

How Are We On Time?

by
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A therapist's office. Full of warmth and mauve. SHELLY, the client, sits on an immense puffy couch, a large tote bag by her side. MARLA, the therapist, sits in a nearby chair. Another chair sits opposite her.

SHELLY

Let me be blunt, Marla.

MARLA

Please do.

SHELLY

I have been here before.

MARLA

You -

SHELLY

Like throughout the entire 80s and well into the 90s.

MARLA

Oh, you mean you've been in therapy -

SHELLY

Like throughout my entire 20s and well into my 30s.

MARLA

- before. I understand.

SHELLY

Can I be frank? Well, of course I can be frank. Therapy is based on frankness, isn't it Marla?

MARLA

Absolutely.

SHELLY

Here is my frankness: I've worked furiously on my Self, on my issues, on my needs both long term and short term and frankly, I am beginning to wonder.

MARLA

About...

SHELLY

Oh, just in general.

MARLA

Okay. All right.

SHELLY

You came recommended to me by -- oh, I better not say. The privacy thing. Anyway, where else does a person go when they are in an empty place? Shall we start with my empty place? Or would you prefer to hear a review of my issues or how I'm feeling at this particular moment or what? I'm prepared to start anywhere.

MARLA

Where do you want to start?

SHELLY

It's still 50 minutes, right? An hour session is still 50 minutes?

MARLA

Right.

SHELLY

Fantastic. Where shall we jump off?

MARLA

Well, why don't you -

SHELLY

I've been trying to hone in on the essence of my nut. Shall we work on my nut? Do you mind if I check my cell phone? For the time. Not to check my messages. Not that anyone ever leaves a message.

MARLA

No.

SHELLY

Why do you say that? Is is that apparent?

MARLA

What?

SHELLY

That I rarely receive a message.

MARLA

You wanted to check the time.

SHELLY

Let's go with an example and then get into my empty place. Does that sound like a good working plan, Marla?

MARLA

That would be fine.

SHELLY

First of all, what you need to understand is that everyone knows something that I do not. Which isn't to say that I am paranoid. Nor do I think it is a matter of low self esteem. That, by the way, is what I worked on the last time I was in therapy. The self esteem thing. No! Wait! The last time I was in therapy, I was working on the anger thing. The assertive express-your-righteous-outrage thing. I punched a lot of pillows, I spanked a lot of dollies. Do you do anything like that?

MARLA

Do I spank dollies?

SHELLY

I don't mean personally, Marla. I mean in your role as a professional therapist.

MARLA

No.

SHELLY

Oops. Sorry. That's a boundary thing, isn't it? I didn't mean to pry into your relationship with your other patients. That is none of my concern. Anyway, the reason I ask is because I recently read in Simple Living that expressing your anger is out.

MARLA

Out? Oh.

SHELLY

No, not in O., in Simple Living. It was an article on clutter, and it said that expressing your anger actually makes you worse.

MARLA

Worse at clutter?

SHELLY

Talk about a rip off. I spent a lot of money on that anger therapy. I should get a refund. Maybe I could sue.

MARLA

We don't spank any dollies in here.

SHELLY

I love you already.

So. I have that self esteem thing down pat. I am a divine person and I have a right to exist and I can do anything I please because I have that right and nothing you can say to me can penetrate the shield of my self love. Excuse me.

Shelly abruptly stands, critically examines the couch, selects to sit on the other end.

SHELLY

Sorry, that just wasn't working for me anymore. Where was I?

MARLA

Ah, self -

SHELLY

Esteem. Got that down pat. Unfortunately I was born lacking a key ingredient. I've got a missing link, Marla. And I'm ready to give my example.

MARLA

Please do.

SHELLY

Okay. I will. Naturally, my body is a temple and I offer it low fat food and lovingly keep it exercised. My spine rather dictates it.

MARLA

Wonderful.

SHELLY

I decided to try a physical activity that had to do with balls. Otherwise I'd be on that Stairmaster for the rest of my life and let's face it you never reach the top stair on a Stairmaster, it's even more frustrating than getting nowhere on that stationary bike. I chose a sport where I could score points. A ball sport. A sport with balls. Tennis. I signed up for lessons with Bashu. Bashu is the pro at my health club. We worked on my swing. We worked on my serve.

Shelly lays flat on the couch. Marla shifts to the other chair in order to see her.

SHELLY

It was almost enjoyable. Secretly I was developing a crush on Bashu and that's okay. Fantasy is healthy. Well, as long as it isn't an anger fantasy. That's out. I have good self esteem and it's okay that I was secretly developing a crush on Bashu.

MARLA

Certainly.

SHELLY

But then Bashu introduced me to the ball machine. Needless to say, Marla, the ball machine was not a positive experience.

(She sits up)

They just kept coming at me.

(She lies down)

MARLA

The balls?

SHELLY

Exactly, Marla. It was exasperating beyond measure.

