

Becoming Yourself Without Leaving Relationship

Adaptation, desire, and the work of belonging as more of ourselves

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“My sister said she was looking forward to seeing me,” Alex says. “I sent her the menu.”

There is a small laugh, then a pause. A family visit is approaching. Alex has offered to prepare the meals, collect their mother, and make sure two siblings arrive at times that will not reopen an old disagreement. They enjoy bringing people together. They are also tired, resentful, and ashamed of the resentment.

In this fictional encounter, the therapist asks what it was like to hear that the sister wanted to see them. Alex begins explaining why the menu needed to be settled. The therapist waits. “I suppose I didn’t quite let myself hear it,” Alex says. “There was something I knew how to answer.”

The distinction is slight enough to miss. One response concerns a task Alex can perform. The other concerns a welcome Alex is less certain how to receive. A person can be loved, competent, and deeply involved in others’ lives while remaining uncertain how to be present when nothing is being asked of them.

My client article *The Self You Became to Belong* examines the roles through which people find a place in relationship and the experiences that may become less available when those roles grow compulsory. This therapist companion concerns the clinical work of helping a person become more present within a life they may already sustain with considerable care.

A valued capacity can become a condition of existence

Alex knows how to notice what is needed. They remember a dietary preference, recognize the change in a parent’s voice, and see the practical difficulty before anyone mentions it. These capacities have brought pleasure, purpose, and real gratitude. We should be interested in what they express before deciding what they defend.

The problem appears when another response becomes difficult to imagine. Alex can prepare the meal but struggles to ask someone else to prepare it. They can offer comfort but become apologetic when comfort is offered. They can identify a sibling’s disappointment almost immediately while needing considerable time to recognize their own.

A role has begun to carry more than a function. It organizes how the person knows themselves in relationship. Being useful provides a recognizable position, a reason to approach, and something dependable to do with the uncertainty of being wanted. Rest may therefore bring more unease than work. Without the familiar activity, the person can feel conspicuous, indebted, or strangely insubstantial.

Asked what might happen if someone else handled lunch, Alex answers, “They’d do it. Probably.” The therapist is surprised; the expected fear of refusal has not appeared. “Then what would be difficult?” Alex looks toward the window. “I wouldn’t know where to put myself.”

That answer changes the inquiry. Some practical burdens are real, but redistributing them will not necessarily make it easy to occupy the space that opens. We need to understand both the family arrangement and the experience of the person who has become accustomed to being present through its maintenance.

How we learn what can come into relationship

Winnicott’s account of true and false self concerns the relationship between spontaneous experience and protective accommodation. His description ranges from ordinary social compromise to arrangements in which compliance leaves little room for feeling real.^[1] It offers a way to consider whether a person can respond to others while retaining contact with experience that has not already been shaped to fit them.

The word false needs particular care. A client’s generosity is not exposed as counterfeit because it has an adaptive history. A capacity can be sincere and constrained at the same time. The clinical question concerns whether the person can also be uncertain, angry, dependent, playful, or unavailable without experiencing those possibilities as threats to the self they know how to be.

In development, this restriction may emerge through many small encounters. A child’s excitement arrives when an adult is preoccupied. A need for comfort meets impatience or the caregiver’s own despair. An objection changes the atmosphere. The child becomes attentive to what a relationship can bear and increasingly practiced at bringing the version of experience most likely to be received.

The adaptation may occur within a relationship that also contains affection. Alex remembers a parent who was often exhausted and visibly relieved when Alex helped. “I liked making things easier,” Alex says. “And I could see when she’d had enough.” The pleasure and the vigilance belong in the same account. Understanding the cost does not require Alex to withdraw love or deny the help that was genuinely needed.

Assor, Roth, and Deci’s research on parental conditional regard contributes a specific empirical finding: perceived approval contingent on behavior was related to internal

compulsion, self-esteem fluctuations, and resentment, among other outcomes.^[2] That evidence supports attention to the terms under which approval is experienced. It cannot establish Alex's developmental history, and a helpful child is not, by that fact, evidence of conditional love.

We ask what Alex remembers, what others also offered, and where different responses were possible. The aim is an account that allows recognition and correction. When history remains uncertain, the current sequence is still available: a wish begins, attention moves toward another person's needs, and an accommodating response arrives before the wish has become clear.

