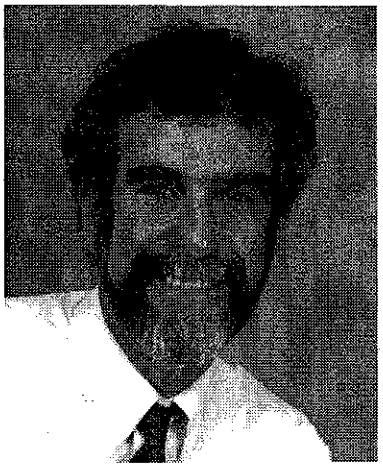
ETHICS AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Ofer Zur

A CHICKEN FOR A SESSION: BARTERING IN PSYCHOTHERAPY



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Bartering is ethically suspect in some quarters, and can complicate the relationship. Can it be worth the cost?

James is an exceptionally talented, homeless sculptor. His sculptures are done primarily in wood and stone, which he laughingly acknowledges are very suited to his lifestyle. We got to know each other at one of the local art fairs where the conversation drifted to issues of choices, styles of living, freedom, consumerism and mortgages, or lack thereof. At the end of the conversation, I asked to buy something from him—an exquisite stone sculpture in his animal series—priced at $100. Consistent with his view of life and commerce, James suggested that he give me the sculpture in exchange for "philosophizing" with me in my office. He said that, in principle, he preferred to barter rather than to get cash for his art. In the first session, we decided that I would reduce my fee to $50 a session (he would not agree to less), thus each $100 sculpture would buy him two sessions. I now have about a dozen of his animal sculptures. The latest one has unique meaning for me—he specially carved a friendly-looking hippopotamus in honor of my intense involvement with the new HIPAA federal privacy regulations, which I refer to—not so privately—as the Hippo.

This is an interesting, not atypical example of barter. Each such deal tends to have singular elements and I find that there can be something very satisfying about the bartering exchange. Barter can have various forms, motivations and, of course, results—which may not always be desirable, but mostly are. The following are a variety of bartering arrangements that I am, or have been, involved in. Each is illustrative of the different qualities that can enter into a bartering agreement.

Ref: Zur, O. (2004). A Chicken for a Session: Bartering In

I was willing to see Mary for therapy on a *pro bono* basis, as she easily fit into the category of "single welfare mother" with three children and neither car nor, indeed, much of anything. She was a proud woman and did not feel comfortable "just receiving" from me. In fact, she felt humiliated even considering the option of seeing me for free. Discussing various possibilities further, we agreed that for each therapy hour she would donate one community service hour to a cause that we both believed in. The arrangement not only preserved her dignity, but also brought us a unique sense of connection and significantly enhanced therapy with this rather cynical client, as she felt that we were, indeed, on the same political and spiritual page. The arrangement also made me feel good, as I was able to contribute to what I believe to be of highest importance. Instead of getting paid in cash, part of which I would have given to this organization anyway, I was able to serve Mary, as well.

A client who is a long-time, non-practicing psychologist faced a dilemma as to how she could continue therapy when her techie husband, like hundreds of thousands of other techies, lost his job in the dot.com crash of the late 90s. This highly talented but disillusioned psychologist had been focused on raising her four young children and homemaking. Given the ages and special needs of the children, going back to work as a psychologist did not seem an appropriate or realistic option. We therefore agreed on a method to continue the much needed and desired therapy. She was well acquainted with my work on dual relationships, and so she proposed a bartering arrangement, correctly pointing out that I needed professional proofreading of my hundreds of online Web pages. Her sharp, professionally trained eye spotted endless typos, grammatical mistakes, and other errors and inconsistencies in need of correction. A couple of phone calls helped us establish the fair market rate for professional proofreading and thus the barter arrangement was easily calculated. Each session would equal 4 hours of proofreading. Besides feeling relieved that therapy would continue, she appreciated my confidence in her and for the first time in many years she was able to enjoy using what she called her "non-mommy" brain.

After a few months of therapy, a successful interior decorator finally expressed her opinion about my poor sense of color and design. She was especially, and legitimately, appalled at the tasteless and cheap picture frames I had in my office. I admitted that I am clueless when it comes to coordinating picture frames and color. She then offered to make by hand new picture frames (her specialty) in exchange for several therapy sessions. While she did not need the money, it was important to her to feel that no one took her for granted "anymore." She was professionally successful but carried a deep sense of shame. She felt that if people knew who she "really" was they would respect neither her nor her work. My enthusiastic willingness to enter into the bartering arrangement was extremely meaningful, because she felt I took her seriously and respected her professionalism and talent "even though" I knew her history and emotional difficulties. The bartering arrange-

ment helped her overcome low self-esteem and a deep sense of shame, and I got a couple of beautiful, handmade picture frames. Neither of us was exploited. She progressed towards her goals, and I was compensated according to our agreement.

