

Finding Home: My Journey as an Integrative Psychotherapist

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Abstract

Our early experiences have a strong influence on who we become as therapists and how we develop a personal philosophy about the meaning of our work. In this keynote, the author discusses how a history of “lost” childhood homes, and the absence of a secure base, impacted her personal and professional growth and the creation of a world view about the necessity of a sense of “home” in order for deep healing and integration to occur. The importance of helping clients find “home” within themselves, and in their world, is also explored.

This article is an adaptation of a keynote originally written and delivered in 2019.

Keywords

Script, procedural memory, relational needs, relational failure, secure base, home

When I received the email inviting me to deliver today’s keynote, it was suggested that my words be “inspirational to a younger audience,” and that I include anything I thought would be “important to say to young therapists.” And with that, I had to accept that the wrinkles I see in the mirror are indeed mine. I’m not a young therapist anymore. As the last of 12 grandchildren, spanning 35 years from oldest to youngest, I have always been the baby of the family; a position I fought mightily so I could be included with my big sister and older cousins in their many escapades and adventures.

When I was accepted into the New York training program at the Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy in 1982, I once again felt like the baby of the family. Coming from my work as a music therapist, the world of verbal psychotherapy was new to me. I looked up to the other therapists in the room, many of whom were indeed older than me. I wanted so much to be included and respected. I needed to prove myself. I remember an afternoon, early on in my training, when I volunteered to do a piece of live therapy work during afternoon supervision. I asked myself, “How hard could this be?” I’d been working with clients and graduate students for a few years now, and I’m a very verbal person, and I’d been watching so very closely how this was done. Richard watched me with his curious half smile. The “client,” another therapist in the program, laid out her issue and I so confidently instructed, “Now close your eyes and just go back to that time and place.” And suddenly, I was completely lost. It wasn’t so easy. I had a lot to learn.

Our lives often have a central theme which informs our narrative and our script, accompanied by a story told through procedural memories (Erskine, 2015). My narrative had long been about the search for a home and finding a way to heal from the many geographical relocations, disruptions, parental dysfunction, and interruptions that defined my childhood and adolescence. Under the watchful eyes of Richard Erskine and Rebecca Trautmann, and so many

colleagues and dear friends at the Institute, up to the final days of the Kent Professional Development Seminar in 2011, the cumulative trauma (Lourie, 1996) of so many relocations during critical developmental periods was finally seen, heard, understood, validated, and, I think, mostly healed. Sometimes we receive a huge gift—the opportunity to grow up the parts of ourselves that still need to grow up, and the chance to iron out the wrinkles and ruptures of the past. During my 29 years in the New York Training group, which then became the Kent Professional Development Seminar, along with the Old Chestnut Inn, and the Kent gardens, provided the dependable secure home base and accompanying relational needs (Erskine et al., 1999; Erskine, 2019) I needed to finish “growing up” and embark upon and succeed in my professional career, and the support required to begin a much-needed long term, in-depth psychotherapy. With this abundance of emotional support and educational guidance, I earned my clinical TA certification, became a founding member of IIPA, an IP Trainer/Supervisor, established my private practice, published a book with my dear friend and colleague Shelley Katsh, had a number of radio and TV appearances, was mentioned in national magazines and newspapers, birthed two daughters, married one off, wrote a few articles, and worked toward earning my certification as a Fellow in Guided Imagery and Music. I was a sponge. I was hungry for stability and security.

Because most of all, I needed to grieve—for the displaced, depressed, and lost little girl, and for all the times I lost myself and had to re-invent myself and adapt to others. I developed a solid social veneer of being mature beyond my years, of “having it all together.” A variety of defenses hid my deep-seated dependency and insecurity. My family marveled at my ability to adjust. I kept my rebellions, some of them severe, sometimes dangerous, in check. I learned how to fly under the radar and not make any trouble. I had few friends, mostly other loners and outsiders. The unwelcome arrival of severe cystic acne as a teenager further compounded my sense of isolation and discomfort, solidifying the development of my introverted nature—another well-kept secret even to this day. I literally wanted to hide from myself and others. I felt betrayed by and not even at home in my own body. It seemed that no matter how hard I tried, I just would never fit in. I was not one of the cool, beautiful, self-assured young women at college. When the legendary singer-songwriter Janis Ian recorded her most famous and iconic song “At Seventeen” in 1975, her song told my story. And I loved her for this.

