

Pipher (2003). Letters to  
a young therapist.  
New York: Basic.

## ■ Introduction

In 1972 I saw my first therapy client, a young homeless woman from a brutal alcoholic family. Timidly and apologetically, Charlotte meandered into the free clinic at the university. Thereafter, in our weekly sessions, we struggled to make sense of her lonely, chaotic life. Charlotte would hang her head, her greasy bangs covering her eyes, as she whispered about rapes and beatings. She was so afraid of tenderness that, when I complimented her on even the smallest things, she winced. Six months into therapy, Charlotte pushed her hair away from her eyes and looked me in the face. By the end of our first year together, she would smile when we met and she even occasionally coughed out a tentative laugh. In the three years we worked together, I don't think I did her any harm. We liked and respected each other. No doubt I learned more from her than she learned from me.

Since then I have seen all kinds of people—hyperactive school boys, abused women, gifted students, gay

dads, grieving widows, angry teenagers, adults who had committed various kinds of stupidity, psychopaths, people who were taking care of too many people, and families desperately trying to hold together or wrench apart. Over the last thirty years I've watched a lot of pain flow under the bridge.

By now I have a Ph.D. in human suffering. I have listened to many cautionary tales and seen the ways humans can hurt themselves and other people. I have learned vicariously what mistakes not to make. I have witnessed the train wrecks that follow extramarital affairs. I haven't had to gamble, use drugs, or keep secrets to realize that those behaviors are ultimately destructive. I have acquired a lifelong tuition-free education in the consequences of various choices.

During most of my years in clinical practice, I worked six blocks from home with my husband, Jim, and my good friend Jan. We created a "small is beautiful" office. Our kids cleaned it until they left home and then we cleaned it ourselves. We did our own billing and scheduled our own appointments. Once, a high-powered psychiatrist said to me, "I'll have my people call your people." I had to confess, "I have no people."

Over the decades the work changed a great deal. New theories marched to center stage, then exited quietly. We therapists frothed our way through the ditzzy seventies and almost destroyed ourselves in the eighties, the era of recovered memory work. We traveled from endless, unstructured sessions to goal-focused short-

term therapy. Family therapy, once our finest technique, has almost vanished. And yet, like Homer's "wine-dark sea," therapy is, "always changing, always the same."

I love the work. Sometimes people ask if it is depressing to spend all day listening to problems. I tell them, "I am not listening *to* problems. I am listening *for* solutions." Clients generally arrive when they want to make changes. They are paying for advice and are ready to listen. As a therapist, my experience is that unhappy clients become happier, that feuding couples start to enjoy each other, and that families settle down and work together. Not always, but usually, after a few sessions, I begin to hear stories of victories.

In therapy, as in life, point of view is everything. As a therapist, I am slightly detached from my clients' problems. I try to keep my eyes on the prize, which, while tailored for each client, is essentially the same. I want people to leave feeling calmer, kinder, and more optimistic. I want them to be more intentional in their choices and, in many cases, less impulsive in their appetites.

Robert Frost wrote, "Education elevates trouble to a higher plane." So does psychotherapy. It is a way of exploring pain and confusion to produce meaning and hope. This book consists of lessons I've learned from the people who have tromped into my office and flopped down on my old couch for conversations. It distills what I have learned from hundreds of hours of listening to people answer the question, "What brings you in today?"

Along with having sex, sleeping, and sharing food, conversation is arguably one of the most basic of all human behaviors. Two or more people tell each other stories. They struggle to solve the problems of their day and to laugh and calm down. Freud structured these conversations in a new way and academics eventually conducted research on these particular conversations but, in the end, therapy consists of people talking things over.

It is complicated work. Mark Twain described himself as "all of humanity crammed into a suit of clothes." Everyone who walks into our office contains all the rest of us. And yet, we all run from our humanity. We prevaricate and puff ourselves up. We fear admitting how vulnerable we feel. We try to hide our flaws. Over and over again, we have to learn how to simply be human.

In my case, I'm what a friend once described as a "clumsy brainiac." My mother joked I could write essays before I could walk. I am blind in one eye, moody, unfashionable, directionally impaired, claustrophobic, and easily tuckered out. And those flaws are just the ones I'll confess to. But somehow, I've found a few people to love me. And I know their flaws and love them, too. In fact, they are my close friends and family, the people I love the most.

As a therapist, I see myself as a generalist, the psychologist equivalent of my mother, who was a general practitioner of medicine. I am not a good play therapist. I treat young children by helping their parents figure out

how to deal with them. I avoid legal work and sophisticated diagnostics. Specialization offers financial and professional rewards, but to me, specialization has always sounded dull. Thirty years is a long time to solve one kind of problem.

For me, the best trick is not to have tricks. When I attempt to be clever or sophisticated, I often confuse myself as well as my clients. Once when I suggested what I thought was a brilliant, rather mysterious, homework assignment, my client asked me if I was on drugs. Another time when I predicted the future in an attempt to generate a self-fulfilling prophecy, my hard-drinking client looked me in the eyes and said bluntly, "If you can predict the future, you ought to go to Vegas."

For the most part, my solutions to human problems have been simple ones—get more rest, do good work, take things a day at a time, and find some people to love. Of course, simple suggestions aren't necessarily easy and they don't always work. When they don't, I generally fall back on my belief in the process of therapy. Albert Einstein said, "A problem cannot be solved by the consciousness that created it." Therapy gives clients a safe relationship in which to explore their inner world and to consider taking risks in their external one. It provides them with another point of view on their own particular mixed-up universe.

