



## **Borrowed Tears**

***A Therapist Reclaims His Buried Past—and  
Upends His Practice***

**By David Treadway**

September/October 2021

Years ago, out on the workshop circuit, when I'd talk to therapists about many of us being some version of a "wounded healer," I'd describe my own role as a parentified child and my futile efforts to counsel my mentally ill mom and somewhat clueless, disengaged dad. Many of us were the children who'd taken care of family members as a way of staying out of the line of fire and feeling good about ourselves. At some point in my presentation, I'd observe that for some of us, our childhood coping strategies made us highly effective therapists. Jokingly, I'd conclude, "And who knows, maybe if I ever really do get well, I'll retire."

Little did I know that this throwaway line would become my life's koan.

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Looking back, I realize even more fully that long before I became a codependent caregiver in my family, I'd split off from myself. I'd become dissociated.

When I was seven, my 11-year-old brother, Jon, was lord and master of our family's horse barn. His favorite game was strapping me into a wooden "electric chair" he'd attached with wires, and then threatening to throw the switch on the wall. My younger brother, Jim, was usually too scared to play, so I was the designated death-row prisoner, sentenced to the chair over and over again. I was frightened but didn't protest, because it was never a good idea to make Jon mad. He'd make you pay for it with "knuckle noogies" until you cried and begged him to stop.

Eventually, the game got pretty well played out. So, one day, Jon announced we were going to practice a hanging. He carefully tied a noose, threw it over a rafter, and told me to stand on the electric chair. He placed the noose around my neck, and then stood back to admire the scene. It felt like one of his usual games—until he started

talking about pulling the chair away. I got scared. Really scared. I yanked the noose away, jumped off the chair, and ran like hell.

I sped across the street toward our house, but it never occurred to me to go inside and try to involve our parents. They didn't like making Jon angry either, because you never knew when his everyday belligerence would morph into a tyrannical rage. As far as I could tell, Jon ran the family. Mom was always trying to make him behave and threatening punishment from Dad when he got home from work, but then Dad didn't want to take on Jon, so my parents usually wound up in a fight over it.

Even in this circumstance, I never thought it would be a good idea to tattle to them. Mom probably would've just told me to go back and finish the game. So I ran deep into the woods behind our house and just kept running. Finally, when I had no idea where I was, I sat down under a pine tree and stayed very still. Slowly, I began to calm down. Somehow, being at the base of the pine and surrounded by the other trees felt comforting—as if they were my friends, sheltering me, protecting me.

Time passed. I heard Jon calling out to me. He shouted that if I'd come back, he'd let me play with his best toy soldiers. But I didn't budge—not until the darkening woods began to get scary and I could see some light in the distance from our house. Then I made my way home.

"Where have you been?" Mom called from the kitchen as I kicked off my shoes by the back door. She sounded exasperated.

Everyone was sitting at the table, eating dinner. Jim looked scared. Jon glowered at me.

"I was bored, Mom, so I went for a walk in the woods," I said, trying to make my voice casual. "Then I got lost. Sorry I'm late."

"David, you should know better than to go off by yourself alone. I'm sure Jon would've gone with you."

"I know, Mom. He was busy in the barn."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Jon smirking.

Sometime after that, I went away, emotionally. It wasn't a decision; it just happened.

Life was just a lot easier when I wasn't in it. I began to live outside of myself, looking down on it from just above my right shoulder—watching everything.

I got good at playing the role of the sweet little boy. Everyone in my family loved me the best—even Jon—because I was mellow and accommodating and never complained. I wore my smile like a shield. I did the same trick at school and became one of the popular kids. It was like I was wrapped in Harry Potter's invisibility cloak. I felt safe.

