

# A HEALING RELATIONSHIP

Commentary on  
Therapeutic Dialogues

*Richard G. Erskine*



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## About the author

**Richard G. Erskine, PhD**, Training Director at the Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy, is a licensed psychologist with five decades of experience in the practice and teaching of psychotherapy. He has specialized in the treatment of severely disturbed children, run a therapeutic community in a maximum-security prison, and conducted his psychotherapy practice in New York City specializing in the treatment of obsession, dissociation, narcissism, schizoid processes.

In 1972, as a professor at the University of Illinois, Dr. Erskine developed the initial concepts of a developmentally based, relationally focused integrative psychotherapy. By 1976 he established the Institute for Integrative Psychotherapy in New York City and, along with members of the Professional Development Seminars, continued the development, research and refinement of a relational and integrative psychotherapy. Each year Dr. Erskine teaches formal courses and experiential workshops on the theory and methods in several countries around the world. He is a licensed psychoanalyst, certified transactional analyst, internationally recognized gestalt therapist, and a certified group psychotherapist. He is the author of eight books and numerous articles on the practice of psychotherapy. Some of the articles are available on his website at [www.integrativetherapy.com](http://www.integrativetherapy.com)

# Preface

As I write this preface to *A Healing Relationship: Commentary on Therapeutic Dialogues* I am joyful and eager to share the word-for-word transcripts of three actual psychotherapy sessions. These transcripts are accompanied by my comments about the theories and methods that have influenced my therapeutic involvement with each client. Over the years I have received support and encouragement from many psychotherapists who have attended professional training workshops in several countries. I am pleased that they always want to know more about what I was thinking and feeling when working with clients in a developmentally based, relationally focused integrative psychotherapy. I share these transcripts and commentaries with you and hope that they will stimulate lively discussions about the practice of psychotherapy.

Several people have requested that I write a book that has detailed examples of what I actually say and do when working with a client. They have wanted to know why I made a particular inquiry, what I was feeling when I paused, what I intended to accomplish when I validated or normalized the client's experience, or why I explained to a client a child's needs in relationship with a parent. They wanted to understand what concepts influenced my therapeutic comments with each client.

Often, they were interested in my countertransference and asked if my emotions and behaviors were responsive to the client's emerging needs or if I was reacting to some unresolved experience in my own life. When we have these kinds of detailed conversations in workshops, we all learn and grow professionally.

This book is about a relationally focused psychotherapy, how I work and why. The heart of this book are the transaction-by-transaction examples of what actually occurred in the psychotherapeutic dialogue. It is composed of three verbatim transcripts along with annotations about what I was thinking and feeling when I engaged in psychotherapy with each client. Many of my annotated comments as well as the actual therapeutic dialogue will describe some elements of the process of relationally focused psychotherapy and the reasoning behind my therapeutic comments, silences, and challenges.

The first couple of chapters are intended to provide a brief orientation to relationally focused aspects of an integrative psychotherapy. These chapters include some references for further reading and study of the diverse concepts that we use in a comprehensive integrative psychotherapy. I have not included a discussion about the developmental basis of my psychotherapy, body psychotherapy, nor the type of therapy where I provide support for therapeutic regression. Nor have I included a theoretical understanding of how we facilitate our clients' internal integration of physiological sensations, affects, and cognition so that behavior is by choice in the current context rather than stimulated by fear, compulsion, or conditioning.

Both the nature of this book and limited page space have imposed an order to the chapters that does not permit a thorough explanation of the comprehensiveness of an Integrative Psychotherapy theory of motivation, the various theories of personality, the influence of child development research and concepts, or the variety of methods. These theories and concepts have been described in numerous professional journal articles and in several books.

Some of the books that will provide an in-depth understanding of the therapeutic interventions illustrated in these videos and transcripts are:

- *Beyond Empathy: A Therapy of Contact-in-Relationship* (1999, New York: Brunner-Routledge)

- *Integrative Psychotherapy: The Art and Science of Relationship* (2004, Boston, MA: Cengage)
- *Integrative Psychotherapy in Action* (2011, London: Karnac)
- *Relational Patterns, Therapeutic Presence* (2016, London: Karnac)

This book is intended to elicit a dialogue between you, the reader, and me, the psychotherapist and author. I trust that it may also stimulate some important conversation between you and your colleagues. I will write it as though I am writing a personal letter to you. Although we are not talking face-to-face, I hope that our dialogue will prompt you to think about your own clients and what they may need in relationship with you. Please stop at various points during your reading and ask yourself, “Would I have made that inquiry or comment?”; “What would I have done differently?”; “What would I be feeling if I were with this client now?”; or, “How is my therapeutic work similar or different than Richard’s?”

