


Lori Gottlieb

“Rarely has a book challenged me to see myself in an entirely new light, and was at the same time laugh-out-loud funny and utterly absorbing.”

— KATIE COURIC



MAYBE
YOU
SHOULD
TALK
TO
SOMEONE

A Therapist, *Her* Therapist, and Our Lives Revealed

**Maybe
You Should
Talk to
Someone**

* * *

**A Therapist, *Her* Therapist,
and Our Lives Revealed**

Lori Gottlieb

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It is proposed that happiness be classified as a psychiatric disorder and be included in future editions of the major diagnostic manuals under the new name: major affective disorder, pleasant type. In a review of the relevant literature it is shown that happiness is statistically abnormal, consists of a discrete cluster of symptoms, is associated with a range of cognitive abnormalities, and probably reflects the abnormal functioning of the central nervous system. One possible objection to this proposal remains—that happiness is not negatively valued. However, this objection is dismissed as scientifically irrelevant.

—RICHARD BENTALL,
JOURNAL OF MEDICAL ETHICS, 1992

The eminent Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung said this:
*“People will do anything, no matter how absurd,
to avoid facing their own souls.”*

But he also said this:
“Who looks inside, awakes.”

Author's Note

This is a book that asks, “How do we change?” and answers with “In relation to others.” The relationships I write about here, between therapists and patients, require a sacred trust for any change to occur. In addition to attaining written permission, I have gone to great lengths to disguise identities and any recognizable details, and in some instances, material and scenarios from a few patients have been attributed to one. All changes were carefully considered and painstakingly chosen to remain true to the spirit of each story while also serving the greater goal: to reveal our shared humanity so that we can see ourselves more clearly. Which is to say, if you see yourself in these pages, it's both coincidental and intentional.

A note on terminology: Those who come to therapy are referred to in various ways, most commonly as *patients* or *clients*. I don't believe that either word quite captures the relationship I have with the people I work with. But *the people I work with* is awkward, and *clients* might be confusing, given that term's many connotations, so for simplicity and clarity, I use *patients* throughout this book.

Part One

Nothing is more desirable than to be released from
an affliction, but nothing is more frightening
than to be divested of a crutch.

—*James Baldwin*

1

Idiots

CHART NOTE, JOHN:

Patient reports feeling “stressed out” and states that he is having difficulty sleeping and getting along with his wife. Expresses annoyance with others and seeks help “managing the idiots.”

Have compassion.

Deep breath.

Have compassion, have compassion, have compassion . . .

I’m repeating this phrase in my head like a mantra as the forty-year-old man sitting across from me is telling me about all of the people in his life who are “idiots.” Why, he wants to know, is the world filled with so many idiots? Are they born this way? Do they become this way? Maybe, he muses, it has something to do with all the artificial chemicals that are added to the food we eat nowadays.

“That’s why I try to eat organic,” he says. “So I don’t become an idiot like everyone else.”

I’m losing track of which idiot he’s talking about: the dental hygienist who asks too many questions (“None of them rhetorical”), the coworker who *only* asks questions (“He never makes *statements*, because that would imply that he had something to say”), the driver in front of him who stopped at a yellow light (“No sense of *urgency!*”), the Apple technician at the Genius Bar who couldn’t fix his laptop (“Some genius!”).

“John,” I begin, but he’s starting to tell a rambling story about his wife. I can’t get a word in edgewise, even though he has come to me for help.

I, by the way, am his new therapist. (His previous therapist, who lasted just three sessions, was “nice, but an idiot.”)

“And then Margo gets angry—can you believe it?” he’s saying. “But she doesn’t *tell* me she’s angry. She just *acts* angry, and I’m supposed to *ask* her what’s wrong. But I know if I ask, she’ll say, ‘Nothing,’ the first three times, and then maybe the fourth or fifth time she’ll say, ‘You *know* what’s wrong,’ and I’ll say, ‘No, I don’t, or I wouldn’t be *asking!*’”

He smiles. It’s a huge smile. I try to work with the smile—anything to change his monologue into a dialogue and make contact with him.

