Less Afraid to Be Yourself · About 4 minutes

Let a Helpful Moment Be Small

Receiving what reached you without making it prove everything

There it is on the screen: Saved. A moment earlier the work felt impossible to finish.

Both can be true at the end of a helpful afternoon. There is no need to decide that you have finally become confident, or that the help was worthless because confidence has not arrived.

In this fictional example, Sonia is learning recording software for a community history project. After a frustrating afternoon, she asks a friend to sit beside her. The friend checks before touching the keyboard and helps locate the missing menu. Sonia saves the file herself.

What mattered about that exchange? Perhaps she liked being able to work at her own pace. Perhaps the greatest relief was that somebody else found the menu. Perhaps she is grateful and still irritated by the software. The answer belongs to Sonia, rather than to a preferred story about independence or teamwork.

Fosha and Thoma describe attending to the experience of helpful change within psychotherapy.[1] Their clinical approach invites interest in how a change is received, instead of treating improvement as a brief checkpoint on the way to another problem. In an ordinary learning situation, we can ask a smaller question: what did this particular help make possible?

That question can be answered without producing a positive feeling. Sonia could say, “I didn’t have to keep searching alone.” She could also say, “The file got saved, but I felt rushed.” Completing the task would remain a fact. Whether the assistance fitted her would need a different account.

Useful help sometimes becomes harder to receive when it comes with an expectation of transformation. “Look how much more confident you are!” may ask Sonia to endorse something she has not experienced. “Was finding that menu the useful part?” leaves her room to answer.

Try this description against the scene: “My friend helped me find the menu. I saved one file. I still need help with the next step.” What would you change if Sonia said she felt crowded? What would remain true?

Stay with Sonia for a moment. Notice how easily an ordinary gain becomes either a sweeping success or a disappointment about what has not changed.

Brach’s writing on nurturing brings care into the way a person responds to experience.[2] For Sonia, care might now mean taking a break, finding accessible instructions or asking someone with different skills for the next task. More effort is only one possibility.

Receiving help also need not create a debt of enthusiasm. Sonia can thank her friend without overstating the difference the afternoon made. She can welcome the company and decline another session. Honest appreciation is easier when it does not have to conceal what remains difficult.

Sonia's saved file gives her a small place to try that.

Before the next file opens, there is a breath in which the work is finished. Let that breath belong to this piece of work.

Companion reading · Less Afraid to Be Yourself

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Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Less Afraid to Be Yourself (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Fosha, D., & Thoma, N. (2020). Metatherapeutic processing supports the emergence of flourishing in psychotherapy. Psychotherapy, 57(3), 323–339. Source.

[2] Brach, T. (2020, January 1). RAIN: A practice of radical compassion. Tara Brach. Source.

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