I learned the truth at 17, that love was meant for beauty queens
and high school girls with clear skinned smiles...
And those of us with ravaged faces,
lacking in the social graces,
desperately remained at home, inventing lovers on the phone. (Ian, 1975)

Understanding early on the power of music and songs to tell our stories, it’s no wonder I was drawn to the field of music therapy as my first calling. Finally, later in life with the support of an extraordinary music and voice teacher, I’ve found the courage to write my own songs and not only rely on other songwriters to tell my story.

After a shaky and traumatic time as a music major in college, I began graduate school in 1976 to study music therapy. With defenses securely in place, I let everyone know that I was just fine. I didn’t really need many friends and I was able to handle large challenges all on my own—just like always. This included accelerated achievements in my music therapy career, where early on I held undergraduate and graduate teaching positions, supervisory positions, and became the President of a national music therapy association, all by the age of 30. And all that was fine. Except it wasn’t. I wasn’t ready but I hid it really, really well. But in the presence of Richard and Rebecca and caring colleagues and friends, in the midst of a marriage that was not going to withstand the needy, dependent little girl that lived inside me, I could no longer hide, because I just couldn’t contain my pain around those folks. The environment was just too provocative and

triggering. And thank goodness. I say with certainty that all the pain of my healing journey was worth every tear, and every tissue that mopped up those tears.

But even a good home has times of crisis and relational failure (Guistolise, 1996; O'Reilly-Knapp, 2016). The sudden and serious illness of a member of the Kent seminar created an unexpected emergency in our group that, over the course of about 18 months, eroded and fractured the relationships I had come to depend on so deeply. And, in retrospect, it seems that no one else anticipated the deep impact this trauma would have on the life of our group, as we attempted to manage the ripple effects and relational failures this had on every aspect of our time together including every meal, every group process session, every lecture, and even our "play" time together. As conflict, division, and disharmony infiltrated my safe space, I could feel parts of myself crumbling and regressing during our training weekends. In the difficult weeks after, I worked in therapy to regain a sense of integrity and solidity, only to return a couple of months later to another devastating training weekend. In my safe space where I had belonged and finally been one of the "cool girls," I was now an outsider. I much later came to understand this as a here-and-now, adult version of the subtle bullying I had experienced earlier in my life (Simmons, 2002).

One cold, crisp, and sunny Sunday morning in Kent, I reached the end of my ability to endure the internal pain over the loss of my "safe home." I didn't think I could stay for one more minute of the remaining few hours of the weekend, or ever come back again. My dear friend Marye O'Reilly-Knapp went over to Richard and said, "Carol needs you." Richard told me to put on my coat and he took me for a walk, his arm linked through mine. I could barely breathe or speak. I felt about as broken as I have ever felt in my life—a wordless despair that I was now losing another home, this most precious home that I had found all on my own, where I fit in and belonged. Where I thought I was loved and safe, at least up until now. We walked the property, around the beloved gardens and the pond. I don't even remember what Richard said to me. But I soaked up his "presence" (Erskine, 2011) and his infusion of caring and concern, the feel of his arm, as he pulled me along to keep up with his fast pace. I can still see his face gazing out in front of us, his calm smile, as he guided my steps. And most of all, I soaked in hope. Hope that I was not alone and that my despair had been seen. I stayed for the rest of that day. And I stayed until our very last day at the Old Chestnut Inn in May 2011. Cuttings from those gardens now live on in the gardens surrounding my house; a house I have lived in now for 28 years. Also from Kent, a small African basket lives on my office shelf, and a beautiful woolen blanket that my clients sometimes wrap around themselves lies across my office couch. I consider these to be mementos from the home I grew up in.