The inner conflict hidden by competence

Competence can conceal an argument the person has been having with themselves for years. One response insists that everyone will be disappointed unless they step in. Another wants to leave the room, ignore the messages, or be unavailable for once. A third condemns that wish as evidence of selfishness. By the time anyone asks how they are, they have already returned to being fine.

Schwartz's IFS model invites curiosity toward protective responses and their relationships with one another. Its guidance emphasizes understanding protective concerns before pressing toward vulnerable experience.^[3] Used collaboratively, this can help Alex notice the difference between caring about the family and feeling that its continuity rests upon constant vigilance.

"What does the part that keeps organizing fear would happen if it stopped?" may fit Alex's language. "What do you imagine would happen?" may fit just as well. The answer might concern actual missed responsibilities, a history of conflict, or a fear of becoming peripheral. We need to hear the response before deciding what lies underneath it.

Alex says, "My mother is getting older. There aren't going to be endless weekends." Now the organizing contains grief as well as anxiety. The wish to keep everyone together is connected to a real limitation in time. A therapist who hears only a controlling protector may miss the love and anticipated loss giving that response its urgency.

The impatient response needs to be heard too. Alex wants to stop feeling responsible for the atmosphere and is angry that no one seems to notice the effort. We can recognize that protest while asking what has actually been requested, what Alex has volunteered, and what others have been allowed to contribute. Appreciating a protective purpose makes this examination less shaming; it does not exempt the person's conduct from attention.

What the familiar identity cannot easily include

Jung's early discussion of persona examines the identification of an individual with a socially formed personality. It also recognizes the disorientation that can accompany loosening an established identity.^[4] The clinical relevance is apparent when a client can describe an excluded capacity only as a kind of person they would never want to become.

"I'm not someone who sits back and lets other people do everything," Alex says. The imagined alternative to doing too much is taking advantage. Between those positions, ordinary receiving has little room. Someone known for strength may organize a similar opposition between competence and helplessness; someone known for kindness may place self-respect dangerously close to cruelty.

We can ask what the person finds difficult to recognize in themselves and what becomes especially charged in others. Alex is irritated by a friend who accepts help without an elaborate explanation. "She seems so comfortable letting people make a fuss of her." Rather than assign this to projection, we ask what is troubling about it. "She just believes they want to," Alex says, then becomes quiet.

The reaction has made a possibility visible. Alex may envy the friend's ease while also having legitimate concerns about particular requests. We do not need to resolve that ambiguity immediately. It is enough to notice that receiving, previously described as taking advantage, might include an experience Alex wants but does not readily trust.

These perspectives illuminate different questions. Winnicott's spontaneous gesture, Jung's individuality in relation to persona, and Schwartz's account of Self and parts belong to distinct models. Their integration requires more than treating each as another name for an authentic core. Here they help us examine restricted experience, one-sided identity, and protective conflict while leaving the person free to correct the account.

When therapy becomes another place to adapt

The therapist may be especially vulnerable to missing this pattern because the client often makes the work feel productive. Alex listens carefully, recognizes the point of an interpretation, and returns with observations. They may be doing meaningful work. They may also be monitoring what kind of client makes the therapist feel effective.

In the opening of "Dialogue," Buber describes two people whose communication becomes possible without either producing an explanation of himself. His example concerns a change in availability within a shared silence.^[5] It offers a different question for this work: can Alex be with another person before knowing what to say or provide? The therapist still needs feedback; silence cannot tell us whether the person feels accompanied, absent, or afraid.

Suppose the therapist says, “You learned that you have to earn love.” Alex hesitates. “Maybe. But I don’t think my sister was asking me to earn anything. I think I didn’t know what to do with her wanting to see me.” If we can receive that correction, the work becomes more particular. Love may be available where receiving it remains unfamiliar. Other relationships may genuinely require too much. Alex needs help distinguishing them.

A response could begin, “I made the relationship sound more conditional than you experience it. You’re telling me something about receiving what is already there.” We then listen for whether that formulation comes closer. An eloquent repair does little if our next question returns to the original conclusion.

This is a form of relational learning in its own right. The client has introduced something that matters to them, and the therapist has remained interested without requiring agreement. We retain responsibility for the professional frame. The client’s freedom to affect our understanding does not create an obligation to care for our feelings.

