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THERAPY PARTNERSHIPS & COLLABORATIONS

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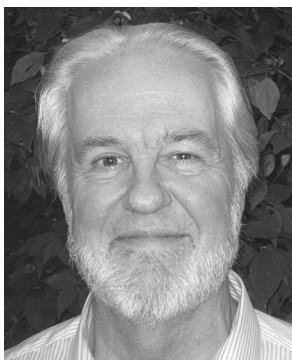
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JOHN RHEAD, PhD: I left California in 1971, freshly-minted Ph.D. from Stanford in hand and motorcycle in tow behind my '51 Chevy, bound for Maryland and my dream job—doing LSD research. I imagined a few years of doing that before returning to Colorado or California to settle down. Little did I know that fate had other plans waiting for me in Maryland in the form of four amazing women: my wife, our two daughters, and Susan. I'm still in Maryland and grateful for it. jrhead@umaryland.edu

We each wrote our portion of what follows before looking at what the other wrote.

AS JOHN SEES IT

People frequently comment that Susan and I are an unlikely pair. They usually make these comments to Susan rather than to me. I understand them to imply a question: “What is a sophisticated person like you doing with an unsophisticated oddball like John?” When Susan tells me about one of these encounters, my reaction is a mixture of amusement and anxiety. Over the years it has come to be almost entirely amusement. However, I do make some conscious effort not to be an embarrassment to her in public. When she makes a wardrobe suggestion or request, I am very much inclined to honor it.

I once disclosed to a group of male therapists who were very active in the New Warrior program that Susan co-leads an all-male group with me. One of them immediately asked me: “What is SHE doing there?” My immediate reply: “Damn good therapy.” I realized later that this is also my reply to those who wonder what Susan and I are doing together in general.

It was something of a whirlwind courtship. We were each on the rebound, having both recently ended a professional partnership—hers with a woman and mine with a man. After having lunch together a few times, we decided to take the plunge and rent an office together. That was 22 years ago. Since then we have been having lunch together each week. The lunch that immediately precedes December 25 has been officially declared the Office Christmas Party for a number of years.

Not long after we moved in together, we began doing our first group. Now we have four groups, and it seems unlikely that we will increase that number. Co-therapy seems much like co-parenting. It grows out of a certain kind of intimacy, it deepens intimacy as it goes on, and it occasionally presents huge challenges to the relationship. Intimacy is deepened not only by our coming to know each other more fully over time, but also by sharing those amazingly deep experiences that people in a mature group are able to access and that leave us grateful for the privilege of doing this work. At this point the depth of my appreciation for Susan

as a professional partner is exceeded only by my appreciation of her as a beloved friend.

In spite of the depth of our friendship, we socialize together very little away from the office. We have agreed that if one of us decides to close his or her practice, our weekly lunch date will continue uninterrupted.

We have spent many more years together in supervision groups than we have spent without being in such a group. The first of these was a paid supervision group led by two people who had been our therapists before we knew each other. The other two were peer groups that we (mostly Susan) started after the first supervision group ended. We were the only co-therapy couple in each of these groups and received invaluable support from the groups as we went through difficult passages in our relationship, while of course feeling enormously exposed and vulnerable. Therapeutic blunders by each of us would normally be seen by the other and processed by the two of us. Having the group brings in that many additional witnesses to our errors, along with much needed support in processing the impact of such errors on our relationship. When one of us is off balance in interacting with a group member who is the other's client, the work on our relationship is particularly delicate and critical.

I think my competitiveness has diminished over time. When Susan makes a brilliant intervention that is exactly the intervention I was just about to make, and it is recognized by the group as being brilliant, I am now more inclined to smile at our attunement than to gnash my teeth at having missed the chance to be the brilliant one.

Infidelity has been an issue. When a client of mine directed some of his virulent anti-semitism at Susan, she felt abandoned and betrayed by my failure to appreciate how terrifying this was for her and to intervene accordingly. When she began running a new group with another male therapist, I was startled at how much I felt like a cuckold. When that co-therapy relationship failed, it was difficult for me to find compassion in my heart for her disappointment and to refrain from gloating that I was the only one good enough for her. Events such as these have caused me to reflect on whether I, a Gentile, would stand with and perhaps risk my life for her, a Jew, in the event of another holocaust. I think I would.

The sexual component of our relationship is obscure. I am quite conscious that she is a very attractive woman whom I love a great deal. Early in our relationship, we had some negotiations about the frequency of hugging that felt right to each of us. In a way, that negotiation seemed to fulfill a popular gender stereotype in

Susan Jacobson



SUSAN JACOBSON, PhD: Susan's therapy practice is in Columbia, Maryland, where she lives with her West Highland terrier, Duffy. She travels as often as is possible and glories in her five grandchildren. therapy@susanjacobson.com

that I wanted a greater frequency than she did. However there doesn't seem to be much overt sexual chemistry between us, which is convenient given the nature of our relationship and the romantic relationships we have each had with others over time. However, there was one occasion when I unexpectedly found myself in a situation with Susan that had potentially sexual connotations, and I was surprised to discover how much sexual energy was suddenly present in me. This leads me to wonder if the way we keep our relationship primarily restricted to our time together in the office (even our weekly lunch is something we feel justified in deducting as a business expense since it always includes some discussion of what is going on in our practices) helps to keep some of our sexual energy restricted as well.