After one of my many and quite routine basketball injuries, a physical therapist client, who noticed me limping into the consulting room, suggested an exchange of a couple of physical therapy treatments, using a new electrical stimulation device he had just acquired, for an equal number of therapy sessions. The client had a very tumultuous history with his own dismissive father, who was openly disappointed that his son did not become a "real doctor." I thought that the proposed bartering arrangement gave the client an opportunity to experience my appreciation and trust of his medical expertise. However, after a couple of sessions, he felt that he was not getting his "money's worth." Talk therapy, he felt, was less valuable than the treatment he gave with his special new device. My attempt to engage him in reflecting on this feeling that he was being "taken" and his sense of entitlement were not successful and he terminated therapy. Once again, I had to come to terms with the limits of my ability to connect with and to heal others. Well, there are no guarantees in therapy, as in life, and this negative outcome in no way diminishes the value of bartering, which so often works well. It was worth a try.

This last, intriguing vignette is about a very wealthy middle-aged "trust-fund baby," woman client whose therapy was focused on how she was "cursed by money." She had never needed to work to get what she wanted. She spent her days shopping on eBay, surfing the Web, watching TV, and feeling stuck in her large, expensive home. Money was her way to buy attention, love, and sex and generally get what she thought she wanted. Paradoxically, she was loveless and did not know what she wanted or how to get it. After many months of inconsequential therapy, we dove into the dark territory of her relationship to me and to money. We discussed how being born to money resulted in her deep distrust of people, her social isolation, her sense of emptiness and meaningless, and her uninvolved life. It became clear that as long as she paid for my "love and care" we would remain mired in unproductive therapy. All the talk in the world would not put a dent in her long-lasting distrust of relationships that were in any way mixed with money. We decided that for a couple of months, instead of paying me for each therapy session, she would contribute four hours at a battered women's shelter. I myself benefited indirectly, in that this was a way for me to contribute to a cause I believe in. This short-term bartering arrangement mobilized her to get out of her house and out of herself, to contribute, and to participate with other people for the first time in many years. The deal also enabled her to trust me more and, as a consequence, allowed our connection to deepen and for us to devise ways to move her to participate more meaningfully in further aspects of life.

In spite of these success stories, bartering is not always advisable. A massage therapist who, like many body workers, is used to bartering massage sessions with other massage therapists offered to barter with me. I declined to enter into such an arrangement due to the unsettled nature of our therapeutic relationship and the fact that she professed to be "in love" with me. She emphatically stated that being "in love" would not interfere with her professionalism as a masseuse. After a consultation with a colleague, I shared with her my concerns and the reasons that I thought it might not be an advisable arrangement. She felt rejected and outraged and left therapy abruptly and angrily, an occurrence that in a way validated my decision not to enter into a bartering arrangement with her in the first place.

My interest, indeed my fascination, with bartering derives from a number of sources. I grew up in a culture that worships ideas and ideals and that was dedicated to building a Jewish homeland out of the ashes of the Holocaust. Money was looked down upon compared to loftier ideals such as dedication, community, and sacrifice. Another source is my belief that some of the most telling aspects of every person are the way she or he handles the trio of money, sex, and time. These three basics reveal many of the strengths and weaknesses of how people interact with the world around them. Each of the three is intimately tied to the individual's emotional, physical, and spiritual beliefs. But let us look at one of these, the one that interests us most here: money. Money has tremendous importance in our culture. It is very closely tied to people's sense of self-worth and self-esteem, and so it is often a metaphorical or actual expression of love, care, and appreciation. Gold shines, but it is dark, as well: *Sticking rigidly with the supposed neutrality of accepting money not only denies poor people access to therapy but often prevents the therapeutic exchange from exploring the important but rugged "money terrain" and the significant positive complexities engendered by bartering arrangements.*

Bartering, in general, is the exchange of goods and services. It has almost surely been a part of human interaction since the dawn of our species many thousands of years before gold, silver, or paper money was introduced. At our inception, obviously, there was no money. People bartered or traded in almost all areas of their lives. Today, in psychotherapy or counseling, bartering is the acceptance of services (massage, automobile or plumbing repair, house cleaning, secretarial work, legal advice, etc.), goods (chickens, cabinetry, produce, sculpture, etc.) or other non-monetary payments from clients, in return for psychological or consulting services. Generally, bartering is more common with poor clients who seek or need therapy but do not have the money to pay for it. It is also part of the norm in certain non-European cultures and alternative communities. It is also more common at times of economic depression, when clients and/or therapists are in financial straits.

