

Tip of the Finger Strategy: Olivia's Dramatic Shifts

I worked with "Olivia" from 2003 to 2006 and made very little progress on her Generalized Anxiety Disorder despite much apparently successful EMDR. I failed then to use Ego State Therapy. Inspired by a brief interaction with a professor who knows me, she returned to me last spring, brought in by her mother's recently recognized dementia.

We have been using Ego State Therapy with some frequency, along with a lot of problem solving and EMDR for present triggers regarding her family of origin and her adjustment to graduate school this fall. This is the first week that we have used the tip of the finger strategy (Gonzalez and Mosquera, 2012). The transcripts of these 3 consecutive sessions illustrate a profound creativity from within Olivia and an increasing integration of her co-conscious ego states. In the third, a previously hidden Protector, whose identity has baffled Olivia for many months, comes forward in a shocking turn of events.

In our first three years of work, Olivia had determined that I was her Gandolph, an extraordinary honorific that I often felt I didn't deserve. But she was quite clear on the matter. In our ego state therapy, Gandolph, dressed just as he is described in the Hobbit and in the movie in a long white robe and with a long white beard, is in charge of her co-conscious ego states – a 5th grader, Junior High, High School, and College age (19, when she was formally diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder). Each week they hang out on a picnic blanket. Some months ago, while Olivia was in her Safe Place on a beach with several dogs, a window popped up and she could see her parts on the picnic blanket. This communication became a common occurrence and there were brief conversations with Gandolph, or the kid parts would wave and say, "We're fine," etc. These are all indications of increasing co-consciousness and integration.

So in these Ego State Therapy sessions you will see that I often work through Gandolph. As I have come to have a better understanding of Internal Family System's concept of the Self, I see Gandolph as that part of Olivia. Gonzalez and Mosquera refer to the Inner Self as the person the client will become when healed. In our conversations, Gandolph is often an inner guide, an observing part of self, and a wise ancient part of herself who can tell her what to do.

In our last session, I asked Olivia if she realized she had become Gandolph. She looked surprised and then smiled quietly and said goodbye. She and her boyfriend of 5 years were about to begin couples therapy, she was thriving in graduate school, getting ready to graduate and begin working as a clinical social worker. She kept in touch with me for a while describing her challenging and rewarding work in a residential treatment center, her comfortable and supportive relationship with her parents, and the growth in her primary relationship.

In the transcripts below I am "F"; Olivia's Adult self is "O"; "G" is Gandolph; "C.O." is College Olivia; HO – High School part

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Session: November 14, 2012

Re-evaluation: Didn't do the homework we discussed but I thought about it. I did more thinking about our session than in a very long time. The Parts work.

Conference Room: stairs to Sunny Patio. Utilized Tappers for BLS

- F Yes fine to follow your breath.
Invite all parts of self and Gandolph to join adult Olivia.
- O When I opened the French doors, Gandolph was of course sitting there. He goes off and whistles like my dad does to the girls by the river. Little one, 5th grader, HS and college. There are always doggies around.
- F Welcome. Your experience this week?
- O They felt more connected to me. A baby step.
College me thinks this is really important. There has been a disconnect between all of us. Olivia gets the blinders on in any one moment. We're all factors, like in a relay race. You can't forget your teammates.
- F Wow
- O Yea, that metaphor.
Last week it was so exciting that college Olivia joined the group. She had a traumatic experience.
- F Is 5th any more relaxed?
- O Oh yea. They came in happily together today. None of them are stressed today. I completely forgot about 5th biting her nails.
- O Gandolph is reminding me to share with you a trauma training yesterday and what I learned. When I said to my parts last week, "I'm tired of living in this tired body," it struck me in the workshop yesterday that the body remembers. For me I didn't experience one Big T trauma. It was years of bottling up anxiety. It trained my body. My switch from relax to fight or flight has been stuck on "on". When college me experienced panic and anxiety and thinking you're going to die, being agoraphobic, I don't think we've rid the body of that. The body does remember those things.
- F Bessel van der Kolk – "The Body Keeps the Score."
- O You process a car accident and get through it. This is different because of years of stressful experiences. I've taught my body and my mind how to react. Can I unlearn all of that? Thanks Gandolph for reminding me of the workshop.

