

JEFFREY
KOTTLER

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CARLSON

THEIR FINEST HOUR

MASTER THERAPISTS SHARE THEIR
GREATEST SUCCESS STORIES



Their Finest Hour
Master Therapists Share Their
Greatest Success Stories

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Chapter One

The Finest Hours

We have each spent our lives doing therapy and trying to make sense of how and why it works. Between us, we have written seventy-five books on the subject, covering almost every facet of this mysterious process imaginable. That is not to say that we can say with confidence that we do know what it is about therapy that is most beneficial, but we can speak with authority about its most salient features.

In our research, we have had the privilege of interviewing hundreds of the greatest therapists who have lived during the past century. We have talked to them about their careers, filmed them demonstrating their theories in action, and interviewed them extensively about what they did in these cases and why they chose those particular paths. We have also had the opportunity to interview dozens of the most famous therapists about the worst session they ever had and what they learned from it (reported in our book, *Bad Therapy*), as well as the most bizarre or unusual case they have ever seen (reported in *The Mummy at the Dining Room Table*). During these quite intimate conversations, we became hooked by the drama, the pure magic, the stunning brilliance of these stories that highlight human transformation during times of adversity. We were struck not only by the changes that took place in the clients in these seminal cases, but also how these greatest minds of our profession were also affected by these relationships.

There have been some excellent books in the past about the most interesting and seminal cases of psychotherapy, but never have the greatest successes of the most accomplished theoreticians been assembled in one volume, and told in their own words. *Their Finest Hour* brings together two dozen of the greatest living therapists, who tell the stories of their best work, however that may be defined. We chose these particular theoreticians not only because of their professional reputations and stature, but also because they are such great storytellers. We wanted to write about those “finest

hours” that best lend themselves to a good read, as well as providing important lessons on living life to the fullest.

All of the therapists we interviewed faced the challenge of deciding what constitutes great therapy. If a client improves in a single session, but the therapist had little to do with the improvement, is that one’s finest hour? Likewise, there are times when a clinician engages in some masterful intervention, or builds a fabulous relationship with a client or family, but there is no discernable progress even after months or years of treatment. And then there are those times when you *know* you have done a fine piece of work that has made a huge difference in a person’s life, but the changes won’t be acknowledged. Another variation on this confusing theme is when a client claims that vast improvement has occurred—thank you very much for your tremendous effort—but neither you nor anyone else can see a whit of difference. This is one reason why it is so difficult for us to research the outcomes of our efforts, much less to choose what we believe are the best examples of our work.

To make matters still more complicated, we are not altogether certain how therapy works in the first place. That is one reason why there are so many schools of thought, many of them represented in the chapters of this book. Each of us has distinct notions of what is most important in a therapeutic relationship and what the ideal role is that a therapist should take in promoting changes. Cognitive therapists (such as Arnold Lazarus and Albert Ellis) believe that the main focus of our efforts should be on changing the ways people think and talk to themselves, and that this will lead to subsequent changes in feelings and behavior. Psychoanalysts (such as David Scharff) believe that the past shapes present issues and that until we resolve those underlying struggles, people are doomed to repeat their dysfunctional actions. Adlerians (such as Jon Carlson) take a more integrative approach, one that looks at family constellations and family-of-origin issues. Existentialists (such as Jeffrey Kottler and Alvin Mahrer) focus on helping people to find greater meaning in their lives. Constructivists (such as Robert Neimeyer, Stephen Madigan, and Michael Mahoney) seek to help people to re-story their lives, creating new narratives that are more self-enhancing and self-empowering. Ericksonians (such as Steve Lankton) downplay theory altogether and instead concentrate on

innovative interventions that disrupt current dysfunctional plans and substitute alternatives. And this is just a sampling of the ideas represented in this book and in the profession!

In spite of the incredible diversity in approaches to therapy, there is some consensus about what tends to work best. A solid relationship needs to be developed, one that is trusting and collaborative. Clients are taught new ways of viewing their problems, especially alternatives that create more hope and possibilities. They are further offered the support and guidance they need to try new things and practice them in their lives. Most practitioners spend some amount of time working on developing greater self-awareness and insight, although this type of work takes many different forms (focusing on the past or present, thoughts or feelings, individual or family dynamics, and so on). Hope and faith play a big role in what all therapists do: instilling a strong belief that change is indeed possible. Finally, all therapists do “stuff.” They have their favorite interventions and strategies, and while these may look different and have varied goals, they do essentially the same things, which are to get people to stop doing things that are not working and try other things that work much better.