Psychotherapy is such an interpersonal encounter—an intimate meeting of two souls. No two psychotherapists will ever do the same therapy, even with the same client, even if we are using the same theory and methods. As I write this, I wonder how you conceptualize psychotherapy? If you were working with each of these clients, how would your theoretical perspectives and therapeutic interactions be uniquely different than mine? I wish we could have an opportunity to share our ideas. A lack of dialogue may be a loss for each of us and for the profession as a whole. It is important to appreciate how we each think about theories, the concepts that underlie the methods we choose, how we assess the therapeutic setting, and express personal temperament.

If you do not agree with what I do with each client I would like to know what you consider the central concepts in psychotherapy and what you would do differently. Please write an article or contact me through the website [www.integrativetherapy.com](http://www.integrativetherapy.com). Also, the *International Journal of Integrative Psychotherapy* provides a forum for professional discussions. It is one of the few journals that will publish case presentations. Let’s find a way to communicate about the practice of psychotherapy, to both agree and disagree, to influence each other, to grow professionally, and to share our knowledge with our colleagues.



## In appreciation

Full interpersonal connection involves the expression of the need to express gratitude, appreciation, and affection. I am very fortunate to have many rewarding relationships in my life. Therefore, it is with a warm heart that I want to acknowledge and express my appreciation to several people who have helped to make this book possible.

First, I want to express my gratitude to Karen Hallett, my brilliant partner, whose editorial assistance is most valuable. She corrects my spelling, criticizes my paragraph arrangements, and challenges my ideas. Karen has made this book come alive.

The beautifully crafted videos that are the basis of this book are the result of the dedicated cinematography of Igor Fernandez. Igor spent countless hours editing the videos, splicing various points-of-view so that you can see both the client's and my facial expressions, and in crafting the interview with Amaia Mauriz-Etxabe that constitutes the last chapter.

I am indebted to Amaia Mauriz-Etxabe who suggested that I make a series of video recordings of how I use a relational perspective in psychotherapy. We had originally intended to use the videos only in the integrative psychotherapy training programs that Amaia and I conduct at the Instituto Bios de Psicoterapia Integrativa in Bilbao, Spain. Thank you, Amaia. I am most grateful for your encouragement, support, and trust in my work. Working with you at Bios Institute has been an honour and a pleasure.

This book, and the companion videos, were possible because Maika Alonso, Kata Etxebarria, and Amaia Mauriz-Etxabe were each willing to refer one of their clients to me for an intensive psychotherapy session. I am honoured by the trust that each of you have in my therapeutic work. I have been professionally enriched by our conversations. Thank you!

A special "thank you" to Ignacio Gomez Marroquin, Dean of Psychology and Education at Deusto University, for including these videos and several of my writings in the post-master's degree program in humanistic and integrative psychotherapy.

Ines Arregui did a superb job of verbally translating from Spanish to English or from English to Spanish. Her skill as a translator is outstanding. She is such an excellent translator that I often forget she is doing

the translation. Ines' fine work allows me to stay completely focused on the client.

Kate Pearce, publisher at Phoenix Publishing House in the UK, approached me with the idea of writing a book that presented how I conduct my practice of psychotherapy, transaction-by-transaction. Thank you, Kate, I appreciate your trust and support.

Karen Cesarano (UK and Italy) and Ruth Birkebaek (UK) have each read my early draft of the first few chapters and have made constructive and encouraging comments. Thank you. I have a special appreciation of Izaskun Andollo Hervás (Spain) who made many clarifying and challenging comments that have helped me articulate why I do what I do. Izaskun, you are a superb writing companion. It is because of colleagues like the three of you that we are able to have productive conversations about theory and practice. Thank you, to each of you, for your support and contribution to the enhancement of a developmentally based, relationally focused integrative psychotherapy.

The cover photo features a piece of Kintsugi art made by Morty Bachar, Lakeside Pottery Studio ([www.lakesidepottery.com](http://www.lakesidepottery.com)). Thank you, Patty and Morty Bachar, for allowing us to use a photo of your fine craftsmanship.