



WHAT DO YOU NEED?



by Carolyn Spring

'How can I help you?' the therapist asks me. 'What do you need from me?'

I look at her closely, examining her features, whilst also looking through her, to make sure I don't connect too closely.

First the fear: *Is this a trick? What does she mean? What does she want? Why is she saying this?*

Then the shame: *What right have I to be helped?*

And afterwards, the sadness: *No-one has ever offered to help me.*

Three emotions in three seconds.

I don't know where to look, where to put myself, what to do. Part of me wants to get out of here, as quickly as possible, to put infinite distance between myself and this

huckster, mocking me with her duplicity. She's ensnaring me. She's offering me hope, so that she can dash it, and then trample over my upset. She's a Trojan horse, trying to get behind my defences, so that she can attack me from within.

But maybe it's for real. Maybe she means it. Maybe she wants to help me.

How can I help you?

But she won't, because I don't know how she can. I don't know how to answer her question. I am unhelpable and hopeless: a limitless emptiness of irreparability. There is no help for someone like me. That's what I've known all my life. Because I am *bad*.

All of these thoughts whirl around like spring gusts in a courtyard. I don't know what to say. I don't know how to *be*.



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'What do you *need* from me?' she says again, because I haven't responded. There's such tenderness in her voice, like crêpe paper folding itself over my heart. I am tempted to believe her good intentions. I'm tempted to hope.

'I'm not allowed to *need*,' I say, guiltily. I feel stuffed full to the lid with neediness, a vast vat of it, all sticky and putrid. My neediness is *wrong*. More than that, *I* am wrong. I shiver with the shame of it and bury my eyes into the biscuity carpet to avoid the reproach of her gaze.

I can hear her sigh, but with such a weight of sadness that even across the room from her I feel it might crush me.

'You're not wrong to *need*,' she says. Her voice is dripping with compassion, like molten nectar. I want to lick it up, devour it, take it into myself, to make her words true, to make it possible to be acceptable within my desperate, aching wantonness of need. But I smother the feeling back down again. *Bad, bad, I am bad.* I feel twisted up inside, nauseous at this conflict within me, wanting her approval, wanting her acceptance, hating myself, hating my need.

Her head tips forward and down slightly, like she's trying to swoop down into my line of sight. 'You're *not* wrong to have needs,' she says again.

It's like a piercing in my heart. And suddenly I feel whisked up away into a scene from my childhood, and I lose the

now-ness of now and I'm stood apart from myself, out of my body, out of the here. I've become little, littler than little, a sobbing frantic mess, all desperate with the terror of abandonment, and this child-me collapses into a ball and out erupts the pain, the anguish, the life-draining agony of neediness unneeded.

'Please don't, please don't, plee-a-ase,' she sobs.

The mother is holding the telephone, the ugly cream bulge of it heavy and threatening, the coiling, curled cable dangling like an appendage from its torso on the wall. 'I'm phoning the children's home,' the mother says, stern and callous and cold and unremitting. 'They can come and take you away until you learn not to cry.' But still the tears come, killing her, severing away all possibility in this conflict of impossibility. 'Please don't, please don't, plee-a-ase,' with hiccuping gulps of salty wetness.

Stop it. Stop it. Shut up. Be quiet. Just stop it.

But she can't. She needs good mummy to save her from bad mummy. She needs her to come back and make bad mummy stop, to let her be, to quietly, sombrelly put her in her room, but without this gibbering malice and rage of the snake-mother, all evil and fetid and frothing. Other mummy disappeared, in a flick of a switch, in a skip of a heartbeat, and she doesn't know where she went, but she needs her to come back so she doesn't



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have to go to the children's home, where the monsters come in the night-time, the big oafs of men who murder the little children. She *needs* mummy to come back, to stop *this one*. But how? She doesn't know. She can't know.

'It's okay, you're just remembering,' says the therapist, with enough volume to rise above the sobbing of the child-woman client. 'It's not happening now. I won't send you away.'

