Role Play #4: Counseling a High Functioning Adult Client

**Counselo**r: So, Anne, it's great to see you again and I'm wondering where you want to pick it up this week.

**Anne:** It's great to be back. I've been looking forward to coming here. Yeah, well you know Kevin and I are still trying to figure out whether we want to be together or not so he's still in that apartment but you know, as we got to talking last week and I just was realizing that it's not just about him but it's just like I don't even know if I like my job anymore. I just, I'm not even, you know, him thinking about leaving I guess has made me wonder what do I want to do with my life. And you know, I don't want to be a housewife. I guess I couldn't do that anyway, can't afford that. I'm not sure if I still want to be even a teacher.

**Counselor**: Well, it's tough. I mean you got all these responsibilities, children and a house to manage, and yet perhaps these newly emerging kind of ideas about what it is that you really want. **Anne**: Well yeah, you know, because he had the kids this past week and so I was by myself and that's the first time he has had them all week. I think we're finally sorting that out and I was really alone. And I just thought, you know, sometimes when I'm with the kids, they drive me nuts but when they're gone I just don't know what to do with myself.

**Counselor**: How interesting.

**Anne**: Yeah.

**Counselor**: So what did you do?

**Anne**: Well I did a lot of work. I sort of took papers home every night and came up with some great lesson plans that I'm going to use next week but I just, you know, would go home after go to bed after that thinking, you know, I'm just doing this because I don't know what else to do. There's like, it feels like there's an emptiness in my life and I don't, I don't know if it was him or whether it's more about me and trying to figure out, you know, who I am.

**Counselor**: So you tried to stay busy essentially?

**Anne**: Yeah. I'm so used to being busy all the time it's so hard to have all of that out of my life, him and the kids, and it's just me.

**Counselor**: I think it was Eric Fromm that said, "busyness is the means of avoiding the torment of the shadows."

**Anne**: Yeah, there was some torment.

**Counselor**: Yeah.

**Anne**: You know, my kids are in high school and so they'll be graduating soon and I will be by myself and if, you know, he's not in the picture anymore, you know, I don’t know what to do for the rest of my life.

**Counselor**: So you're looking at the day when you might actually not have all these responsibilities and what then? Yikes.

**Anne**: Yeah. And then you know, the other, the thing that is so ironic is then when the kids are with me they drive me nuts and I just, you know, am looking forward to going to the movies or whatever. So it sort of feels like I just can’t get right in my skin.

**Counselor**: Probably back there somewhere there is some yearnings or some things that you thought about at one point in your life about things that you really wanted to do or.

**Anne**: You know, maybe there are, but I think they were like… I've done those. Like I wanted to get married, I wanted to have kids, I wanted to have my own career, and it's like they're not enough or they're not what I thought they'd be or….

**Counselor**: Or you did them and maybe it's time for something else. Something new.

**Anne**: Yeah. I don't know what that would be. It's kind of exciting. Is this like, pretty common? I mean is this like what they call a midlife crisis? Is that what's going on here?

**Counselor**: Well you haven’t bought a sports car yet but maybe that's the next thing. I mean sometimes people do all kinds of interesting things.

**Anne**: Yeah, I guess I never really had the freedom to think about what I might want to do next. **Counselor**: And, it's kind of scary to think about.

**Anne**: I guess it could be exciting to think about.

**Counselor**: Well, what if there were no children around? What if you were any place you could be?

**Anne**: And I had all the money I needed?

**Counselor**: Yeah, sure. Let's go whole hog here.

**Anne**: You know what? I'd love to work on a cruise ship. I think that would be cool and I could go and travel around and I don't know what I would do. I guess maybe I could be a teacher, do they…maybe they do that. They have people who go with their families and they need teachers. I know how to teach piano. I could teach piano. I could be a piano teacher. There is something about a cruise ship that's appealing. Yeah. Yeah, it’d be kind of fun. Cause then I could travel and, you know, maybe get out of here and start a new life for myself somewhere else.

**Counselor**: So traveling is something that has some appeal?

**Anne**: Yeah.

**Counselor**: What else?

**Anne:** But you know, I wouldn't be able to do that because then I would be, you know, I’d be far away from the kids even if the kids weren’t at home they'd be probably in college. So that, I wouldn’t be able to do, I mean I say like I’d love to do that, but I’d never do that.

