

# CHARLYNE GELT, PH.D.

## Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



### **Boundaries, Growth and Change**

*by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.*

Not long ago, I was given a beautiful, exotic orchid plant. I consider myself an avid gardener, but I didn't know how to care for this lovely orchid. After a few weeks of producing colorful blooms, it died — or so I thought. I was reluctant to toss the plant into the trash bin, so it sat dormant on my counter for several months. Then one day, astonishingly, my orchid appeared reborn. First, new buds peeked out, then new flowers began blossoming on its long, green stem. My fixed mind-set had said, *"It looks dead, therefore it must be dead."* It wasn't! It was engaging in a critical inner process.

As a psychotherapist, I couldn't help but see a similarity between orchids and people. Both have a blooming cycle as well as quiet periods. In the case of the orchid, it was quietly initiating the growth of new leaves and storing up energy for the blooming cycle. Orchids, like people, need water, sunlight, warmth, and nourishment. And, like people, they are sensitive to the environment, to how they are cared for, and to change. When they are in their dormant, hibernating, or perhaps even thoughtful internal state, it doesn't mean they are dead. It indicates that one need is not being met. When met, the orchid will bloom forth once again.

Life change, in people as well as in plants, occurs according to their own timing. I learned a new perspective about life change from my orchid: Growth and change often means that first something within needs to die.

Not long after my orchid experience, I ran into a former client, "Jean," someone I hadn't seen in years. As we talked, she reminded me of where she'd been in her life at that point. Her husband of thirty-five years had just left her, abruptly, sneaking out the back door one night leaving everything he owned behind, including his Rolex watch. When she learned that he'd married the woman he'd been having an affair with, she blamed herself, and wondered what she had done wrong. We worked together on issues that she, like so many women, deal with when it comes to love relationships — a tendency to get repeatedly bamboozled, deceived, and hooked by men who take advantage of the woman's nurturing goodness.

Jean went on to tell me that recently, fifteen years after her ex had left her, he had called her out of the blue, wanting to rekindle the flame. Shocked, taken aback by his brazen way of playing with her heart, Jean "forgot" that horrific wound of fifteen years ago, "forgot" her confusion, pain, loneliness, and the sense of abandonment she'd felt. She was suddenly overcome with her old, driving need to *please* this man, experience that "high" of feeling wanted — even by this snake!

Caught off-guard, Jean felt caught like a fly in a spider web, especially when he started crying. "Tears ran down his cheeks; he seemed remorseful," she told me. "He began a stream of apologies and begged forgiveness for his previous outrageous behaviors." He *wanted* her again! Love was pouring out of her; her arms ached, reaching out to hold the wounded part of him. Mistaking his manipulations and neediness for love and remorse, she hung onto his every word and even considered inviting him back in

to her life. “For a few moments,” she said, “I forgot about me? Once again, I was a yo-yo on his string. He never saw my pain. My wounded self was a non-existent issue. I didn’t exist except to fill him up.”

But this time Jean recognized the enemy within, the self-abuser. She realized that she — thanks to all the psychological work she had done on herself — had changed. Her ex-husband had not.

Jean did not invite him back into her life. On the outside, she may have *looked* like the same old “dead” person, the one he could always manipulate, but Jean, like the orchid on my counter, had worked on and learned to value what was *inside*.

Breaking old patterns is hard work. Lacking awareness of essential, emotional boundaries leads vulnerable, hungry-for-life women, like Jean, into the dark cavern of destructive relationships, and too often keeps them there. Taking a deep breath to observe a situation without getting emotionally caught up in it is something that one can learn to do, especially in therapy. Making the *unconscious* conscious, turning crisis after crisis into mere “events,” is what therapy is all about.

Therapy is also about establishing boundaries instead of “emotional mergers,” and that’s hard work, too, especially if you have grown up in an emotionally enmeshed, “my way or the highway” family. To belong in such a family, to be loved, you must *please* others. The true self takes a back seat or gets lost. What’s *me*? What’s *not* me? These are unknowns. Pleasing others is a survival tool, and remains a survival tool. Pleasing others becomes the pattern in adult relationships, and is self-perpetuating.

Fortunately, therapy as well as life itself can provide opportunities for learning to “know thyself,” and for true change. For example, certain empathic emotional environments and relationship dynamics offer ample opportunity to encourage us to sprout. A “corrective emotional experience” provides a different lens to view past experiences, beliefs, expectations, and assumptions.

### Staying Stuck

But what happens to women who, drawn by phantom energies, seemingly *choose* to stay, like fixed objects, in abusive relationships? What circumstances will drag them kicking and screaming into healthier connections? What will make them truly desire to get rid of the pain, move out of the swampland of their inner prison, and make that inner journey towards meaning, wholeness, emotional intimacy and a strong sense of identity? How does one finally move away from “fixing others,” start examining one’s personal beliefs (so often the culprit that causes continuous suffering and prevents change), and begin “fixing” the broken parts of the self? What will encourage a woman to hold a mirror up to her restricting beliefs and expectations so they no longer enslave her? What a task!

In the case of my orchid, I learned that if the old spike does not generate a new spike and bloom, in all likelihood it will turn brown and die. In that case, take a sharp knife and cut off the old spike and the dead parts so new ones can grow.

People, unlike orchids, hang on to the deadened, dysfunctional aspects of their lives. What “blooms” instead is a spiral of negative inner talk, depression, anger, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Growth is painful. But the gift in it is that if we keep pushing through it, we, too, may be reborn and bloom! Rebirth and the development of a clear sense of self in the face of ongoing life challenges mean learning to build a boundary that separates the neediness of a “we” from the normal, unmet needs of the “I.” Developing the sense of an “I” is a good starting position for healthier relationships.

A valuable lesson for clinicians is that change can come about outside the therapeutic setting as well as within it. It can come about in emotional environments that offer a healthy space to learn to sit with the anxiety and pain rather than acting it out or withdrawing from it. Women can decide what is the *need* in having or maintaining a particular situation, and then release the need for that situation, thereby gaining relief from the throbbing ache of *stuckness*. Each one of us has the power to ask, “What’s causing the symptom?” “What is my *need* that makes me hang onto this situation in my life?” As one up-grades one’s self-image and sense of identity, one begins to make healthier choices.

Just as Jean did.

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