“I’m curious about your smile just now,” I say. “Because you’re talking about being frustrated by many people, including Margo, and yet you’re smiling.”

His smile gets bigger. He has the whitest teeth I’ve ever seen. They’re gleaming like diamonds. “I’m smiling, Sherlock, because I know *exactly* what’s bothering my wife!”

“Ah!” I reply. “So—”

“Wait, wait. I’m getting to the best part,” he interrupts. “So, like I said, I really *do* know what’s wrong, but I’m not that interested in hearing another complaint. So this time, instead of asking, I decide I’m going to—”

He stops and peers at the clock on the bookshelf behind me.

I want to use this opportunity to help John slow down. I could comment on the glance at the clock (does he feel rushed in here?) or the fact that he just called me Sherlock (was he irritated with me?). Or I could stay more on the surface in what we call “the content”—the narrative he’s telling—and try to understand more about why he equates Margo’s feelings with a complaint. But if I stay in the content, we won’t connect at all this session, and John, I’m learning, is somebody who has trouble making contact with the people in his life.

“John,” I try again. “I wonder if we can go back to what just happened ___”

“Oh, good,” he says, cutting me off. “I still have twenty minutes left.” And then he’s back to his story.

I sense a yawn coming on, a strong one, and it takes what feels like superhuman strength to keep my jaw clenched tight. I can feel my muscles resisting, twisting my face into odd expressions, but thankfully the yawn stays inside. Unfortunately, what comes out instead is a burp. A loud one. As though I’m drunk. (I’m not. I’m a lot of unpleasant things in this moment, but drunk isn’t one of them.)

Because of the burp, my mouth starts to pop open again. I squeeze my lips together so hard that my eyes begin to tear.

Of course, John doesn't seem to notice. He's still going on about Margo. *Margo did this. Margo did that. I said this. She said that. So then I said—*

During my training, a supervisor once told me, "There's something likable in everyone," and to my great surprise, I found that she was right. It's impossible to get to know people deeply and not come to like them. We should take the world's enemies, get them in a room to share their histories and formative experiences, their fears and their struggles, and global adversaries would suddenly get along. I've found something likable in literally everyone I've seen as a therapist, including the guy who attempted murder. (Beneath his rage, he turned out to be a real sweetheart.)

I didn't even mind the week before, at our first session, when John explained that he'd come to me because I was a "nobody" here in Los Angeles, which meant that he wouldn't run into any of his television-industry colleagues when coming for treatment. (His colleagues, he suspected, went to "well-known, *experienced* therapists.") I simply tagged that for future use, when he'd be more open to engaging with me. Nor did I flinch at the end of that session when he handed me a wad of cash and explained that he preferred to pay this way because he didn't want his wife to know he was seeing a therapist.

"You'll be like my mistress," he'd suggested. "Or, actually, more like my hooker. No offense, but you're not the kind of woman I'd choose as a mistress . . . if you know what I mean."

I *didn't* know what he meant (someone blonder? Younger? With whiter, more sparkly teeth?), but I figured that this comment was just one of John's defenses against getting close to anybody or acknowledging his need for another human being.

"Ha-ha, my hooker!" he said, pausing at the door. "I'll just come here each week, release all my pent-up frustration, and nobody has to know! Isn't that funny?"

Oh, yeah, I wanted to say, *super-funny.*

Still, as I heard him laugh his way down the hall, I felt confident that I could grow to like John. Underneath his off-putting presentation, something likable—even beautiful—was sure to emerge.

But that was last week.

Today he just seems like an asshole. An asshole with spectacular teeth.

Have compassion, have compassion, have compassion. I repeat my silent mantra then refocus on John. He's talking about a mistake made by one of the crew members on his show (a man whose name, in John's telling, is simply The Idiot) and just then, something occurs to me: John's rant sounds eerily familiar. Not the situations he's describing, but the feelings they evoke in him—and in *me*. I know how affirming it feels to blame the outside world for my frustrations, to deny ownership of whatever role I might have in the existential play called *My Incredibly Important Life*. I know what it's like to bathe in self-righteous outrage, in the certainty that I'm completely right and have been terribly wronged, because that's *exactly* how I've felt all day.