**Counselor**: Well, so there’s traveling but also you’re a creative person. You've done other things, I mean, like writing, like…. Raise kids?

**Anne**: Like raising kids, yeah, and there’s some creativity it that, it's not all just responsibility, you know…

**Counselor**: So yeah, you've done a lot of things but a lot of them have been defined by other people.

**Anne**: Yeah, absolutely. You know, I was sort of a soccer mom for, I have been, still am, but that's all about my kids. You know, and the other thing is with my husband's job I used to have like hostess a lot of, or whatever the word would be, you know, we'd have a lot of the other people at the, he’s a professor, so all the university people would come over the house and I'd be bringing the…doing dinners and that kind of thing. The socializing, you know, good host kind of person. Yeah. Well this is really interesting, I mean this is a new chapter. It's pretty scary. I mean and then I think maybe I should just keep doing what I'm doing maybe it's cause he's left and, you know, maybe I'm just really not all that happy or maybe I should just, you know, it's not the end of the world but you know there are people starving other places and maybe I should just be happy with what I've got. I've got a house, I've got kids, and a job and maybe I shouldn't, you know, be so self centered.

**Counselor**: So certainly there is something to be grateful for in having what you have.

**Anne**: Well I think I should be grateful, I don’t sometimes feel very grateful, but I think I should be grateful.

**Counselor**: So in addition to feeling vague dissatisfaction there's some sense of guilt about not being happier with what you got.

**Anne**: Yeah. I think it has to be like kind of how I grew up that my parents were always saying you know we don't have very much. You should be happy for what you have. And, you know, they were pretty poor. And so yeah, and I mean I do have a lot. But it's almost embarrassing to say it's not enough or it’s not feeding me.

**Counselor**: There is going to be this transition time when the kids are, and it’s not far away, when the kids are going to be up and out and so it strikes me, this is a interesting time to prepare, you know, and kind of get ready for this next event. And you’re saying you don't, you never want to be very far from them. So it’s mixed. It's like I want to and I don't.

**Anne**: Yeah. And that's, you know, the other thing is like after he moved out then we got back together and I keep on thinking maybe we should just get back together and I don't know if that's the fear or whether it's the fear of that transition.

**Counselor**: Well, that's a tricky one. Certainly for many weeks you were talking about being pretty dissatisfied.

**Anne**: I don't remember. With him? Was I? Yeah. Cause I forget that when he's…. Yeah, he's gone. I was pretty pissed off at him, you know, for what he did. But now that he's not here I think, oh you know, I should be understanding, I should be a good wife. I should, you know, I should understand the circumstances, you know.

**Counselor**: So if you were to decide that you really wanted him back in your life I would assume you'd want to do that because you really want him back in your life as opposed to just another thing to fill up your time with.

**Anne**: Yeah, I would suppose. You know, I guess I just don't feel like I don't know what I want and so it's so hard to know what to do.

**Counselor**: So how are going to find out? Who could we ask about what it is that you want?

**Anne**: I guess I should, it just feels so empty inside. It feels like there's nothing in there. I guess I just don't even trust my own judgment anymore. You know, back when I was young when the kids were little I was excited, enthusiastic in doing this and that. That's when I was going to school and got the job. Not anymore, it's just been a routine for so long I've just like it’s been…. Have you've seen that movie The Stepford Wives when they just don't even think anymore? You know, you hate to say it but it's kind of what it's like. Just do the same thing over and over and over again.

**Counselor**: And especially what other people tell you to do. This is tough.

**Anne**: Yeah. I mean I just find myself wanting to say why don't you tell me what to do.

**Counselor**: Yeah. OK, good. Change your name and move to California, I don’t know what the thing would be.

**Anne**: Well that's stupid, I wouldn't do that. I didn’t mean to call you stupid but yeah, I guess that's too drastic.

**Counselor**: So a radical change is not something that you contemplate?

**Anne:** Yeah, I guess I'm not a radical change kind of guy – girl, guy.

**Counselor**: Yeah. Too radical. And it would be a lot easier if somebody would tell you what to do.

**Anne:** Yeah, and that's part of the problem right? People have been telling me what to do all of my life. There was that one time when I first met him and when we were first talking about having kids when I felt like I was truly empowered, I really was in charge of my life. So a long time ago, the kids are in high school now. But I remember there was something alive about that time inside of me and I felt like the world was just right there at my feet and I could do anything. **Counselor**: Yeah, I can see the sparkle when you talk about it.

