

Seeing Doctor Adams
By John Michael Yonts

Whenever I go for group or individual therapy at Doctor Sheila Adam's office I almost always get the full effect of her experience and her incredibly masterful work. From the first time I greeted her at her office door, it's always been, "Sheila", never "Doctor Adams". And before each session she greets me with a warmly spoken "Welcome". And this youthful, lithe and graceful woman somehow always appears professionally attired whether she is wearing an outfit with a Saint John's line or a business suit. Her striking light complexion is dominated by warm liquid blue eyes. That face is framed by blond hair and usually also by a scarf or collar.

Her manner and attitude make me feel that she is with my emotions from the time I cross over the threshold into her office. With her, there are always the dual unspoken questions to me suggested in her attitude and affect: "Where are you in your thoughts and emotions and how can I help you?" I have a sense of my individuality always being carefully considered and supported when I meet with her. Although most recently from Silicon Valley her accent and her manner tie her more to her Midwestern roots in Minnesota. In many ways, she is unusual and special even for the unusual and special field she is in.

Sheila is direct with what she has to say and easily understood in the way she says it. Her communication is conversational; virtually jargon free unless I ask her to explain something. Then she explains simply with an economy of words whatever my question involved. The questions from me are usually about the therapeutic process, some term I may have run across or just an explanation of what is going on in our many verbal transactions in the course of the therapy session. And in doing so, she always seems to have an incredible sense of the appropriate, the apt, in what she has to say. Since she feels free to express her emotions honestly, most everything fits; everything is "human-sized".

Because Sheila is so plainly and clearly spoken and easily understood, I see her as a kind of open, pleasantly direct Everywoman, who, with her special work, would be at home and fit in nearly anywhere socially and emotionally. Sheila rarely overstates and her own human experiences seem to have provided her a certain balanced humility towards how she views herself.

This special, this unusually helpful human being seems to have a presence about her at all times. She speaks volumes with only a look, an expletive or a simple question. There is a succinct quality about her communication.

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Some years before I entered therapy with Sheila I had worked as a probation officer, so I was often working with children and families to try to create change. We in probation field frequently relied on psychologists, social workers and other practitioners like Sheila for insight about the people we dealt with. We generally supported the efficacy of their treatment and knowledge and the effective work they had to offer. While working as a probation officer, I sat in on therapy sessions and watched these professionals do their work. I had been a part of a number of therapeutic groups and even led one such group. In my own work, I strived to adopt an effective style with my clients when considering their emotions that went on in their lives.

Previous to Sheila, I had been in therapy for a year in and around the time I was divorced. And since that year of therapy, I'd been to see therapists and family counselors about life's issues that came up and as a source of another view on solutions to life's problems. A number of good friends over time have been therapists. In short, I was comfortable with these therapy folks and comfortable with their process before I even started sessions with Sheila. As I was to learn, however, nothing was an adequate preparation for the indelible experiences I've had with Dr. Sheila Adams. I just don't think that there is anyone quite like her.

I learned of Sheila for the first time while listening to a local radio station where she was speaking about intimate relationships: "have more love in your life", as she phrased it. I was once again ready to consider such a relationship but very ambivalent because of what had happened in the past. During her radio broadcast she announced she was having an evening workshop on the subject of relationships. I marked my calendar went to the workshop, was impressed with what Sheila had to say and after getting more information in an interview with her, I made an appointment to see her in ongoing individual sessions and also agreed to begin weekly sessions as a member of her on-going therapy group which would explore intimate relationship issues among many other things.

I made big commitment by agreeing with what Sheila suggested; and I had the necessary motivation. I was in pain about my life like I'd never been before, it seemed. I was weighted down with life-long depression and an accompanying anxiety. I was taking medication for the depression that didn't seem to be working for me. And I had had four unsuccessful intimate relationships since I was divorced some fifteen years before. The burning embers of those relationships seemed to add to my depression and make me feel like a failure. I was really in need and I was ready to extend myself and to make a strong effort in a new direction.

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After three or four group and individual sessions I made a private estimate. My feeling was that I would have to consult with Sheila for several months to overcome my strong feelings of cynicism, fear and vulnerability as well as my depression and anxiety. All of these emotions at one time or another seemed to fill me to overflowing whenever I considered the possibility of once again being in an intimate relationship. But after more work with Sheila I was confident that at some point I would be able to initiate such a relationship.