### **The Making of a Hero**

Our family seriously deteriorated when I was 10 and we moved from central Massachusetts to Boston's Beacon Hill. Mom's heavy drinking mutated into raging alcoholism. My dad withdrew from all of us. Jon went to boarding school and became a drunk. My older sister, Lauris, tried to be sweet to everyone, but my mother was hypercritical of her, particularly about her attempts to dress fashionably and look pretty. And my younger brother, Jim, was always pissing Mom off with his hyperactivity. Meanwhile, I glided along, hiding behind my smile and having a perfectly good time because I wasn't feeling anything at all.

By my teens, I'd become the family's therapist. I was everyone's confidant, including my parents'. I remember dinners with Dad at the York Steakhouse, when he'd divulge his worries about my mother, who was now zombified on drugs—mostly barbs and amphetamines—and trying unsuccessfully not to drink. She was in bed all day. Some mornings, Dad and I would try to get a smile out of her by singing Bing Crosby songs and doing a father-son vaudeville soft-shoe at the foot of her bed. She'd just look away.

All this led to the discovery that trying to take care of others made me feel important—like I mattered. Then, when I was 20, the shit hit the fan. My mom ended her life with 30 Seconal tablets. Right after her funeral, Lauris went psychotic and had to be hospitalized. In short order, Dad had a major manic episode and started telling people he was God. He was hospitalized a week later.

*"All this led to the discovery that trying to take care of others made me feel important—like I mattered."*

At the time, I was in college in Philadelphia. Within weeks, I'd developed a regular weekend schedule. On Friday afternoons, I'd drive up to the Boston area to visit with Dad at McLean Hospital. I'd stay until Sunday morning, and then shoot down to Manhattan to spend the day with my sister at Columbia-Presbyterian. Then I'd get back on the turnpike to Philly in time for Monday classes. Oddly, instead of feeling overwhelmed and sad, I felt grown up and strong, as if I was making a difference. But I also felt guilty that I wasn't feeling much of anything about Mom's suicide. I was too busy playing the role of family hero—and enjoying it.

### **Borrowed Tears**

Kate and I fell in love in college shortly after Mom died. Sitting side by side on a pool table during a raucous fraternity party, we were so captivated by each other that we barely noticed the chaos swirling around us. But the moment we truly, deeply connected was on our first real date at the Moravian restaurant near campus. There was a lot of flirtatious banter. Then suddenly, while sipping her coffee, Kate fell silent.

"Where did the laughing girl with sparkling eyes go?" I asked playfully.

"I don't know why I want to tell you this," she said softly. "It never makes anything any better."

"You can tell me anything," I said, feeling suddenly serious and connected to her.

"My dad is the most important person in my life," she said. Tears welled in her eyes.

"But he isn't anymore, because he died when I was 15."

I reached across the table and took her hand. She began to cry, and—much to my surprise—so did I. Seeing my tears, Kate naturally assumed we shared the same deep sense of loss, because I'd already told her about Mom's suicide. But we didn't. I was feeling her grief, not mine. I'd never suffered those devastating feelings of loss about Mom when she died—or frankly, during much of the time she lived. Sadly, I'd written her off long ago.

Even though I wasn't connecting with my own feelings, connecting with Kate's pain felt good. At night, she'd cry in my arms, and my heart ached for her, allowing me to contact a grief I couldn't feel for myself. Essentially, I borrowed her tears. And for quite a while, it worked for both of us.

We were still college kids when we got married. My ushers made side bets that we wouldn't last a year. And for a decade, we did struggle. We loved each other deeply, but we were immature, and I was still emotionally frozen. I could melt with tenderness for Kate, but I felt hollow inside. Not only was I totally disconnected from myself, but I was totally unaware of my detachment. My cluelessness was total. Whenever she tried to reciprocate my care, like the time she surprised me with a photo album on our second anniversary, complete with loving quotes from our favorite song and poems, I just couldn't take it in. The gesture bounced off me. My perfunctory thanks hurt her deeply.