I struggle to comprehend her words. My body is jolting still with emotion, and snot is peeking out from the end of my nose. I reach for a tissue to wipe it away, shaky, forlorn, and deeply mortified. Surely this is the point at which the therapist will tell me that she can't work with me any more. Because I am too much. Because I dissociated. Because I really, really, don't deserve to be here.

'How can I help you?' she asks again.

I gulp in a ratchety breath and try to force myself calm. The scene of what just played out here is like afterburn on my mind. I can see enough of it to know that it just happened, but I can't remember it directly. I don't *want* to remember it.

'I don't know,' I say, my voice shaking with the effort of calmness. 'It doesn't feel right to be helped.'

'No,' says the therapist ruefully and sagging her face into an empathic frown. 'You were punished when you had needs.'

Punished? I'm surprised at her choice of words. *Was I 'punished'?* *What is she referring to?* I look up at her, quizzical.

'Do you remember what just happened?' she asks.

I shrug. 'A little,' because that's true. But I can't look at her.

'You seemed to be reliving a time when your mother threatened to send you to the children's home because you were upset about something. She punished you for having needs.'

Something rips through me. It's unbidden and surprising. It slits open a memory like a sack of grain. Out come tumbling pellets of emotion.

'I was upset because I'd fallen off my tricycle,' I explain, and my words are fast and clipped and my breath is shallow. 'I'd cut my hand when I fell. It was on the path outside the house. I went in to show her. She was cross with me for bleeding. It hurt. I cried. And she flipped.'

'Flipped in what way?'

'Screaming at me, hitting me. Just crazy. An eruption, like a bomb had gone off. I needed her. I needed comfort from her. And she flipped.'

'She flipped?'

I've said it twice now, so she must have heard me. What's her question?



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'Yes, flipped,' I say, and I can see it, for that moment, in my mind's eye: the terror of child-me, a preschooler, with blood trickling down my hand onto my wrist, the stinging pain of it, the fear that I'll drip onto the carpet, the shakiness of the tumble, grit on my knees, in my palms, on my forearms. And I need a cuddle. Just so desperately, desperately need a cuddle. So I run to mummy and she *flips*.

What I saw, of course, was her switching. The therapist is right to question the word. She didn't *flip*. She *switched*. I triggered her no doubt with my attachment need. She couldn't handle it. She didn't know how to respond to it. And she switched into the rageful screamy one and threatened to send me away if I didn't stop crying.

But it was okay for her to cry, I think to myself, wistful but angry.

'What sense did you make of it?'

The upset has subsided within me. I have, for this moment, dual awareness: I can hold in my mind's eye the traumatised child, bereft of comfort and support, and I can see – for now at least – that she was me. And at the same time I know that I am here, and that I am me, and that I am sat with the therapist – the therapist, not my mother – and that I am remembering. This is a feat of therapeutic progress which has taken years to achieve. I can both be here, and remember, and I can know that

I am me, and she is me, and that I am remembering being me. And yet only a few moments ago I *became* her. My progress is neither linear nor neat.

But this time I've come quickly back into my adult self, and the therapist has mediated that shift. I am learning. I am beginning to be able to be me and remember being me, without switching away, out of shame, from the unacceptability of me. The therapist is making it acceptable.

I have a sudden insight.

'The sense I made of it,' I say, slowly, spreading out my words, like uncreasing a sheet, 'is that I was wrong to need. The sense I made of it is that I was wrong to be upset. The sense I made of it is that I shouldn't have fallen off my trike – I should have been more careful – that it shouldn't have hurt when I did, that I shouldn't have been upset by it, and that I shouldn't have sought comfort and care from my mother.'

'That's a lot of 'shouldn'ts''

'Yes.' But better than that is the fact that right in this moment, with the therapist as my auxiliary cortex, I can stand back from that incident and *see* it. Really see it. And see it from the outside, not just be immersed by it, on the inside of it, reliving it, swamped and drowning.