But more important than physical spaces is the sense of home within myself. The release of old "script driven responses" and patterns (Erskine et al., 1999) has led to personal agency and a sense of control over where I can find home. I am home with my guitar, on my yoga mat, when I am sitting in my synagogue and praying, when I sing with my choir, and when I am with clients in my office. I am home with my husband and my children, and when I am holding my grandchild and experiencing the wonder of birth and the continuity of the generations. I am home with IP and most certainly with all of you, my beloved community filled with so many friends and colleagues. I can now be home with myself. And there is one more piece of healing that remains. My therapist and I call this last piece "bringing the baby home," a core piece of work that emerged from a series of intense dreams after the birth of my first granddaughter. To be continued.

So—thank you for allowing me to tell some of my story. By now you may be asking, what does this have to do with integrative psychotherapy, and the inspiration I've been asked to bring to you today?

Our clients come to us because in some way they've lost their home, either inside or outside, or they've lost their way home, or they've lost a part of their home. The death of a child, a spouse, a sibling, a parent, a marriage, child so wanted but never conceived, a breast. Grief about a chronic debilitating illness, or the fact that they will never be a grandparent. Or, they've

never really known the comfort of home, for they may have been living as a man or a woman in the wrong body or dealing with alcoholism, incest, or neglect. Sometimes homes have been violated, either literally or symbolically.

And what do we do for them? First, we provide hope. We provide sanctuary (Bloom, 1997). We provide asylum. We ask them to have faith that we will accompany them on their journey to find their way back home. We provide a home to do the hard work of therapy. One of the famous teachings of the esteemed Reverend Martin Luther King is that faith is “the idea of taking one step, even if you can’t see the whole stairway when you start” (Mirow, 1986). When Richard linked his arm in mine and walked me around the pond, I was blinded to the whole staircase. But I let him take me on the first step. And since I do believe that all things happen for a reason, I can look back now and understand that I probably needed that crisis to propel me to my next steps of healing on the staircase.

We are living in a time of crisis, when people are regularly displaced and forced from their homes because of violence, religious and political persecution, political beliefs, war, famine, drought, poverty, fire, and floods. There are families separated at the border and children in cages; our 2019 version of the Holocaust at the US border. I don’t think any world leader who believes that people leave their home voluntarily, even when in pursuit of a better life or to avoid violence and despair, truly understands the meaning of home, or the grief of leaving a homeland behind. And anyone who believes that we should not “welcome the stranger in our midst,” when they’ve lost their home, is deeply misguided, even cruel. When people step into our offices, it is often because they feel like a stranger in their own life, because of things that have happened to them and around them. And we must help them reclaim the lost, abandoned, or disowned parts of themselves that will bring them home. We must tolerate and absorb their “juxtaposition reactions” (Erskine et al., 1999, pp. 151–155) and all the defenses they throw at us as we offer our presence and a healing relationship (Erskine, 2015). Sometimes, we provide the first experiences of what it can possibly feel like to be at home. And in order to do this, we must be at home with ourselves and our work. It is essential that we ourselves, as IP therapists, must be integrated.

Just last week, a client who experienced incest as a child, years of deception and secrets about the true identity of her birth parents, and then a double mastectomy as a result of breast cancer, told me that she was finally, at long last, feeling comfortable in her own life and her own body. I asked her, “Do you feel at home?” And she responded, “I’m not quite there yet, but I’m definitely in the neighborhood.” I am so honored to be accompanying her on her journey home, and trust that she will tell me when she gets there.