Slowly, Kate began to recognize that my ability to be there for her didn't mean I could be present for myself. "I just feel like you're not really there," she said one afternoon after a somewhat desultory lovemaking effort. "I'm here!" I retorted. "Feel this!" I put her hand on my biceps. "See?"

Fast-forward a few years, and I became a psychotherapist. No surprise there! As I experienced with my family of origin and then with Kate, being a compassionate witness for my clients made me feel kind, connected, and powerful. And my dissociative tendencies, which I still didn't really know I had, allowed me to be fully present for my clients without getting overwhelmed by my own sorrow. All the rewards of intimacy without the messiness of vulnerability. What wasn't to like?

### **Michael's Gift**

It wasn't until my son, Michael, came along that my self-protective armor started to crack.

One night, Kate was working a shift at the hospital, and it was just Michael and me at home. He was two and a half. "Michael, you have to get back in your bed," I barked after his umpteenth visit to our bedroom in the middle of the night.

"But I can't sleep," he whined.

“You’re not trying hard enough,” I told him, feeling my irritation rise. “I’m going to count to three, and you get back in your bed or I’m going to put you in it. One. . . .”

“I want Mommy,” he wailed, throwing himself on the floor.

Now I was really pissed off. I jumped out of bed and scooped him up. He started screaming and thrashing about. When I stuffed him back into his bed, he screamed louder.

And I yelled even louder: “Shut the hell up!”

Michael went silent. I watched his face turn white.

“Oh my God, Michael, I’m so sorry,” I stammered. “I didn’t mean to scare you. Do you want to sleep in my bed, after all?”

In a very quiet, sad voice that broke my heart in half, he said, “No thank you, Dad. I’m okay here.” Then he rolled over and turned his back to me.

That was when I realized, finally, that I needed some serious therapy.

Kate strongly agreed. It had become progressively obvious to both of us that my elaborate defense system of being compassionate, calm, and tuned-in for others, while maintaining a safe emotional distance from myself, didn’t work for fatherhood. As a dad, I wasn’t one bit cool and collected. I was anxious and vulnerable, easily overwhelmed and prone to anger. Never before in my life had I had a temper. Growing up, I’d never felt safe enough to get angry. Now, the rage came roaring up inside of me. When Michael resisted authority, as any normal two-year-old would, the little boy in me howled, I was never allowed to do that! What right do you have to be yourself?

Experiencing my intense emotional reactivity as a dad was the door I walked through to finally and painfully connect to myself—the scared, lost, lonely boy I didn’t know I’d been, and the emotionally shut-down and heavily defended man that I’d become.

### **Diving into the Wreck**

Making those connections wasn’t easy. Sitting across from Barbara, my new therapist, I began by reciting my whole disastrous family experience—my terrorist

older brother, my alcoholic mom and her suicide, and my dad's and sister's institutionalization. I named these traumas without feeling the slightest connection to them.

Gently, Barbara asked if we could go back to my childhood and talk about what growing up in my family actually felt like.

"I don't remember what it felt like," I replied. I thought about it for a moment.

"Actually, I don't remember much of anything before I was about 11."

Barbara nodded. "Perhaps we need to find a way to get to know that boy."

"Good luck to you, Doc," I said with a wise-ass smile.

It wasn't until a year into therapy that memories began to bubble up. During one session, a scene from my fifth birthday arose. It was a pool party, and one of my friends hadn't brought a bathing suit. So my mother gave him mine and told me I could go in the pool in my underwear.

"But, Mom, everything will show when I get wet!" I protested, horrified.

"Don't be such a baby, David," she laughed. "Nobody's interested in your little boy bits."

Now, sitting on the sofa across from Barbara, I dissolved in sobs. I was that five-year-old boy again. My mom was making fun of me right in front of my friends. I felt shamed and abandoned. As I cried uncontrollably, Barbara leaned toward me, her hazel eyes filled with tenderness. But instead of feeling seen and cared for, I decided that she was delighted with my "cathartic" therapy moment.

