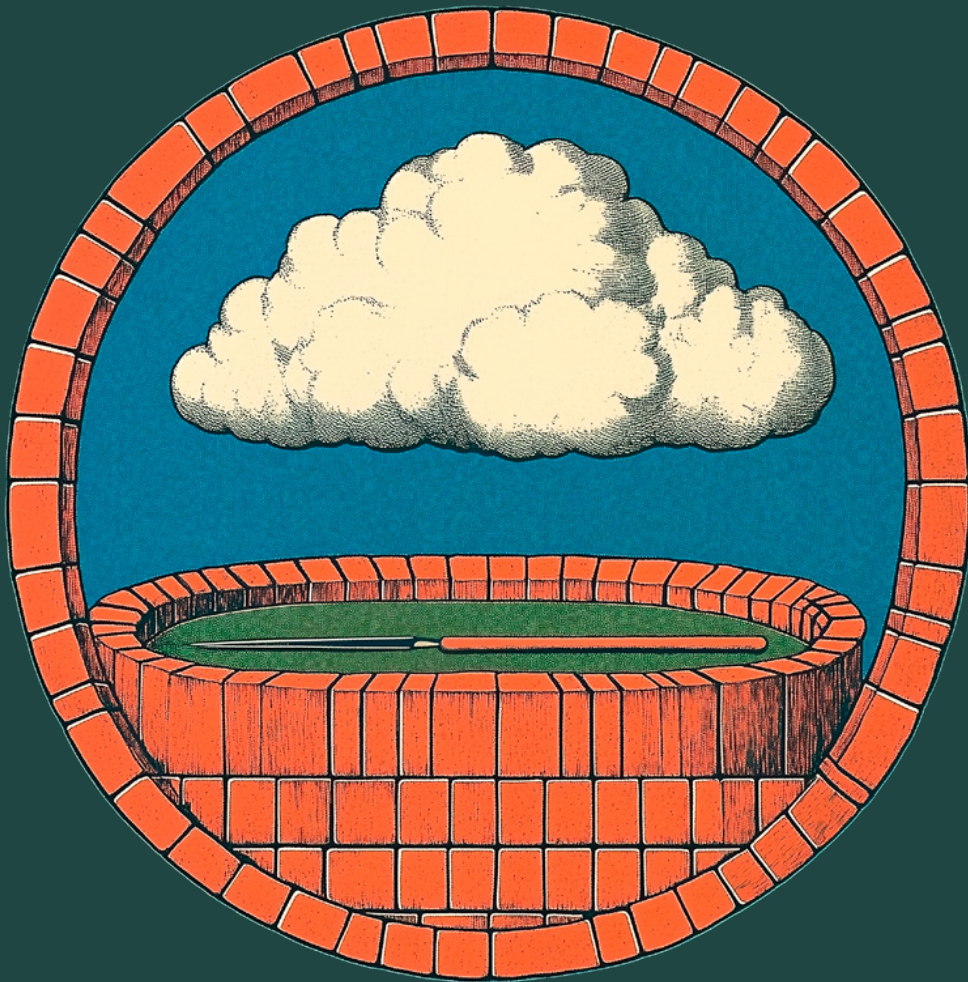


A story about ISTDP

ARTS



BY DESARAY SMITH

A couple of years ago, I was sitting around with myself and I realized that I had been conceived by homeless drug addicts. And you would think that I would have already known this about myself – and I did – but I had just never put it to myself that way, never thought that’s how my story started, but it did, so that’s where we’ll start tonight. I was conceived by homeless drug addicts in 1977, maybe 1976, somewhere in South Florida. There’s a lot of mysteries about that part of my life, but don’t worry, I have really turned out pretty okay. I have a place to stay, I am not addicted to any substances, if you don’t count social media and best of all, I definitely don’t live in Florida. (Let’s take a moment, not only to be grateful that we don’t live there, but to think about the people who do and the people who are suffering.)

So, anyway, I don’t live in Florida and it was 1977, maybe 1976, but fast forward to 2021 and my partner of 2 years turns to me one day and says, “Sometimes you are really mean to me and if you don’t stop, I’m going to break up with you.”

So I turned out pretty okay because I got some help and some of that help was from therapists and here I was in need of a therapist again. Have I mentioned – I think I forgot to mention – that I’m a therapist? So, luckily, a few months before this happened, I had gone to a training on a type of therapy that I had never heard of before – *Intensive Short-term Dynamic Psychotherapy*. And I was astonished. I’ve been a helping professional for 20 years and the therapist presented his work by video and I saw him and his patient do in 30 minutes what most clients and therapists can’t accomplish in a year and I knew I wanted to learn how to do that, I actually found my calling, but first, it turned out, I needed to find someone to do that to me.

So, I did! I called four or five people, got started with a therapist who turned out not to be the right fit, but we talked about it and she referred me to

Lisa. Lisa had done hundreds of hours of training with the person who developed the therapy and magically, more astonishingly she was accepting new clients. So, ISTDP is like most therapies. Your therapist holds you with lots of care and respect but also these therapists are really active, really assertive. ISTDP can be really confrontational and so they offer something called a trial therapy – you show up, they ask for the help that you want, they give it to you, see if it works and you also decide if it works if this is how you want to be helped.

