

The Inner Work of Age: Shifting from Role to Soul

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Retirement from Clinical Practice Connie's Story as a Helping Professional

In each week of my career as a therapist, I shared intense intimacy with my clients and guided them where others fear to tread—into the shadow. I felt privileged to mentor them and watch them alter deeply ingrained patterns and lead more fulfilling lives.

I deeply loved my clients. My heart was filled by their openness, vulnerability, and honesty. It was filled with compassion for their suffering, too. I enjoyed the stories of their lives, their eagerness to learn shadow-work and plumb the depths of the unconscious, the seeker in their souls who longed for more awareness. My days were filled with depth and intimacy, and I felt gratitude.

But during my sixty-eighth year of life experience, I noticed a restlessness, a stirring that I had felt several times before at the end of a cycle and the beginning of another—when I had stopped teaching meditation full-time but had no vision of a new career and felt like I stepped off a cliff; when I had stopped working in journalism but didn't hear a new call and stepped into the dark unknown; when I had left book publishing and decided to go to grad school to become a therapist, but without financial or emotional support. Each time, my soul had whispered to me, and I had agreed to leave behind my former self and enter liminal space, not knowing what lay ahead. Each time, a path appeared, with allies and guides and, eventually, a fulfilling destination.

Now, I was aware that I was approaching a threshold again, although no one else in my friendship circle was using the "R" word. After many years of attuning to myself, I listened to the conflicting inner voices:

"I wonder what else I could do with the time I have left?" Then "I wonder what I need to stop doing."

"I think I should do more." Then "I think I should do less."

"I don't want to travel." Then I book more trips.

"I want to slow down." Then my calendar fills up.

As I reflected on these internal contradictions, I became aware that it no longer bothered me when clients disappeared without a formal closure. Previously, I felt that I was left holding the relationship when a client stopped communicating. Now, I could let it go. Previously, I looked forward to traveling from the Santa Monica mountains into my office in town. Now, I didn't want to do the drive. Previously, I enjoyed traveling into others' inner worlds. Now, I wanted more time to explore my own.

It wasn't that I cared any less about my clients; it was that my attention was moving away from the work, and my heart was opening in other ways. What was it moving toward? I was hearing the call of a divine messenger for a new orientation to time—less structure, more flow. A new orientation to responsibility—less obligation, more choice. A new orientation to service—from one-on-one therapy to teaching large groups. A new orientation to purpose—from role to soul.

Then, the most essential question arose: Who am I, if I'm not Dr. Connie, a therapist, the shadow expert? What would it mean to let go of my role and my brand? What have I sacrificed to maintain that role? Who am I if I am no longer the Doer? How do I overcome resistance to letting go in this transition?

First, I stopped accepting new clients. When they emailed, I took a breath, wished them well, and referred them out.

Next, I began discussing my own departure with clients. We explored the range of their feelings and moved slowly, each in a unique way, toward completion.

A few months later, the opportunity came to give up my city office. I went for it—and let go into the unknown.

I suspected that, with the gain of freedom, there also would be loss. I would feel less needed and less important for a while. I would feel less secure and more uncertain for a time. I would feel less independent with the loss of income from therapy. It would change my partnership with my husband, who was still working, and the way we cared for one another. And I might feel less purposeful and a bit disoriented, with the path ahead still hidden.

Perhaps hardest of all, I would lose the precious vehicle, the clinical relationship, in which to transmit all that I've learned from my own inner work, intellectual development, and spiritual growth to others. It has been a sacred container to radiate my level of development to others, who willingly received it.

Of course, I cherish my clients for who they are, but also for who they are for me. Aside from my husband and grandkids, who would I love with such fierceness? Who would receive my consistently positive gaze and devotion? That would be a terrible loss—and a potential gain, if I turned my loving gaze back to my family, friends, and self.

My clients love me back in a certain way, of course, in the projection of a good parent. For some, I'm the only good mother they've ever had; for others, the only kind sister or wise grandmother or spiritual mentor. As I've carried that positive projection over the years, I've become accustomed to wearing it like a gown and standing in the archetype for them, rather than disclosing my personal story. It will be a loss to give up the power and status of that projection—and a gain to cultivate more equal and reciprocal relationships. It will be a loss to give up the “brand” of shadow expert—and a gain to extend it into this whole new territory of late life.

