

FORGIVE ME NO LONGER: THE LIBERATION OF MARTHA

FORGIVE ME NO LONGER, recently published by Family Service Association of America, is a compelling story told by two women in a joint description of their journey through therapy.

A truly collaborative venture, the book begins with the client (Martha) writing her own story and with the therapist (Esther) reflecting and commenting on the story — but with an important difference: the therapist imparts some of the personal background from which her responses derive. Their crucial therapeutic work together is demonstrated in transcribed recordings of each session. Additional insight into the “unconscious” or nonverbal aspect of their work together is provided by notebooks that both women kept. Both professional and personal reactions are intertwined as we learn what actually takes place as the therapy progresses. Finally, each writes a personal summing up of the joint experience in which both therapist and client achieved liberation.

Through this unusual and dramatic document, we are confronted with the dynamics of writing a book while simultaneously continuing therapy — with the writing of the book contributing a spur to the course of the therapy. Martha tells us: “Together they’ve helped free me from perpetually repeating the past.”

Martha’s story discloses a remarkable human being. She was married to a manipulative, brilliant man with a Machiavellian sense of humor. A paranoid schizophrenic, he was able to convince several

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therapists that he was able, intelligent, and sane. Martha, herself was diagnosed as a schizophrenic with paranoid delusions by a succession of psychiatrists at a well-thought-of mental facility. She fought that diagnosis tooth and nail. She tells:

“I couldn’t sleep, or even rest. My body was rigid with tension day and night. I felt trapped and desperate. Past and present were without pleasure, the future was hopeless . . . My death seemed the only hope for any of us . . . There was no one, then, to whom I could turn . . . I found out what it’s like to hit bottom and how to stay alive there.”

Although the focus is on the client’s story, the therapist reveals enough of her own life to show that she too was faced with many similar problems. The reader sees how therapeutic understanding develops on both sides of the desk. Gradually both women change and grow. Together, Esther and Martha achieve an understanding, and we witness the gains of both participants as the therapy is successfully concluded.

The account is unique — not because it is a story of bizarre pathology or sensational events, nor of therapy proceeding at breakneck

pace to a miraculous conclusion, but because an extraordinary sense of immediacy and intimacy is achieved. The transcriptions of the actual sessions, supplemented with the comments from the notebooks kept by both women, provide, insofar as is possible, an account of the therapy exactly as it occurred.

FORGIVE ME NO LONGER illustrates a kind of therapy that is not well known to the general public, one that has been evolved by social workers. It is a therapy that differs in some important ways from that offered by psychiatrists, psychologists, and the wide variety of councillors, lay and professional, who have entered the mental health field in recent years. FORGIVE ME NO LONGER is of value for the lay person as well as for the professional. It was written to give the lay reader some understanding of social work therapy and also to describe an instance of such treatment for professional colleagues.

Was the treatment successful? What finally happened? Does it have a happy ending? In Martha’s words:

“The answer is yes, the ending is a very happy one.”

“I’m starting to move toward people, to want to make new friends, see old one again . . . My long mood of isolation and resentment seems at last to be wearing off . . .”