What John doesn't know is that I'm reeling from last night, when the man I thought I was going to marry unexpectedly called it quits. Today I'm trying to focus on my patients (allowing myself to cry only in the ten-minute breaks between sessions, carefully wiping away my running mascara before the next person arrives). In other words, I'm dealing with my pain the way I suspect John has been dealing with his: by covering it up.

As a therapist, I know a lot about pain, about the ways in which pain is tied to loss. But I also know something less commonly understood: that change and loss travel together. We can't have change without loss, which is why so often people say they want change but nonetheless stay exactly the same. To help John, I'm going to have to figure out what his loss would be, but first, I'm going to have to understand mine. Because right now, all I can think about is what my boyfriend did last night.

The idiot!

I look back at John and think: *I hear you, brother.*

Wait a minute, you might be thinking. Why are you telling me all this? Aren't therapists supposed to keep their personal lives private? Aren't they supposed to be blank slates who never reveal anything about themselves, objective observers who refrain from calling their patients names—even in their heads? Besides, aren't therapists, of all people, supposed to have their lives together?

On the one hand, yes. What happens in the therapy room should be done on behalf of the patient, and if therapists aren't able to separate their own struggles from those of the people who come to them, then they should, without question, choose a different line of work.

On the other hand, this—right here, right now, between you and me—isn't therapy, but a story about therapy: how we heal and where it leads us. Like in those National Geographic Channel shows that capture the embryonic development and birth of rare crocodiles, I want to capture the process in which humans, struggling to evolve, push against their shells until they quietly (but sometimes loudly) and slowly (but sometimes suddenly) crack open.

So while the image of me with mascara running down my tear-streaked face between sessions may be uncomfortable to contemplate, that's where this story about the handful of struggling humans you are about to meet begins—with my own humanity.

Therapists, of course, deal with the daily challenges of living just like everyone else. This familiarity, in fact, is at the root of the connection we forge with strangers who trust us with their most delicate stories and secrets. Our training has taught us theories and tools and techniques, but whirring beneath our hard-earned expertise is the fact that we know just how hard it is to be a person. Which is to say, we still come to work each day as ourselves—with our own sets of vulnerabilities, our own longings and insecurities, and our own histories. Of all my credentials as a therapist, my most significant is that I'm a card-carrying member of the human race.

But revealing this humanity is another matter. One colleague told me that when her doctor called with the news that her pregnancy wasn't viable, she was standing in a Starbucks, and she burst into tears. A patient happened to see her, canceled her next appointment, and never came back.

I remember hearing the writer Andrew Solomon tell a story about a married couple he'd met at a conference. During the course of the day, he said, each spouse had confessed independently to him to taking antidepressants but didn't want the other to know. It turned out that *they were hiding the same medication in the same house*. No matter how open we as a society are about formerly private matters, the stigma around our emotional struggles remains formidable. We'll talk with almost anyone about our physical health (can anyone imagine spouses hiding their reflux medication from each other?), even our sex lives, but bring up anxiety or depression or an intractable sense of grief, and the expression on the face looking back at you will probably read, *Get me out of this conversation, pronto*.

But what are we so afraid of? It's not as if we're going to peer in those darker corners, flip on the light, and find a bunch of cockroaches. Fireflies love the dark too. There's beauty in those places. But we have to look in there to see it.

My business, the therapy business, is about looking.
And not just with my patients.

A little-discussed fact: Therapists go to therapists. We're required, in fact, to go during training as part of our hours for licensure so that we know firsthand what our future patients will experience. We learn how to accept feedback, tolerate discomfort, become aware of blind spots, and discover the impact of our histories and behaviors on ourselves and others.

But then we get licensed, people come to seek *our* counsel and . . . we still go to therapy. Not continuously, necessarily, but a majority of us sit on somebody else's couch at several points during our careers, partly to have a place to talk through the emotional impact of the kind of work we do, but partly because life happens and therapy helps us confront our demons when they pay a visit.