"Wipe that smile off your face," I snapped. "I'm not having a fucking breakthrough. Stop being so pleased with yourself or I'm walking out of here."

But I stayed. We slogged along as one memory after another arose, and I felt them like I never had before. The story of "The Hanging" had long been a family joke, but when I repeated it to Barbara and she responded with obvious care and shock, I was suddenly flooded with terror. I was that seven-year-old boy again, running for the woods like his very life depended on it.

Therapy became a journey of coming home to myself. Of cradling that small boy in

my arms. Of owning my tears. And in the process, becoming a solid, safe, and loving dad. Becoming a better husband, too. After my therapy sessions, I'd bring my childhood stories back to Kate and cry in her arms.

I became a better therapist, too. Now that I was finally connected to my own feelings, I could more authentically connect and empathize with my clients' emotions. I'd arrived at the wonderful point in my work where I felt balanced, able to experience genuine intimacy while keeping appropriate boundaries between my clients' pain and my own.

In the '90s, I wrote a memoir about the unraveling of my childhood family and my therapy journey. I felt well and whole. Even healed.

### **Shock Waves**

Then, without warning, my life flipped upside down. In 2005, I was diagnosed with Stage 4 non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Then in 2012, I suffered a small stroke. Six months later, I had open-heart surgery. A year after that, a bad concussion left me cognitively impaired for almost a year. Did I mention several orthopedic surgeries? It was such a rapid succession of assaults that when friends asked me how I was coping, I'd quip, "I'm on the pity pot with the seat belt fastened." On top of everything, I began to get old.

In the face of these multiple shocks to my system, my hard-won emotional balance started to crumble. Starting with my cancer diagnosis, my dissociative tendencies began to reassert themselves. When the oncologist told me I had a less than a 20 percent chance of survival, I promptly adopted a kind of faux equanimity, reassuring Kate that I was grateful for my good life and at peace with my impending death, blah, blah, blah—and at some level convincing myself it was true.





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Needless to say, this emotional blackout was not good for me, nor for my family. Nor for my clients. Once I'd tumbled back down the rabbit hole of dissociation, I went unconscious in some important ways. First, my boundaries started slipping, and I skidded back into my time-honored hero role. The overfunctioning got pretty extreme. During one, long-anticipated vacation in the Bahamas, I found myself conducting daily phone sessions in my hotel room with numerous, far-flung family members in crisis. I'd flipped into full rescue mode.

My boundaries with clients slipped in another way, too—one I never could have anticipated. Newly vulnerable as I was, I found that I could no longer keep my own personal sorrows appropriately separate from those of my clients. In the face of the raw, unfiltered pain I was witnessing each day in my office, I could no longer suppress my own lingering childhood anguish. I'm keenly aware of the irony: whereas earlier in my therapy career I'd kept my feelings on ice, I now began to feel *too* there with clients—too deeply in touch with my own pain.

A turning point came in a session with Hank, a middle-aged lawyer I'd seen three years earlier and who'd just returned to therapy. His wife was leaving him, and he was struggling with serious depression and anxiety. Over the course of several sessions, he began—for the first time—to delve into his traumatic childhood. One day he told me, haltingly, that he'd been abused by a group of kids when he was seven years old.

It started, he said, when he was invited to go swimming with some older boys that he didn't know very well. "I guess it was pretty stupid to go with them," he said. "Because when we got there, they stripped me naked, threw me in the pond, and ran away with my clothes." He lapsed into silence, staring at the floor.

I leaned toward him. "What was that like, Hank?" I asked gently.

His shoulders began to heave, and he groaned.

"Take your time, Hank," I encouraged. "Let's make room for that boy from long ago."

From somewhere deep inside me, I felt my own heart constrict.

Hank began sobbing.

And so did I. All at once, I was that little boy in the horse barn again, with my neck in a noose. My brother was talking about hanging me. Sitting in my chair across from Hank, I wept.