But there is another home we must address, and soon. We are on a dangerous trajectory to destroy the earth. Donna Orange (2016) writes in her book *Climate Crisis, Psychoanalysis, and Radical Ethics*,

Having received extensive education and training, including mandatory personal analysis, to prepare us for our work, we have, I believe, also acquired responsibility to be leaders, moral if not scientific, in confronting the global crisis we are living. We possess the intellectual and communal resources to take on this responsibility. So far, however, we have been resoundingly silent. (Orange, 2016, p. xii)

And so I challenge myself, and all of you as well. Why are we so reluctant, as relational Integrative Psychotherapists, to discuss with our clients our relationship to the earth, to climate change, and to the humanitarian crises that exist all around us? Do we actually support a sort of narcissistic amnesia and avoidance by not bringing these issues into our offices for discussion? Is this the new taboo, replacing previous reluctance by therapists to discuss religion, sex, and money? I so deeply believe in integrative psychotherapy, and I deeply believe that we hold the most elegant, user-friendly techniques, methods, and philosophy to begin to confront the healing

so desperately needed in the world around us. We need to teach the world what we know how to do.

Being home in oneself requires integration. Music, yoga, meditation, Judaism, and relational integrative psychotherapy all integrate and ground me and, most of all, give me hope. I began playing guitar at age seven, and music has provided a nourishing home and been a constant emotional companion. The famed cellist Yo-Yo Ma has said, “Music actually was invented, as all of culture was invented—by us—to help us figure out who we are” (Kelly & Huizenga, 2018). We need music to nurture and sustain us, and to help us figure out the world and who we are. Music gives me hope.

“*Tikkun olam*” are the Hebrew words that mean “to heal the world.” This core principle of Judaism tells us that we have an obligation to perform acts of *tikkun olam* on a regular basis (My Jewish Learning, n.d.). Regardless of religious or spiritual orientation, we live in a time that is crying out for us to integrate *tikkun olam* into our daily lives, whether it is through our work with clients or our refusal to use one more plastic bag. And how do we repair the world? One small step at a time. A saying popularly attributed to Gandhi echoes this sentiment: “Whatever you do may seem insignificant, but it is most important that you do it.”

This is so important, so I’ll say it again: “Whatever you do may seem insignificant, but it is most important that you do it.”

I often ponder at the end of the day, “what did I do for that client? Did I help at all?” “How did I contribute to a better world today?” “Could I have done more?” only to be re-affirmed over and over again, as I witness the therapy process, of the importance of presence, empathy, listening, a smile, a shared tear. Even the year-round fresh flowers in my office hold significance. They tell my clients, “You matter. I create this space for you. I welcome you. You deserve to be in the presence of the beauty and bounty of the earth.” As one client told me, “I look forward to these flowers every week.” So I embrace *tikkun olam*, and I embrace the significance of even the smallest of gestures.

And still, we the healers can lose our hope from time to time. But Jewish tradition teaches us:

Do not be daunted
By the enormity
Of the world’s grief.
Do justly, now.
Walk humbly, now.

(Adaptation of *New International Version Bible*, 2011, Micah 6:8)

You are not obligated to complete the work,
But neither are you free to abandon it.
(*Pirkei Avot*, n.d., 2:16)

Our responsibility lives in the here-and-now and in our daily interactions with others—even strangers. A dear departed yoga teacher of mine once instructed, “Take out into the world what you do on your mat.” And what does that mean? Yoga teaches us strength, resilience, discipline, and flexibility so we can bring that to others. We create space in our bodies and spirit because the more space we create in ourselves, the more space for we have for others. We learn how to breathe deeply through binds, twists, and exertion—a metaphor for the twists and turns and binds and exertion of daily life. We learn how to open our hearts. And then open our hearts more, and then offer it up, and then let go. We learn to be humble about our limitations, and we learn that what happens off the mat, in our relationships with others, is way more important than what happens on the mat. Because after all, it really is all about relationships.

