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COUCH

Me, Me, Me and My Therapist

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Couch is a series about psychotherapy.



Eleanor Taylor

“Just because I go someplace doesn’t mean you lost me,” Jeffery, my therapist, said. Crouched on the floor, my back to him, I tried not to listen. “It’s true I do other things, but that doesn’t mean I forget you.”

Moments before, as we sat facing each other, our session nearly over, I’d learned that he owned a boat and would be sailing to New England when he went on vacation. I found out because, for the first time in the five years I had been seeing him, I’d been brave enough to ask. “This is a big step,” Jeffery had said. “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Yes!” The conviction in my voice belied my trepidation. If I knew specifics, I could no longer pretend his only life was in his office.

I had a problem with what Jeffery called object permanence — in my case, understanding that people I depended on emotionally continued to exist when I couldn’t see them. Staring at the carpet, I tried to reconcile the information about his sailboat

with the two versions I had of him. One was the Jeffery in a skin container whom I saw in my twice-weekly sessions. The other was an amorphous being whose molecules floated loose in the atmosphere. His magical version watched over me between sessions, knowing everything I thought and felt and did, day and night. But if his skin container would be sailing in New England, he couldn't also be in the atmosphere. I would lose my connection with him. A part of myself I called Outside-Me understood that Jeffery was permanent and didn't stop existing when I couldn't see him. Inside-Me was still learning that. It's what we were working on in therapy.

Outside-Me was a competent grown-up in my 50s, involved with family and friends and holding two jobs, one during the week, the other on weekends (to pay for therapy). Inside-Me was a conglomerate of 10 or so people-parts whom I referred to variously as I, we, she, they or even ourself. I'd been that way ever since I could remember, but never thought to mention it to any of the five therapists I'd seen since I was 16.

It wasn't until my late 40s that I learned I had [Dissociative Identity Disorder](#), and a few years more before I found Jeffery, who was experienced in treating dissociation. According to the [International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation](#), the prevalence of the disorder in the population is between 0.01 and 1 percent. I don't know whether anyone in that slice also has something like the atmosphere, but the connection between early trauma, dissociation and insecure attachment has been [well documented](#). Jeffery was the first therapist with whom I felt I was making progress, however bumpy.

"Is that where you go every weekend when you leave early on Fridays? On your boat?" One of those Inside was Wendy, a precocious 6-year-old who, like her namesake in "Peter Pan," was a caretaker. Wendy often dominated our sessions, appointing herself speaker whenever she felt any of us was vulnerable. The moment we heard about Jeffery's sailing trip, she'd popped out to direct the interrogation.

"Yes," Jeffery said. The jolt from this knowledge was too shattering for Wendy to deflect. TheOneWhoCursesCars, another Inside part, punched Jeffery in the arm. Then I — the collective-we — dropped to the floor and sulked.

"I'm always connected to you by the invisible strings that stretch from my heart to yours," Jeffery said, continuing to talk to my back.

Eventually Emily, a shy 6-year-old who yearned for a mother, ventured out. "If you go very far," came her tiny voice, "the strings will break, like when you stretch a rubber band too far."

"They're special strings," Jeffery said. "They never break."

"Do they stay good even in a thunderstorm?"

"Yup."

A few more questions, and soon the session would be over. As if on cue, Wendy reappeared. “I think it’s time to have some toast,” she said. It was our traditional way of ending.

“Good idea,” Jeffery said, and like two conspirators, we walked into the kitchen.

After toast, I put on my jacket and slung my backpack over one shoulder. Then we got into place for our ritual goodbyes, Jeffery in the center of the room, me at the door.

“Bye, Jeffery,” I said, locking eyes with him.

“Bye, Vivian and Wendy and Emily and everyone else.” He lifted his hand in a wave and held it there.

“Bye, Jeffery.”

“Bye, Vivian and Wendy and Emily and everyone else.”

“Bye, Jeffery.”

“Bye, Vivian and Wendy and Emily and everyone else.”

Holding his eyes, I reached behind me for the doorknob and backed out, taking his image with me. For some parts of me, he would remain frozen until our next session, when he would step into himself and come to life.

I never had a goal for therapy and didn’t work at letting go of the atmosphere. Little by little, over the 15 years since that day, it faded by itself, a result of Jeffery’s consistency. Nor did I aim for integration, but as I became surer of his permanence, blending, too, took place on its own. Though I didn’t know it then, what happened in the next few weeks was the first step.

I arrived at the following session with two AAA maps. “I want you to mark the places you’re sailing to,” Wendy said, handing Jeffery a red pen.

He picked up one map. “This is all we need.” Relief. If his wanderings would be contained within the borders of one map that could be neatly folded, maybe this wasn’t going to be so bad.

Jeffery drew a red line through the blue water from Stonington, Conn., to Block Island and marked it Day 1. Another line from Block Island to Cuttyhunk, Mass. “That’s Day 2,” he said. By toast-time, we’d covered his three-week itinerary.

In the remaining sessions before Jeffery left, after we reviewed his route, Wendy asked questions. Was there a stove on his boat? Did he ever go where he couldn’t see land? She did not ask who would be traveling with him.

In the last session, Wendy gave him snacks I had bought in the health food store. They were for his boat, so he’d think of me when he ate them. She asked whether we could

take home one of the mugs we drank from when we had toast. He said yes. She also asked him to make a coupon, another of our traditions. On an index card, he drew two smiling stick figures, big and little. There was a dotted line connecting their hearts and a border around the picture.

After toast, I put the map, mug and coupon in my backpack. "Please don't forget me," I said, pulling on my jacket.

"I won't," Jeffery said solemnly.

"And remember to wear your hat." I didn't want him to die of skin cancer.

"I will." We got into position.

"Bye, Jeffery." That was once.

"Bye, Vivian and Wendy and Emily and everyone else." He lifted his hand in a wave.

"Bye, Jeffery." Twice.

"Bye, Vivian and Wendy and Emily and everyone else."

"Bye, Jeffery." Third and last.

"Bye, Vivian and Wendy and Emily and everyone else."

I felt ready. Holding his eyes, I backed out and closed the door.

Vivian Conan is working on a memoir, "Losing the Atmosphere."