And visit they will, because everyone has demons—big, small, old, new, quiet, loud, whatever. These shared demons are testament to the fact that we aren't such outliers after all. And it's with this discovery that we can create a different relationship with our demons, one in which we no longer try to reason our way out of an inconvenient inner voice or numb our feelings with distractions like too much wine or food or hours spent surfing the internet (an activity my colleague calls “the most effective short-term nonprescription painkiller”).

One of the most important steps in therapy is helping people take responsibility for their current predicaments, because once they realize that they can (and must) construct their own lives, they're free to generate change. Often, though, people carry around the belief that the majority of their problems are circumstantial or situational—which is to say, external. And if the problems are caused by everyone and everything else, by stuff *out there*, why should they bother to change themselves? Even if they decide to do things differently, won't the rest of the world still be the same?

It's a reasonable argument. But that's not how life generally works.

Remember Sartre's famous line “Hell is other people”? It's true—the world is filled with difficult people (or, as John would have it, “idiots”). I'll

bet you could name five truly difficult people off the top of your head right now—some you assiduously avoid, others you would assiduously avoid if they didn't share your last name. But sometimes—more often than we tend to realize—those difficult people are us.

That's right—sometimes hell is us.

Sometimes *we* are the cause of our difficulties. And if we can step out of our own way, something astonishing happens.

A therapist will hold up a mirror to patients, but patients will also hold up a mirror to their therapists. Therapy is far from one-sided; it happens in a parallel process. Every day, our patients are opening up questions that we have to think about for ourselves. If they can see themselves more clearly through our reflections, we can see ourselves more clearly through theirs. This happens to therapists when we're providing therapy, and it happens to our own therapists too. We are mirrors reflecting mirrors reflecting mirrors, showing one another what we can't yet see.

Which brings me back to John. Today, I'm not thinking about any of this. As far as I'm concerned, it's been a difficult day with a difficult patient, and to make matters worse, I'm seeing John right after a young newlywed who's dying of cancer—which is never an ideal time to see anyone, but especially not when you haven't gotten much sleep, and your marriage plans have just been canceled, and you know that your pain is trivial compared to that of a terminally ill woman, and you also sense (but aren't yet aware) that it's not trivial at all because something cataclysmic is happening inside you.

Meanwhile, about a mile away, in a quaint brick building on a narrow one-way street, a therapist named Wendell is in his office seeing patients too. One after another, they're sitting on his sofa, adjacent to a lovely garden courtyard, talking about the same kinds of things that my patients have been talking to me about on an upper floor of a tall glass office building. Wendell's patients have seen him for weeks or months or perhaps even years, but I have yet to meet him. In fact, I haven't even heard of him. But that's about to change.

I am about to become Wendell's newest patient.

If the Queen Had Balls

CHART NOTE, LORI:

Patient in her mid-forties presents for treatment in the aftermath of an unexpected breakup. Reports that she seeks “just a few sessions to get through this.”

It all starts with a presenting problem.

By definition, the *presenting problem* is the issue that sends a person into therapy. It might be a panic attack, a job loss, a death, a birth, a relational difficulty, an inability to make a big life decision, or a bout of depression. Sometimes the presenting problem is less specific—a feeling of “stuckness” or the vague but nagging notion that something just isn’t quite right.

Whatever the problem, it generally “presents” because the person has reached an inflection point in life. *Do I turn left or right? Do I try to preserve the status quo or move into uncharted territory?* (Be forewarned: therapy will always take you into uncharted territory, even if you choose to preserve the status quo.)

But people don’t care about inflection points when they come for their first therapy session. Mostly, they just want relief. They want to tell you their stories, beginning with their presenting problem.

So let me fill you in on the Boyfriend Incident.

The first thing I want to say about Boyfriend is that he’s an extraordinarily decent human being. He’s kind and generous, funny and smart, and when he’s not making you laugh, he’ll drive to the drugstore at two a.m. to get you that antibiotic you just can’t wait until morning for. If he happens to be at Costco, he’ll text to ask if you need anything, and when you reply that you just need some laundry detergent, he’ll bring home your favorite meatballs and twenty jugs of maple syrup for the waffles he makes you from scratch. He’ll carry those twenty jugs from the garage to your kitchen,

pack nineteen of them neatly into the tall cabinet you can't reach, and place one on the counter, accessible for the morning.