Finally, I had to acknowledge the grief I'd been feeling about the direction the field of psychotherapy has taken. Some hundred years ago, the discovery and exploration of the unconscious was at the center of therapy. Freud, Jung, and their colleagues were like the first humans on the moon, traveling through entirely unknown worlds. As depth psychology evolved to include and transcend their findings, the unconscious remained the therapist's territory of choice. It came to be called the psyche, which is Greek for soul. I was fortunate to find a graduate school in the 1990s that still taught depth psychology, training us to orient to the unconscious and to honor the life of the soul.

Enter the American Psychological Association's school accreditation system, which has forced transpersonal and depth-oriented grad schools to either accommodate to their medical model or close. Enter the pharmaceutical companies. Today, psychology is a science, not an art. It's about the brain—transcranial magnetic stimulation, neural feedback, EMDR, and meds, meds, and more meds. Enter the ranking of psychiatrists as M.D.s at the top of the field, who only prescribe medications and no longer practice therapy. And it's about behavior—brief, cognitive-behavioral therapy, which posits that human beings have no soul, that we need only change our thinking to relieve symptoms, and that the relationship with the therapist is not relevant to healing. In the end, therapy has become no longer a spiritual journey guided by the precept “Know thyself.”

As I approached the threshold, during many conversations with my husband, Neil, I began to see how offering therapy had become a spiritual path for me. Yes, my meditation, shadow-work, and primary relationship were the key psychological and spiritual practices for my development. But now, with a 360-degree view, Neil and I could see how the practice of psychotherapy had cracked open my heart, helped me eliminate judgment, resolved some of my personal shadow issues, and pulled me into presence, hour by hour. It taught me to orient to the unconscious and attune to the hidden fears and unspoken dreams of others. It taught me to guide each of them as a soul on a journey.

In the first stage, I viewed the therapist/client relationship as subject/object. I was the expert who assessed, diagnosed, and treated the client. This created a superior/inferior dynamic in which the parent-child relationship could be relived. This is how therapists are trained to work, and it reinforces their ego needs to feel smart, admired, and special. This is a shadow side of all “helping” professions; it risks keeping those being helped in an inferior position. It risks splitting opposites into self/other and blocks a more unified experience.

In the second stage, I viewed the client and myself as part of a larger system, a mutual process of intersubjective experience, shared caring, love, and respect. I discovered that I learned from my clients, too, that there was something larger holding us both in the field of the unconscious. Poet Robert Bly referred to this energy as a “Third Body” that can emerge between two people, as if another energetic presence were in the room, joining us but larger than us at the same time. This more reciprocal dynamic transcends and includes the earlier stage; that is, I’m aware of the parental projection but I’m not operating from it. I feel less separate but not yet spiritually joined.

In the third stage, I discovered that therapy opens to something larger still—what’s inside the room is connected to what’s outside the room. The Third Body, holding our conscious and unconscious minds, is a reflection of the collective unconscious in the world at large. In other words, I am not only working on a client as the client works on me; the whole culture is in the room within us and between us, shaping and influencing us as we change, and as we shape and influence it. Our inner work, the evolution of soul, is affecting change in all living things. The work is happening in the room and outside the room at the same time—because everything is connected in a unified flow. This is the end of separation and the emergence of unity.

When I came to this stage, I was not operating from my mind; my speech became a manifestation of spontaneous, direct intuition. My client brought what I needed, as part of a collective process. I brought what the client needed. Sometimes every client came through the door with the same issue, and synchronicity appeared again and again. This collective stage transcends and includes the earlier stages; that is, I was diagnosing, while holding the projection and the unity all at once. We were working on the story of humanity not as two isolated people with egos and shadows, but as integral parts of humanity’s evolution as a species alongside other species.

So, retirement from clinical practice is not simply stepping away from the office. It means retiring a spiritual path to my own deepening and widening awareness. It means retiring the need to help; it means retiring the need for answers; it means retiring the need to be appreciated. It means retiring from a life that’s known and facing an unknown, liminal time. And it means retiring a practice of love that has connected me to the depths of the human soul and to the journey of the human species. It has been a privilege.

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