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I have a whole world up in my head. (!)

F 11/7 Gandolph's advice to stir up the stagnant pot. Are you ready?

Parts We are more than ready. But why doesn't adult Olivia follow up on things?

C.O It's always been that way.

O I have to take and put us, all of us, first.

I begin to use the Tip of the Finger Strategy for the first time.

F Ask inside if it would be OK to let off a little bit of the anxiety, the fear?

O It's certainly OK. They will follow our lead and Gandolph will take care of them, but the first reaction, interestingly, is, "What will happen?"

F Hence just a little bit. Since OK, tell me when they've done that.

O How?

F Gandolph, can you teach them? It's like letting out a big breath of air and puff, it goes into the atmosphere.

[She lets out a big sigh.]

O They have. It was interesting. They said, "How will we know that we've done that?" Gandolph says, "Since we're all visual people, he set up a test tube, and the red anxiety level went down a notch." We'll leave it on the patio for future weeks.

F OK to let out just a little bit more? If so, let them do that.

O It's interesting. I just looked at each one on the rattan couch to see if they are doing that. They need to know what we put in there. Little one, pre anxiety, is playing with the dogs. It's like each one needs a container. Once it's in there they can start emptying it.

F They don't need to know what they're carrying. The 5th grader has been carrying it with her for 20 years.

If they're willing, with Gandolph's help, just have them let off a little bit more of the anxiety and fear...And tell me when it's done.

O They did.

F If they're willing, with Gandolph's help, just have them let off a little bit more of the anxiety and fear...And tell me when it's done.

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... [Big exhale]

O We've let out about a quarter.

F Would it be OK to let off a little bit more of the anxiety and fear?

...[Several big exhales]

F Are you beginning to notice a shift in their body language?

O They're sitting slouched on the couch, like I am here.

... [More big exhales]

O OK.

F Are you noticing a shift in your own body, adult Olivia?

O I do feel more relaxed than I did. I can feel little twitches that remind me there's still more anxiety in my body. They're little reminders.

F Would it be OK for them to let off a little bit more of the anxiety and fear?

...[One big exhale]

O They did.

F Would it be OK for them to let off a little bit more of the anxiety and fear?

...[Several big exhales]

O They did. It's interesting. Gandolph was coaching them that when they take in that deep breath it's gathering all the crud in their body and when I exhale they blow it out. Gandolph says it would be helpful for me to exhale not just to relax but also to empty and not to add to the soup.

F Would it be OK for them to let off a little bit more of the anxiety and fear?

...[Several big exhales]

O It's so funny; the 5th grader just leaned over to the side and fell asleep. Should I wake her?

F No. A huge letting off. And the test tube?

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- O We're under half. Gandolph feels it's enough for today. He wants to see how this goes. [Olivia smiles.] Gandolph says to adult Olivia, "All I am asking you to do this week is pay attention to the exhale."
- F Ask Gandolph to take them back to the picnic area by the river. Tell me when they've gone.
- O They've left. Gandolph is carrying the sleeping 5th grader wrapped in a blanket. College is carrying little one. They're headed back to their favorite sunny place by the water.
- F Adult Olivia, come back to my office. 5 steps. Open your eyes.

Tappers turned off.

Evaluation:

- O Yes, body is relaxed. That was awesome. Did I slide down your couch?
- F Yes.
- O Gandolph is very good to me. He knows.

Olivia is delighted to have a copy of this transcript. She gives me written consent to share this and other session transcripts with consultees and trainees.

