to have your private place.

R: *Again I am validating her phenomenological experience to lessen the likelihood that she will criticize herself.*

C: [with a higher voice] And the more you are saying this, the more I have the impression that I have no choice.

C: *I feel like a prisoner to myself. I feel a constraint, an impediment that I generate within myself, an impossibility of living. I feel in contact with Richard, but it's dangerous. Now it is more a conflict than a split. By now, both needs are available: withdrawal and contact.*

R: [a little more animation in the voice] Perhaps no choice. Just the need to escape to a private place... A quiet place.

R: *With my comment I want to validate the significance of her private, quiet place.*

[14 seconds silence]

C: [with a relaxed voice] The more you say this, the more I have the impression that the Earth is coming closer.

C: *By accepting my withdrawal, Richard shows me that I have the right to feel what I feel. He's not intruding. I have the right to refuse contact, and this is what allows me to consider it. He respects me, my needs and my rhythm. Now I feel in contact with him, but this time I feel safe. It's not what I expected; I expected to be forced. He's waiting for me. He's right there, available to me.*

[7 seconds silence]

R: It is so important to have a place to withdraw.

C: [my upper body relaxes a little] Yes.

R: Maybe nobody knows how important it is.

C: [answers quickly] You know... You know: I've read about it. And I can feel it now. And it is strange for me to feel normal in this.

R: [speaks more softly barely audible] Maybe there is a deeper hiding place... [8 seconds silence] When the external world gets too bad... [19 seconds silence]

R: *My comment is based on my wondering if there is a deeper more sequestered place that she might retreat to, if her private place is threatened. Previous clients have talked*

about various levels of withdrawal depending on how critical or invasive they experienced the other person.

C: [crying]

R: A place to escape criticism.

R: *I am again validating the significance of hiding to escape criticism. I made this comment about escaping criticism because I had the thought that she may be struggling with internal criticism—criticism that is either self-generated or criticism from significant others (Erskine, 2020).*

[26 seconds silence]

C: [whispering, as if it were difficult to speak] Yes, it is inside of me, in a tiny place, [even softer whisper], tiny as a bean.

C: *Inside me, I can see a hiding place. An authentic, secret, and precious place. I feel vulnerable, dependent, like a bean in Richard's hand: at his mercy. But this time, it doesn't scare me: it feels good to depend. I like feeling carried, but the more I feel dependent on Richard, the more I feel sad. Experiencing Richard's presence leads me to a place of abandonment inside myself. While feeling in contact with him, I sense more the relational emptiness and the absence within me.*

R: Well, I will stay right here with you. Right here, if you go to this little, tiny place.

C: *I have always believed that by being myself, I would lose others' presence. That's why I am pretending to be someone I am not with people. Richard accepts that I'm scared. He stands here, and I don't feel alone in my cave because he's there waiting for me outside. I feel I can be me without threat. I have the feeling that his presence is unconditional, and I feel accepted. Silence and slowness have something to do with this. By slowing down, Richard points out that I need to calm down my rhythm. I realize that my everyday rhythm is not my biological rhythm. To live in a hurry helps me from feeling this loneliness inside.*

R: *My words "I will stay right here with you" are intended to affirm to her the security in our relationship.*

[15 seconds silence]

C: [her back bends over] [whispering] Are you sure?

C: *It's new and strange for me to feel unconditionally accepted. I want to believe that I can trust that presence. That nothing bad will happen to my feelings. But this is not what I am used to. I expect to be injured while making contact. Is it safer to believe it is dangerous?*

R: Yeah but take your time. I am in no rush.

[29 seconds silence]

C: [seems to lose her balance] I need to lay down.

R: Of course...

C: [lays down in fetal position]

R: [with a lot of air in his voice] I am going to move to get a pillow. [puts a pillow under Christine's head] I am going to watch over you to make sure that nobody interferes with your private place... [37 seconds silence]

R: I am still here...

C: *I feel like I'm fainting. My head spins a little. My body feels as heavy as a stone. I need to lie down, rest, and make it stop. I want to forget everything. I want to disappear from myself.*

*While I am vanishing, I can feel Richard standing here. He is the light of a lighthouse that I see through the fog. He seems far away, but this is the closest I can stand. He doesn't go beyond the distance I need, staying in the distance, but the more he respects that, the more I feel an emptiness. That is the lack of an attuned presence within me. I start feeling loneliness and isolation thanks to him, who makes me experience his listening, respect, and attuned presence.*

R: *I am calm and patient, with no plan or desire for her to be different; I just want to meet her in her experience.*

C: [continues to arch, begins to tremble, crying] I would like to go inside of myself until it hurts.

