



ACADEMY OF

THE THERAPY WISDOM[®]

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WISE THERAPY

Spotlight

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Lisa Arrigo, LCSW



Wisdom

My home rests on the majestic Hudson River, just north of New York City. I am so close to the river that I could throw a stone off my balcony and spook the blue heron that often visits, with her long slender legs and neck foraging for fish on the shoreline. Although I have had the privilege of living on this historic and breathtakingly beautiful waterway for a handful of years, it took a global pandemic for me to fully land here and get curious about my natural surroundings.

I have come to discover that the river stretches and curves for 315 miles from the small and unassuming Lake Tear of the Clouds in the north all the way to the New York Harbor, home of the Statue of Liberty. The ambling Hudson River reminds me of human life—long and winding like the river. We begin as a shimmer of reflected light glinting in our parent’s eyes, then as embryos we fill with pulsing life and coursing energy. Once we are born, our bodies and lives cut through time and space like the river cuts through land, the experiences we have along the way curve and turn at times unexpectedly, forming life-changing relationships—the same way river and land meld and blend, form and unform the other. Some bonds that form are life-affirming and allow us to flow more freely while others can be toxic, leaving a trail of pollution and devastation in its wake. It took a pandemic for me to locate myself in time and space, here on the riverbank, and to begin to lean more fully into the grace and suffering of my inner and outer worlds.

It was mid-March when COVID 19 descended on New York City and the surrounding suburbs like bald eagle, its long talons and vice-like grip swooping down close to the river with an eye on its unsuspecting victims. We were

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oblivious to what lurked overhead, like the fish frolicking obliviously in the sun, only moments before they got snapped up by a hungry eagle. This is when I made the difficult decision to leave the sanctity of my office in Mount Kisco, NY, where I have met with my clients for the past twenty years. My office is in so many ways a reflection of myself.

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Framed photos from my solo trip to Tuscany grace the walls, the soft lighting and plush furniture invite a feeling of safety and care. Inspirational quotes serve as gentle reminders to breathe, to find hope and to trust in the goodness of others. The bookshelves are lined with proof of my intense interest and passion for learning and perfecting my craft.

Cherished gifts are placed in prominent locations around my office, reminding me of the important work done within these walls—the work of humans healing wounds too deep to see on the outside. Even Rumi, my sweet Pomeranian, holds an open-hearted space for my clients and for me from his cozy bed.

When Covid cases were skyrocketing in New York like nowhere else in the country, I transitioned out of my office in Mount Kisco, choosing to work “remotely” from my home office in Nyack, NY. Losing this physical space made me acutely aware of the important role it played in my life. I relied on the sentimental items and trinkets in my office to make me feel safe and connected to my own life as well as my work. My home office is comfortable, but littered with reminders of my other life—unpaid bills, half-empty mugs, hand sanitizer and a big screen TV that even when off, reminds me of the turbulence of this current political climate and the constant drone of 24 hour Covid-19 news. My other office, the real one in Mount Kisco, has been a sacred place and a secure container where my clients can feel safe and in the presence of someone who can listen attentively, and help process and heal old wounds. With this move, I could no longer ignore the fact that the world had changed profoundly in the blink of an eye, as quickly as it takes a hungry eagle to swoop down and snatch up its prey, leaving nothing but an empty beach behind.

Despite my therapist’s knowledge that change is an invitation to go deeper, when New York went into “lockdown” my animal instinct of “fight or flight” took over. Since I couldn’t do either, there were times I literally felt frozen, my body tensing up so I felt I couldn’t move at all. In these moments, it became difficult to access my thoughts or emotions, as if they, too, were frozen inside me. Fear would show up as a knot in my belly or a constriction in my throat—I clung to it like I did as a child when my parents were destroying each other in the next room. I would stand there, immobilized, grasping my favorite stuffed bear for comfort.

