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# Endings

**Rosemary Tredgold**

## Abstract

We all know that endings are part of our human existence and, as psychotherapists, we know that our termination of work with clients often raises for them memories of other, incomplete endings. In the same way, leaving the job of psychotherapy raises memories for the psychotherapist of other endings, particularly in the profession. This paper argues that it is important to prepare for the ending of our professional lives, whether this ending be planned or unplanned. Without preparation and support through the process it is impossible to make the good enough endings that we owe both to our clients and to ourselves.

## Introduction

This paper, which has been three years in the writing, marks the ending of 36 years of professional practice: an ending which needed to be recognised and evaluated in some way. I resigned from full-time work in 1997, continuing to teach part-time for a further year. As I considered the closure of my professional life, I became aware of ends, seemingly woven into the tapestry of my existence, suddenly standing out like loose threads needing to be darned into the fabric: in other words, needing to be integrated.

As I wrote, I found my throat tightening at times and my eyes filling with tears. Then came the question: "Shouldn't I have got over it by now?" This is the response shaped by the dominant discourse in our society about grief: that one should 'get over it' and 'in a short time'. I prefer Silverman and Klass's (1996) view of grief as needing to be integrated into a person's system. This means the integration of all the layers of experience of the life lost and the life existing without the grieved object, a process that takes time. With this alternative discourse in mind, I persevered with the paper, knowing that the writing of it was also part of the process of letting go. As well as being useful to me, I hope this story may be useful to others in provoking discussion of an immensely complex process: terminating one's professional self at the same time as terminating work with clients.

## **The potential space of retirement**

I decided to resign from full-time work when the demands of the institution I worked in became intolerably restrictive. Changes in management and philosophy, together with a sore back, led to my decision to retire sooner than I would have expected. I had the financial resources to do so, and in therapy I had identified parts of me that did not want to go on caring for others in the way that I had done. I needed a change from working with depressed people, and wanted time to explore the world and my own spirituality.

Last year, I travelled like a butterfly through China, alighting briefly in places across that vast country, of whose history and culture I knew little. I travelled, wondered, walked and stared at the space, history, beauty and differences of culture and custom. I returned with two themes etched on my memory: the importance of the long view and the value of the space between. 'The long view' is exemplified by the response given to an inquiry as to the importance of the Cultural Revolution. We were told that this would not be known for another 100 years, in contrast to the instant comment of the West on major political events. 'The space between' was illustrated by the design of Chinese gardens. Gardens in China are designed to highlight the balance between plants, buildings, water and rocks, recognising the value of the space between each ingredient and the harmony of Yin and Yang. They are designed to enable the viewer to look through windows and doorways to the splendours beyond.

Since resigning from work, I have greatly enjoyed 'the space between', the time to think and ponder. As I came to write this paper, I found myself immersed again in the maelstrom of elements ever-present in full-time employment: competing deadlines, complex clients, known usefulness, intimacy and conflict, providing a rich if pressured working life. The seeming space of retirement had presented a threatening void when I was working. "What will you do?" was the constant question that I was asked. My response then was, "I don't know, I want time to recover from burnout", trusting that this response would ensure my facing that void and not filling it with activity.

## **Terminating psychotherapy for the psychotherapist**

Much has been written about the termination of therapy, but I could discover little on the process of the retirement of a psychotherapist at the same time. It seemed that most psychotherapists do not give up, but just fade away, dealing with fewer and fewer clients. Was this the only way to go? Was it a wiser, gentler way of not dealing with very difficult issues all at once? This was

certainly how I had previously envisaged giving up work. However, I knew I did not have the energy to do this, and wanted a complete break from client work. So, having arrived at this decision, I was faced with the dilemma of how to disentangle myself. I remember thinking "Thank goodness I am not dying as well; I don't have to say goodbye to everyone at the same time". Yet in one sense I was dying, dying to a full-time professional existence, identity, meaning and all that work entailed.

I was fortunate enough to be able to finish in my own time. What would it have been like—for my clients and myself—if I had not been able to do this? This raises important questions that all therapists would do well to consider, as Suzanne Henderson's endpiece to this paper illustrates. What arrangements have you made for your clients if something unforeseen should happen to you and you were not able to terminate your therapy with them? If you were to develop Alzheimer's, who would persuade you to stop working? Who would place your clients' needs for the closure of a relationship with you above your need to continue work?

I think that we, as psychotherapists, need to pay far more attention to our endings, and to the meaning and processes these entail, something our culture is not good at. Perhaps this is why there are so few papers on this topic. Those psychotherapists who do not withdraw gradually retire completely, close all doors on the profession and do not return to describe the process. I hope this will change and that others will share their experiences of the process of retirement.