The enormity of suffering in the world can seem overwhelming. I can cry and complain about my own problems past and present, but just the other day I watched a TV news report about the humanitarian crisis in Central Africa, and a community that has been named “the most dangerous place in the world to be a child” (NBC News, 2019). Why, as a world community, do we not have zero tolerance for a dangerous place to be a child? Another news report focused on a troop of volunteer scouts who are attempting to help this community. One of their recent tasks was to teach the children to wash their hands before eating as a way to control disease (Djibo, 2019). Such a small, small thing. “Whatever you do may seem insignificant, but it is most important that you do it.”

One of the vestiges of so much moving as a child is that I very much dislike packing for trips, and I’m not good at it. You might think it made me an excellent packer, but actually, it had the opposite effect. I want to bring everything with me, and anyone who has ever traveled with me knows that I am not a light packer. My procedural memories (Erskine, 2015) tell the story of my lost homes. On a cellular level, maybe I still think I’ll never come home. Maybe it’s intergenerational and my genes tell the story of my ancestors who were forced to leave the *shtetl*—their small eastern European villages. They carried everything they could on their backs. They did not want to leave home, but they needed to in order to survive and avoid religious and racial persecution.

But in Milan two years ago, I asked a colleague if she would be willing to hold onto my art supplies from my Guided Imagery and Music workshop, fully expecting that I would be doing another GIM workshop at this conference, which, ironically, I am not. I have *schlepped* these supplies from Rome to Slovenia to Milan and even paid extra baggage fees. I am very attached to these supplies. But then I thought: certainly it would be easier for someone in Europe to bring them to the next conference so I wouldn’t have to travel with them from New York again. After my colleague agreed, I obsessed that I was burdening her. Why did I do this? Why should she have to bring them and not me? I asked her again, “Is this a burden for you?” She reassured me that no, it was not a burden. Back in New York, soon after the conference, I realized the story my behavior was telling. I now actually felt secure enough to leave a part of myself—my art supplies—in Europe. My previously frightened Child was no longer frightened to leave something behind. I knew I would be back, and I now knew that I had truly integrated IP, and all of you, and these conferences, into my life.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner (1999), in his iconic poem “Jigsaw,” tells us that we each have the pieces of one another’s puzzles, even if we don’t realize it. He tells us that we can’t complete our puzzle until we find those who are holding our pieces, sometimes pieces we didn’t even realize we needed. And in his book *Invisible Lines of Connection: Sacred stories of the ordinary* (Kushner, 1996), he talks about how we are all connected and how our “ordinary” interactions with other people—sometimes strangers—have the power to impact and change us forever. Rabbi Kushner, meet relational integrative psychotherapy. And to my European colleague, thank you for the puzzle piece.

And so, I encourage you to think about home. How you define home? How do *YOU* come home? How do your clients come home? How do they find a home with you? What do they need to integrate in order to be home? How can we use all of ourselves, all parts of ourselves, to heal and do service and make this world a better place, a better home? A place where love, empathy, compassion, and respect in all our relationships are our guiding principles. A place in which we can all truly be home.

And so, I close today with this ancient Sanskrit chant (Gannon, 2010):

Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu

लोकः समस्ताः सुखिनो भवन्तु

May all beings everywhere be happy and free, and may the thoughts, words, and actions of my own life contribute in some way to that happiness and to that freedom for all.

And may all beings everywhere find their way home. Namaste and thank you.

Author's Note—2025

When I wrote this keynote in 2019, I had no idea how the enormity of human suffering would continue and expand in throughout the world, not only from the impact of a global pandemic, but also sadly from the continued escalations of global climate change, wars, political and ideological conflicts, and racial and sexual discrimination. As people are displaced by floods, fires, illness, border conflicts, and violence, it is imperative that we hold one simple truth: We are all connected. Though those “invisible lines of connection” may become foggy, thin, and muddled at times, we are connected through our relationships to each other and the earth. I continue to hold hope that is through those relationships, and the power of love and relational healing, that IP therapists will continue to contribute to the healing of the world.

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