

## TURNING POINTS IN THERAPEUTIC CONVERSATIONS

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Of the many potential turning points in this therapeutic conversation, the author highlights two from this demonstration interview recorded on DVD. These frames illustrate the mutual guidance of both therapist and client towards positive patterns of possibility that the client could take forward in her life.

**Setting the Framework.** In this consultation interview, there are many significant decision points, as there are in all influential conversations. In training and supervising therapists, I am fascinated by their choices about what is relevant to pursue, and in what direction does the discourse flow to create the potential for new realities, new ways out of the forest of problems that our clients often present.

In this particular interview, all I know, as is usual from the setting of the first appointment in private practice and consultation, is that “Kim” wants to see me for problems of unhappy feelings about her current life situation. I know that her first lead will be to tell me about her woe, so my first intervention in this conversation is to utilize our mutual observations of this autumn day in the setting of our first meeting, so that I can contextualize it as a moment to “hear the patterns of rain beating down on the roof” (the first externalization of the problem). Then Kim is invited to withdraw inward to feel the warmth of the imagined fireplace, (self-soothing and re-orienting) and then perhaps to lazily play with “pieces of a jigsaw puzzle” (her own internal resources) until a picture emerges (potential workable solutions). All of this sequence is the setting of a context or framework by the therapist in advance of the first frames of a narrative of helpless-trapped-ism by the client. The stage has been set for the unfolding drama of our subsequent interaction. Hopelessness has been shifted to a solution-focus in moments by the use of a congruent metaphor of mutual experience. This is a subtle shift point in our discourse within moments of our first encounter with each other. In Judo we say that “small circles turn big circles” and thus it is that the smallest moments of shifting in posture in our approach that we

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render complaining into a bias toward resolution toward solution. From what I can see there is no unusual reaction in my client to this contextual resetting, so that perhaps it is subtle enough to be effective.

**Getting Specific.** The next event is a transaction wherein Kim is rambling on with a large amount of general complaints very quickly. From a communications perspective, she is making statements that are loosely formed with few specific referents. Frank quickly steps in to redirect the conversation toward specific information and numbers, such as names and ages of other family members. While this is standard procedure in any therapeutic assessment, it also recalibrates the tone of the interview so that the underlying structure emerges more clearly and thus potential solutions can emerge.

Clients need to tell their story and have their pain acknowledged by therapist empathy. The problem in this process is that it reifies or cements the reality of the client's repeated discourse. The appropriate therapist response is to maintain empathy while gathering as much specific information as the client will permit. Notice in this instance that the therapist says that we are passing over too much material of significance here (validating her reality) and wanting to get down to the specifics (will not be misled by generalities). Indirectly, the therapist is stating the frame that this will be a conversation of accountability in the conduct of the consultation, and thus, by implication, the therapeutic relationship, further engaging the client in an invitation to authenticity in collaboration. This is a small, but by no means insignificant, shift toward the describable and achievable.

**Soon Kim presents her first major theme. She is somewhat depressed because she feels trapped in the role of traditional mother and housewife.** She feels resentful about having to report in a framework of patriarchy to her partner John, who seems to want to control her freedom. Specifically, he is jealous and distrustful when she spends time and money with her friends while he is out of town earning money for the family. The mutual distrust of the couple also could have its origins in the **two** unplanned pregnancies of their early relationship when she was on the Pill. The problem of role rigidity and the unsettled question of initiative within the relationship is partly addressed by Frank talking about how other couples handle this frequent dilemma (a normalizing reframe). They negotiate a 3-level system of total personal initiative (no reporting needed), partial freedom (informing the partner after the fact), and restriction (consultation must occur before the decision is made). Kim seems to respond quite favorably to this seemingly novel idea. The piece ends with the reframe that most men do not really want to demean their wives with controlling tactics; they just have not found an effective system to reassure them in their financial and relational insecurities. Kim resonates with this reframe, because she knows that when John questions her integrity, and she produces the data, that he does settle down. This is the third minor tilt in the direction of a solution focus in this interview.

**Next comes the first major turning point in the session.** At minute 11:00 Frank begins to expand the inquiry in asking Kim about her partner John, and soon finds to his mild surprise that John is unaware of this consultation. In fact, this is one of several activities that she conveniently “just kinda doesn’t tell him.” because he would get upset and angry if he knew. Frank is now further aware of the reciprocity of Kim’s role in fuelling relationship distrust. Rather than confront her, his non-verbal reaction conveys a silent punctuation of this connection, and her non-verbal language conveys that she understands her complicity in John’s distrust. The point has been made without having to verbalize it. This conveys his acceptance that these are the perceived relationship constraints, for now at least.

