

It Takes More Than Talk*

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*Excerpted with permission from Healing Journeys: The Power of Rubenfeld Synergy

I had been a psychotherapist for several years before Madelaine* came to work with me. She arrived looking for hope after a year of grave despair. A year earlier, her husband had betrayed her with behavior she could not bring herself to forgive and by the time she came to see me she had begun to lose her sense of who she was, if not the wife of an honorable man.

Madelaine arrived at my office as I was beginning a three-year training program in the Rubenfeld Synergy Method. During my three years of training I practiced only traditional therapy with Madelaine, relying on language without touch as the primary vehicle for communication. Talk therapy was fairly effective for Madelaine, as it was for many of my clients, but over those three years Madelaine and I came up against its limits. For all the skill she and I both had at using words to access feelings, nonetheless we eventually found ourselves at an impasse: Therapy of the mind and verbal expression of emotions were insufficient for the changes Madelaine wanted to make for herself. Madelaine's story illustrates the dramatic shift that can happen when therapy moves into the non-traditional realm of learning from the body.

During our three years of work together in traditional therapy, Madelaine labored courageously to come to terms with her past. In spite of her physical attractiveness and her loving nature and inquisitive mind, she was self-conscious and retiring, motivated primarily by fear and self-judgment. Her sense of inadequacy showed itself in the way she compared herself to other people. It was there when she limited her choices of career and when she argued with herself as she struggled to leave a husband to whom she was invisible. Her inadequacy was the part of her who selected her clothes and her friends. And it was there in her body when she stood or walked, for she rolled her whole body forward, as though by shrinking herself, no one would see whatever secret she hid. She felt strain in her shoulders and back as if from the weight of the family messages she had carried for most of her thirty years. Understandably, she was tired.

Madelaine worked hard in therapy. She pounded her rage into many a pillow and wept for all the years without nurturing. She made new friends, took a new job and shopped for new clothes. But through it all, there was a piece missing. Fear was still her primary motivation. In addition, she continued to feel that her husband's choices were in some way her fault. On the deepest levels, Madelaine still did not believe she deserved to release herself from her family rules and freely choose her own life. The revolution she had created in her thinking had not filtered down to the deeper levels of her being. There was an essential piece missing in her work of self-transformation.

I recognized this phenomenon, for I had seen it for years with other clients and I had heard other therapists speak of their frustrations as their clients sometimes hit similar impasses. From many years of observing the limits of traditional therapy, I knew that the missing piece was Madelaine's invitation to her body to participate in her therapy. For all her growth in understanding, recognizing and experiencing her feelings, Madelaine's body still carried the early programming that she was not acceptable. Through those three years of therapy Madelaine still hadn't accessed the beliefs her body carried in her nervous system, soft tissues and skeleton. After three years of therapy, Madelaine's body still didn't know she was entitled to make choices unlike the choices her family had made for generations.

I was caught in an ethical dilemma. During most of these three years of treatment, I practiced Rubenfeld Synergy to help short-term, non-paying "training" clients move through the same kinds of impasses. From my experience, I was increasingly certain this expanded form of therapy was effective. Having been trained as a psychologist, however, I believed that using it with paying clients before I was certified as a Synergist would be unprofessional. I knew that when the time came for us to add to Madelaine's therapy the richness of her body wisdom,

she would begin to truly embody her healing on all levels.

And indeed, the shift came for Madelaine when I finished my training and invited her to consider adding the elements of touch and movement to her therapy. Changing from sitting across from me in a chair to lying on a table was a huge shift in our relationship. Her body was rigid as we began that first session. She chose to keep her glasses on and watched me anxiously as I moved around the table, lightly resting my hands on her head or shoulders or hips. Before long, however, her anxiety began to soften as she shifted her attention away from me and toward her inner experience, following it deeply into herself.

As she let down her relentless guard against allowing me to witness her, her muscles and soft tissues began to offer up early family messages for her to reconsider and alter consciously.

Her own words, written between sessions, document this experience of rediscovering herself. After the first session with touch, she wrote:

[I felt] very nervous at first and [had] feelings of being judged and on-show. I was anxious that I would get it wrong in some way and that you would finally see the real me. As the session progressed, I felt great warmth where you were working. I felt taller afterwards! I felt warm, like I'd just got out of a warm bath, relaxed and alert but disoriented too. It was almost as if I was on a high—like an alcohol buzz. My muscles felt softer, longer. Definitely a sense of strangeness but it wasn't unpleasant. It just felt as if I was flowing more naturally—unblocked! Most of all, [I appreciated] the fact that I felt I could control what was happening and that I could say no if I wanted to.

Madelaine had encountered an experience unlike those she had known in traditional therapy. In all those three years of our sitting across from each other, she had never felt safe enough to let down her social façade and relinquish her efforts to project a favorable image to me. Now, in a state of profound awareness, she had allowed herself to be fully seen for one of the few times in her life. This session was the beginning of a shift in our relationship, where she could test whether or not she was as inherently unlovable as she believed. She had let her guard down and now she waited.