During our trial therapy, I remember, she said to me, “What do you feel towards me right now?” And I said I don’t know how I feel towards you, but I’ve got the sensation in my legs, my legs are tingling and I love it when this happens, anytime I watch a video on the internet of people protesting, I get this sensation and I love it, it makes me feel alive and she said, “That just tells me that you don’t know how your anger works,” and I didn’t quite know what she meant, but I wanted to. I could tell *she* knew what she meant, so I came back for the next session.

This was going to be really intense. ISTDP is all about unlocking the unconscious, really getting to the heart of the matter and like any part of us that protects us it’s no easy task. If you’re doing a heart surgery, for example, you have to get through the rib cage and you can’t summarize the rib cage to the rib cage and validate it. You’re really *going to have to get in there*, do some tough work. I compare these therapists – like if I get poetic about it – to a scalpel and a brick wall and a puffy cloud, all at the same time. They make really precise, planned cuts that are almost painless. They’re really firm and you can lean against them or you can just crash into them over again it’s your choice, and like those big, white clouds from far away they seem one way but if you do the work and you get up close climb the mountain get on the plane you see that there is something more to it something different. So this was

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going to be wild, weird talk about mysteries, talk about the unconscious, it doesn't get weirder than that. We've got the deep sea, we've got outer space and we've got our own minds, right? So, I was ready. I was in the waiting room, this was going to be painful sometimes, surprising sometimes, and expensive – and it was going to be expensive. I had gotten a part time job to pay for this. But I was ready. And again, 15 minutes early – that's how you know, I really really wanted it.

So I'm there in the waiting room, and this woman spots me from 30 feet away and she says, “Are you here for the therapist?” and I say, “Yeah,” and she said, “She's not here,” and I said,

“No, I've got an appointment.” And the woman paused and she said, “She's not coming,” and this is when I realized that something was going on, maybe traffic or an emergency. I said, “What do you mean?” And the woman looked at me and said, “She died.” And I said, “What do you –” And she said, “Here, I'll, I'll get her son on the phone.” So she called Lisa's son and handed me the phone and he introduced himself to me and I introduced myself to him and he explained what happened and I said, “I'm so sorry,” and he said, “No, I'm so sorry.” And we hung up the phone and I handed it back to the woman and she walked away and there I was alone again.

My first thought was, now I can buy that patio furniture that I've been wanting. My second thought was, "Now I don't have to do this, I don't have to figure out how my anger works, I don't have to talk about my parents. I had tried hard enough, right? And my third thought was not so much a thought as it was a realization that I *was* going to do this. I was going to get my patio furniture and then I was going to get another therapist

Emily Dickinson has a poem, "It goes 'After a great pain, a formal feeling comes.'" I was sitting there in the waiting room and that feeling was coming over me and I love this feeling, too, it helps me stay present and connected under some really terrible situations, but if I let it go too far, it gets too far, it goes too far. So I'm sitting there, but I don't know what to do. She calls it a "quartz contentment" and it is satisfying, but it's not quite right, this stony feeling. What do I do, who do I call, do I just send a text? What do you say? So all this is going through my mind when Lisa opens her door and says, "Are you ready?"

I look at her and she looks at me and I break the silence and I say, "Someone just told me that you're dead," and she said, "Oh no, come in." And she sat me down and she explained what happened, her friend had died, the other therapist in the office, the woman that she shares the space with, had died suddenly and I said, "I am so sorry," And she said, "I'm so sorry," and then she said, "What does this bring up for you?" And I said, "Well, it really just reminds me that the next time I see my biological mother it will be at her funeral." And that began the most

transformative therapeutic relationship of my life.

I learned a lot about my anger that year – how it works, how it doesn't work. You know none of us are born mean. We're born to love or maybe get angry, to be excited, to grieve, but somewhere along the way we notice that when we feel those things that the people we depend on get kind of weird, so we stop feeling and figure out how to do everything but, so I knew how to get mean, but I didn't know how to get angry.

I also learned a lot about how I see myself and how I worry other people see me and how that might have happened. It could be that the people who raised me didn't quite see me for who I really was and that's what happened in the waiting room, right? That woman, when she saw me, she saw the dead therapist's client and that's who I became. Just like a kid, I didn't know any better and it wasn't the worst 15 minutes of my life, you know? I figured out that I really want patio furniture *and* that I really wanted to change more than I wanted to stay the same. And thank goodness for Lisa, right? She came out and cleared that up. And I want that for all of you, too. I hope that you have someone in your life who sees you for who you really are, or at least who you really want to be and I hope that you do not have to pay them \$250 an hour. But, if you do have those people in your life, or even one person in your life, who does that, your chances are really so much better at being who you really are, becoming who you really want to be. And the other thing that I learned is that it could be that I have been who I really am since the day I was born, all of us, right? Maybe even since the day that we were conceived.

Desaray Smith



Desaray Smith is an infertile, twice-divorced, queer therapist and morning person in private practice in Baltimore, Maryland. She is in her first year of core training and pursuing certification in sex therapy through AASECT with an interest in treating out of control sexual behavior. In addition to Emily Dickinson, she also enjoys the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay, C Dale Young and Danez Smith. If you live in the mid-Atlantic and also love rattan porch furniture, let's grab a coffee!

FOOTNOTES This is a performance delivered at The Green Room in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, in the summer of 2024. You can listen to the audio of the text here: istdpjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Smith_story_about_ISTDP.mp3