Session: November 21, 2012

Reevaluation: I'm remembering to breath. I visualized briefly what they were doing. My fifth grader is still sleeping. I breathed out a negative message from my sister.

Olivia asks to lie down on my couch for the Conference Room.

TheraTappers on 6 and 6.

I guide her down the stairs to the outdoor patio.

- F Choose your comfortable spot to sit.

I'd like to invite Gandolph to bring the girls over, and to carry over the 5th grader.
- O There're here. They're all sitting on the couch. I'm in a swing chair hanging from a tree branch. Gandolph sits across from them. The test tube is there. We're all present.
- F Can you ask them how their week was?

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O Gandolph gently woke up the 5th grader. She says it's been a much-needed rest. All of them are saying that they noticed that I was mentally aware of what they were doing this week [*increased integration*] and that I followed through on the breathing. They seem like there isn't anything else they want to share.

F Can you ask them through Gandolph if it's OK to let off a little more negative energy?

O Yes. Gandolph asks where the test tube level was last week.

F It was half empty.

O That's where it is today.

F So tell me when they've let off a little more steam.

[Multiple big inhales and exhales]

O We let off a little dash below half. College me is suggesting that since 5th grader is so relaxed, let's focus on the high school part of you. That way it is targeted. Let's empty her. She's suggesting that to you and Gandolph.

F Excellent idea.

[A long series of long slow big inhales and exhales - 5 minutes]

F Would it be OK to catch me up?

O Just one second.

It's pretty awesome. Going one at a time and emptying out, it went from using the test tube to looking at the level of stuff in my high school self. It was up to her eyes and gradually decreased to her shoulders. I slipped into her body and noticed what she was breathing out. It's down to my knees now.

[Notice this fascinating description of increasing integration that she desired last time. "I slipped into her body...It's down to MY knees now."]

[Several minutes]

HS I was getting stuck with a little left in my feet. Gandolph said, "If you can't breathe it out, let me open the secret trap door at the bottom of your soles." So he emptied it out.

O She's a tough one. She did feel lighter after 5th grader emptied out. It was harder for her to let go. She's held onto it for so long but it needed to get out. We're all a team. She has leaned over onto 5th grader.

I'm feeling some angst in my head. I don't know ...

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F Check inside and with Gandolph if it's time to work with the college part of you.

O Yes it is. And Gandolph says [to me] if you're anxious about letting it all go, it's just the weight you've been carrying for so long.

[Continues slow deep inhales and exhales]

O What's interesting is that I'm starting from my head. As she starts to empty, and is down to her neck, I'm no longer feeling the tightness in my head.

[As is so often the case with parts work, Olivia was carrying the discomfort in her head of what her part was feeling.]

O Again, I was feeling some angst in my belly, and now I'm just below my belly button and as I breathe in I feel a vacuum sucking all the crud into my nose and as I breathe out, it all goes out. My stomach feels better.

[Again, notice the integration. She is speaking of the college part of self in the first person.]

O Gandolph says, "Yea you have to have a place to get rid of it." It's like dust particles in the air. I'm mid thigh. I remember my muscle twitches during this work last week. I'm having some very light twitches in my right leg. Usually it's more noticeable. And I just had one in my wrist. Gandolph said I'm doing an emotional cleaning out.

F Let Gandolph know that we have about five more minutes.

[Continued breathing]

O In light of having just a few minutes late, I got to below the knees. Gandolph said, "Let me using the secret door underneath her soles to let the rest of it out." I just took a quick peak at the test tube. There is just a little bit in the very bottom.

Gandolph says let them stay here on the patio. I asked Gandolph about my homework and he said just pay attention to your breath this week.

F Say goodbye, lock the patio doorway and come up the stairs.

O Wait a second. I'm still locking the patio door.

F I am sorry I moved to quickly. When you're ready, just count to five in your head.

[She sits up.]

