

## A CHARMING PSYCHOPATH

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Therapy with Vincent was particularly challenging, unpredictable, and questionable from the start. To begin with, he presented a definitely antisocial and narcissistic history and personal style that is usually not amenable to depth psychology. In addition, we were largely opposites in personality, societal values, and lifestyles. If I had been asked by a colleague, I would have predicted that the therapy would be short-lived and unsuccessful. Instead, it has been continuously developing and transformative for the client, and rewarding for both of us.

Vincent was in his late thirties when he began therapy, and was attempting to establish a serious work life for the first time, which stimulated considerable anxiety. In addition to an inconsistent and uncommitted work life until that time, his attitudes about work and personal responsibility were suspect. He had been heavily involved with gambling and horse race betting, “shady” business deals, overly adventurous stock investments that inevitably collapsed, and systematic efforts at cheating insurance companies. In his longest job—five years for the city government—he managed to spend most of his time at the horse races and seemed never to have been found out by his superiors. At the end of our first session, he warned me that he had a problem bouncing checks with previous therapists and that I should be prepared for that possibility. He was correct in his prediction.

I had never had such an outspoken sociopathic personality in my private practice. I knew I would be tested to the limit as he would inevitably cast me as the representative of societal rules to be challenged at every turn, and a father figure to oppose and from whom to seek support and a different kind of male identity.

My willingness to accept him as a client was based on a variety of perceptions: he seemed genuinely desirous of making serious psychological changes, and he realized, to some extent, his own involvement in his conflicts and frustrations; he revealed genuine concern for the welfare of certain groups and in

dividuals, particularly the underprivileged; he had a keen interest in the state of the world with hopes for social improvement. This was not the picture of a convincing and inveterate antisocial being. He also revealed flashes of raucous humor and a folksy warmth that charmed me.

Vincent was the oldest of three sons. His most painful childhood memories centered around learning difficulties, struggles with his father over these difficulties, and a conflict-laden closeness with his mother. He had severe problems of comprehension in several subjects, particularly English, and he felt “stupid.” Written examinations and answering verbal questions were torture. He also stammered. A typical home situation was being tutored by his father, failing in this task, and his father then becoming impatient, angry and sometimes hitting him. Vincent hated these struggles, yet also felt satisfaction because his father was at least paying attention to him. A pattern developed between them that persisted throughout Vincent’s life. He would become entangled in a troubled situation, his father would become angered, and then help him out of his difficulties. In therapy, Vincent frequently described himself as a “fuck-up” and was aware of a double motivation of attention seeking and rebellion against his father. In school, he became a clown and a boisterous rebel.

Vincent’s relationship with his mother was also ambivalent. He was her favorite of the three sons, and he felt that he was given more attention than his father. In retrospect, he conceived that he had won a victory over his father but was therefore in particular jeopardy of attack, in Oedipal fashion. His mother was colorful, affectionate, controlling, but also hysterical and easily frightened, so that he had to “take care of her” and withhold his own needs and problems. Consequently, no one at home knew how frightened and pained he was by school and playmates. His mother would often walk around the house nude, and Vincent’s first masturbatory fantasies centered on his mother. As an adult, his love life was characterized by the excitement of pursuit and conquest, with fear of closeness and sustained intimacy. In his middle thirties, he developed his first serious relationship, which played a vital part in his life since that time.

My first impression of Vincent was mixed: swaggering, awkward, insecure, and oppositional on the one hand; affable,

cooperative, and pleasantly humorous on the other. He had a special need to show mental acumen about his psychological and emotional life. He often would resist hearing anything I might say or ask with an abrupt “no” before the meaning of my remarks became clear. At these times, he had a furtive, frightened, and pained expression. The therapy quickly threatened to become a replay of the tutoring sessions with his father, but this time Vincent was determined to have more control, while I was determined not to become his angry, impatient father whom Vincent could mistrust and maintain distance from. A balance between a caring but neutral objectivity and normal human responses to a frequently difficult personality were crucial to our work. The traditional detached, objective psychotherapist’s persona would be as threatening to him as a very temperamental psychotherapist. Vincent stated at the outset that, in addition to his career problems, he was interested in an active body and emotional therapy. He talked a good psychoanalytical jargon, reflecting his previous years of verbal therapy.

His current work situation was complicated by the need to enlist several other individuals in the financing and running of a business, even though his own creative inspiration had established the business and had a need to be boss and to win out over competitors. Further, his woman friend, soon to be his wife, had an inheritance and provided the resources for Vincent to begin financing his part of the business, which necessarily affected the dynamics of their relationship and his self-esteem. She was his complementary opposite: stable, reliable, conservative regarding societal structures and customs, refined and reserved interpersonally. He admired and respected her, feared her, and held back emotionally. He did not confide in her important aspects of his business decisions, and he complained that she was reserved sexually.

His body structure and expression added more understanding. In addition to his awkward and somewhat swaggering gait, his body was very tense overall with particular thickening in his neck, shoulders, and chest. He also walked slightly bent forward, indicating diminished self-confidence and anxious anticipation of the future. On the couch, he held his chest in a fixed attitude of inspiration. Exhaling was very minimal and forced. His upper

body was puffed up in an attitude of exaggerated ego expansion. This upper body attitude, found in some males, reflects an unyielding pseudo-strength warding off vulnerable and soft feelings and expressions. Vincent's overall body tightness impeded direct emotional expression and resulted in restlessness, anxiety, and frustration. His eyes looked pained and frightened, especially when he lay down on the therapy couch, while the expression around his mouth and jaw was angry and contemptuous.