C: *I feel rejection towards myself. I am willing to destroy not who I am, but the feeling of existing. I feel lonely. I feel stunted, pulled inside myself. My body is hard as a stone. My shoulders are tense.*

R: *[with a reassuring, higher-pitched voice, as if calming a child] Ok... I listen to that... [16 seconds silence] That must seem much better than all the conflicts outside. All those conflicts outside that hurt. So, it must seem so wonderful to go inside. [with a soft voice] I can sense you crying. [1 minute silence]*

R: *I am sitting quietly and watching over her, much like I did when my children were sick with a fever. I can wait and respond to her when she is ready.*

C: *[starts shaking]*

C: *This shaking is the only clue of any life inside of me. My muscles tell me I am living because I don't feel it.*

R: *I am right here with you, listening to you. Even if you are silent, I am listening because there is a big story in there. A story that may not have words. [46 seconds silence]*

R: *In the last couple of minutes, I am using therapeutic description, statements that I hope describe her non-verbalized experience. I am not inquiring about her inner process because clients who are sequestered in their private place may experience inquiry as an invasion. I make non-definitive statements, in a tentative voice, and I watch her bodily reaction. When I said "all those conflicts outside that hurt... it must seem so wonderful to go inside" and "there is a big story," I am watching for muscle tension and small movements in her body. With each of these therapeutic descriptions she nodded her head. That head nod signaled to me that I was attuned to her experience.*

C: *[back, legs, and arms seem to relax gradually]*

R: *[with a very low and soft voice] I am wondering if it gets lonely in there... [higher-pitched voice] Protective, maybe lonely!*

*[8 seconds silence]*

C: *But it is calm.*

C: *The fear is gone. It leaves behind a sense of calm, as if I was awaking.*

R: *Oh, it is so important, calm... [18 seconds silence] so important to have a private place that is calm.*

R: *My intention is to acknowledge and validate the importance of her calm, private place. My commitment is to remain calm and attuned to her, to observe the subtle movements in her body, and to sense the various changes in her affect.*

*[24 seconds silence]*

C: *It's different now. I am feeling wrapped up, and it is pleasant.*

C: *I realize that Richard's words are the same as earlier, but it doesn't sound the same. Calm is no longer only inside my hiding place. It's in my whole body. I can feel my whole body now.*

R: *[very slowly] Should I?*

R: *At this moment I considered reaching out and gently touching Christine with my hand. I wanted to pair her "pleasant" feeling with comforting physical contact. I made a gesture toward her with my hand as I said "Should I?" It seemed to me that she did not recognize my gesture, therefore I assumed I had no invitation to approach her private space.*

C: *As if your arms were around me. As if I were in your hand, tiny as a bean.*

C: *I picture myself as a little bean, on Richard's palm, laying down here, vulnerable. I feel his temperature, his mellowness.*

R: *[with a very low and soft voice] Safe from any hurts, safe from any criticisms...*

C: *I finally feel secure. I can be held with no threat. I feel relaxed.*

*[2 minutes and 20 seconds silence]*

R: *My calm presence seems so important during these couple of minutes. I want to create an atmosphere in which she feels secure and completely accepted. I have no goal except to be fully present with her. I watch for the little movements that may tell a non-verbal story.*

C: *[left pinky finger starts moving]*

R: *[whispering]* Those fingers of your left hand tell us a story. *[13 seconds silence]* Pinky finger is telling us a story.

C: I think he is seeking something.

C: *My pinky finger is moving by itself. It's fun to move it even though I have no control over this.*

R: *[approving voice]* Mmm.

C: *Richard moves to sit next to me on the floor. Richard gently touches my pinky finger with his forefinger, moves his finger away, and touches my finger again. I grab Richard's finger. I then cry much harder, and finally I just sob with my whole body. Richard again touches my finger with his finger. He touches me gently, and then moves his finger away. It is important that he doesn't push. I get an invitation; therefore, I feel allowed to refuse, but I don't. Then he touches me again, with his fingertip, leaving it to me to answer, which I do. Suddenly, I realize how much I need this contact and how much I miss it. I've been avoiding this until now. Feeling his skin and warmth on my skin makes me feel whole, as if I have the right to be in this world. It's as if the pieces of me were sticking back together.*

*[1 minute 18 seconds silence]*

R: *[almost inaudible]* I hear you crying.

*[15 seconds silence]*

C: *[sobbing]*

R: Crying all alone.

