



Training Psychotherapists in the Almost Impossible Task of Just Paying Attention

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A subtext of controversy underlies the question, "How do we train psychotherapists?" Or, the question, "What is psychotherapy?" The sad fact is, both answers depend upon whom you ask.

The latter statement takes us into a socio-political context. Further, it brings up the important distinctions between psychology and psychotherapy so clearly articulated by Dr. Jan Resnick's in the May issue of Psychotherapy in Australia. We could not hope to say it more thoroughly, or gracefully than he, although if pressed, we would repeat many of the same points.

Nevertheless, we will refer briefly to the perennial debate that has continued in the West at least since Socrates: the question hinges upon what Charles Tart (*Waking Up*) calls “consensus reality”, i.e. are we to assume that the dominant paradigm is the measure of truth, or is it no more nor less than the thought form which for various historical, economic, sociological reasons happens to control or primarily influence what is officially defined as valid, respectable, legal, “true”? Tart and others go so far as to call “consensus reality” a “trance”.

Currently the dominant paradigm in psychology/psychotherapy is characterized by (or at least enamoured with) the term “scientific”. The most recent manifestation of the “scientific” approach is represented predominantly by the behavioral/cognitive schools, the adherents of which maintain a firm grip on our universities, our professional associations, and our licensing agencies, apparently in Australia, clearly in America and Europe.

The non-dominant or “alternative” side might argue that our emulation of materialist, empirical science has only served to cripple and dehumanize the field of psychology (once the study of the soul), repel some of our brightest and most creative spirits, spawn a whole world of new, ex-academia therapies (many well-supported by public demand), and often scandalize and confuse the novice seeking therapy. Judging from the psychology (and sociology) curricula of the larger universities, (and most of the smaller ones) with their emphases on empirical thinking, measurement, and research, we have a long way to go before we escape the “physics envy” that marks the dominant paradigm.

The definers of consensus reality, who loyally guard and protect the scientific approach in psychology, counter with the argument that we have to maintain rigor, academic discipline, and control. Otherwise we will have chaos. Principles, methodology, and teachings must be solidly supported by empirical evidence. Candidates must be carefully screened, standards maintained, licensing procedures in place to protect an unsuspecting public from charlatans, incompetents, and lechers. Anyone can set out a shingle and do “therapy.” We have to have laws which ensure that therapists are coming from a solid, scientific foundation and can meet approved professional standards of competency. (In America and Europe, third party compensation may depend upon compliance with these standards.)

(Incidentally, there is no support in the literature to date, including the regularly published complaints and procedures from the medical grievance board in some states in America, that credentials and licensure are any guarantee of protection from charlatans, incompetents, and lechers in the fields of medicine and psychology. We await a thorough study.)

Dr. Resnick skillfully mediates the conflict by differentiating “productive” from “practical” sciences, psychology possibly belonging to the former, psychotherapy to the latter. Psychotherapy, like art, is “a way of being” which involves “a very personal way of knowing that should not be formulated into a system,” he offers. I could not agree more. This way of thinking makes an inspiring contribution to a peaceful delineation of boundaries between the two types of science. Would that Resnick’s highly civilized line of reasoning find its way into academic and professional circles on a large scale! If so, “artists” like Ron Kurtz in America and George Sweet in New Zealand would receive their due recognition.

The people will, anyway, find what they really need despite the cautionary labels put forth by the powers that be. A parallel phenomenon is happening in medicine, as an overly intrusive, cumbersome and expensive allopathic model competes with lower-costing, more holistic, alternative approaches like homeopathy, Chinese and naturopathic medicines, chiropractic, and other, older healing traditions. In many countries of Europe, and to a large degree in America, a substantial percentage of the population relies exclusively or partly on alternative medical modalities.

The numbers involved and the intractable inroads already made indicate that this movement is more than a fad or a brief trend. Twenty-five years ago, an American intellectual critic (and prophet), Ivan Illich, predicted that society would “deschool” itself. It would cease to believe that we need the structure and authority of an established school or university to teach us what is true, relevant and useful. People would vote with their dollars, he argued, and create new “learning webs” outside of the traditional structures so often ruthlessly dominated by one school or mode of thought.

Moreover, the centuries-old town/gown dispute, which once grew out of the avant-garde nature of university thinking versus the conservative nature of the populace, has produced a reversal of roles. In many fields, Universities have become museums of outmoded ideas. With reverse snobbery, a new, media-savvy urban avant-garde sneers at academic credentials. And the information highway, especially via the internet, perhaps the ultimate deep democratization of learning, is only in its infancy. It does not take a Nostradamus to predict that the university, like the Medieval Church, stands to lose its monopoly on the truth, even its intellectual hegemony, especially if it continues to be a de facto closed system.