My therapy sessions seemed to start so fast with an unusual jolt of insight for me. I also started to feel something in small bits and snatches that I really could not identify for a few months. Plainly, under all of the mixed emotions within me, I was beginning to feel something. I was beginning to really learn what it felt like to be me. I don't know if I ever had my subconscious so exposed and so worked upon in my life before these sessions. Intense army training experiences were the only mental emotional equivalent to which I could compare them.

Sheila's sessions mostly left me with a "high" and had an energizing effect on me. I began to realize how I had used therapists in my past. I used them to return to what I thought of as normal, a kind of equilibrium. I had never myself realized and recognized the potential for profound change in therapy. I'd seen others accomplish it but I had never really allowed myself to experience the opportunity for change available to me by working on my attitudes and feelings. For some time I began to push back the estimate when I'd be done with this process with Sheila. Then I stopped estimating and gave myself over to its success.

As she worked with me, Sheila clearly indicated that we were going to take it from the top; start working on my most present and dominant emotions, beginning with my hammering depression; and so it went. In this process, she worked at getting through to me and helping me to identify the different emotional effects of depression and we also explored my anger, vulnerability, fear and my frequent desire to put people at an emotional distance. She revealed to me what I always thought was myself. But really, it wasn't me that I perceived; it was just an endless collection of habitual emotional patterns. And I knew patterns could be changed.

In my sessions with Sheila, she allowed me to see who I was as a child and how that had emotionally shaped me as a man. Working together, we were certainly able to get into the "now" of my existence instead of endless childhood messages that played over and over inside me.

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As I continued in therapy, I seemed to undergo a certain unraveling, a kind of molting. It seemed to me that I was in the process of taking off several layers, like of skins or “coats”, Sheila’s word. And I started using that phrase “peeling the onion”; some onion – me.

In my early work with Sheila if I would attempt to avoid her line of inquiry or avoid an issue or question with some kind of flip or sarcastic reply she was there waiting for me. In response to me putting her off verbally Sheila would simply rephrase or redirect the question or sit across from me in dead pan or stone face expression and wait me out. She sometimes would just wait for me to engage her in a genuine tone and then really answer her question. If she could not elicit a response at all, Sheila would simply verbally depart this apparently unproductive area. I learned over time that we would revisit these originally fruitless areas most effortlessly when re-introduced very naturally by Sheila during a later session. I began to believe that both of us would get the answers to the questions to which I was originally unresponsive. I mean, after all, we were both on the same side.

What I seemed to encounter in sessions from time to time were what appeared to be deftly placed verbal snares put there by Sheila as if she were “waiting in the weeds” for me. But whenever I encountered them there was always something I learned about myself, perhaps an example of the distancing I practiced with members of the group or an almost automatic, unconscious way I had of avoiding genuine inquiries about how I felt.

After some months, there didn’t seem to be as many snares or perhaps I was beginning to be able to be more appropriate, more direct, perhaps more genuine. I had gotten to a point where I was much more comfortable with myself; I didn’t resist the process of self-knowledge so much. Yes, I was becoming more open. Sometimes when I realized this, I’d crack a smile of self-recognition. And it’s good I was coming into my own this way; for there was much ahead on this my most personal of journeys that I never could have anticipated.

And after four months in treatment with Sheila and the group, I knew one thing that seemed to be looming in my very immediate future. My depression was unmistakably lifting; it was less, much less. I knew it every time I woke up in the early morning to start the day; I reflected on it during the day with quiet joy as I worked in my cubicle. The kind of depression I experienced was a strong pain in my head, like I had a huge stone pressing down on my skull and tightening on it in a vise-like manner. The depression also sucked away at my bodily energy.

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Many of the effects of this seven day a week phenomena were leaving me; I could feel it; I was literally lighter. My joy was almost unbounded. I began to understand that each day I showed up in Sheila's office was a sign of a coming victory over something that had oppressed me for most of my years.

I believed from the way things were going in therapy that my depression as a constant feeling would just simply go away with my continued work. I knew I'd be making a decision about contacting my physician to tell him I'd be ceasing my medication altogether.

And I was starting to use a phrase with myself I'd never thought of or even considered using before. Now that I was starting to understand more about myself and to get to really know who I was, I started to consider what it was to really love myself, to fully value myself and what I had to offer the world. And if I kept working like I had in therapy I asked myself if there was really any limit to how much more I could learn to love myself.