

Isolation, Loneliness, and a Need to Be Loved: Part 3 of a 5-Part Case Study of the Psychotherapy of the Schizoid Process

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Abstract

This article describes the psychotherapy of a lonely and emotionally withdrawn man who stalked women searching for someone who would love him. Through a relationally focused psychotherapy and dream analysis, the client became aware of his history of being criticized and how he coped by retreating into an internal schizoid hiding place.

Keywords: Lonely, loneliness, criticism, shame, relational withdrawal, schizoid, schizoid process, integrative psychotherapy, relational therapy, case study, dream analysis

It must be nice to disappear
to have a vanishing act
to always be looking forward
and never looking back.

How nice it is to disappear
float into a mist
with a young lady on your arm
looking for a kiss.

— Lou Reed, 2003, *It Must Be Nice to Disappear*

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The third year of Allan's psychotherapy began with him telling me the details of his summer vacation, complete with exquisite photos of Arctic foxes and polar bears. He was always excited when he talked about his photography. After the first 20 minutes, I inquired about his internal criticism, something we had been working a good deal on in his psychotherapy the previous spring. He said that he was "less tense because there was almost no self-criticism." I made several inquiries about Allan's internal experience, and he described his sense of comfort when camping alone. He looked down and was silent for a couple of minutes. Then he added, "I felt empty, what you call lonely." With my continued inquiry, Allan talked about his mixed feelings of enjoying the solitary experience of the wilderness and, at the same time, realizing that something was missing that felt like "an emptiness in my stomach."

I surprised myself when I blurted out, "Were there any women to look at?" I remembered the tangential comment Allan had made the previous September when he said, "There were no women to look at." He turned his head away and was silent. I immediately knew that my remark was disturbing to him.

I was embarrassed by my indiscreet comment. My remark was not empathic with Allan's telling me about his empty, lonely feelings. I searched internally for what had prompted my inappropriate question. Usually it is easy for me to be empathic with clients' feelings of loneliness. I was perplexed. Was my countertransference a reaction, an expression of some unresolved aspect of myself, or was I identifying with some unspoken characteristic of Allan? I did not know, and I did not know what else to say so I remained quiet. I needed time to consider how to repair the rupture in our relationship. After some minutes, Allan returned to telling me about his vacation, but his facial expression had changed; his enthusiasm was gone. Although he was talking, it seemed to me that he was putting on a social façade composed of pleasant but nonmeaningful conversation. Throughout most of the previous spring, Allan's social façade had disappeared after a number of sessions in which we attended to his internal criticism and particularly after Allan realized that his self-criticism distracted him from remembering his mother's harsh criticisms of him.

At the end of the summer, when I thought about Allan returning to psychotherapy, I began to formulate a treatment plan. If he was no longer suffering from internal criticism, I planned to invite him into a series of therapeutically supported withdrawals into his "private inner room." I could observe how he often relied on relational withdrawal to stabilize and regulate himself, but I surmised that he was alone in his "private room." I firmly believe that the healing of cumulative neglect and trauma occurs through a contactful therapeutic relationship (Erskine, 2015).

So, if we did engage in a therapeutically supported withdrawal, it would mean that I would have to be fully present with him, to listen to him if he spoke and even to his silences, to be an external guardian of his quiet and private place, and to help him process his affect and implicit memories. I had learned from other clients who used relational withdrawal to self-stabilize and ward off anticipated emotional invasion that a supported withdrawal provided the space and opportunity for them to feel viscerally more secure and validated. It was an opportunity to identify their own, often nonverbal, experience (Erskine, 2020). However, my plan was suddenly placed on hold. We had an urgent situation that required a different therapeutic posture.