In the third session, as I touched her left shoulder, she remembered a childhood episode of rejection by her mother. She found herself actively expressing long-denied anger. Afterwards she wrote:

Very, very powerful—I was shocked by the strength of the emotions I expressed but also pleased (afterwards) that I got angry! I defended myself. I felt that I had been through a whirlwind but that I came out stronger, taller and lighter. I wasn't carrying that pain around anymore.

I felt the terror of being abandoned but I wasn't just left with it. I moved on to reconnect with my power. The work that you did on my left shoulder while I was lying on my side helped to release all the feelings of fear and clear them out of my system—out of my bones. I also got the chance to revisit that situation and “redo” it—fight back, defend and protect myself. I felt calmer than I had ... all week. ... I felt very connected to my power and sense of joy and my little child.

Moving her attention from me to herself, Madelaine had freed herself to explore the impact of family relationships and childhood anger on her development. For the first time ever, she had simultaneously experienced and expressed some of her anger and thus had been able to resolve it. Through touch, I had stayed actively present to her without distracting her. What she perceived to be “work that you did on my shoulder” was, in fact, physical and emotional release she herself had done while I was simply touching her shoulder lightly. She had known intuitively how to proceed.

As Madelaine felt increasingly safe with Rubenfeld Synergy, we were gradually able to move

our focus to her longing to be authentic with others. After one session, when she felt particularly challenged with my having fully “seen” her, she wrote:

I confronted a lot of feelings of shame and anger about my body—and that I felt used as a child as a weapon in [my] parents’ battles. It was terrifying. But this time I had the opportunity to defend myself and fight back. I didn’t have that chance as a little girl. My shoulders [became] ... looser, more relaxed, softer. A sense of opening up and releasing—instead of my usual pattern of shrinking, closing down. The other feeling, later in the week, was a sense of vulnerability. That I had really been “seen.” A sense that I had unblocked feelings that I had been very ashamed of for a long, long time. ... I think that this is an important piece for me. I’ve disconnected from and loathed my body for such a long time. It was good to be able to explore these frightening feelings and feel safe at the same time.

In this session we broke through the limitation of our earlier work in traditional therapy. Instead of talking about and understanding the “terror of abandonment,” Madelaine felt that terror there in the moment with me. Instead of remembering the choice to hide herself from her mother’s fully seeing her and possibly rejecting her, returned to that choice point in the session. Could she let herself be fully seen by me and thus risk abandonment? She let me witness her in that moment without the social, self-conscious defenses she had maintained for the previous three years. She allowed herself to simply be and courageously allowed me to see who she was. Though she had allowed herself to be fully seen only a few times before, she trusted her body and settled into the experience with ease.

During the next few months, Madelaine forged a new relationship with her body by re-experiencing on the table both the negative messages she had received as a girl and her long-buried anger about these messages. After one session, in which she revisited her decision as a young teen to shut down her sexual energy, she wrote:

My relationship to my body has started to change. I notice that I’m smiling at myself when I look in the mirror now—instead of grimacing!

[I liked] the chance to expel all those feelings of shame and self-loathing—to finally be rid of them and to replace those feelings with a really positive and sensual image of myself. I am really starting to connect more with my whole body—to be more appreciative and respectful of it.

In a relatively short time, Madeleine had come to a new and unexpectedly friendly relationship with herself as a sensuous, attractive woman. With subsequent sessions, as Madelaine and I worked to weave together her reclaimed authenticity and newly discovered sensuality, she recognized a sense of peace and rightness to her life. Following a session a few weeks later, she wrote:

I felt that I really reconnected to a very special place—home. That experience has stayed with me for the remainder of this week. It has been very comforting and wonderful. As if I’ve re-entered a very special place I’d been torn away from years before. The images I visualized during the session were very vivid—almost photographic. I’ve found that remembering those scenes calms me down and deepens my breathing. It helps to reduce tension throughout my body. The only way I can really describe it is a sense of coming home. To my true home, at last.

[I was] putting my feet back on the floor and feeling the solidness and comfort of the floor again! This helped me to really understand that I can bring this experience of God, Spirituality, serenity, with me. I didn’t have to leave it behind on the table. It took me a while to grasp that the experience of peace was inside me, not external.

After about five months of Rubenfeld Synergy, Madelaine was offered a job in another part of the country. Though she was reluctant to terminate therapy, we both knew she was prepared to begin the next phase of her life. She had cultivated her ability to attune to her own power and grace. Her body was now her ally in her journey. And now she knew how to decipher the

code with which her body spoke to her.

When we said good-bye in the last session, Madelaine wondered if she could find her way without my help. But both of us knew this anxiety was just part of the habitual pattern from her past. Under the anxiety was a rock-solid belief in herself that transcended the doubts and fears her family had taught her. She didn't need to know the details of what life would bring her. It was enough to be ready to welcome it, however it appeared.

We had spent our first three years together trying to gently coax the deeper, symbolic meaning from Madelaine's story. During that time we had built a sturdy, loving relationship that was the container for Madelaine's deep delving into herself. But it wasn't until we began our work with touch that Madelaine began to literally embody her insight and fully integrate into her life the many changes she had made in our earlier therapy. In the five months of our work with Rubenfeld Synergy, Madelaine progressed from understanding that she was entitled to joy to experiencing the richness of claiming her place in life. In those five months she began the journey toward both her softness and her power as a woman.