This is a gross simplification, of course, but one of the things that is so amazing about the therapy profession is the different forms it appears to take and yet still produce positive effects. And make no mistake: therapy does help people most of the time. Some of these individuals might very well have improved anyway, but they would not have done so as quickly, nor would they have learned the lessons that go with this type of growth.

Although you will see many types of therapy described in this book, and cases of miraculous cures, the routes taken on these journeys are as different as the individuals. That is probably no different than the way people approach their work in your own chosen field.

In spite of the variety of approaches represented in this book, as well as the diversity of cases described, all the contributors were asked essentially the same questions, to use as a basic structure. First, we asked them which case came to mind that represents their best piece of work. We encouraged them to tell the story of what

happened in this ground-breaking episode, followed by queries about their own understanding of why things unfolded the way they did. This will give you a unique window through which to view the way each prominent therapist thinks about his or her work and makes sense of the world. Finally, we asked about what could be learned from this situation that might be useful to others. We are not just speaking about other therapists, but what *anyone* can draw from this case that might help him or her to initiate more powerful and lasting changes in his or her own life.

Each of the interviews was recorded and then transcribed, then written by Jeffrey into narrative prose, including re-created dialogue that was based on case notes and recordings. We sent each chapter to the contributor to check for accuracy, and in some cases, to fill in further details. The contributors also worked to disguise further any identifying features of the clients.

We will talk to you again at the end of our journey, after you have had a chance to enjoy these therapeutic tales and the wisdom they contain. At that point, we will revisit the central themes of the stories and what they have to offer us as object lessons for how change best takes place. In the meantime, fasten your seatbelt and be prepared to alter your views of what therapy is all about and how it really works. In the stories that follow, you will have the opportunity to observe the most accomplished therapists in the world work their magic with some of their most challenging and yet rewarding cases.

Chapter Twenty-One

Thinking Out Loud

A Case from Gordon Wheeler

Gordon Wheeler is a senior faculty member of the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, as well as Director of Gestalt Press. He also works as a consultant, clinician, and trainer in private practice.

Wheeler has written over a dozen books and numerous articles in the field, most of them drawing on the Gestalt model to integrate a range of new approaches for understanding human experience. He seeks to articulate a postmodern vision of self and relationship. His most recent works include Beyond Individualism: Toward a New Understanding of Self; Relationship and Experience; The Voice of Shame: Silence and Connection in Psychotherapy; and The Heart of Development: Gestalt Approaches to Working with Children, Adolescents, and their Worlds.

The Resources Within

Joe had been in therapy with Wheeler for almost 14 years, most of that time in weekly sessions, but the latter years structured as occasional phone consultations.

“Fourteen years?” we asked him.

“Long-term therapy all depends on the client’s ultimate goals,” he explained. “Some people need an ongoing developmental resting place that may not exist elsewhere in their lives. Indeed, we have all seen clients in this type of lengthy relationship that spans decades, if not a lifetime. This may be because of the severity of the presenting problems, but most often it is because some clients either want (or need) regular contact with a professional who supports and challenges them in ways that would not otherwise be possible.

While Wheeler organized his thoughts, each of us thought about our own long-term cases, individuals we have seen over a period of many years. It seems amazing to consider that we have spent more time in intimate engagement with them than we have with some of our own friends.

As is so often the case, Joe's core issues remained relatively consistent over the years even as he made progress on a number of fronts. If you think about it, Wheeler pointed out, there is no real reason why these developmental imprints should fundamentally change, since they are part of our very being. The goal instead is to help people to carry the issues within them in such a way that they become resources rather than liabilities and chronic injuries.

Flawed Merchandise

Joe was a gay man in his mid-forties who struggled constantly with a need to be liked and accepted by others. This severely limited the risks he was willing to take in relationships, because he was so terrified of rejection.

Over the course of the first few years they worked together, Wheeler witnessed Joe attempting to deal with his issues, but in a steadily widening scope of living. He particularly made progress in his professional life, learning to take small but incremental steps toward risk taking that were paying off for him in other areas of his life as well.

It was during their sixth year working together that Joe came in one day feeling particularly discouraged. He had just taken on new responsibilities at work and things were not going well at all; his worst nightmare was unfolding in that he was being told that his performance was not up to par. Just as he did in other situations throughout life when he received criticism, Joe overreacted in a rather controlling and defensive way. Not surprisingly, this only exacerbated the situation.