### **The meaning of retirement and the place of mentors**

My job as a psychotherapist and educator had been an immensely enjoyable, stimulating, frustrating part of my life, and gave me a good livelihood. Letting go of this has at times resembled the unravelling of the strands of 16 ply knitting wool, each ply needing separation and integration.

In giving up my work as a psychotherapist, I was aware I was relinquishing some hopes and dreams: the dream of doing a superb piece of work, making a mark on history, understanding all about human interactions and making reparation for my mistakes, as well as other personal issues that I will come to later. There was a loss of what had been or might have been, and concern for the future. I am not sure what I thought of retirement, just that I knew I was not ready for that state yet. I saw retirement as a void, and retired people as

somehow less valued and interesting. As I wrote this I wondered what you, my readers, would be thinking of me, and realised this is a crucial part of retirement. What will others think of us as 'retired persons'?

One of the difficulties in leaving work was that as well as there being little written, there were few with whom I could discuss my fears and rejoicings. I felt somewhat isolated in my decision. In hindsight, I think there was a component of shame for me in giving up what had become a major struggle in the institution I worked in, and this prevented me from seeking more help, other than from supervision and from a colleague who had studied the effects of retirement. I was very grateful to know of some psychotherapists who had retired and survived. It was with relief and gratitude that I met women, particularly in North America, who had chosen to resign in their 50s, and were enjoying life! I also had the invaluable support of a New Zealand woman making life changes and leaving a high profile job. These mentors in the possible creativity of early retirement were very valuable, even if I still had to do it my way.

My resignation provoked strong emotions in others and it was difficult dealing with their reactions. The decision to give up client work highlighted my need not to care for and be responsible to others; there were few who could support this part of me because of what it might mean in my relationship to them. Many people, having supported me through good and bad times, were now encouraging me to continue in work, understanding my desire to quit an increasingly restrictive institution, but not that I should give up altogether. For some the move provoked envy that I could afford to do this; others had feelings of loss and anger that I was leaving them to struggle in that same difficult institution; others could not face their own retirement, perceiving it to be the end of life. These reactions compounded my own fear of retirement as a dust heap rather than a rich, nutritious compost.

In retiring I had thought I had solely to leave my clients. As I wrote this I realised my task had also been to leave the counselling service, the institution, my colleagues, and my own professional practice all at the same time: layers of terminations. A tertiary institution is a place of many, varied personalities, all contributing to a rich tapestry. After 23 years I wanted to recognise the enormous contribution so many of my non-counselling colleagues had made to my life there. Then there were the special friends I had made over years of coexistence and struggles to maintain humane value systems in times of increasing monetarism. I wanted to say goodbye and thank you to as many as

I could in private, as well as on the necessary public occasion—a celebration (or a wake) for those who had trusted and supported us.

### **Personal issues**

It was an immense step for me to give up work, as all my family conditioning had been to work hard in the service and care of others. As a single person much of my identity was linked to this role. Psychotherapy and teaching had satisfied many of my needs: purpose, curiosity, usefulness and intellectual stimulation. In retiring, I would have to mourn the loss of a place in which I could care for others, the pleasure of being part of a larger whole, the external recognition and status this role provided, money, purpose, friendships, opportunities to explore ideas and stimuli. It was not as though I was giving up a mundane, unexciting, undemanding, dull profession. There were many good things to mourn: the pleasure of working with others, seeing people change and grow, the stimulation of new ideas and the challenge of an institution where racism and sexism were constantly questioned. I also had to face the fact that this was the end of my professional life, without the excitement and hope of new and continuing work elsewhere.

An aspect of my pathology is to see as my fault any breakdown in communications, so that I felt shame about the deteriorating relationships within the counselling service, even though they resulted from bad management decisions over which I had no control. The ending of the service was the end of a dream, and I am not sure how well I dealt with my disappointment, anger and sorrow at the way this was done. My anger was, however, tinged with humour and pride that I had managed to get away with providing long-term psychotherapy for so long. In hindsight, my anger, guilt and sorrow at the disintegration of the 'good enough' service was one of the elements in my overarching concern to resign in a 'good enough' manner.

Then there were the specific client-related aspects of my being. My philosophy of psychotherapy, learnt over the years through mentors, experience, trial and error, was that I was there for the long haul with a client. I was available to them for as long as they needed me and were progressing, within the limitations of a professional framework. So in leaving my job, I had to deal with feelings of guilt and shame about abandoning clients before they were ready. I had been part of a counselling service where long-term therapy was available as long as they remained students. My resignation coincided with the destruction of this service as I had known it and, to make matters worse, there was no place other

than private therapy and the crisis agencies in the town to refer clients who needed to continue therapy.