Throughout the week, I was worried about the effects of my behavior. It was clear to me that my error had triggered a breach in our therapeutic relationship. Prior to that session, I had decided to take direct responsibility by opening the next session with, "I want to apologize for my lack of sensitivity to you when you told me about feeling empty. My question was inconsiderate. What happened between us when I asked about 'women to look at'?" When Allan heard those words, he hung his head in silence. I assumed that I had again caused him to feel a sense of shame. He looked away, his face was tense, and he remained silent for the next several minutes.

Allan eventually looked at me and said, "I guess I had better tell you the truth." There was another long pause and he added, "I'm so tense. You'll think I'm demented." There were a few minutes of silence, during which I remembered the previous year when we had spent many sessions talking about the various dimensions of his sense of shame: hiding his shame by avoiding people, the sadness in his conviction that he was not worthy of anyone's attention, his fear of ridicule and rejection, and his core belief that "something is wrong with me." He had just said "You will think I'm demented." Was he again recoiling from internal criticism? Was he making a confession?

I honored Allan's silence but continued looking at him. I tried to communicate acceptance through my facial expressions. He then said, "That's what I do at night." I was not certain what he meant, but I knew that it was important to wait in silence while something churned inside Allan. After another long pause he said, "I have never told anyone ... when I go walking at night, I am looking for a woman." With a nod I acknowledged what he had just said but made no direct comment. I knew that my patience was a valuable form of interpersonal contact, and it seemed important that I go at his pace. He was quiet for a couple of minutes and then added, "There are several women that I watch. I know what time they get off work and I follow them home." Allan was again silent. While he hung his head I thought

about how painful shame can be: the intense sadness at not being accepted as one is and the fear of rejection for who one is.

After a few more minutes of quiet, I made what I hoped would be a normalizing comment: "There must be some important reason you are looking at them." He was again silent for several minutes. I repeated my comment. He looked at me and with tears in his eyes said, "I'm lonely." Slowly, bit by bit, we talked about the empty feeling inside his stomach and how he had some relief when he followed a woman and wondered what it would be like to be with her in her home.

In response to my gentle inquiry, he talked about the pain of loneliness. He described how he always felt "low down" when he finally returned to his apartment. Throughout that session, Allan was physically tense, caught between wanting to reveal his story and his reluctance to say anything. I decided to reassure Allan that he was not "demented," and I explained that his watching the women had some important psychological functions. I promised him that in our coming sessions we would explore his desire to watch them and, importantly, what he was needing as he searched for a woman.

Although I tried to reassure Allan, I ended the session with an intense mixture of thoughts and emotions. I felt compassion for Allan; he was lonely and depressed. Simultaneously, I was alarmed. I had a fantasy of Allan stalking the women, of his being a sexual predator, or worse. I had a duty to uncover Allan's intentions, to discover if he was "demented," to determine if he was dangerous to the women, and, if necessary, to protect them by reporting him to the authorities. I suddenly felt overwhelmed with responsibility. As Allan was leaving my office, I ran after him and invited him to return the next day for another session. He was reluctant. But later he called me to say that he was willing to come at lunch time for an additional session because he had more to tell me.

When Allan arrived for that next session, he was physically tense. He made no eye contact and seemed to be withdrawn to some internal hiding place. I waited patiently, mostly in silence. I interspersed the silence with a few comments such as "I'm here for you," "There is no need to rush," "There must be a lot of feelings going on inside." After about 20 minutes, he looked at me and said, "What am I going to do?" At that moment, I sensed a little boy, lonely, depressed, and not knowing how to feel better. I was in a dilemma about whether to address the troubled child in Allan or to alleviate my internal tension and worry. I had spent part of the previous night distressed about Allan's behavior and the possibility that he was a potential danger to women. I spontaneously decided to use this session to directly address my worries. I asked him, "Do you have any sexual fantasies about

these women?” Allan immediately responded with “Oh, no! I never do that.” I continued with, “Do you ever want to hurt them?” At first he was appalled that I asked such questions, and then with tears in his eyes he said, “I only want them to be with me.”