Giving a wish enough time to become knowable

We often ask people what they want as though desire were a clear signal waiting behind an inhibition. Sometimes it is. Sometimes the person knows they want to leave, protest, rest, or reach toward someone and is afraid of the consequences. At other times, the wish has received so little sustained attention that it is still taking shape.

Alex first says they want everyone to have a good weekend. Later they say they want a break. With more time comes something more particular: “I want to sit with my mother before she gets tired. She tells stories when we’re alone. I’m usually in the kitchen.” The desire includes relationship. A formulation organized around escaping the family would have missed it.

Ryan and Deci’s self-determination theory places autonomy alongside relatedness and competence, and distinguishes autonomy from independence.^[6] This helps us ask whether Alex can participate with an experienced sense of endorsement, rather than judge growth by how much less they do for others. A demanding commitment can be freely valued. A pleasant activity can be pursued under considerable internal pressure.

We can give the wish a place before turning it into a decision. Alex may want time with their mother, want the food to be right, value hospitality, and have promised transportation. These are different strands in one life. The task is to make them available for consideration so that one familiar response does not settle the arrangement before Alex has participated in it.

When Alex imagines sitting with their mother, there is relief followed by apprehension. “What would be difficult about that?” the therapist asks. Alex is unsure. We can leave the question open long enough to discover whether the difficulty concerns a practical task, an

uncomfortable closeness, or simply the unfamiliarity of doing nothing together. We do not need to find the deepest answer before a modest experiment becomes possible.

The risk of being interested in something

The discovery of desire can bring another vulnerability: wanting something exposes the person to a life they cannot fully control. An interest can disappoint. Someone else may find it unimpressive. A beginner has to tolerate making something that does not yet match their taste. Remaining useful in a familiar role may feel safer than becoming visibly invested in something uncertain.

Alex mentions drawing, then immediately reduces its significance. “It’s just something I used to do.” The therapist might become enthusiastic and inadvertently make the interest more difficult to approach. Now drawing has an audience and an expectation. Alex may feel required to retrieve a lost talent in order to make the conversation worthwhile.

Marianne Williamson’s passage in *A Return to Love* imagines fear attaching to possibility as well as inadequacy.^[7] Read as a spiritual invitation, it can open a question about the costs of becoming visible. It need not become an explanation imposed on Alex or a demand for an exceptional life. The question here is more modest: what makes an ordinary interest difficult to take seriously on its own terms?

Alex remembers drawing beside their father, absorbed in looking at a tree. “He didn’t need me to finish. He was just there.” In that memory, concentration had company and no immediate purpose. We can stay with what Alex remembers enjoying, without declaring that drawing is the true self or that returning to it will repair the past.

Mary Oliver’s “The Pond” offers a particular literary example of returning. Its speaker revisits a place after years away, remembers happiness and its absence, and becomes absorbed in what is happening there now.^[8] The poem does not erase the intervening life in order to make a present encounter possible. Beside Alex’s memory, it suggests that approaching an old pleasure need not require recovering an earlier self intact. Alex can discover what the interest has become, including the possibility that something else now draws them more.

Having an experience before knowing what it means

An underdeveloped preference can be mistaken for an inhibited one. We may become skilled at helping a client overcome the fear of expressing a wish while failing to notice that the wish itself is still unformed. More encouragement can make that uncertainty feel like a deficiency. The client begins searching for an answer that sounds sufficiently personal to satisfy the question.

In “Creativity and Its Origins,” Winnicott approaches creativity as a way of experiencing the world, in contrast with relating to it principally as something that demands adaptation.^[9] This broadens the clinical purpose beyond retrieving a hidden talent. Alex’s drawing matters here because it once involved absorption in something encountered, without an immediate need to turn the experience into a product or an account of identity.

We might offer time for a tentative association, an unfinished image, or a preference that changes as it is spoken. “I don’t know yet” can become an accurate description of experience in progress. The therapist contributes by staying interested without extracting a conclusion. This is different from leaving the person alone with an overwhelming blankness; pace and company need to be discovered together.

A small experiment could be opening the sketchbook privately and noticing what attracts attention, with no promise to draw, finish, improve, or report a meaningful result. Alex might make a mark, look out of the window, feel bored, or close it. The inquiry concerns how the experience is organized: does interest have a chance to develop before evaluation takes over? Is Alex able to stop without calling the interval wasted?