He looked up at me, obviously startled, concerned.

I caught myself. "I'm so sorry, Hank," I said. I thought of trying to finesse the moment by saying something about being overwhelmed with empathy for his experience. But that was bullshit. I was feeling for *myself*, that little boy in the hangman's noose; I wasn't with my client at all.

"I'm so sorry, Hank," I said again. "In the midst of you talking about your terrifying, humiliating ordeal, I suddenly got connected to some of my own terrible childhood experience."

Hank looked at me kindly and said he appreciated my openness. While I was grateful for that, it was clear that his feelings had been short-circuited and that he was now taking care of me.

Hank and I got through the incident okay. He told me he actually felt some relief from knowing that I'd endured some scary stuff, too. But I was shaken to the core—shocked that my tears about the hanging episode were still there, almost 70 years later. I thought I'd dealt well with my childhood stuff during my work with Barbara back in the '90s. And to a large extent, I had. But, of course, trauma is etched into our brains and bodies. Some people do manage to resolve it. But for many of us, even if we've done good work in therapy, it remains with us, waiting for the right trigger.

I knew my time as a therapist was coming to an end. My tears—tears I'd shed for myself—had taken me away from my client in his healing moment. And it wasn't an isolated incident. Again and again, I found that my clients' pain was more apt to trigger my own distress than elicit wholehearted empathy for them.

It was time to say goodbye.

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To be a truly loving, compassionate, and well-boundaried therapist, one needs to find the balance and wisdom expressed in T. S. Eliot's poem "Ash Wednesday," in which the protagonist seeks "to care and not to care." I've long known that I was a codependent wounded healer, but until recently, I hadn't fully appreciated how my dissociative defenses had been an odd gift to my clients, providing a boundary that reliably protected them from my own unresolved emotional turmoil. I'm not recommending this path. Still, in a strange way, being disconnected from myself had allowed me to be a therapeutic presence for many of the folks I'd worked with.

As it turned out, my own healing journey did contribute to my decision to retire—as I used to joke about back in the day. The more contact I made with my emotions, the harder it was to keep them obediently under wraps. Also, as I said, I just got old. At age 75, my heightened vulnerability due to illness, plus the weight of the responsibility I felt for my clients, simply became too much.

In telling this story, I'm not suggesting that all therapists are inherently wounded healers who should be getting help. Most are not. Certainly, most therapists' heart-centered compassion and connection with clients don't depend on being a little dissociative. This is just one therapist's story about some of the challenges of our calling—what we bring to our work and what we take away from it. Just one experience of the complex, intimate alchemy between us and our clients.

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This morning, the meadow and woods behind our house are enshrouded in fog. I sit on my porch, sipping coffee and treasuring the silence and the intermittent calls of mourning doves. After all my health crises and the hazards of the pandemic, I feel blessed to be here now and get the chance to begin this—the getting old, sick, and dying chapter of my life.

It's been six months, exactly, since I retired. I look back on my career with awe and gratitude. Last night, I dreamed about my clients, some from this past year and some from 40 years ago. I still miss them, worry about how they are, and love them. But I don't miss being a therapist.

Recently, I started training to become a pastoral counselor at my church. In this work, I'm simply called to bear compassionate witness to parishioners in distress. I see them for three sessions only, and if they need more than a brief time with a caring heart, I refer them to appropriate treatment. I resonate with their emotions, but I don't get lost in them. Nor do I try to be a savior. The core of psychotherapy is built around truly compassionate listening, but over the years, I'd increasingly become an advice-giver, strategic interventionist, and frankly overfunctioning therapist. What I'm undertaking now feels different.

I'm regaining the heart of our calling, the profundity of simply bearing witness. I'm learning "to care and not to care."—to be responsive, but not responsible.

I'm learning how to be still.

To be present.

To practice sacred listening with all my heart.

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