Judging from the proliferation of new therapies, institutes, private trainings and faculties, completely and avowedly off-campus, it is safe to say that Illich was right. And not only in the field of psychology. Deschooling is as much a reality as the multi-billion-dollar alternative medicine industry.

The validity debate continues in various forms even within academic circles, where voices of moderation who advocate a more democratic and open-minded investigation of the best of the new therapies, are often labeled “flaky” by their more conservative colleagues. In fact, it may be a stretch to call it a “debate”; one of the characteristics of a dominant thought form is a refusal to allow scrutiny of commonly held assumptions, despite lip-service to academic freedom. To veterans of more than twenty years of therapeutic practice in various settings, academic, clinical and alternative, Dr. Resnick’s well-considered distinctions between psychology and psychotherapy come as a clean breath of hope for more than mere peaceful coexistence; perhaps we might even hope for mutual appreciation and cross-pollination.

Shifting more directly to the topic at hand, the question of what makes a good psychotherapist becomes more pointed when we consider, for example, the evidence on efficacy research as reported by Michael J. Mahoney in *Human Change Processes*:

“In four major research projects at the University of Pittsburgh, Johns Hopkins University, the Veterans Administration in Pennsylvania, and McGill University, for example, the therapeutic impact attributable to the psychotherapist was eight times greater than that associated with the treatment techniques. The ‘person’ of the therapist, and the ‘therapeutic alliances’ she or he is capable of encouraging and co-creating, are much more central to the quality and effectiveness of professional services than are the specific techniques, explicit interpretations, and theoretical scaffoldings for structuring and enacting the experience of psychotherapy.”

In another work, *Healers on Healing*, dozens of renowned therapists, doctors, spiritual teachers, healers of all types are asked to summarize what heals. The most often repeated word, and perhaps the theme of the book, is “resonance”. If there is a magic ingredient, it is the resonance created in the healing relationship: one human being meeting another in a space of safety, mutual acceptance, respect and—dare I say it?—love! Ron Kurtz, the developer of Hakomi Therapy, calls this work, “developing loving presence”, after the quality most desirable, most efficacious in the being of the therapist.

In short, experience, wisdom, humanness and personal development matter far more than the fanciest or most scientifically valid techniques. Qualities like cleverness, rigor, and thoroughness, so highly valued in academic and professional disciplines, may not be useful in this almost sacred process; they may, in fact, interfere with our ability to be there, to be truly present with the other person.

Kurtz reports his own change of perspective in this way:

“I had to shift my attitude from wanting to make something happen for the client, or making things better, to being perfectly okay if nothing happened. I realized that my agendas were getting in the way of the client’s power to direct his or her own growth.” (p. 18)

On the other side of the planet, George Sweet, a New Zealander who is a long-time counsellor and teacher of counsellors, refers to the art of paying a certain kind of attention:

“I do not even need to know what the problem is. It is a distraction from how the client is, now, with me. And from how the client moves in relation to the problem. I may get so caught up in ‘what’ is being said that I fail to pay attention to the life-changing ‘how’ it is being said. If I do not approach the problem with the flaming attention of choiceless awareness I will seek a solution from outside the person—from my conditioning and needs, training, prejudices and values.” (p. 52)

Paying attention, in this sense, is not the same narrowly focused concentration so elevated in scientific thinking. Multi-faceted, it is an attention that includes internal as well as external experience. It is more spacious and relaxed, though no less alert. Like the discipline of meditation, it must continually return to the here and now, to the client, and the therapist’s own, present experience.

The 19th-century Hindu mystic, Ramakrishna, and more recently Ramana Maharshi, after decades of studying different spiritual systems, taught that to gain control of the attention is the sole aim of all spiritual exercises and disciplines. Following this theme, Russian mystic and teacher, George Gurdjieff,

added that the value of spiritual disciplines lies in their ability “to reach and study an attention which can transform, an attention which can link a man with his deepest aspiration and the power to resist the automatism of flight in the face of suffering. ...” (Fremantle, pp. 50-51.)

In our psychotherapeutic work, we call this skill by various names: “being with”, “non-doing”, “listening to the storyteller not the story”. It seems simple enough, but it goes against a deep and pervasive conditioning we Westerners have (which, undoubtedly, has served us well in other contexts) to be busy, to do, to change what needs changing, to fix what seems broken. How do we reconcile “non-doing” with the simple fact that a client comes to therapy in the first place because something is not working?

Clearly, there is a paradox here, captured best perhaps in the Taoist notion of “action through inaction”. The new counsellor-in-training, eager to fix and change, may be “not yet sufficiently disciplined to be spontaneous”, (to add another potentially frustrating Taoist expression to the chemistry) and need to learn the fine art of waiting.