MARLA

How did it make you feel?

SHELLY

(Sits up)

It made me feel...it made me feel...exasperated beyond measure.

MARLA

Yes.

SHELLY

So I abandoned sports with balls because why, in this day and age, would anyone choose to do anything that wasn't comfortable?

MARLA

And the balls weren't comfortable.

SHELLY

I believe my ball dysfunction is either a genetic deficiency or I'm giving off some sort of negative...no, wait...it would be positive, wouldn't it?

MARLA

What would be positive?

SHELLY

Right. Exactly. Positive ion that discombobulates ball machinery or my interaction with said balls, among other things. I think it is possible because I'm the only one that I know who had a toxic reaction aroma therapy and I believe somehow there is a connection to my missing link. Do you see what I'm saying?

MARLA

You're saying...what are you saying?

SHELLY

Oh, I have no idea. Damn. Caught in a tangent right in the middle of honing in on my nut. I tangent, Marla. I was telling you about balls...well, it's gone. I'll just keep talking, maybe something will come up. How are we on time?

MARLA

We're fine on time.

Shelly sits upside down on the couch with her head hanging.

SHELLY

For the rush, the blood rush. By the way, I have a compulsion to fill in moments of silence, so there's not going to be a lot of down time on our journey together.

MARLA

Why do you -

SHELLY

It's an inherited trait, Marla. My mother gusts up to 65 miles an hour.

MARLA

My heavens.

SHELLY

I can't bear silence. It unnerves me.

MARLA

Why?

SHELLY

Because it would mean I've run out of things to say. Believe me, it is safer to just keep talking. I like to talk. I like to express. Expressing gives articulation to all those voices in my head, if you know what I mean. Not that I'm schizophrenic. I'm not schizophrenic. The voices are real.

She falls over in a heap on the couch.

SHELLY

Marla, where do you stand on the Prozac thing?

MARLA

As in taking it? As in taking a psychotherapeutic drug?

SHELLY

Well, in specific I mean a serotonin reuptake as opposed to, say, a tricyclic. I was on an MAO inhibitor and I'm telling you, I didn't have a REM cycle for 3 months. That was a dicey situation.

MARLA

How dreadful.

SHELLY

I don't want to go there again. Not to digress any further, but before it slips my mind, where do you stand on the God issue? Truth? Fiction?

MARLA

Do you mean do I believe in God?

SHELLY

Where I stand on the God issue is this: Either there is one or there isn't one. Either way I think we were put here to work on our issues and heal our souls. I do believe in souls and I think they need healing big time. I mean birth was traumatic enough and then immediately after your birth you have to start living, and then you're expected to spend the right of your life living and it just gets to be a bit too much and I do not know what they did before psychotherapy. How did they do it?

MARLA

What I believe -

SHELLY

The world must have reeked of dysfunctionality with all those poor souls wandering around with low self esteem and not knowing how they felt about anything and not having the proper tools in their soul box to get what they wanted from each other. And then there was that whole terrible Middle Ages thing with the Catholics. Well, it really must have been more than the Catholics, that whole organized religion thing that was just so unspeakably unspeakable and is still going on today, what with the Islamic thing and the Methodist thing...

MARLA

Were you or are you a Catholic?

SHELLY

God no. I'm just saying.

MARLA

What?

SHELLY

That we're all survivors of Religion with a capitol R. Marla?

MARLA

Yes?

SHELLY
 (stands)
 Would you mind switching chairs with me?

MARLA
 You want to sit in this chair?

SHELLY
 Yep.

MARLA
 Why?

Shelly shrugs.

MARLA
 Ah, why don't you try sitting back down.

SHELLY
 I don't think so, Marla.

MARLA
 Okay...

Shelly checks the time on her cell phone.

MARLA
 Okay...well, I guess that would be all right.

Shelly sits in Marla's chair. Marla, uncertain, sits on the edge of the other chair.

SHELLY
 Oh! And angels.

MARLA
 What about them?

SHELLY
 I do believe in angels. I have a guardian angel. Carl. He stopped me from getting on the wrong bus last Wednesday night, for which I am eternally grateful. He's a real pal. How are you on that?

MARLA
 On Carl?

SHELLY
 Frankly, I could live with the idea of no God. Really I could. I just wish there was some...some...some...*thing* to take His place. Or Her place.

MARLA

So you're saying you do believe in God?

SHELLY

I didn't say that, Marla.

MARLA

I'm a little confused -

SHELLY

Tell me about it. If there is a God, I can accept that He or She put me here with my missing link but I think He or She should have made me extra super special in some other category.

MARLA

You're saying that you feel inferior?

SHELLY

No. I didn't say that, Marla. I know I'm not inferior. Maybe you'd be more comfortable on that couch.

MARLA

Maybe I would.

Marla switches to the couch.

MARLA

So. You know that you're not inferior.