Psychotherapy consists of intimate relationships. I had to mourn the loss of the intimacy I had had with a wide variety of people, including clients with whom I had struggled. I would not know how they were progressing. Had they achieved what they wanted? Were their relationships flourishing? These were feelings I knew well in the termination of my work with most clients. Alongside this there was relief at not having to be responsible to others in this way and not to have the demands of anxiety-provoking, disturbed, manipulative clients. I would be free of an appointment-packed diary, stretching for weeks in advance, and would have time to think, travel, garden and enjoy friends. But would it be like this? Or would my fears of the void be realised, and if so, would I be able to manage this? These were some of the threads running through my mind, having to be known and contained along with any unconscious ones. So I began the long goodbye to clients, the counselling service and the institution, knowing that each interaction would produce a different inter-subjective experience. In this process I attempted to call on my intellectual understanding of client termination as well as my empathy for the other.

### **Process of termination**

We know that seemingly sudden termination is more likely to be experienced by the client as rejection or abandonment than a planned and forewarned ending would be. Working in a tertiary educational institution had provided me with a very helpful frame of realistic reference for clients in planning terminations. The end of the year marked a natural gateway of change; even if students were studying for long-term courses it marked some natural boundary. So there seemed to be few clients experiencing abandonment, in that they were already expecting some change at the end of the year. Or was it that I missed this through my own countertransference issues and my weariness at having to deal with loss continuously?

There seem to me to be a number of dilemmas in the termination of therapy at the therapist's initiative. Firstly, how much notice should one give? Clearly this may be different for long- and short-term clients. For long-term clients the termination process will have a life of its own and this needs to be taken into account. Some may be overwhelmed by old fears and difficulties that had seemed to be under control. Others face the challenge of putting new skills to

the test without the support of therapy. I suggest the therapist therefore give as much notice as possible.

There are ramifications to living in a small town and working in an institution with a very efficient and far-reaching grapevine. In respecting this, I decided to tell most clients at the same time unless they were very short-term, when the information seemed irrelevant and unhelpful, as it would only detract from their need to be held for a limited time. For one student I decided it was important she heard from me before the others; she was a very long-term client in whose work my decision came at the same time as some major issues for her about terminating therapy. What had been a mutual dance in the decision as to when this would occur was altered by my decision. I considered she needed more time with me to work through this and told her before other clients and asked her not to tell other people. Was this right? I am not sure.

In informing clients of my departure so long in advance, I was also aware that I ran the risk of their dealing with perceived abandonment in the same way as they had done previously, such as by avoidance and so cutting short the time we might have had together. This proved to be true, some not returning after I had told them, deepening my feelings of guilt. Some students were able to deal more openly with my departure. They had made gains in therapy, but could have made more, and with these I had to deal with my sorrow and sense of inadequacy.

### **Personal disclosure**

How much of myself did I share in this process? I agonised over this, and over the dilemma of how much self-disclosure is ever therapeutic. When it seemed appropriate I shared my warm feelings for the client and my hopes for their future. I accepted presents as they were given: I think it is important to honour clients' gratitude for living more creative lives. One student gave me something he had made, and in a paradoxical way this was more difficult to receive because of my love of craftwork. The piece was beautiful, but as one of the central issues of our relationship had been his need to take care of everyone including me, I was concerned it might have been given in the same vein. I said so, and was told very firmly that it was not so; that the ingredients came from the volcanoes of Antarctica and represented the molten fire of his experiences with me and that he wanted me to have it. I was enormously moved and said so.

When students asked why I was leaving I attempted to listen carefully to the meaning behind the words. At times it was clearly to satisfy their own concerns

as to my feelings for them. Had they been too difficult? Had I found their struggles too hard to bear? Others wanted information out of their interested, caring selves. I responded to this. To them I explained that I needed a change and found it difficult to continue in the changing environment of the institution.

When the process of termination produced regression or strong emotion, I had to maintain my intellectual but empathic understanding of the person. My dilemma was to stay empathically attuned to my clients when their issues mirrored mine, or triggered off within me feelings of inadequacy or failure in such a way that I had to shut down emotionally. In this I was greatly helped by supervision, which I found to be a place where I could express my side of the journey. Supervision was a place to grieve, to enjoy the prospect of freedom and also discuss the process of how to say goodbye as well as I could.