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Session: November 28, 2012

As I rely more and more completely on Gandolph to make all decisions for our work and to navigate and negotiate, I am more and more clear that he is Olivia's Self, the person she will become when she is healed. He has transitioned from an internalized representation of me, her therapist, to her own higher Self.

Reevaluation: Weird dream about friends from high school and how I couldn't trust them. It was my younger self. She decided she didn't need these people. I haven't checked in with them. Last night I did. They usually stay the way we leave them.

Yes, Back to the Patio

TAPPERS ON for the rest of the session.

O First, I need to begin with my container. I have lots on my to do list I want to contain first.

F Stairs down to patio where we left the parts of self.

Settle in and let me know what you see and experience when you're ready.

O I walked into the patio. They're still asleep on the couch. Gandolph is there. Today I'm sitting in a glider rocker with an ottoman. Gandolph has not woken them up yet. He wants to know if you want to check in with him and me first.

[How's this for an example of Gandolph as her Self!]

O Gandolph says they have been very peaceful, tucked in where we left them. He says the dream I described to you was a dream that one of them was having.

[Integration on yet another level.]

O I want to ask Gandolph if it's OK that I didn't check in and visualize what they're doing as much during this last week. He's saying the goal is not necessarily me checking in on them but them being integrated into me. Let's talk to Farns about it too, Gandolph says. Gandolph adds, "The ultimate goal for this process is for them not to be as separate but for the team to be integrated into the self, into me." Does that make sense?

So through her higher Self, Gandolph, Olivia cognitively has a full understanding of the goal of integration.

F Yes. That's exactly the process.

O How does that happen? Gandolph says, "That's why we call it a process."

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F It is already happening. You've used the language of being in the body of the parts several times.
Gandolph, is there any more crud to be released?

[Big sigh.]

O He's saying that we focused on the crud in the parts but that now we need to release the crud in the adult me. Each part accumulates the crud as they pass the baton of life.
(Smiles.) I like that metaphor.

F Gandolph would it be OK for adult Olivia to release some of the crud while the parts sleep?

G Yes. She is filled with red, as were the girls.

O And he can see me release the red as I breathe out.
Should I start?

F Yes.

[Audible breathing in (sometimes) and out (always).]

O I'm down to my neck.

F Gandolph, would it be OK for adult Olivia to let off a little bit more?

G Yes

...

F Would it be OK to check in?

O I've come down to my collarbone. I was just thinking, and Gandolph heard me, that this is the hardest one to empty, probably because I've stored the most crud.

F Gandolph, is it OK to let off a little more crud, and if so, have adult Olivia do so.

[Audible breathing continues throughout this process.]

O I want to share something with you. I was telling Gandolph, the crud is sticky. It doesn't want to come out. He suggests, "Think about a scrubber brush to loosen up the crud in each part."

The brush is helping but I'm getting lightheaded, as it requires more breathing. He suggests that I unlock my jaw and he will go in there with a vacuum and vacuum out the crud.

I'm down in my stomach.

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- O He did the rest of my legs and feet. I told him I still feel heavy. He replied, "That's because I haven't emptied out the vacuum canister." He picks me up and empties the canister out of my feet. I ask him, "How do we keep it from coming back in? He says, "That's why you breathe. We can't avoid having stress in our lives but we can choose if the stress stays in our bodies."

[The Self's wisdom is endless!]

[Big sigh.]