Throughout my years of graduate school, internships, and continuing education, I was told to avoid bartering due to some elusive but nevertheless

forceful argument that had to do with exploitation and "power disparity" between my clients and me. My analytic supervisors were convinced that I would destroy the therapy if I bartered, and some in a fit of dogma claimed that I would irreversibly damage my clients if I bartered with them. My ethics instructors, like some licensing boards, put bartering high on the "don't ever" risk management list, somehow fully convinced that bartering is likely to be the first step on an inexorable descent towards harm, exploitation, and even sex. Almost all my supervisors and clinical and ethics instructors taught that all bartering constitutes a kind of dual relationship and therefore equated it with harm. They mistakenly assumed that all bartering arrangements are unethical, illegal, and harming. Technically, while bartering goods does not necessarily create a dual relationship, bartering services does. Like any other non-sexual dual relationship, bartering services may be unavoidable and can be helpful if implemented with thoughtfulness, care, and attention to the therapeutic relationship, as well as to the clients' needs, personality, and culture.

Thankfully, I have transcended the fear of boards, tyrannical risk management advisors, attorneys' warnings, and analytic dogma, and can consider whether bartering is appropriate in the context of the individual client. My bartering decisions are primarily based on each client's needs, financial situation, values, character, culture, history, and the nature of our therapeutic relationships. All my bartering arrangements were co-developed with my clients through a continual dialogue and follow-up discussions. They have been clearly documented in the clinical records. As the examples above illuminate, most of these bartering arrangements also harmonize with my personal values and/or need for the goods or services being traded. In other words, if I were a vegetarian, I would not be likely to exchange a chicken for therapy.

There are many ways to structure bartering arrangements. One common way is an exchange of the fair market value of the exchanged goods or services. For example, if the therapist's fee is $120 per session, a client's sculpture with a fair market value of $1,200 would buy the client/sculptor 10 sessions. In some poor agriculture communities, one may observe more flexibility in bartering, such that the arrangement may be something like one chicken for one session. Other bartering agreements for services are based on an hour-for-an-hour trade, i.e., an hour of the client's work, regardless of its fair market value, is provided in exchange for one therapy hour.

The introduction and proliferation of the Internet has revitalized the acceptance and popularity of bartering in our general culture over the last decade. This has been a new frontier for people wanting to trade services and goods, including psychotherapy services. Hundreds, or even thousands, of Websites, such as www.craigslist.org or www.barterforless.com, offer all kinds of online bartering arrangements. When the high tech bubble burst in the late 90s, it caused an exponential increase of those who suddenly became poor, were ready to barter, and were skilled and trusted to do it online. Online

bartering seems to know no limits. People simply list online the items, skills, talents, and services they are ready to trade and then make an additional list of what they need or desire. When cash is sparse, many people trade their graphics skills for car repair, massage for a bicycle, foreign language tutoring for a German shepherd puppy, Web design for a timeshare, or a painting (viewed online) for a home sound system. While some Websites focus the bartering in small geographic areas where services, such as car repair, can be easily traded, others are open to the global village. Barter has become a major force in the economic system of the United States. In the psychotherapeutic-Internet arena, the new, fascinating, intriguing, and complex frontier is the bartering of what has been called tele-health or e-therapy. This is where people will exchange online therapy for other products with people all over the planet.

It may be helpful to note that most therapists and experts consider bartering goods less complicated than bartering services. By no means does that mean we need to avoid the more complex types of arrangements, but we do need to be more thoughtful and deliberate when arranging and executing bartering of services and seek expert consultations when necessary. I have had a less than desirable outcome a couple of times when I bartered for services and found the clients' work unsatisfactory. In one case I chose to bite the bullet. In another I thought it could be helpful grist to the mill if I discussed my dissatisfaction, but it did not turn out successfully.

What seems to be missing in the literature is a discussion of bartering implemented not only when clients' face financial difficulties but specifically and deliberately in order to *enhance* the client's well-being. Also missing is the discussion of the importance of exploring the meaning of money in our culture, for ourselves, and for each of our clients. Interventions that include bartering, like any other clinical intervention, must be matched with the client's needs, wishes, style, situation, culture, etc. The focus should be not on the traditional, limited "do no harm" or risk management approaches but on the imperative to "do good" or do what is most likely to benefit the client and improve his or her mental health and quality of life. At times, the attempt to do good requires courage because there is often an element of risk. I try to be guided by this precept: Whatever the form of payment, my clients do not pay me to practice defensively or conduct risk management. They pay or barter with me to help them grow and heal. And that is what we all must strive to do, using every means at our disposal—including bartering.

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