Terminating a Relationship
The Ecology of Therapy and Its Participants

Background

In the preceding two chapters, we discussed the new and somewhat unique shared ecosystem that the therapist and the client form. Further, they utilize their therapeutic relationship as a way of working together to help the client resolve some personal and interpersonal confusions, difficulties, and conflicts. In the present chapter we turn to the task of concluding our therapeutic relationships. We have emphasized that we bring our ethnic ecosystems into therapy with us and that we transcend them as we build and utilize a shared ecosystem. We have been stressing that in doing so the therapist and the client are changing as individuals in a variety of ways. Now we need to look at how they have changed and how they leave each other and go ahead with their lives. Specifically, how do they return to their respective worlds? What has therapy meant to them? What does their relationship mean to them? Personally? Ethnically? What new understandings and feelings do they carry back to their own separate worlds about others from their own ecosystem and others from different ethnic/racial ecosystems?

To answer those questions we need to ask more generally what the ecosystem aspects of relationships, particularly therapeutic relationships, mean to us. Finally, we need to ask what it means to add to these considerations the reality that this particular relationship has been therapeutic in its focus. Overall, we need to ask who and what we are saying goodbye to and what doing so means to us. We need to look as well at what we are taking with us. In other contexts, Tyler (1978) has written of the importance of conceptualizing the termination of any activity as involving culminating, concluding, and redefining. Those
facets of termination are central to this discussion. When we finish an activity, it is important, indeed essential, that we culminate and “celebrate our success or suffer our failure” (Tyler & Pargament, 1982). It is only by doing so that we can fully complete that activity. Simply completing it in an instrumental sense is *in*completing it. I may finish reading a book, but I am not through with it and it is not through with me until I deal with the experience of it, the feelings it has led me to—the laughing, the crying, the dreaming, the thoughts it has generated or terminated, the exhilaration or disappointment of my experience with it. Once I have culminated, then I can conclude. I can say goodbye to that book and put it on the shelf of my past experience, even if I do not want to keep it on my bookshelf. Finally, I can turn to redefining myself. Who am I now that I have completed that activity, that book? We have all read books that profoundly moved and changed us, that led us to a new place with ourselves and the world. We have redefined who we are. We have said, “If that person can do that, I can do what I want.” We have said, “That’s how I want to live my life,” and committed ourselves to doing so. We have said, “No way,” and turned from a path that previously had seemed possible and even attractive.

Those are the kinds of issues to which we attend in this chapter. We try to look at and ask about how we culminate, conclude, and redefine ourselves and our lives as we complete and move beyond therapeutic relationships. However, before asking those questions about therapeutic relationships, we are going to look at them briefly as a part of all relationships.

**Terminating a Relationship**

*The Individual as a Psychologically Autonomous Unit in the Ecosystem*

Each of us has some range of capabilities for terminating or severing our relationships with other individuals, with our families, with our communities, with our country, or with our ethnic group. We may discontinue a friendship entirely or reduce the level of closeness within it. We may seek a total separation or we may wish to terminate a particular part or aspect of a relationship. We may even wish to terminate our relationship with our nation, ethnic group, or race. However, the world at large has developed broad race-related categories that are based on physical appearance. As a consequence, physical appearance limits our possibilities for terminating our ties with at least parts of our identities,