Consider, too, Martin Buber’s words:

“What do we expect when we are in despair and yet go to a man? Surely a presence by means of which we are told (emphasis mine) that nevertheless there is meaning.”

If Buber, Kurtz, Sweet, and Resnick are all on track, we are faced with a realization at once consoling and disturbing: perhaps all of the teachable aspects of psychotherapy do not make effective psychotherapists, while all of the things that matter most are next to impossible to teach. You can teach technique, you can create good technicians, but can you teach art? The art of being human?

Perhaps the great ones, Jung, Satir, Erickson, and Rogers carry an extra ingredient we can emulate but should not try to imitate. At best they can inspire us to find a way to awaken something similar in ourselves, our own unique version of the human alchemy. Our conviction is that we all have it; we already have loving presence, compassion, wisdom, insight. At least the seeds. The Buddhists refer to this “basic goodness”, as our very nature. The seeds rest, awaiting nurturance, in the fertile ground of our consciousness. In that sense, Plato was right, and the education of psychotherapists is essentially a process of “remembering”. The function of therapy itself, furthermore, is to help clients remember their own basic goodness and their self-compassion, what Buddhism calls “maitri”, or “loving kindness to the self”.

Before there was any such entity bearing the name “therapist”, there were elders, priests, shamans, grandfathers, wise women, saints, mentors, and inspired teachers. What the good ones had (and still have) may be able to be caught, but can it be taught? Because so many of the structures which once made these people generally available are now gone, “debunked” by science, or relegated to unreachable fringes, we have tried to replace their functions in the roles of psychologist, and therapist. And many have forgotten that “mentoring” includes much more than teaching; it includes modeling, inspiration, and compassion, or “suffering with”.

In any training, student expectations may also get in the way. Trainees often expect that they will learn the work as if it were a craft. They may know that personal development is a big part of the process, and yet still find it difficult to understand, or even to see, their own character limitations. There is often a readiness to deal with the “how to do it” of therapy and much less readiness to face the difficult personal issues which may be painful to face and to work with, consciously and publicly, that is, in full view of their fellow trainees. The simple truth is that our cutting edge is always in the realm of the not-yet-known; the psychotherapy student, (like Einstein’s fish, which is the last to discover water) may be the last one to see what is getting in the way of learning. It may feel safer not to attend too well to the client within:

Because I am much more like my clients than different from them, I hear myself when I truly hear them. (Sweet, p. 78; emphasis mine).

Clearly then, there are two levels to a psychotherapy training: the “mechanics” of learning theory, skills, and methodology, and this more foundational piece we refer to as the personhood of the therapist. Mechanics can be learned to varying degrees of mastery depending on intelligence, motivation, and perseverance. The personhood of the therapist is another matter. Like the artist, some will have natural gifts and excel almost effortlessly; others will try too hard and somehow miss the point. The majority of the students who take our trainings have already earned a psychology degree, and/or have been working with clients in a therapeutic setting. If this is not the case, they have a lot of fundamental information to put in place. If it is the case, they may have a lot of “unlearning” to do in order to make way for a different set of emotional and intellectual attitudes. Our work is, after all, a shift into a new paradigm.

Some brief mention of the nature of our work might serve to clarify. The Hakomi approach to psychotherapy facilitates the creation of certain attitudes intrinsically related to the notion of personhood. The system is based on a set of five interrelated humanistic principles derived to a large extent from Taoist and Buddhist psychology. Those principles, which constitute a philosophical as well as methodological base, are : Mindfulness, Unity, Non-Violence, Organicity and (Body/Mind) Wholism.

These principles philosophically circumscribe, and have the potential pragmatically to create (or evoke) within the trainee (as well as the client) a certain attitude of gentle, non-critical self-study, self-acceptance, connectedness to the “larger selves” (i.e. other people, society, the planet), and a trust in the built-in natural order of things, especially living systems (the Tao). These principles can be explored and taught philosophically, but in order to make full, holographic sense they must be grounded in experience, must be grasped in the context of exercises which access and make conscious the real feelings, bodily involvement, thought processes of the student/client, (what we refer to as the organization of experience).

The methodology based upon these principles is as teachable as any other method. The difference is that we do not teach method and skills by themselves or for their own sake; in teaching the skills we also, but indirectly, teach the “untrainable” or attitudinal factors.

For example, a student may be clumsy with the method but be working well “within the principles” as we call it . Conversely, a trainee may be highly skillful in the use of technique and still be “Violent” or “not Mindful” or “out of Unity” and therefore off-track in terms of learning the more fundamental and crucial attitudes necessary to become the kind of “Presence” we have been describing.