"I'm just not getting any better," Joe complained. His voice was tired, strained, and discouraged. "I think we're just wasting our time. I think this whole thing has been a waste of time."

"A waste of time?" Wheeler prompted.

"Yeah. I mean, what's the use? It's the same old song over and over and over again. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of myself."

"It has got to be frustrating for you when. . . ."

"Frustrating? You gotta be kidding? It's goddamn exasperating! We've been over this same crap three years. Maybe it was four years ago. Hell, it could have been five years ago. It's the same stuff we've been talking about for years. And I'm just tired of it. Nothing seems to make any difference." As he finished the tirade, it was almost as if his store of energy suddenly ran out. His shoulders dropped and his whole body seemed to fold inward. His head dropped forward.

Wheeler did his best to reassure Joe, to recast the latest disappointment in a larger context in which it might be viewed as a temporary setback rather than a major crisis. All the while Gordon was attempting to soothe and comfort Joe, he couldn't help thinking that, in part, he agreed with him. Joe *was* dealing with the same things that he had been when he first came in. Still, there had been a lot of progress thus far, and Wheeler did his best to remind Joe of what they had accomplished already. "What I didn't do," Wheeler reflected, "was to pay attention then to what I myself was really feeling—the frustration and irritation I was pushing down—and then find a way to use *that*. Not say it necessarily, in so many words; *use* it. And as long as I didn't do that, as long as I wasn't fully aware of my own process, we kept turning in the same circles."

"I know everything you are saying is true," Joe picked up again right where he'd left off, "and I already thought of all these things you are telling me. The thing is—I just think there's something wrong with me. It's kind of just like I'm flawed merchandise. You know, like those shirts you see for sale at half off because they are discolored or have a hole in them."

"I know that's the way you feel right now," Wheeler said, still trying to get things on a more constructive track. "And it's certainly understandable that you would feel that way after what happened at work this week."

"But it's not just this week. Look Doc, I know you are trying to help me and all, but. . . ."

"But what?"

"But all your reassurances don't work with me. I just can't take them in. That's what I mean—there's just something wrong with me. Everything turns to crap."

Wheeler recognized that Joe was spiraling downward and felt unable to stop the self-destructive spin. He felt such despair and hopelessness he just couldn't imagine that there was anything that would make any kind of difference, at least over the long haul. He would always be discolored and have a hole in him.

Shared Responsibility

"At this point," Wheeler explained, "I tried to step back and remind myself that we were co-constructing a relational system here. I tried to reach for a useful hypothesis because if there is any use to theory it is something that you can reach for when things are not going well."

"What do you mean?" we asked him, intrigued by this statement.

"When your instincts are taking you down a productive path, you don't need to stop and plan every step. You would fall over your own feet. It's when you're feeling lost that you most need a compass. In this case, my theory reminded me that if Joe was locked in a masochistic spiral, there had to be some way I was joining him, from a sadistic position. In a different model, this might be called 'projective identification'—which still suggests that the dynamic is entirely driven by the client. I prefer to think of it in a sense more simply, and I believe more productively: whatever is happening, we're both constructing it, together."

"So you're saying, then, that it is when you are having a problem that you need a good theory to make sense of what is going on and reorient yourself?"

"Exactly," Wheeler agreed. It is during those times when he is feeling most stymied that he falls back on his favored theory of relational meaning, in which interactions are deconstructed to find their essential core. In this case, he could feel himself resonating with Joe's own hopelessness; they were both feeling helpless together—and yet somehow Joe was the one carrying the brunt of this feeling. Any feeling Wheeler himself might have, of frustration or diminished competence, wasn't "on the table." It seemed time to bring things into the here and now, just as any self-respecting Gestalt therapist would.

"What might you be feeling right now?" he asked Joe.

"You mean right now?"

In *Their Finest Hour* therapists on the cutting edge of their profession detail their most professionally rewarding cases and share what they learnt from them. They talk about what defines achievement in their field, describe how therapy really works and speak frankly about how their cases shaped their ideas. Each contribution is a transcribed interview written into narrative prose, including re-created dialogue based on case notes and recordings.

There have been some excellent books in the past about the most interesting and seminal cases of psychotherapy, but never have the greatest successes of the most accomplished theoreticians been assembled in one volume, and told in their own words. Included are stories from:

WILLIAM GLASSER
PAT LOVE
NICK CUMMINGS
MICHAEL MAHONEY
ALBERT ELLIS
LAURA BROWN
ARNOLD LAZARUS
BRADFORD KEENEY

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