He'll also leave love notes on your desk, hold your hand and open doors, and never complain about being dragged to family events because he genuinely enjoys hanging out with your relatives, even the nosy or elderly ones. For no reason at all, he'll send you Amazon packages full of books (books being the equivalent of flowers to you), and at night you'll both curl up and read passages from them aloud to each other, pausing only to make out. While you're binge-watching Netflix, he'll rub that spot on your back where you have mild scoliosis, and when he stops, and you nudge him, he'll continue rubbing for exactly sixty more delicious seconds before he tries to weasel out without your noticing (you'll pretend not to notice). He'll let you finish his sandwiches and sentences and sunscreen and listen so attentively to the details of your day that, like your personal biographer, he'll remember more about your life than you will.

If this portrait sounds skewed, it is. There are many ways to tell a story, and if I've learned anything as a therapist, it's that most people are what therapists call "unreliable narrators." That's not to say that they purposely mislead. It's more that every story has multiple threads, and they tend to leave out the strands that don't jibe with their perspectives. Most of what patients tell me is absolutely true—from their current points of view. Ask about somebody's spouse while they're both still in love, then ask about that same spouse post-divorce, and each time, you'll get only half the story.

What you just heard about Boyfriend? That was the good half.

And now for the bad: It's ten o'clock on a weeknight. We're in bed, talking, and we've just decided which movie tickets to preorder for the weekend when Boyfriend goes strangely silent.

"You tired?" I ask. We're both working single parents in our mid-forties, so ordinarily an exhausted silence would mean nothing. Even when we aren't exhausted, sitting in silence together feels peaceful, relaxing. But if silence can be heard, tonight's silence sounds different. If you've ever been in love, you know the kind of silence I'm talking about: silence on a frequency only your significant other can perceive.

"No," he says. It's one syllable but his voice shakes subtly, followed by more unsettling silence. I look over at him. He looks back. He smiles, I smile, and a deafening silence descends again, broken only by the rustling

sound his twitching foot is making under the covers. Now I'm alarmed. In my office I can sit through marathon silences, but in my bedroom I last no more than three seconds.

"Hey, is something up?" I ask, trying to sound casual, but it's a rhetorical question if ever there was one. The answer is obviously yes, because in the history of the world, nothing reassuring has ever followed this question. When I see couples in therapy, even if the initial response is no, in time the true answer is revealed to be some variation of *I'm cheating*, *I maxed out the credit cards*, *my aging mother is coming to live with us*, or *I'm not in love with you anymore*.

Boyfriend's response is no exception.

He says: "I've decided that I can't live with a kid under my roof for the next ten years."

I've decided that I can't live with a kid under my roof for the next ten years?

I burst out laughing. I know there's nothing funny about what Boyfriend has said, but given that we're planning to spend our lives together and I have an eight-year-old, it sounds so ridiculous that I decide it has to be a joke.

Boyfriend says nothing, so I stop laughing. I look at him. He looks away.

"What in the world are you *talking* about? What do mean, you can't live with a kid for the next ten years?"

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Sorry for what?" I ask, still catching up. "You mean you're serious? You don't want to be together?"

He explains that he *does* want to be together, but now that his teenagers are leaving for college soon, he's come to realize that he doesn't want to wait another ten years for the nest to be empty.

My jaw drops. Literally. I feel it open and hang in the air for a while. This is the first I'm hearing of this, and it takes a minute before my jaw is able to snap back into position so I can speak. My head is saying, *Whaaaaaat?* but my mouth says, "How long have you felt this way? If I hadn't just asked if something was up, when were you going to *tell* me?" I think about how this can't possibly be happening because just five minutes ago, we picked our movie for the weekend. We're supposed to be *together* this weekend. *At a movie!*

“I don’t know,” he says sheepishly. He shrugs without moving his shoulders. His entire body is a shrug. “It never felt like the right time to bring it up.” (When my therapist friends hear this part of the story, they immediately diagnose him as “avoidant.” When my nontherapist friends hear it, they immediately diagnose him as “an asshole.”)