C: *[cries harder, starts shaking]*

C: *This is more than I can stand. My muscles are shaking.*

*[1 minute 13 seconds]*

R: *I attentively and patiently watch over her. I am cautious about prematurely comforting her. I do not want to distract her from her intense emotional experience. I stay present with her as she shakes and sobs because I know that this therapeutically supported, cathartic experience will be healing.*

C: *[catches her breath]*

C: *I just climbed something, I came across, down to the other side. Something inside of me gave out: like an ending journey within my dark inside. My body has experienced those turbulences in order to integrate them. I just went through a painful memory and now I realize that it is over, that it is not occurring anymore. It is more than a relief: it is a digestion. It doesn't go out, it stays in but with a different shape.*

R: Mmm *[approval]*. *[slowly]* Yeah, your body wants to cry.

*[2 minutes 35 seconds]*

C: *[Christine pulls her hand grasped to Richard's finger to make it touch her forehead.]*

C: *I need to feel more of this contact, and I need it on my face. It calms the loneliness inside. My muscles relax, my breathing gets calm. My internal sensation begins to feel pleasant again.*

R: *[with an airy and soft voice]* A lot of emotions inside.

*[2 minutes 51 seconds]*

R: *[gets a chair and sits down without letting go of my hand]*

C: *I cling to his finger. It's as if I'm breathing through my hand, which is in contact with Richard's hand. My whole world is in this contact. I don't think about anything. I don't feel anything. Only this skin-to-skin contact exists for me.*

R: *[barely audible]* It's safe. You can come back in the world now. In the world of you and me.

C: *Richard brings me back to the present. I'd forgotten that I was here, in this workshop, surrounded by these people, and that it should end. But it doesn't scare me. His presence has infused into me. I can come back into contact with others now that I feel safe. It's as if a new envelope protects me without preventing me from opening up to others.*

*[41 seconds silence]*

C: *[speaking as a child]* I know that I have to let you go but I don't want to!



C: *I realize what's happening, and that the session has to end. It's not painful to contemplate separation, but I feel so good that I don't want it to end. I feel a deep attachment to Richard. As I go back to the surface, I realize how good it feels to be in this body and to be me. Now I have value, I feel worthy. I feel like laughing and having fun. I feel energy flowing through me. My body is still slow, but I feel full of life.*

R: *[with a soft voice, almost inaudible but higher pitched].* It's ok! No rush! *[11 seconds silence]*  
I am still listening to you, I am still there.

*[10 seconds silence]*

C: *[starts stretching]*

R: Yeah have a stretch... Stretch your back. Stretch your back; it got tense a little while. Stretch your other arm.

C: *My body isn't awake enough for the amount of energy flowing through it. I need to wake up every part of my body. I need to feel every muscle and to come out of the numbness.*

*[Christine sighs with relief.]*  
*[1 minute 50 seconds silence]*

R: *[whispers approvingly]* Mmm... Can you do it that loud?

C: *[blowing loudly]*

C: *Focusing on my sensations and on my body continues to bring me back inside myself.*  
*[22 seconds silence]*

R: *[with a low voice, whispering]* To wiggle and stretch. Come back to this world.  
*[36 seconds silence]*

C: *[blowing, breathing more slowly]*

C: *I feel much more air in my lungs. My chest seems bigger. I'm getting back the air I missed earlier.*

C: *[breathes loudly but speaks]* I can feel the mattress. *[7 seconds silence]* I am cold. *[6 seconds silence]* I can feel the light. *[6 seconds silence]* *[speaks louder]* I can hear my breathing. *[17 seconds silence]* I have the impression that I feel my heartbeat again. *[11 seconds silence]* I am not so sure that I feel like totally coming back. *[7 seconds silence]* There are beautiful things here, this makes me want to come back.

C: *I'm used to my hiding place. I know I'm safe in here. The outside world seems interesting but also new and worrying.*

R: *[barely audible]* This is so important to have a quiet place. A place to hide. A place to re-nourish.  
*[2 minutes silence]*

C: *[breathing loudly and peacefully]*

C: *[opening her eyes]*

C: *The energy inside of me is too intense to keep my eyes closed. I need to see the light, and to move again. I need to interact with my surroundings. I feel joy. Richard doesn't rush me. He follows my rhythm to come back. I feel an invitation, with no pressure.*

R: *[looking at C with concern]*

C: *[with energy and sadness]* I feel like nobody has ever looked at me like you are doing now.  
C: *I thought I was alone, but when I see Richard's concern, I realize that I'm not. I thought I was invisible in my hiding place, but I realize I'm not: he can see me. I feel important, worthy of interest. Richard's solicitude helps me to respect myself, to take care of myself, to stop adapting, and to be myself.*

R: Mmm *[approval]*... Perhaps... I am looking to really see you, to see your experience.

C: *[louder and quicker than before]* Without being intrusive.

R: I hope.

C: You are here, and I am there.