## Conclusion

I have reached the end of the description of part of a journey. In the revisiting, I have reclaimed some of the positive aspects of a long career, including pride in starting a counselling service where short- and long-term psychotherapy could be practised and available to all those who needed it. The torrid times of the destruction of the service have been put into context. The process of leaving was good-enough, not perfect by any means, and I continue to integrate it, and to learn how I can use the skills and wisdom of a lifetime of working with people. I have time to enjoy friends, something I could not do before, as I was generally spaced out and needing time on my own. I miss professional contacts and ideas and enjoy the stimulation of the Self Psychology group in Christchurch. I have weathered both a hip replacement and the feared void of retirement, with much support from friends and from a spiritual nurture group of Quakers. Paddy, a wheaten terrier, is a great companion and forces me to walk. There are luxuries such as films at 11 a.m. and others who do not work to see and do things with.

When I left school, my heroine was Lady Hester Stanhope, who rode through the deserts of Arabia. The traveller in me became buried in work and she is emerging while she can, to see blue footed-boobies, Machu Pichu and, I hope, the Silk Road next year. I still find it difficult to say I have retired completely, partly because of the stigma attached to this and partly because I am not ready to close all the doors on a rich existence. My ambivalence is evident in the paradox of my offering this paper and the continuing energy and interest



represented in its authorship. I take pleasure in my memories of an exciting job and I am still interested to read and learn, and sometimes I wish I were still working. Just sometimes!

## Reference

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## Postscript: An unplanned 'ending'

### Suzanne Henderson

In December 1999 I had planned to take a two month break, to go to the UK to visit my son and his wife and to enjoy a Northern Christmas: something I had always wanted to do. I had prepared my clients for my absence over this two month period and was to leave two days later. I put my tiredness down to a chronic anaemic condition and the need for a long holiday. To my dismay, after a series of tests I heard the dreaded words 'You have cancer and will require immediate surgery to remove the cancer'. As I struggled to assimilate this news the wonderful mechanism of denial kicked in and I went into coping mode, dealing with what was most pressing: to prepare myself for surgery and a six-month of chemotherapy in the best way I could. The implications of what this diagnosis might mean were temporarily lost to me, waiting to be processed later in my grief.

Most of us live with the wonderfully comforting illusion that we will always be able to carry on as we are: well, at least until we are old. Losing this was one of the major facets of my grief. I found myself looking at people and envying them the comfort of 'knowing' they could keep on keeping on and the luxury of feeling able to plan a future. There was doubt about the future for me. Would I recover, or would this be the beginning of the process of dying? I did not know.

What was to become of my clients? Had I prepared for this? The answer was no. My clients thought I was on holiday, so this gave me two months' grace to prepare myself to tell them I would not be back for a while. I was not looking

forward to this disclosure of such a personal and profoundly disturbing experience. I felt I needed to be honest to prepare my clients for what was promising to be an extended period of absence, so that they could make their own decisions about how they wanted to deal with this disruption. I also felt that I wanted to tell most of my clients myself, but I was aware I was too fragile to deal with their fantasies about what this might mean.

My supervisor and some colleagues offered their assistance and I gladly accepted this. We shared the contacting, with me telling my long-term clients myself. Some were very distressed by my sudden departure and found it difficult to accept what was happening. I found this stressful, sometimes feeling guilty and wanting to make it better for them: I had always been there, obsessively punctual and waiting. But this time something greater was happening which I felt I had little control over.

The one preparation I had made for this eventuality was to have procured an income protection policy, which for me was a life saver. I support myself financially so this enabled me to take the time off and devote the year to my healing. Now, after a year off for treatment and two lots of surgery, I am feeling well and regaining my energy. Although I don't think I will ever want to say, as some people do, that the experience of cancer was the best thing that has happened to me, I have learnt a great deal from the experience. I feel positive about the future but I take nothing for granted. I appreciate and value more acutely the wonder of this life and the relationships I have both professionally and personally.

I have begun work again, both with the clients who waited, processing the disruption they have experienced, and the new clients who come my way without knowing what has gone on for me during this last year. I have many thoughts about the effect of the negative projections that we often hold in the course of our work as psychotherapists. I wonder whether we are fully able to discharge those projections in our self-care rituals, and what impact this has on our wellbeing. I realise that my commitment to self-care as a balance to this work is a priority for me.

My message to you, the reader, is to consider how you would manage if you were suddenly unable to continue working and to think about what strategies you would put in place for that—unplanned—eventuality.

Email: [suzannehenderson@yahoo.co.nz](mailto:suzannehenderson@yahoo.co.nz)