More silence.

I feel as though I’m viewing this scene from above, watching a confused version of myself move at incredible speed through the famous stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. If my laughter was denial and my when-the-hell-were-you-going-to-tell-me was anger, I’m moving on to bargaining. How, I want to know, can we make this work? Can I take on more of the childcare? Add an extra date night?

Boyfriend shakes his head. His teenagers don’t wake up at seven a.m. to play Legos, he says. He’s looking forward to finally having his freedom, and he wants to relax on weekend mornings. Never mind that my son plays independently with his Legos in the mornings. The problem, apparently, is that my son occasionally says this: “Look at my Lego! Look what I made!”

“The thing is,” Boyfriend explains, “I don’t want to have to look at the Legos. I just want to read the paper.”

I consider the possibility that an alien has invaded Boyfriend’s body or that he has a burgeoning brain tumor of which this personality shift is the first symptom. I wonder what Boyfriend would think of me if I broke up with him because his teenage daughters wanted me to look at their new leggings from Forever 21 when I was trying to relax and read a book. *I don’t want to look at the leggings. I just want to read my book.* What kind of person gets away with simply not wanting to look?

“I thought you wanted to marry me,” I say, pathetically.

“I *do* want to marry you,” he says. “I just don’t want to live with a kid.”

I think about this for a second, like a puzzle I’m trying to solve. It sounds like the riddle of the Sphinx.

“But I *come with a kid*,” I say, my voice getting louder. I’m furious that he’s bringing this up now, that he’s bringing this up at all. “You can’t order me up à la carte, like a burger without the fries, like a . . . a—” I think about patients who present ideal scenarios and insist that they can only be happy with that exact situation. *If he didn’t drop out of business school to become a writer, he’d be my dream guy (so I’ll break up with him and keep dating hedge-fund managers who bore me). If the job wasn’t across the bridge, it*

would be the perfect opportunity (so I'll stay in my dead-end job and keep telling you how much I envy my friends' careers). If she didn't have a kid, I'd marry her.

Certainly we all have our deal-breakers. But when patients repeatedly engage in this kind of analysis, sometimes I'll say, "If the queen had balls, she'd be the king." If you go through life picking and choosing, if you don't recognize that "the perfect is the enemy of the good," you may deprive yourself of joy. At first patients are taken aback by my bluntness, but ultimately it saves them months of treatment.

"The truth is, I didn't want to date somebody with a kid," Boyfriend is saying. "But then I fell in love with you, and I didn't know what to do."

"You didn't fall in love with me *before* our first date, when I told you I had a six-year-old," I say. "You knew what to do *then*, didn't you?"

More suffocating silence.

As you've probably guessed, this conversation goes nowhere. I try to understand if it's about something else—how could it not be about something else? After all, his wanting his freedom is the ultimate "It's not you, it's me" (always code for *It's not me, it's you*). Is Boyfriend unhappy with something in the relationship that he's afraid to tell me about? I ask him calmly, my voice softer now, because I'm mindful of the fact that Very Angry People aren't Very Approachable. But Boyfriend insists that it's only about his wanting to live without kids, not without me.

I'm in a state of shock mixed with bewilderment. I don't understand how this has never come up. How do you sleep soundly next to a person and plan a life with her when you're secretly grappling with whether to leave? (The answer is simple—a common defense mechanism called compartmentalization. But right now I'm too busy using another defense mechanism, denial, to see it.)

Boyfriend, by the way, is an attorney, and he lays it all out as he would in front of a jury. He really does want to marry me. He really does love me. He just wants much more time with me. He wants to be able to leave spontaneously together for the weekend or come home from work and go out to eat without worrying about a third person. He wants the privacy of a couple, not the communal feel of a family. When he learned I had a young child, he told himself it wasn't ideal, but he said nothing to me because he thought he could adjust. Two years later, though, as we're about to merge our homes, just as his freedom is in sight, he's realized how important this