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Nothing I had relied on before gave me comfort. All my routines were uprooted. I even replaced my morning coffee grinding ritual with a more efficient Keurig machine, and rather than working out first thing, I just sat there staring at my Peloton as it collected dust. The only thing turning were the wheels inside of me in a constant rotation of “fight, flight, and freeze.” My body felt hijacked and my restless mind spun old stories of danger and unsafety mixed with current day horrors and heartbreaks. I stopped showering every morning and spent weeks in my PJ bottoms and a fresh pressed shirt, an attempt to communicate to my clients that all was still A-OK.

Before Covid, despite the challenges of everyday life—helping my clients and myself break old patterns that no longer served them—life had a rhythm and a sense of predictability. My office parking spot, chatting it up with colleagues, seeing my clients in the waiting room, being able to make eye contact and do body tracking to best meet them in the moment and frame the therapy session. These were the things that marked my days. But confined to my home office and to online sessions, with Covid raging through New York and the rest of the country and world, it was hard to find a rhythm. Barking dogs, leaf blowers, a partner working in the next room, to say nothing of being a therapist from only the shoulders up. My clients were reduced to necks and faces, my access to their body’s expression and communication now blocked.

The world of “telehealth” with its email invitations and virtual waiting rooms felt sterile and strange, compared to the three-dimensionality of my office in Mount Kisco, an office that was attached to a life that was seeming further and further away. I

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struggled for weeks trying to make peace with the technology that would allow me to maintain the continuity of the work with my clients during these dark and uncertain times.

Much to my surprise, my clients rallied and I was reminded that the power of the therapeutic relationship transcends the medium, and many of my clients dug deep into their vulnerability, and trusting the process, experiences significant breakthroughs. The ground below us, while feeling shaky was fertile for growth and transformation.

It was during my time in lockdown that I made friends with a trusting juvenile red tailed hawk who first landed on my ironclad railing between sessions on a Tuesday afternoon. Since then, I have learned that the red tailed hawk is referred to by some Native Americans as the Keeper of the Sacred. We spent about ten minutes together, me slowing inching towards him to see how close I could get and he staring back at me with the trust of a child and the wisdom of a warrior. It took my breath away.

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There have been many moments since last March that have made me feel like this moment with the hawk. My breath has been taking away over and over again.

The killing of George Floyd in May was one of these moments. As he took his last breath, I felt the enormity of his suffering in a way that no other act of violence and discrimination had before. I now realize that this moment that rippled through the US and world, inspiring and inciting protests, opened me to my own vulnerabilities and to my own fears, allowing me to open my heart and mind in a brand-new way. In this moment, I was able to connect more fully with the uncertainty of life through the pain and suffering of another. I watched as the country and the world stood up with passion and compassion for the senseless murder, reminding me of the interconnectedness between all living beings and our collective capacity to make our world a better place.

As a therapist and as a human, I know I will reflect back on this time the same way I can gaze down from one of the high cliffs of Hook Mountain on one of my many walks from my home office. From this perspective I can see the fuller scope of the meandering Hudson River, with its twists and turns, its gentle curves. Or I can walk down to the river's edge, close my eyes and appreciate both the stillness and motion of the river, of life. I think of the red-tailed hawk and thank it silently. I can now recognize a new trinity in myself: I am the Keeper of the Sacred, the child, and the warrior.

Lisa Arrigo, LCSW is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in full time private practice, with offices in Westchester County and New York City. Her areas of specialty include the treatment of trauma (PTSD and Complex Trauma), addiction, anxiety and depression. Recent and exciting advances in neuroscience, and mind/body based approaches such as sensorimotor psychotherapy have broadened her understanding of trauma and how best partner with my clients on their healing journeys. She also works with clients who identify as LGBTQ, and is passionate about helping them address issues unique to them. Every day she is both humbled and inspired by her clients, who remind her of the strength and resiliency of the human spirit and our capacity for growth, transformation, and living more authentically.



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