MONTANA ACADEMY

Kalispell, MT
Letter from Lost Prairie:
What is "therapy" anyway?

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Periodically I join a group or run one when a therapist is absent. This is an opportunity for me to dip into the ongoing clinical work at Montana Academy, a therapeutic boarding school, and test the waters to see what our students are learning. Recently I sat with a boys' team. They spent the first half hour talking about their concerns and anxieties in preparation for the addition of a new student who was arriving that afternoon.

They were thoughtful, remembering their own arrivals with their attendant confusion and sense of being overwhelmed. They also valued the gains that they had made, the comfort that they took in their team which had not had a new member in some months and their worry that a new student would upset the cohesion of the existing group. Yet they were at pains to tell each other that it was important to set the tone of the team so that the new student would find them functioning well and discover a culture where he would be expected to do likewise.

We turned to the subject of therapy and I asked them what they thought that "therapy" actually was. One student said that he really didn't know, but that he was struggling just to be honest about what he was thinking and feeling. He said that his father didn't think much of therapy but that his mother "believed it was helpful." This was confusing as he began to have a better relationship with his father and cared what he thought. Another said that he saw his mother using therapy for advice and that he was skeptical about this approach.

One young man said that he thought that he was doing therapy all day long, not just with his therapist in the office, but with his friends in serious conversations and with staff that he had come to know. He was trying to increase his self-awareness, to say what was on his mind and to work on improving his relationships, knowing that this therapeutic milieu would help him to avoid "crashing and burning" as he had done at home.

A fourth, who had been in treatment for 18 months, said that he didn't really think about being in therapy or at a therapeutic boarding school any more, but that his therapist and team leader were so much a part of his everyday life that consideration of their thoughts and approach was integrated into everything he did and not separate from it. Not one young man referred to therapy as something which was done to him or as a set of learned skills. Each one was in his own unique way attempting to follow a path of mindfulness and improvement of day-to-day relationships.

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