The experiment need not remain solitary. A companion might share the room without asking to see what has been made. For someone accustomed to becoming useful in another person’s presence, this can be a different kind of participation: being occupied with an experience of one’s own while another person remains nearby. Whether that arrangement feels supportive or intrusive belongs to Alex to say.

Being cared for can feel more exposing than caring

Alex can describe feeling exhausted without much embarrassment. It provides a reason for rest that others might recognize. Wanting someone to think of them, remember what they like, or enjoy their presence feels less defensible. “It sounds needy,” Alex says. We may hear an ordinary attachment wish precisely where the client hears a claim they should have outgrown.

There can be grief in recognizing that giving and receiving have developed unequally. The person may have substantial evidence of being appreciated and little confidence that their need will have a place to land. They may have learned to receive help only when illness or collapse makes it unavoidable. Ordinary dependence remains harder to authorize.

In “Finding Our Sacred Center,” Nouwen describes a movement from solitude to community and then to care, and contrasts it with his own tendency to begin by trying to accomplish things alone.^[10] His account is explicitly Christian, grounded in communion with God. It invites a question about the organization of a life: is there a place to encounter one’s own experience and receive company before returning to service? This sequence need not be prescribed as a routine to become useful to Alex.

Alex recalls a friend bringing soup during an illness. They remember planning repayment almost immediately. The therapist asks whether anything happened before that plan. “I felt relieved that she’d thought of me.” Then, after a pause: “I wanted her to stay.” The longing had been present for a moment before Alex organized a more familiar response.

We can ask what it is like to let that wish be known here. The question is not an invitation to unlimited dependence upon the therapist. It concerns whether needing company can be experienced without immediate self-contempt. Someone can recognize a need, ask another person, respect a limit, and still consider the need worthy of care.

Support and differentiation become closely related at this point. When help can be sought and received, choosing becomes less burdened by the assumption that every consequence must be managed alone. Learning to rely appropriately can enlarge a person’s range as surely as learning to decline an unreasonable demand.

The grief that comes when something reaches us

A welcome response may make the absence of earlier welcome more painful. Alex begins to speak about the drawing and cries. “There was so much I put away without even deciding to.” An opportunity to approach life now has brought an awareness of time that cannot be recovered.

Part of this grief concerns an imagined life rather than a recoverable event. Alex cannot know who they would have become with different opportunities, yet can recognize interests repeatedly postponed and choices made before alternatives felt possible. The therapist can help mourn what is known to have been lost without constructing a more complete, gifted, or authentic person whom the past supposedly prevented from existing.

We might ask what Alex is most aware of. They speak about their father waiting, then about the present rush to turn every unassigned hour into something useful. The sadness concerns a remembered pleasure and a continuing way of living. We can accompany both without needing an explanation that makes every lost possibility part of the same wound.

There may also be grief for the familiar identity itself. Alex has taken pride in being reliable. Being the person everyone turns to has provided continuity and significance. A different arrangement can leave them less praised, less central, and uncertain how to recognize themselves. We should not require them to celebrate a freedom whose emotional cost we have barely begun to understand.

The longing for a fuller life carries limits too. A parent ages. There will not be unlimited time for the conversations Alex wants. Drawing now cannot restore every afternoon that passed. Mourning allows those realities into the work without making the remaining life seem futile. Something may still be worth approaching even when it cannot give back what was missed.

Bringing a position into an actual relationship

There comes a point when understanding needs contact with ordinary life. Alex wants more room during the visit and believes it would be safe to ask. The therapist can help shape an invitation that is small enough to try and specific enough to learn from.

Bowen's differentiation framework concerns maintaining considered judgment in emotional relationships while recognizing realistic dependence and remaining able to receive influence.^[11] Applied here, the question is whether Alex can give their wish legitimate weight without requiring the family to approve the whole of it, and whether they can consider another person's concern without automatically abandoning their position.

Alex rehearses: "I'd like some time with Mum before she gets tired. I can make dinner on Saturday. Would you arrange lunch?" There is a contribution, a preference, and a request another person can answer. The family need not receive Alex's therapeutic history in order to discuss the arrangement.