C: *At no time did I feel forced, obliged, or adapted. I was able to let myself listen to my body's needs, and I felt accepted in doing so. Paradoxically, being accepted at a distance makes me want to get closer. I feel like a scared animal, but Richard now*

*seems totally harmless. I accept being approached. I now feel uniquely me, and therefore in existence.*

*[18 seconds silence]*

R: *[with a very soft voice]* And even when I touched you, I wanted it to be an invitation.

C: It was perfect.

## **Richard's Postscript**

Throughout my years in practice, I have worked with several clients who use relational withdrawal as a way to self-stabilize (Erskine, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e). These clients have a particular need for a sensitive responsiveness to their fear-laden affect state—a state that is so dominant in the schizoid process and often related to nonverbal experiences. They also need a psychotherapist who is exquisitely attuned to their developmental level of functioning, especially to what Daniel Stern (1985) described in his writings as the emerging self, the core self, and the intersubjective self—those levels of developmental functioning that are pre-language. In fact, many clients who use relational-withdrawal as an attempt to self-stabilize, in the presence of intense relationships, regress to pre-linguistic developmental functioning as a safety zone (Guntrip, 1968). Such clients require the psychotherapist's consistent attunement to their affective state, a sense of meeting their sadness with compassion, their fear with security, and their anger with a sense of being taken seriously in the expression of that anger.

Several clients have taught me about the importance of attuning to the client's affect and validating their subjective experience. When our psychotherapy focuses on the client's internal process, we are able to acknowledge and validate the psychological void that the withdrawn client experiences internally. What becomes evident in a phenomenologically focused psychotherapy is the sequestered, hidden, encapsulated affects of the client's self. With relationally withdrawn individuals, the affects of terror and rage have often never found their way into verbal dialogue with another person. We know from treating trauma victims that trauma remains traumatic in the person's life because of the failure of a healing relationship. Many people have traumatic experiences but do not remain traumatized because someone was there in a healing, supportive, and clarifying way that allowed the trauma to be integrated within the individual's experience (Erskine, 1993). So too for clients who rely on relational-withdrawal; they need a supportive and validating other who is present and patient, without any plan that they change their behavior.

For clients who engage in relational withdrawal, the early relational failures are often the result of cumulative neglect—the repeated misattunements, disparaging comments, capricious punishments, and rejections of the child's relational needs—like grains of sand that pile up until they form a dune. The accumulation of missed attunements and missed connections creates the conditions wherein the child hides more and more in his own sequestered world while adjusting his behavior to provide what the other demands.

Interpersonal connections are a threat to the sense of self for clients engaging in relational withdrawal. They experience a great fear of contact; for such individuals, a genuine relationship seems dangerous. Metaphorically there is a "split" in a person's sense of self that occurs when the child's natural organismic functioning is repressed and denied—split off—and they adapt the social façade required by the grown-ups around him. The adaptive, social façade becomes "me," and the natural, fundamentally human part becomes "not me." What is natural is lost and disregarded so intensely that the person experiences no other way of being in the world. My psychotherapeutic experience has led me to believe that a patient, consistent, respectful, and attuned therapeutic relationship allows those hidden aspects that were made "not me" to become "me." Such a relationship allows the person to find out for themselves what is natural for them.

## Christine's Postscript

I have always felt like I had a broken radar; I was unable to find a sense of direction to my true self. My internal experience was to secure safety in distancing myself from others because of the fear of invasion. I tried to make my own subjectivity disappear. I became passively willing to adapt my behavior to give others the illusion that I was connected with them. My capacity for self-definition surrendered to compliance and fawning in order to have some semblance of contact with people. The result was that I lost a sense of who I was in relationships with others. It was as though my center of gravity shifted away from me; it left me feeling an emotional numbness, almost depersonalization.

In the psychotherapy described above, Richard's absolute attunement to my unexpressed affect, moments of patient silence, and the absence of his making any demands was instrumental in removing any threat of invasion of my privacy. Along this process, my internal experience was that I could be myself, feel my mix of feelings, have my own rhythm, and establish my own balance between distance and interpersonal contact. I sensed that he provided exactly what I needed in order to feel secure. I became acutely aware of the pain I felt when I held myself in isolation. I experienced an unaware longing for interpersonal contact and explored what I could feel if I was safe with another person.

In choosing to engage in a developmentally based, relationally focused psychotherapy, the goal I set was to allow myself to be fully in the presence of an intimate other. My description of this psychotherapy process may not seem significant to some readers, but the hour of therapy that I have just described has fundamentally changed my life. Richard understood and accepted my predisposition to withdraw from interpersonal contact. He was aware that somewhere within me there was a dormant desire for intimate connection. He resonated with both my urge to withdraw into a safe hiding place as well as my needs for person-to-person relating.

Interestingly, this piece of therapy has left me with a sense of calmness in my body, while it has also significantly diminished my sense of shame. It is a privilege to share my therapeutic journey with you.

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