During the next several sessions, Allan described the stories he had invented regarding the women he followed at night. I consistently and continuously inquired about these various fantasies and particularly about his body sensations, affects, and hopes. A theme in Allan’s stories included his imagining that the various women would be happy to be with him. As I learned more about Allan’s imagined encounters, we identified that the most important themes included his fantasy that the women were kind to him, wanted to tell him stories about their lives, and were delighted to listen to his stories. Allan’s imaginings were full of details about his hoped-for relationship with the women, such as their pleasure in having dinner together, discovering their joy in hiking with Allan, and the excitement of doing photography together. In each of his stories there was an imagined joyous connection between Allan and a woman. Near the end of one of our sessions, he confessed that, while following the women, he would repeatedly say to himself, “Can you love me?” However, by the time he returned home he was depressed.

I continued to wonder if sexual activity had any place in his fantasy. During our therapeutic dialogue, I interspersed some questions about his sexuality. From the various things Allan said I had the impression that he was not imagining anything sexual with the women. I asked some direct questions about his sexual history. Allan told me that he had a girlfriend when he was 14, they had kissed a lot, but he had felt guilty because he had touched her breasts. His mother had become enraged when she discovered that he was spending time after school with the girl and forbade him to see her again. He never had another girlfriend, never dated, and avoided any conversations with women. His life was sexless. I asked if he masturbated, looked at pornography magazines, or watched erotic videos. Allan was surprised by my questions and answered “No” to each of them. But in responding to my questions about masturbation, he described how his mother “was furious with me when she saw stains on my bed sheets. So, I stopped touching myself.”

In between our sessions, I thought about the possible homeostatic functions that might be involved in Allan’s silent quest for a woman, such as:

- Emotional regulation of his loneliness and depression
- An identity and sense of value in “who I am”

- An orientation of himself in relationship with women
- Compensation for unsatisfied relational needs
- Self-protection against the memory of the pain and fear of loss of interpersonal connection with his mother

My heart went out to Allan when I realized that we had a great deal of work ahead.

We spent time talking about his “empty, lonely feelings.” I validated the significance of his internal question “can you love me?” Now Allan repeatedly talked about being an “unloved child.” Together we interpreted his mantra “Can you love me” as the lament of a neglected yet controlled child who yearned to be loved. During some of these conversations, Allan cried. I watched for signs of anger but his sadness predominated. I focused on responding empathically and helped him to identify his current relational needs for validation, companionship, and self-definition. Periodically, he would slip into a withdrawn place. He would become silent, hunch his shoulders, and not respond to any of my inquiries. Sometimes it seemed that these reactions stimulated Allan to shrink even more into himself.

In another session I asked if he had ever spoken to any of the women. His body seem strained as he answered, “I would never do that.” As we talked more he said, “Then it will all go bad. She won’t want me.” I explored with Allan what he imagined would happen if one of the women wanted a relationship with him. He answered, “They will try to control me. They will criticize me.” He pulled into himself and was quiet. Throughout this period of time I sensed that my inquiry and comments had to be delicate, and I was sensitive to how quickly Allan could slip into silence. I began to encourage him to take time to withdraw into his private place, to feel whatever he felt, to experience a sense of quietness or any memories. During these prolonged moments, I would quietly watch over him, just as though I were watching over a sick child.

In another session, Allan was “deeply discouraged.” He had discovered that a waitress whom he frequently followed had a husband and two children. He was distraught: “I lost my dream.” I responded to his sadness as though he had actually been betrayed by a partner. I talked to him about grief as he told me how he had longed to be with her. He was angry that she was married and not available. He then spontaneously talked about his mother: “She was never there for me. I was always alone. I am still alone.” He then wept in childlike grief for the betrayal of a real person, his mother.