Then he does a surprising thing. At 12:42 he asks “Do you have a picture of him?” She is startled and slightly bewildered that she has no pictures of him in her purse. Further, she also has none of her children as well. Frank introduces the notion of the internalized other in asking “How do you think John would feel if he knew that you carried pictures of the family as metaphorical armour against would-be intruders?” This intervention utilizes her description of John as protective against intrusion. Frank does a mini role-play (one of his favorite dramatizations) of a situation where she might be approached by a man and how she could use pictures as a way of discouraging his further advances. She deflects this by her usual defence that she does not do anything to encourage men to approach her. Frank bypasses this deflection by emphasizing that because Kim is intrinsically attractive, and John knows this, she will attract men anyways, so she might as well have a strategy to deter them and thus reassure him of her loyalty. She looks reflective and says “I never thought of it that way.” She is thus seeing her change in behavior as a possible solution to the pervasive depth of John’s distrust and insecurity, a way whereby she will not be as oppressed by his need to control her. This solution certainly illustrates the use of systemic recursions in solutions that likely could work to break deadlock in a couple.

**A second major turning point occurs in response to Kim’s theme of frustration in not being able to pursue her career in hairdressing.** Of course, the obvious idea of her operating a cottage industry in her home is missing a primary ingredient: enthusiasm and joy. So Frank introduces this line of thinking with the request “Tell me about Lucy’s hair!” (16:07). Kim immediately lights up like a Christmas tree as she describes her daughter. Lightened and exuberant, she is now more open to consider her hairdressing her friends’ hair at home. The fact that they do not have much money is not a major concern (trade and barter for future babysitting so that she can go on “date nights” with John will be integrated in a later intervention). Soon Kim’s spurt of enthusiasm runs out as the momentum of a “good idea” gets clogged in the mud of inertia when she says she is too tired and depressed to consider beginning such a project. A discussion ensues when Frank describes the cartoon character “Snoopy” meditating on his doghouse, marveling at his consistency. This humor gets Kim giggling, a good sign, as Frank begins the treatise on repetitive work as a meditative practice, an intriguing reframe. The conversation then drifts into the fun (rather than tedium) of child-rearing, and John’s fun with the

kids, his loyal parenting and staying with her after the surprise pregnancies. Frank gently reflects (28:14) “I guess both of you can wonder who is playing tricks here?” gesturing perhaps it could be God or fate. Despite Franks’ unexpressed skepticism about lightning striking twice, the time for Kim’s possible disclosure is not now, so he conveys respect by leaving the mystery unsolved. Instead he invokes the story of another couple who survived an unexpected pregnancy with the husband remaining loyal, and going beyond his initial distrust when the wife made a strong gesture of solidarity to her partner and their relationship. Again, Frank was not prescribing a solution, but merely indicating that others had found a way to go beyond distrust. Kim then went on to give examples of John ultimately affirming her needs when she presented them in a non-threatening manner (see Gottman’s research on the value of a soft start-up).

**Family of Origin Issues.** In the late middle phase of the interview Frank broadens the picture by inquiring about Kim’s relationship with her nearby parents as grandparent supports for the family. This opens the difficult but almost expected family-of-origin issues, again part of the assessment, but hopefully transitioned smoothly. Kim distrusts her father’s temper and dreads her mother’s passivity in the face of it, fearing she is replicating the same pattern in her own generation. Frank probes her fears, but notices many instances wherein if she is assertive, John respects her boundaries and her decisions. She is transcending the limitations she sees in her mother’s marriage. This discovery pleases and reassures her.

**Containment of Stress and Future Pacing Positive Memories.** As the session begins to wind down, Frank offers stories that help to add containment to a difficult phase in every marriage, when the children are small and needy, and the young couple is stretched for resources trying to cope with the large changes that are happening in the young family. Stories illustrate that although such times are tense, they will offer precious memories, and their very containment in time means that the amount of sacrifice and suffering will seem minimal in the retrospective of a lifetime. This description of a future-pace of a future scenario is a way of bringing the client forward into a retrospective of a past not-yet-lived. At 38:29 he asks “Can you picture that in your mind?” and she nods acceptingly.

**Reviewing and Applying Possible Solutions.** Towards the end, Frank reinforces the learnings of the session by asking Kim what she will take forward into the future. The three levels of initiative idea seemed to be useful, and Frank said it could be applied to several contexts, such as social planning as well (amplifying the range of application of a solution). The idea of “date night” using her girlfriends as babysitters so that she and John could reinvest in their couplehood, thus reducing his insecurity about their union, was especially interesting to Kim. A reminder that she would be successful in having her needs met, provided she stated them assertively with a gentle start-up, was another intervention that she trusted. And finally, she liked the idea of carrying family pictures as a token of the warmth of the love of her new family, with the application of this idea as a token of our consultation, one she is unlikely to forget.