- O And he did say, "It's fine to vacuum regularly. You vacuum your home once a week, or more than once a week." That's a tool for my toolbox. If my body feels tight or sore or I'm having twitches, then I'll know I need him to vacuum it out.
- F How does your body feel now?
- O I definitely feel more relaxed but my stomach is a little upset and I think it's my skeptical thoughts. I really want this to work. I want to stay more relaxed on a daily basis.
- F Gandolph, do you have thoughts about the skeptical thoughts and the upset stomach?
- O He would like to find out who the Skeptical Part is, if that part would come out, so we can make an alliance with it. But since that hasn't been possible yet, ... I lost my train of thought.
- F Just go inside and let Gandolph speak to you when he's ready.
- O He says that he expected me to be skeptical of the change and not let go 100% even though it's out of the body. The Skeptical part of me...we just have to show it who is boss and prove it wrong. It's like the bully at school. You can't let it get the best of you because then it wins. It's like the Pac Man. There is 75% of me that is on board. And there is this 25% of me that is a pain in the ass that is entwined with the anxiety but it's a coward.
- F Skeptical Part, I want you to know that I appreciate the important role you have played in Olivia's life. I am encouraging Adult Olivia to understand that she can't get rid of you. I would like you to see how capably Adult Olivia is living life and ask you to consider whether, through Gandolph, you can imagine a new role.
- ...
- O Wow! Something is happening. After you talked to the Skeptical Part, a person wearing all black dress and a black veil appeared in the grass and is standing there. Gandolph said, "Welcome. Please come sit on the couch." It did. I feel Whoa. My stomach is in a knot. I never thought it would join us. I think your approach worked. It didn't feel so attacked.
- I asked it if it would lift the veil. It decided to do so. Underneath is my mom. What the fuck! I did not see that coming!

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F May I speak to her? We are all very, very grateful for your presence. Would you share more about your role and when you came into being?

O I'm not sure why I'm crying.
My mom is sitting there. She's saying

[Olivia is sobbing.]

O I just never thought it would be her. I'm realizing that while I always felt she was my rock, she also instilled fear in me by her words and concerns. I always expected it to be my Dad or Marcia (the lead bully in 5th grade). I think that is why it's been so hard to meet her.

I don't want it to change my relationship with my mom [who now has dementia] because she is a different person. [Smiles.]

I have been let down, as I've told you Farns. She didn't always hear me or support me or understand how intense 5th grade was for me, for example. And when I spoke of my desires, she and Dad always spoke of the cons. If I wanted to scuba dive, they emphasized that I could drown. I wanted to go camping in 6th grade with the class, they decided at the last minute I couldn't go because it was too cold. They always instilled fear in me.

F Our time is nearly up. We are all so grateful for your presence Skeptical Part. Thank you for coming forward. Can you continue to make yourself available so that we can give you a new role?

SP Absolutely.

O It's uncomfortable that she's here but I am glad that she is here. Can she and Gandolph go off? I don't trust her. I don't want her with my parts.

F Gandolph, can you take her to a different place and teach her about how powerfully Adult Olivia is working in her training to become a clinical social worker?

O There is a beautiful cottage just across a little bridge by the water where the girls usually are, so they can have some tea and talk. They will exit now.

F And the other parts of self will stay here on the Patio. And Gandolph will check in and keep them safe.

How are you feeling?

O I feel all sorts of things. Now that she and Gandolph have left I feel calmer.

F So come through the door and climb the steps. 1. 2.

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O Wait a second. I have to lock the patio door.

F So bring yourself back at your speed.

O I have to gather myself for a minute.

...

[Eyes open]

She cries more.

O I understand that I wasn't ready to know who the Skeptical Part was before now in our Conference Room work. I needed to be stronger emotionally. Now I am. Did I tell you that my grad school online password is "newbeginning32" [She's 32 years old.] I really am feeling much stronger and this Conference Room work on the patio is making another huge difference.

...

I need to keep them [*her ego states?*] here in your office. I don't want to think about this between sessions. That was some powerful stuff.

O SHE CAME OUT BECAUSE YOU, FARNS, SAID THE KEY WORD – PROTECTOR; BECAUSE THAT IS THE ROLE SHE THOUGHT SHE WAS PLAYING.

[It is of course not that simple. I had asked the Skeptical Part to come forward a number of times before. Olivia's comment above is much more to the point – "I needed to be stronger emotionally." Gonzalez and Mosquera note that when EPs don't come forward it is because the ANP has a phobia of that part – and isn't ready to know that part.]