'And what sense do you make of it now?' she asks, pushing me forwards. I feel like



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there are two pieces of paper, each with a heading: 'Then' and 'Now'. I am lining them up in my head, side by side. The comparison will be stark.

I force air out through my mouth to release some tension and I frown myself into a focused state, leaning forwards. Concentrating is hard when you're used to dissociating. Especially this kind of thinking, when emotions are swirling hard and threat levels are high, due to the proximity of the therapist. I'm nearly shaking with the effort.

But the therapist is here, willing me on, and she is safe, and I am safe, and it's not happening now. I grasp onto the deep-in-my-guts sense of the safety of *now* and I dare myself to say it.

'The sense I make of it now ...' The thoughts keep bobbing below the horizon of consciousness, as if my mind doesn't want me to see them. I squeeze my brow tighter. 'The sense I make of it now is that my mother had her own struggles. That for whatever reason she had attachment difficulties and that she was dissociative too. And so when a small child – *her* small child – wanted comfort and affection, it triggered her. Maybe it reminded her of all her own lack of comfort and affection, what she failed to receive as a child. Whatever the reason, she couldn't give it. She was broken. And so she lost her emotional balance and she flew off the handle. And what she did, and how she reacted, was

damaging to me at the time as a child. But her reaction was because of *her*, not because of me.'

The therapist is looking at me, focused too, her head bobbing slightly in encouragement.

'And so the sense I make of it now is that it wasn't wrong for me to be upset or to have needs or to go to her with them. That was the most natural thing in the world. What was wrong was her reaction to me.'

A big rush of air comes out of me as I collapse with the strain of thinking this. At one level, it is so simple and so straightforward. At another, it reeks of terror. This is treason, to think such thoughts. To blame my mother at all, however graciously. To call her 'wrong'. Not to take the blame myself. Not to be the bad one.

And there is conflict inside me.

Part of me wants to retract it all, throw myself on the floor, beg for forgiveness, sob and scream and cry and plead for the pain to stop. Because the pain will come now. The pain always comes if we talk back.

Another part surges with anger. With the unrighteousness of it all. The injustice. The unfairness. The cruelty. The hurt.



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Another part wants to run away, to drift into oblivion, to not know, to not feel, to not be. Anything other than think about this, feel these feelings, be here.

And yet another part wants to vomit with dread. Helpless, frozen, legs all collapsed under us.

I sit in the conflict, twisting around within myself. I lose contact with the therapist, with the now.

'What do you need from me?' she says again. Again. Why can't she just let it go? Why does she keep foisting herself into me, invading me, coming where she's not wanted, intruding where she's not needed? I don't need anything from her. I don't need anything from anyone.

But then I sit across from myself as I feel the sobs begin to rise. *Acceptance*, I think to myself, but don't say it. *I need you not to reject me. Not to shame me. Not to punish me. Just don't send me away. Don't humiliate me. Don't ignore me. Just sit with me. Hold my hand. Tell me it's okay. Wipe away the blood and put a plaster on it. Tell me a story of when you fell off your bike. Ask me what happened. Say you know it hurts. Ask me to show you where. Tell me I'm being brave.*

But I sit, as these thoughts swarm within me like a thousand angry wasps, and I say nothing, and I can't meet her gaze. I'm too ashamed still.

'I'm overreacting,' I say instead. 'It was only a little cut.'

'You were only a little child,' the therapist retorts, kindly but firmly, searing into me with compassionate eyes that won't let me discount it all.

I sigh, frustrated, and turn away further. Really I want to escape now.

She tracks me.

'Receiving anything from anyone is hard for you, isn't it?' she says.

And then it comes. Erupt and away.

'I don't need anything from anyone!' sneers a strident voice, churlish and adolescent. 'I never have, I never will. I can look after myself. I don't need anyone.'

'You've looked after yourself extremely well. You've coped through very difficult circumstances.' She's trying to placate 'him', trying to bring him onside, trying to mitigate the conflict that he wants to stir between us so that we can avoid these feelings that are steaming on the surface.