In each of the next few sessions I made historical inquiries about Allan's relationship with his mother during the years he was 5 to 15, after his father died. Allan increasingly had memories of how he responded to the "criticisms heaped on me" by both his mother and sister: "When they weren't hassling me they ignored me. But that was fine with me because I could be alone in my room." As I inquired about what he was experiencing internally when he was in his room, he replied, "I closed up inside. I guess I was protecting something. I told myself 'nothing matters.'" I inquired about what he was protecting, and he described the tensions in his stomach and chest. I suggested that the tension in his body was loneliness.

I could see that periodically Allan was briefly looking away and/or tensing his jaw muscles. I took advantage of those moments to invite him to close his eyes and go to his "private room." I promised him that I would neither come near nor would I go away but that I would stay present. At first he withdrew for only a couple of minutes, and then he would open his eyes to see if I was still attentive. Over the next many sessions, he was able to withdraw to his private place for longer periods of time. I sat quietly, observing each breath and the little gestures that he made.

After one session when Allan was in his private place for about 20 minutes, he described it as "cool and quiet and that's the way I like it." I offered that perhaps that was why he liked camping in the Arctic. He seemed to enjoy that comment and ironically said, "My mother was hot tempered and noisy ... the farther from her the better. That's why I like it cold and quiet." We made an interesting discovery. Following withdrawals to his private place (usually for about 10 to 15 minutes), he was more relationally contactful and somewhat playful. It was as though his energy had been replenished with spontaneity and vitality.

A few weeks later, Allan was disturbed by a dream. He said that he knew the dream was significant. He was conflicted because he did not want to think about it, but he wanted to know what it meant. We talked about his ambivalence around knowing and not knowing before we attended to the content of the dream. Almost inaudibly he uttered, "I want to hide from the painful truth." He described the dream: "I am the age I am now but I am carrying a heavy backpack, a big weight, so I feel small. I'm trying to get on an old-style train to go to a faraway camping place. The steam locomotive could not move because a large woman was blocking the track. The woman began to stare at me but she had no face. I noticed that she had large pendulous breasts, but I knew that there was no warmth in them." Allan described how he woke up frightened by the faceless woman. After about an hour, he fell back to sleep, and just before morning he had another short dream: "The same large woman had her back turned to me and was directing a crowd of people, telling them what to do. She and the crowd of her faceless admirers continued to

block the track. I was stuck on a cold train platform. I woke up with a low-down feeling, what you call depressed.” Allan then said, “Last time you asked me to analyze the dream, but now I want you to tell me what it means.” I was momentarily stymied; dream analysis is always idiosyncratic, visionary, and relational. Allan was directly requesting my involvement in his understanding of his dream experience. This alone was a significant change in his demeanor. To me he seemed like a young boy asking his father, “What does it mean?” I needed a few moments to think. I wanted to speak to him heart to heart. It seemed imperative that my words provide some healing understanding. Eric Berne (1961) described the therapist’s use of a duplex transaction wherein the psychotherapist talks simultaneously to both the client’s Adult and Child ego states. That was my challenge.

I quickly reviewed all that Allan had told me and realized how this dream captured some of the themes of his life script: being blocked in self-expression and choice, his mother’s failure to acknowledge his vulnerability, observing people but without any face-to-face communication, and the absence of human warmth. I had a developmental image of Allan as a 5- to 6-year old boy. I decided to tell him a story about how I understood the dream. I talked as though I were speaking to both the young boy and the mature man. I wanted his active involvement in deciphering the meaning of the dream so I decided to interpret the dream in small segments. I began with, “The boy is on the track of life; a boy full of steam and energy.” I paused for Allan’s reflection. He said nothing but nodded in agreement.

I went on, “He has a heavy weight on his back. It is such a big weight, like a pack full of commands and insults. It is such a big weight, perhaps even painful.” Allan appeared to be emotionally moved, his eyes moistened, he swallowed hard but this time he did not turn away. After a few minutes he then said, “Before you, no one has ever understood.” Allan motioned me to continue. I added, “He wants to go to a cool and quiet place to camp because the camp is his own private place.” Allan answered, “I take that camp with me all day, every day. It is my refuge.” I was feeling gratified because Allan was actively cooperating in our coanalysis of his dream, but then we were out of time. Neither Allan nor I wanted to stop. He asked if he could come later in the week for an additional session because he wanted to hear the rest of the story. After he left I rushed to my desk to write the details of his dream before I lost any of it.