**Anne**: Yeah. That was my twenties.

**Counselor**: All kinds of time stretching out in front of you.

**Anne**: Yeah. It's traveling and newly in love and…but then it's just sort of everything went into neutral and just kind of moved along. Got layered over with responsibility and all the joy having children started to turn into, oh man I got to do this, I got to go there. Yeah. And the creativity around teaching and the bringing in new lesson plans started to get more routine and, you know. Can I just get my paycheck?

**Counselor**: Just a different set of faces every year.

**Anne**: Yeah.

**Counselor**: So it's hard to figure out what happened to the spark.

**Anne**: Yeah. I mean I'm wondering maybe I'm just getting depressed I think, you know, maybe I’m just sort of slipping into this, realizing that I'm depressed, or maybe I should take some medication, you know?

**Counselor**: That would be another kind of good way out around not having to decide.

**Anne**: You don't think that's a good idea?

**Counselor**: Well I'm just saying it would be another strategy to not have to decide or find that spark.

**Anne**: Right. I don't know what my hesitancy is about not wanting to decide.

**Counselor**: Yeah. See, you talk about this time in your twenties when everything looked bright, fresh, and new. You know, I found myself wondering in addition to just being youthful and young if there was something about that time you felt really connected to.

**Anne:** You know, I have to say that was when I was really involved in politics. I was going to rallies and there were a lot of other people around and we were doing some voter drives and I was really involved in local politics when, that was back when I was living in the university town that I lived in. And there was just a lot of causes. There was this disability awareness thing that was going on and we were really involved in that. It just seemed like a lot to sort of get involved in and I guess I was around people who had similar interests. And so we, after we’d go and do this protest march, I remember one time we went down to Washington D.C. and then we met these people and went out to eat afterwards and we talked about, you know, world events and stuff like that, and you know, we just really had a lot of passion for it.

**Counselor**: So you're an activist, you're a rabble rouser, you know, and I can see the excitement in your face as you talk about this.

**Anne**: Well I was. I don't think I am anymore.

**Counselor**: Well, it's back-burnered maybe.

**Anne:** Well, you know, I'm not, you know, besides sort of raising funds for my kid's soccer team I'm not an activist anymore and so maybe that is something that I should be thinking a little bit more about. Because that was such a fun, exciting time and it wasn't around, you know, Kevin, and I mean maybe he came in at very end of it, but it was really about me and who I was.

**Counselor**: Yeah, and these connections with vibrant, alive other people outside of your home situation.

**Anne**: Yeah. Yeah, sometimes it feels a littledull on the sidelines of, you know, little league baseball or, you know, whatever.

**Counselor**: Well, I mean, there’s certainly lots other opportunities out there to engage with those kinds of things now.

**Anne**: Yeah, oh yeah.

**Counselor**: This is a good time for that. A lot of big issues out there that need people with energy and action.

**Anne**: Yeah, well that’s good, that’s helpful cause now I'm thinking maybe I should, you know, take a step in that direction.

**Counselor**: Of course there are other responsibilities too, you know, the kids.

**Anne**: Yeah but now we have this sharing arrangement and maybe he'll come back, I don't know, but we have this sharing arrangement so I do have more time for that. So maybe I don't have to, you know, drop my job, and I mean that felt too scary but this feels like something that I could do.

**Counselor**: Right, get your toes in the water now, as the time is approaching when your children will be gone so you could perhaps begin some things that could have a larger life.

**Anne**: And that would really honor my parents too because that's kind of how they raised me when they were in poverty to just speak out and to appreciate but to, you know, that would sort of honor them and that would be kind of cool too. My dad just died so that would be cool.

**Counselor**: Well, you’ve told me about the kinds of ways in which they were involved in their community and kind of vital contributions they made and so in addition to the responsibilities and the notion of providing for your family messages you got from them was also that other side. **Anne**: Absolutely, he was a leader of the Polish community and that was, you know, that’s what he did and he took that seriously. Once we got a little older and once he had a little more money, and a little more stability, and so yeah, absolutely.

**Counselor**: You certainly look a lot more vibrant and alive now then 15 minutes ago.

Anne: See what happens between now and next week though.

**Counselor**: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

**Counselor:** Yeah and maybe you'll do some things to make some calls to put some things in motion or whatever if you feel like it.