'It's an impossible bind,' I say, forcing myself to speak, feeling distant and withdrawn and yet vibrantly immanent. 'If I need anything from you, you'll send me away. You'll close me down. It'll be the end of the session, and there won't be any more. I can't contain all this need'



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– arms wafting, as I always do, when words won't suffice – 'in just the therapy hour. I can't let it out. Because I'll never get it back into the box again. And it won't be here, in the session, that I'll feel the fall-out. It'll be when you're not here. So don't tempt me with 'what do you need from me?' Like I can just switch that on and off.' – Angry, horrified, pleading, morose. – 'Just don't.'

A long pause now as the words fizzle away and I gulp some air to try to calm myself and I try to come back into me, into *just me*, and to stuff down the vulnerability of this rancorous part, so frightened and disavowed.

The therapist picks her way through the minefield I've just set for her. She guards the way with warmth and connection and humanity and realness.

'I know,' she says. 'You've had a lifetime of not having your needs met by a human being, and then here I am asking you what you need from me. And it sounds like you feel that if you ask for anything, you will need to ask for everything. And you're frightened of the hugeness of the need on the inside of you. So instead you get angry with me, to push me away, so that you're not tempted to reach out to me and receive something, in case it's not enough. Is that about right?'

Yes, that's about right. In fact, that's about perfectly, completely right.

I soften my ribs and sink a little into the chair. There's a bit more space for air in my lungs. My fists uncurl.

I nod, because I'm not sure what sound I might make if I speak. It's an olive branch.

'You're right that I can't meet all your needs,' she continues. 'A therapy session never feels long enough. It's a smidgen of your week. And I'm not there for you the rest of the time. So you're right to mistrust me. But I'm not offering you everything, and neither am I offering you nothing. I'm offering you something. And I'm hoping that that something can be a transformative experience for you, which shows you that it's okay for you to have needs. Whether your mother couldn't meet them then or I can't meet them now doesn't mean that you're wrong for having them. The something that I can offer is designed to show you that your needs aren't shameful – that *you* aren't shameful. That's all.'

In a tight, closed-up space in my mind is a little bubbling of resentment, that she didn't agree to meet all my needs, all the time, and forever. But her limitations at least feel safe. The boundary of what she can and cannot do feels safe. She is offering a transformative experience, within the confines of 'something', rather than 'everything' or 'nothing'. That is largely alien to me. But its compactness feels safe.



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'Doesn't it make it worse, though?' I ask, apprehensive, but genuinely curious. 'Doesn't it make it worse to have *some* needs met, but not all? Doesn't it just make you crave more?'

She puckers her lips into a thoughtful gaze and chews on the idea for a moment.

'I guess,' she says – and I can see that she's trying to be loose and flexible in her response, so as not to be caught out by my legalistic rigidity – 'I guess it's like a seed. If you're hungry, a seed won't do much to abate your hunger. And as you say, it might just make things worse, by whetting your appetite. But it depends what you do with it. Because if you plant it, and nurture it, then maybe in time it will be enough to feed you for a lifetime.'

I look at her, suspicious. I don't want to be fooled by the seeming profundity of what she's just said. And I don't want her to see that something is resonating, deep in my guts. I want to think about this, and mull it over, and consider it. I

don't just want to take her word for it. I want to *know* that it's right.

She smiles at me, perhaps sensing my struggle.

'The important thing from today,' she says, 'is that you know that your needs are not shameful. They're not wrong. They won't get you in trouble. You won't be rejected, or humiliated, or hurt. Your needs are what make you human. Your needs are essential for proper human connection. Your needs are the essence of you. And your needs are acceptable here.'

But it's the end of the session, and I have a sense, as if she's about to pick up the phone.

'Our time is up,' she says, 'for *today*. But I'm not sending you away. A limit on our time, a limitation on your needs, is not a rejection. Therapy is something. It's not nothing, and it's not everything. It's a seed.'

And so off I go to sow. ●