Just before Allan arrived for an early Thursday morning appointment, I reread my notes about his dream. I was glad that we had had a 2-day break because I could now focus on what I considered the most important element of the dream: the faceless woman. Allan began our session with a new curiosity about how the

dream represented his life. As we reviewed what we had talked about on Tuesday, Allan added, "I have always had the weight of her negativity and criticism on my back. I wonder if that is why I can carry a heavy backpack when I go camping. I am used to her weight." After a pause he added, "I am tired of carrying her criticisms. They are not about me. She was unhappy with life. Perhaps she was always irritated with me because I was curious and full of life ... until she forced me into hiding."

Allan asked me to continue analyzing his dream. In previous sessions, I had made my interpretation in a metaphorical way by talking about "the boy." As I thought about how well Allan had processed our previous conversations about his dream, I now assumed that he was ready for me to make my interpretation directly about him. I changed my language from "the boy" and "he" to "you." I looked him in the eye as I said, "It must have been impossible for you as a young boy to have a real face-to-face contact with your mother, particularly if she was criticizing and misdefining you. It seems that your mother could not face your uniqueness and vitality. Nor was she sensitive to your vulnerability ... but she was able to stop your locomotion. Just like in the dream where the faceless woman stopped the steam locomotive." He said, "Yes, that's it." Allan was silent for a few minutes, but he was not withdrawn. He then looked me in the eyes and keep repeating, "That's it." We spent the rest of the session talking about the loneliness in being constantly criticized. Allan described an almost impossible struggle to define himself in the presence of a domineering mother. He said, "My only option was to withdraw to my private place, and when I got too lonely, I imagined being in the wilderness."

In the next session, Allan was eager to have me continue talking about his dream. I returned to the beginning of the dream with, "In the dream you were trying to go to a faraway camping place; even as a small child you needed to find some place of quiet." After talking a while about my interpretation, Allan exclaimed, "That is how I have always lived, searching for the quiet. I am getting on the train to get away from her but she is always stopping me." We continued with what I thought the dream meant, and then I asked a question: "Allan, you described the woman as 'faceless' and having 'no warmth or sympathy.' That is exactly how you have often described your mother's behavior to you. What do you think it means when you described the faceless woman in the dream as having 'large pendulous breasts?'" Allan quickly answered, "She was always disgusted with her breasts. She blamed me for destroying her figure. She was disgusted with me. That's what stops me in my tracks. There was no warmth or caring in that women." In the next few sessions Allan had a number of memories about his mother's and sister's treatment of him, and he was angry.

As Christmas approached, Allan said that he was no longer depressed. Since October he had not followed any women. Instead, he spent his evenings working on his photography projects and planning his hiking and camping adventures. He confided that when he saw “a kind-faced woman” he would internally say, “Can you love me?” In several sessions he clearly stated, “My search for women is my longing to have my mother be kind and love me. I know that I will never get my mother to love me.” His sadness was intense but he was present.

In the next session, Allan suggested that it might be time to terminate our work together. He talked about how he had changed and was no longer depressed. He wanted to move out of New York City but did not know where: “Some place with rugged mountains, a place for my photography.” Although I celebrated the changes he was making, I was bothered by his suggestion of termination. I did not know what else might emerge if we continued to address his internal process. I lacked assurance that we had come to a good conclusion. I was aware that we had not addressed his early childhood, before the age of 5 when his father died. I talked to Allan about engaging in an investigation of the unknown, what might be unresolved. Out of curiosity he reluctantly agreed to continue until June.

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