As the therapy proceeded, an organic process developed that fused spontaneous needs and conscious intentions. First, it was apparent that Vincent's mistrust of me as a male authority was so strong and so evident that real progress could not be expected unless that issue was significantly diminished. He challenged and opposed me in a variety of ways to test my self-confidence, objectivity, and caring for him. Firmness with setting limits, occasional annoyance, and much humor helped to soften his distrust. It was very important to elicit the details of his business decisions and motivations in order to bring to light his tendencies to wild, unrealistic ideas and his deceptiveness. For example, long before the new business was well organized and effective, he was exploring the purchase of another business that would demand full-time attention. On the side he owned a race horse as well as several old foreign sports cars which he was attempting to remodel and sell for a large profit. Both the horse and the foreign cars led to continuous frustration and distraction from the business, but appealed to the dreamer of adventure and great conquest. Finally, he gave up these two side ventures,

In this early phase of therapy, the body work focused on releasing surface emotion and thereby decreasing inner pressure, facilitating deeper breathing, and assisting in awareness of the emotional and psychological meaning of body attitudes. This was accomplished in a variety of ways, only a few of which can be highlighted here. Evoking deep exhalations brought screams of fear and helplessness, an unusual occurrence in a new client. Vincent's hidden hostility and anger were stimulated by having him kick, hit, and yell "No" or "Leave me alone," sometimes with physical pressure on his tightened jaw or neck muscles. Spontaneous words, phrases, and images were particularly helpful, as

with any client. Vincent was asked to make “faces,” which can reveal underlying attitudes and emotions. Making an “ugly face” is frequent with children and is often punished. It was very important for Vincent to make eye contact with me, saying what he felt at these moments. I doggedly challenged his tendency to withhold his thoughts.

A deeper phase of therapy developed when his inflated upper body yielded somewhat and he was able to breathe more fully, leading to a lessening of his arrogance, rebelliousness, and unrealistic ambitions. He was coming down to earth. His business was becoming a potential success, which forced him to become organized, adult, and law-abiding—anathema to his old self image. He married and had a baby daughter, which further stimulated awareness of his behavior and attitudes to others in situations of intimacy. He became a devoted and anxious father.

When the superficial body and character armor softened, there ensued several years of struggle between surface and depths in Vincent’s being, between contactless role-playing behavior and emotional connectedness. Fears of loss, failure, and sorrow emerged as a heartening shadow from within his mask of exploitative adventurism and pseudo-confidence. He reacted to these genuine and helpful experiences or “weaknesses” for some time in the sessions, with tantrum-like behavior and denial of vulnerability in his everyday life. His drive for business success and some initial character change brought more awareness of the necessity for organization and responsibility. At other times, he felt that going “straight” (law-abiding) meant the death of his identity and aliveness. Directing the details of the business bored and frustrated him; overseeing the employees, creating innovations, and dealing with the public as charming host inspired him.

During this period, his father and one of his brothers died, and he experienced much grief, though he was inhibited about crying deeply in the therapy session. He still feared that crying meant a weakening of his strength and autonomy, as well as a loss of his need to fight authority. I also felt that he was still very angry with his father, which later work demonstrated. Vincent now approached his wife with more feeling, desire, and consideration, which allowed for both more personal nourishment and more conflict about core issues. His wife was no longer a person to be

avoided, idealized, and put on a pedestal. Another daughter was born, and Vincent's involvement with family life further increased.

An aspect of his psychology not previously mentioned was a tendency to take care of disadvantaged persons, diametrically different from his drive for conquest and competition. Some of these individuals took advantage of the situation, and Vincent was forced to challenge the unruliness and irresponsibility of others, as his father had often challenged him. This was a painful task, yet an essential part of his maturing.

As the body portion of the work progressed, it became clearer how Vincent inhibited the expression of his deeper wants and feelings by immobilizing his arms and legs when an impulse began to come to the surface. It was his unconscious way of saying, "I can't. I won't." The capacity to show strong anger, rage or hatred was blocked in this fashion, as was the ability to reach out for comfort or to express love. The reality and intensity of childhood feelings and memories were thus controlled. When this inhibition was overcome, a vital childhood experience emerged. He remembered in detail and with some strong feeling his experience of deprivation of love and security, and actively discharged his rage against his mother, using his whole body in a unitary expression. Soon after, he sobbed with a feeling of love and appreciation for her, a new and transformative experience. This kind of deep body-emotional experience does not occur unless there has been a genuine strengthening of the ego, greater trust developed with the therapist, and improved work and interpersonal functioning.

An advanced, integrative stage in our work has now been reached, in that Vincent is becoming an aware and lively adult rather than a man dominated by unmet childhood drama and need. Responsibility in work and personal relations no longer means being dull and ordinary, and he is even talking out problems rather than shaking the rafters with his pain and rage. Remaining impediments to closeness and a loving sexuality with his wife are being faced directly, and there is hopefulness in this regard. Vincent's anxiety level has decreased, and pleasure has correspondingly increased. He is no longer the brat, "fuck-up," and compulsive rebel, and he feels more of his true identity.

Vincent has changed in many ways after a decade of persistent and hard work. Without a feeling of genuine trust and caring between us, it would not have been possible. Along the way, I had to face areas of my own psychic wounds, and grow along with him. Our work was also aided with adjunctive work he chose in therapeutic massage and the Feldenkrais method. Both of us are aware that he has not reached his fullest capacity for responsibility, love, and self-acceptance, and our work continues.

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