SHELLY

I know that, Marla. I have a healthy self esteem. Speaking of, where are you on the God Hypothesis?

MARLA

The hypothesis that there is or isn't a God?

SHELLY

No, Marla.

MARLA

Oh.

SHELLY

You don't know about the God Hypothesis? You're a therapist.

MARLA

Maybe I do, I -

SHELLY

Marla, you've got some reading to catch up on. The God Hypothesis posits that believers are healthier and better adapted. The proof is in the numbers.

They've found a direct correlation between going to church and a reduction in prostate cancer.

MARLA

Really?

SHELLY

Yes! I'll believe in anything that reduces prostate cancer. I'm sorry. This isn't working for me.

Shelly moves back to the couch next to Marla. Marla shifts a bit over.

SHELLY

Anyway, that is really the issue I want you to work on me with.

MARLA

What is the issue?

SHELLY

I've got a cavity that needs filled, Marla. My empty place. Now don't get me wrong, I'm grateful I live in an era with so many spiritual choices but what should I believe *in*? Certainly I could never choose a God who suggested my inner child was anything less than perfection, so the whole baptism thing is out. Original sin? I don't think so. Not in this day and age. Still, one is thankful for selection. Competition does keep the marketplace healthy. I do believe in capitalism, Marla. But it's just not enough. For health reasons along I think it's a good idea to believe in something and that is where you come in.

MARLA

Where? Where do I come in?

SHELLY

I've brought this tote bag full of brochures from various spiritual organizations, all of whom are not religion with a capital R - and I would like us to sort them in yes, no, and maybe piles. 3 piles, Marla. Not unlike the Trinity.

MARLA

You have brochures.

Suddenly Shelly plops on to the floor.

SHELLY

There were several reasons why I dropped out of my 12 Step Program. Quite frankly, 12 steps is not nearly enough steps.

MARLA

Did we change subjects?

SHELLY

I'm not sure. Did we?

MARLA

I'm not sure. Is there a 12 Step Brochure -

SHELLY

Well, it was an anonymous program, right? The 12 Step Programs are all anonymous, right? *But everyone kept networking!* There was an awful lot of pressure, an awful lot. I had to get new cards with my web site on them. I'm sorry. Marla?

MARLA

Yes?

SHELLY

I'd feel a whole lot better if you'd come sit on the rug with me.

Shelly pats the rug. Marla hesitates. She pats it again. Again. Again. Marla silently slides down to join Shelly.

SHELLY

And at the meetings everybody knew how to get picked but me. I never got picked. I never got a chance to do my testimony. I was invisible. The leader would say, "Who wants to share?" And everyone raised their hand but I never got picked. Not once. Life is a cruel bitch, isn't it Marla? Isn't it?

MARLA

Yes, yes it is.

SHELLY

Everybody got to tell their story about their trauma but me. I didn't get to share. I didn't get to express. It was a real rip off. Not that I could compete because everyone's addiction was way more dramatic than mine. Or at least they were making it sound like it was. Plus, it wasn't the appropriate Anonymous group for me in the first place. I'm not a do-aholic, I'm a *start-aholic*. There are too many balls in my air and none of them are going over the net. You don't happen to have any Prozac on hand now, do you Marla?

MARLA

No.

SHELLY

Before I forget, where do you stand on the recovered memory thing? Truth? Fiction?

MARLA

Fiction. No - Truth.

SHELLY

The Eat Right For Your Blood Type thing?

MARLA

Truth. Fiction. Truth.

SHELLY

Let's save that for another day. We've got miles to go, my friend.

Shelly lays her head on Marla's lap.

SHELLY

I was finally so exasperated beyond measure at the 12 Step meeting that I stood right up and said, "You people are all wrong and I won't play with you anymore!" And then I dumped the whole jumbo jar of Cremora on the floor and walked out the door. I know that was distasteful but sometimes in this life you have to be a Goofus and not a Gallant, right Marla? I immediately forgave myself in the parking lot. Besides, I suspect that group was a camouflage for a covert Religion with a capital R organization. "Higher Power" is just a really cute way of saying God so why not just say God if they mean God? Hello?

Shelly curls into a fetal position.

SHELLY

I'm seeking an up-front and personal spiritual organization which meets my needs and loves me not matter how many Goofuses I pull. I want a church which can serve me and I want a God who picks me when I raise my hand and need to express. Therapy has made me such a super duper special person, the person that I am today, and my new God should reflect that.

Shelly sits up.

SHELLY

So help me in my spiritual pick, Marla. Who better than my new therapist, my new high priestess! I've been blest with so many enhancing therapeutic experiences, so many marvelous therapists. I hope God can live up to them. How are we on time? I'm going to dash out to my car and get the rest of those brochures. I only brought the one bag in, didn't want to overwhelm you till I knew if we were on the same plane. And Marla, we are!

She dashes off. Marla sits, dazed.