I often tell couples that every intimate relationship is partially psychotherapeutic in that it creates an opportunity for one person to catch a glimpse of the other's unconscious and to give feedback about it. Between Susan and me such feedback often starts with, "I was uncomfortable with what you did in yesterday's group." On an easy day, the one hearing this will acknowledge some kind of therapeutic misstep and already will have begun the process of examining where it came from. On a hard day, the recipient of the feedback initially will have no idea what is being talked about and will feel like the victim of the other's unconscious distortions. The growing edge of this feedback process—and it is a delicate one—occurs when it can be done in the group itself at the time the behavior in question arises. We know each other well enough to know the current struggles, growing edges, and character issues in the other's life that might show up unconsciously in group.

I wonder what writing this paper is going to do to our relationship.

AS SUSAN SEES IT

We met in the airport on the way home from an AAP Summer Workshop. I had seen John around at AAP meetings and read his frequent submissions to the newsletter, but we had never before spoken. From a distance, I saw him as a bit strange; yet I was fascinated by his willingness, in print and in community meetings, to reveal with apparent sincerity so much of himself and to seem to accept whatever came back at him from others.

I was taken with his effervescence. He must have been drawn to something in me, and we decided to get to know one another. My memory is that he called soon after, and we met for the first of a series of monthly lunches at which we talked without pause, sometimes interrupting each other, in our enthusiasm to share who we are, our love of the work of psychotherapy, ideas that piqued our interest, and details of our life journeys. I always had fun, and I always felt both stimulated and a bit breathless when we parted.

About six months after we met, we began to explore the possibility of sharing an office suite. Both of us were in offices too large for a single practitioner due to the dissolution of previous partnerships. I had recently emerged from a 13-year

partnership that had ended badly, and a 7-year second marriage that had ended as well as shattered dreams allowed. Because our leases were ending, and neither of us wanted to renew, we were propelled into faster decision-making than we knew would have been prudent. Hurriedly, we tried to review what had gone wrong in our previous partnerships. I clearly remember telling John everything I could think of that my former partner had objected to about me (and that I wanted to continue doing). John told me what had driven him nuts in his shared practice. We tried to imagine what might cause difficulties going forward so that those issues were, at least, out in the open. John was more excitedly optimistic than I, a difference that continues to this day. When someone leaves group before we think he's ready, John holds out hope that he'll show up in our waiting room the following week. There's a joke about someone happily shoveling manure because, "With all this shit, there must be a pony here somewhere." We have many opportunities to repeat this punch line. At the outset we tried to fix one another; I wanted him to be more like me—guess what he wanted? Today we're more likely to try to help each other.

Twenty-two years ago, we opened our new office. Our process in locating a space, designing the build-out, and negotiating the trade-off between the larger office vs. the one with more windows augured well for the partnership we were creating.

A year later we began our first co-therapy group, still going strong along with the three other groups we created over time. We have witnessed both each other's skill and sometimes brilliance, and also our most egregious mistakes. I love it when someone is mourning the death of a pet, and just at the exquisitely right moment, John asks them to say the pet's name. Every time this happens, it is a cathartic experience for the patient.

On the other hand, for a period of several months, I struggled to make John aware of the misogyny being directed toward me by two of his male patients in one of our groups. I felt that his blindness to the effect it was having on me and on the group implied his complicity. It was our longest and most hurtful fight. Our consultation group held us gently and helped us to work through the issues and our bruised feelings. We have been in supervision or consultation groups throughout our co-therapist relationship, and I send prayers of gratitude their way all the time.

I have learned so much in our professional marriage: to develop some humility about what John once termed my "pathological certainty," to be more tolerant of differences, to speak openly about my anger and my complaints, and to trust that, no matter how hard-fought the fight, we will weather it and go on. I've been forced to examine my competitiveness and envy and to tolerate or challenge John's. He's impatient with what he describes as my impatience, and he is helping me to understand it and to soften. Without John's urging, I wouldn't be writing this article, and I wouldn't be co-author of our group therapy article, "How to Get the Most Out of Group Therapy: an Owner's Manual," previously published in *Voices* (2007).

We have lunch that we call “staff meeting” every Thursday from noon until 2:00 PM. The time is precious for discussing group issues and for sharing intimate details of our inner and external lives. We never miss unless one of us is out of town or sick. Last summer, when I was in the Galapagos Islands on vacation, John emailed me for consultation about a thorny issue that had emerged in one of our groups, and I was able to comment before the group’s next meeting. We have each other’s back.

In addition to our having created a smooth and easy office partnership and an enlivening co-therapy relationship, John, in his role as the fix-it man, has helped me fix things in my house and put together Ikea furniture that had me stumped. He also chopped into firewood a huge tree that fell in my yard—and then a second one. I am his wardrobe consultant and window into aspects of popular culture. We are witnesses to each other’s joys and sorrows; we’re best friends. I’m a better therapist and a happier person because we are together. This is my third “marriage” and, by far, the longest and the best.

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We only really value a relationship when it survives our best attempts to destroy it. As every sado-masochist knows, nothing is more seductive than resilience. It is the only aphrodisiac that continues to work the more you take it. So the only way we can test our infidelity is through monogamy. A lot of confusion is created by our belief that it is the other way around.

— Adam Phillip
Monogamy