Attachment work attends to the expectation that a request will jeopardize the bond, the vulnerability of needing another person, and the experience of receiving a response. Differentiation work attends to the capacity to hold and revise a position while the other person remains separate. Sequencing requires attention to what is preventing participation now. Alex may need accompaniment with fear, help assessing a responsibility, or support making a decision after enough reflection has already occurred.

We can distinguish these possibilities in the consulting room. If Alex becomes frightened and loses track of the request, we slow down and attend to the fear. If Alex can think clearly but repeatedly asks whether the request is selfish, we explore what reassurance is being asked to settle. If someone identifies an overlooked commitment, we examine it. Integration becomes visible in these choices about the next intervention.

When a new response meets an old expectation

In the fictional continuation, the sister agrees to arrange lunch. She also asks Alex to confirm the transportation already promised. Alex initially hears criticism and begins composing an explanation of everything they do. Looking again, they recognize that the sister is checking an agreement on which their mother depends. Alex confirms it.

Here the past may be entering through the meaning of an ordinary question. A request for clarification can feel like the beginning of a judgment about adequacy or selfishness. That resonance deserves inquiry. The actual words and present relationship remain necessary checks on a transference or projection formulation. A compelling expectation does not establish the other person's intention.

The weekend brings a second complication. Alex keeps entering the kitchen, correcting the preparation, and answering questions directed to the sister. Later, the sister says, “I said I’d handle it. It’s hard to help when you keep taking it back.” Alex feels hurt and recognizes something true.

The result makes the work more demanding than learning to ask. Other people may have relied too readily on Alex’s availability. Alex may also find it difficult to tolerate their different timing, methods, or competence. An unequal arrangement can be maintained from several positions without everyone having equal power or responsibility. We need to examine the specific contributions rather than decide who caused the whole pattern.

At the next session, the therapist asks what happened just before Alex returned to the kitchen. “I could hear them talking,” Alex says. “I wanted to be part of it.” The intervention needs to change. Alex may need help joining a conversation without acquiring a task, as well as practice allowing someone else to make lunch. The new information takes us closer to the difficulty the original account only partly understood.

There was still time with their mother, some enjoyment, continuing guilt, and an unsettled conversation with the sister. Drawing did not happen. The request was neither a failure nor a completed transformation. It revealed available support, a remembered duty, and a way Alex reentered the familiar role when belonging felt uncertain.

The therapist’s own terms of belonging

This work asks us to examine what kinds of clients make us feel most welcome as therapists. Some of us learned to earn a place by being useful and may feel especially relieved when Alex appreciates an interpretation. Some learned to secure freedom through distance and may favor refusal. Others become attached to the client’s generosity and feel uneasy when anger begins to appear.

Aponte and Kissil’s Person-of-the-Therapist framework gives us a basis for examining an enduring personal theme as it enters clinical work.^[12] Here the question may concern our tolerance for an encounter in which neither person knows what will emerge. If we need a vivid inner story in order to feel connected or useful, we may reward an articulate account of selfhood more readily than the hesitant experience from which an account might eventually grow.

Our reactions may be informative before they are fully understood. We become impatient when Alex says they do not know. We feel triumphant when they request help. We become discouraged when they take over the kitchen again. If progress has come to mean supporting our preferred account, the client may begin performing a more independent self for us while becoming less free to describe what actually happens.

Alex might say, “You sound disappointed that I didn’t just sit with Mum.” We can notice the impulse to defend our intention and ask what in our response conveyed disappointment. A repair could begin, “I think I treated asking for help as though it should settle more than it did. I want to understand what was difficult once the help was there.”

The next exchange matters more than the sentence. Can Alex describe wanting to join the kitchen conversation without being redirected toward a better boundary? Can we examine the interference with the sister’s contribution without humiliation? Can we remain interested when the experiment reveals a different problem from the one we hoped to solve? The therapist’s capacity to tolerate these tensions is part of the environment in which fuller participation becomes possible.

A person exceeds the history that explains them

Developmental understanding can reduce shame by making a response intelligible. It can also become another identity that is difficult to leave. A client learns to understand every act of care as defense, every hesitation as an attachment wound, and every pleasure as evidence of healing. The account becomes more elaborate while the life remains organized around explaining itself.