**Anne**: Yeah, that’s a good idea. Thanks, that's helpful. Yeah thanks a lot.

**Counselor**: Okay.

**FEEDBACK/DEBRIEFING SESSION**

**David**: So thanks a lot. You were a terrific client and, you know, it's always fun to work with somebody who's verbal and articulate, and it kind of freed me up to do some things and I'd be curious to know what other people saw.

**Jane**: We certainly made the observation that you really had a good rapport with this particular client. You used quite a bit of humor and it was also very evident to us that you’d assessed the client developmentally in terms of the shapes that she was making and you addressed that in the interventions with her.

**David**: It is certainly seeing you as somebody who has pretty highly functioning kind of person freed me up to not have to be overly directive or overly active, and I can of lie back and digest the kinds of things you're saying and being more reflective.

**Anne**: It felt like you were just giving me something that I could go with. You put something forward and I could do something with it and you weren’t telling me but suggesting and that was helpful.

**David**: Right. Yeah.

**Gary:** David, and raising questions about what she should do next and putting that out there directly and you’re hearing that but also continuing to note what she needed to do for herself. The way you did that and the way you handled her question about medication too, how you responded to it but also used that to incorporate into this question of what should I do next.

**David**: Well, it's a struggle, you know, I mean there is some anxiety with somebody is asking you to give them some answers, you know, give me some direction here. And certainly the medication question if there was some kind of sense of her anxiety around all this were debilitating or if there was significant difficulty in functioning. Yeah, I mean, yeah, we would consider that. For now however, that doesn't appear to be the case so we just kind of blew by that as a question and kind of moved on to what was behind it, which is wanting to plot some directions, some excitement in my life. So it was more…the challenge was really about trying to find out about what is there back there for you that has provided some of that spark that you felt in your early 20's? What were the things?

**Anne:** Yeah and by asking me about that time, you know, what happened back there, that just, I did, I felt myself come alive and it was easier to get in touch with it when you sort of brought me there in space and time.

**Jane**: I certainly noticed that there were times when Anne would downplay some of her previous accomplishments or even talents and abilities and you, in a very subtle way, you kind of say, well, maybe in the back burner. I’m wondering if you could speak to the possibilities that you chose to emphasize and how you made the decisions in the moment that this client could do this when she seemed to be downplaying those possibilities.

**David:** Not exactly sure. Certainly a big part of this had to do with wanting to help her identify what the things were and seeing her as a very capable person who clearly has managed a lot in her life. I mean she's a successful teacher, mom. There is this relationship break up, which we spent a fair amount of time talking about. Exploring the possibilities for what the future or second half of her life, if you will, the whole new chapter, how to build on those successes that she’s had as opposed to abandoning them and leaving them.

**Gary:** And Jane mentioned before your use of humor and because I’m wondering if that is spontaneous, if is a knowing of yourself and trusting of yourself that humor will be facilitating of more conversation and acknowledgment but just the letting that happen but in a considered way. **David:** Well certainly, and humor can be a tricky kind of thing to use. Certainly it should never a have an edge to it and to me it felt simply additive to the fact that I really like Anne and that the humor was meant to kind of put a little tweak on the situation as opposed to hopefully, I don't know what your reaction was, but hopefully being taken as any kind of sarcasm.

**Anne**: Well it was like having a conversation with another adult rather than someone who was going to fix me, or a therapist, or psychologist, and so it made you feel more real.

**David:** Well thank God I wasn't sounding like a therapist…. So in addition to the humor and, you know, the fact that this was a solidly engaged client, are there any other things that you would have seen or wondered about?

**Jane:** Yes, I noticed earlier, as I mentioned, that you assessed the client developmentally and were responding to her at that level but I also noticed you addressing some gender issues and class issues that were emerging in the session.

**David:** Well certainly she's talking about her parents coming from a, you know, kind of a poverty background. But parents who were also actively engaged in their community and so to kind of respect and build on both of those kinds of traditions and to respect the kinds of messages that must have been provided in that time.

**Anne:** Yeah, it felt like almost an honoring of, when you brought that up, I just, it was like yeah, that I can honor my parents, and that was sort of a piece that I hadn’t even brought up but by you making that connection for me it really made me engage in wanting me to go ahead and do some of these things.

**David**: Almost part of your legacy.

**Anne:** Yes absolutely.

**David:** Thanks very much.