As a student, I studied Carl Jung, Harry Sullivan, Otto Rank, Fritz Perls, and George Kelly. I read Freud, but I never much liked the idea that all good behavior

was sublimation. I resisted his view that life was mostly competition, aggression, and sex—a very male theory. I was always attracted to growth and strength-based models. I respected the humanists and the existentialists—Abe Maslow, Rollo May, Victor Frankl, and Carl Rogers. I was intrigued by Carol Gilligan's and the Stone Center's ideas about the self in relationship to others. Even before Positive Psychology existed, I believed in the importance of focusing on good news.

When I began my training in 1972, psychologists were mainly testers. I learned to administer intelligence tests, personality inventories, and projectives, in which clients were shown indistinct stimuli, such as inkblots, and asked to report on what they saw. At first, I was fascinated by all those tests, but with experience I grew to prefer conversations as a diagnostic method.

I interned at the University of Texas Medical Center, which at that time had several pioneers of family therapy employed. I relished the liveliness of family therapy. Later at the University of Nebraska I taught one of the first Psychology of Women courses. In some ways I've swum in the mainstream, but I've also paddled alone. I had strong biases against family bashing, cutoffs, and blaming people who were not in the room to defend themselves. I urged clients to go home for holidays and attend family reunions. I never used the term "dysfunctional family" or recommended that anyone sue his own parents.

Even as a little girl, I felt protective of my own quirky family. I experienced my mother and father as rather in-

competent, unavailable parents with many complicated problems of their own. But I also experienced them as loving me and doing their best. Much of my internal landscape comes from my conversations with them. I don't judge them harshly for their mistakes and I don't feel inclined to judge others too harshly either.

Perhaps because of my training in anthropology, I have always viewed mental health problems as related to the broader environment. Depression, anxiety, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse, not to mention hyperactive children and eating disorders, arise from our deeply dysfunctional culture. Who can be healthy in a culture in which children watch movies about hookers and serial killers? How can we expect people to be happy when they don't know their neighbors, see their extended families, or have time for naps on Sunday afternoons?

As a culture, we are mired deep in denial about our effects on others, on the earth, and on generations to come. We ignore the problems of children, refugees, the aged, and the poor. Our media encourages us to live at a surface level, to think about window treatments instead of world peace or our own spiritual needs. We are educated to be compartmentalized. Our culture makes us sick, physically and emotionally.

Good therapy gently but firmly moves people out of denial and compartmentalization. It helps clients develop richer inner lives and greater self-knowledge. It teaches clients to live harmoniously with others. And it



enhances existential consciousness and allows people to take responsibility for their effects on the world at large.

For me, happiness is about appreciating what one has. Practically speaking, this means lowering expectations about what is fair, possible, and likely. It means finding pleasure in the ordinary. I'm not a television-watcher or shopper and, as best I can, I steer people away from the idea that happiness is connected to having more, more, and more.

To be an adult means to accept the awesome responsibility of constantly making choices. I believe that after a certain age, with the exception of the chronically mentally ill and the profoundly mentally challenged, we are all responsible for our own lives. It's patronizing and contemptuous to believe otherwise. I encourage clients to understand and accept the past with all its complexity. Then I urge them to move on to create something beautiful for themselves and others. We all have our sorrows, but they don't exempt us from our duties.

I opened my private practice in 1979, and most of my practice took place during the golden age when therapists had plenty of time to help clients. Most people carried good insurance coverage for therapy and even factory workers could come in for extended periods and explore their issues at a leisurely pace. Therapists weren't expected to produce rapid concrete changes. When managed care slammed into our state, I ignored it. I had enjoyed too many years of doing things my own way. I couldn't tolerate outsiders calling the shots with my clients.

Recently I met a busy therapist who bragged his therapy was, "All killer, no filler." He claimed he could treat most people in four sessions. I could barely conceal my skepticism. Good therapy, like good cooking, takes time. Of course some clients and therapists abused the old system. But most of us used our time wisely. In the past, we could develop strong relationships with our clients. Now in the crunch to save time and money, therapists must work fast and demonstrate weekly progress. Much is lost in the process.

Over the years I worked for the University of Nebraska as a clinical supervisor for graduate students in psychology. Sometimes I drove to the university and sat in on sessions or watched my students work from behind a one-way mirror. Often the students carried their tapes of therapy to my home. We played them on my VCR and I offered tips and sympathy.

I have written this book in the form of letters to Laura, who was my favorite graduate student. Laura was in her twenties and single. She was open-minded, warm-hearted, and deeply in love with psychology. Like me, she was an outdoors person. Unlike me, she was a risk-taker who liked canoeing, roller blading, and rock climbing. Like most young therapists, Laura was a funny mix of scared and overconfident. She wanted to sample every kind of client, but she was easily overwhelmed.

I hope both therapists and general readers relish these letters. I offer plenty of clinical examples from my own work. I save quotations and I can't resist throwing

in some of my favorites. I try to avoid popular psychology lingo and social science jargon, and yet I want to gently remind readers that in these harsh times, therapy can be a solution.

I wrote these letters in the early morning. My desk overlooks an old maple tree, my flower garden, and bird and squirrel feeding stations. The letters were a yearlong project and the seasons influenced my moods and my writing. (The reader may enjoy analyzing me for seasonal affective disorder!)

I began writing these letters on December 2, 2001, a bitterly cold day in Nebraska. We were just about to put to bed the year that included September 11. All of us were hopeful that the New Year might bring better tidings, but it was a dark time for the world. For me, these letters were a kind of vacation. They gave me an opportunity to focus on human-sized issues rather than global events.

Dear reader, I hope you find these letters both educational and fun. Indeed one of the things I have observed as a therapist is that fun is by no means trivial. It's one of the best things we have. So, settle yourself into a comfortable spot in the sunlight or by a fire. Make some peach tea and find a cat for your lap. Let's visit.

## ■ PART I: WINTER