Asked in “The Inner Landscape of Beauty” why he regards everyone as an artist, O’Donohue points to ordinary participation in shaping the world and to the imagination present in human life.^[13] The emphasis here is on making and receiving a life, rather than reducing selfhood to a settled description. Alex’s next arrangement with the family, a quiet interest, and the choice of company can each contribute to a world they also inhabit. The philosophical image does not require artistic talent or turn every choice into a project of self-creation.

Alex may draw because looking closely gives pleasure. They may discover that the interest has changed, or that music, friendship, gardening, or an ordinary walk now draws them more. We can help investigate what matters without deciding that every movement toward life must retrieve a previously lost self.

Whyte’s “The House of Belonging” imagines an adult aloneness that includes an invitation to friends and a wish to love the world.^[14] This offers a literary image for a selfhood with room for company. Time that belongs to Alex need not be guarded against all relationship; relationship need not fill every unassigned space with usefulness.

A fuller life can include a meal made for others, a meal received, an hour alone, and a call asking someone to stay. The significance lies partly in the range available and partly in the person’s capacity to know what they are participating in. Selfhood continues to be discovered through relationships, choices, bodies, responsibilities, and changing circumstances. It does not require a final answer to who one really is.

The five modules as a clinical learning arc

Who Am I Apart From Adaptation? invites recognition of a role's capacities and restrictions. With Alex, noticing begins in the shift from a sister's welcome to the certainty of a menu. The question concerns when care is chosen, when it feels necessary for belonging, and what other participation becomes difficult. The valued capacity remains part of the picture.

The Self I Became to Belong examines what has seemed welcomed, risky, or unavailable. Remembered history can help, but the account remains open to correction and present constraints. Alex's family contains affection as well as expectations. Understanding becomes more useful when it distinguishes what others ask, what Alex anticipates, and what they cannot yet easily receive.

Difference, Conflict, and Identity brings a modest position into contact with another mind. The lunch request has a prediction and a context: Alex expects disappointment, essential care is covered, and the exchange appears safe. Private rehearsal, a smaller step, or declining the experiment remain legitimate. Where retaliation is credible, the task changes toward protection and support.

Values, Desire, and an Inner Direction distinguishes wanting company, valuing hospitality, fearing exclusion, enjoying an interest, and keeping an actual promise. These strands need attention rather than a verdict about the pure motive. The private sketchbook experiment gives interest a little time before evaluation, while the family request tests an arrangement. Neither requires a major decision about identity.

Becoming More Fully Yourself in Relationship returns to what actually followed. The sister helped, a duty remained, and Alex partly reclaimed the work while trying to join the company. That result revises the formulation and the next practice. A later experiment might involve entering the conversation without taking over, checking how help should be shared, or returning to the sketchbook and discovering that a private interest has changed. The learner's actual response determines what to keep.

The movement across the pathway is noticing, understanding, chosen experience, practice, and reflection. The person's response can change the explanation at every stage. An educational sequence creates opportunities to learn; its value is discovered through what becomes usable in the learner's actual life.

A welcome that includes the person who arrives

Some relationships will resist a person's fuller participation. A clear preference may meet dismissal, threat, or punishment. Then the clinician needs to help assess the setting and the support required. More accurate communication does not make an unsafe relationship safe, and an unwelcome result should not automatically become another failure assigned to the client.

In other settings, there will be room that the person has not yet learned to inhabit. Accepting it can require repeated encounters with uncertainty, disappointment, tenderness, and ordinary dependence. The work includes learning how to ask, how to receive, how to let another person differ, and how to remain responsible for one's own effects.

Alex's first sentence has acquired more meaning: the sister wanted to see them, and Alex sent the menu. Preparing food could express love. It could also provide a familiar answer to the more exposing experience of being wanted. Therapy becomes useful when both truths can be explored without reducing either the care or the longing.

Perhaps, on a later visit, Alex still brings a meal. They also hear the welcome, sit down before everything is finished, and let someone else ask whether they would like a cup of tea. There is no need to declare a new identity. Something more of the person is present, and the relationship has an opportunity to meet them there.

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Source note

Clinical theory, motivational research, philosophical writing, and literature contribute different forms of understanding here. The applications to Alex are this essay's clinical integration. Alex's encounters and outcomes are fictional illustrations. Source-reading limits are retained in the editorial record, including the abstract-only use of Winnicott's creativity chapter. The educational pathway and these illustrations do not establish a treatment outcome.