The point here is that technique, methodology, even overall theory are always in service of attitude. Our object is not to impose, for example , a theory of the self upon our clients, or even to base our procedure unequivocally on a certain school of thought or set of meanings about the self. In psychotherapy, there is no one “Meaning”. The client, after all, has a very personal set of meanings within which s/he lives and moves and has his/her being. As Resnick points out:

These theoretical notions or myths of therapy are neither true nor false but enable the psychotherapeutic process to move. In a way it doesn't really matter if the theory is true or not if it succeeds in giving form and meaning to a client's discourse—in a way that works for them.

One recalls William James notion of useful beliefs, the first principle of pragmatism. In Hakomi, we go for a set of therapeutic attitudes that we know will allow a client's process to unfold organically and non-violently; we name those attitudes; we train them. For the sake of structure and form, which are necessary for linear thinking and teaching to proceed, we call them by names: “uncritical awareness”; “loving presence”; “mindfulness”; “heartfulness”; “beingness vs. doingness”; “curiosity” vs. “a desire to change someone”; “experimental attitude”. We even describe the qualities of those attitudes, but we don't pretend to be able to teach them directly.

Although a great deal of cognitive material is presented through lectures and written texts, the training is primarily experiential. We trust experience, in Francisco Varela's words:

“The only real way to do a science of mind is to accept the hard and solid fact that the realm of experience is ontologically irreducible. . . Explanations that do not allow me to link up with my experience are ipso facto discarded. . . (as) bad explanations. . . bad science. . . because they leave a big chunk of the world out.” (quoted in Davis, p. 31.)

Part of the essence of our approach is “experience evoked in mindfulness”; therefore, the emphasis is on “felt sense” learning. The process recalls the etymology of the word “educate”: i.e. e/ducere, to lead toward. Exercises are designed to access in the student or to lead them toward awareness of how they stand in relation to the material being explored. In other words, the question is not, “Do you agree or disagree?” but more, “What does this bring up for you and how do you notice that? Does something happen in your body? In your feelings? Or in your mind?” The ultimate point of focus is not on the individual experience but on the student's (and client's) relationship to experience itself. The distinction is at first subtle and elusive, but in the end, potentially life-altering, like a Zen Koan.

How, in fact, do you stand in relation to what is happening, right now, to and for the client? Here we would honor George Sweet's injunctions about the “client within”, for no therapist, in our view, is inseparable from their client's process. From this perspective, therapy is “a mutual co-arising”, to use

a transpersonal term. To use a scientific concept, no phenomenon is inseparable from the observer of that phenomenon; the observer is part of the equation. Transference, therefore, is potentially harmful only to the degree it is unconscious. The never-ending journey of therapy is one of self-discovery, every step of the way, and not just for the client. Called by many names, the attitude of self-remembering is the key:

“Less and less do I give energy to the doing of counselling. Now I seek stillness, to pay attention, be there - the almost impossible which, when it occurs, produces a miracle, and a celebration.”
(Sweet, p. 6)

The ancient practice of mindfulness, adapted to use in the therapeutic setting, is the cornerstone technique in Hakomi therapy. Each student learns personally to use as well as to teach this practice to his or her client. The intense self-study fostered by this powerful tool is an inescapably transformational process, one that has given rise to the notion of “therapy as spiritual practice”. Mindfulness, together with the conscious practice of loving presence or compassion, puts this training solidly in the realm of the transpersonal, although we do not align ourselves with any particular religion. The practices we have named, although inspired by Buddhism and Taoism, are deeply rooted in all of the major spiritual traditions.

The changes a student undergoes are not always easy. For that reason it is strongly recommended, and in some cases required that trainees receive regular sessions of therapy during the training, preferably, though not exclusively, Hakomi therapy. By regularly changing roles, the trainees stay in touch with both sides of the relationship. Frequent, supervised practice, after as well as during the training, is essential.

A typical training exercise may serve to illustrate the principle of mutual co-arising in its practical manifestation. In a triad practice exercise, one student works as “therapist” with another student as “client”; a third student is “observer”. A staff person oversees. The “therapist” works until s/he gets stuck. The staff person then takes over and works with the stuck “therapist” while the observer completes the session with the original “client”. The staff person, in working with the original “therapist” precisely at the point where s/he stumbles or freezes, is often able to uncover, in a gentle and non-critical way, exactly how the student’s mostly unconscious, personal process is entering into the dynamics of the therapy session or the healing relationship.

Every session, indeed every relationship, is a dance, a two-part system. Normally we are blind to our part in the system. Throughout the training, practice in mindfulness and “jumping out of the system” enable the trainee to become more and more aware of how s/he is affecting the therapy. This highly developed self-knowledge enables the therapist to get out of his/her own way when necessary, and to use the relationship more consciously when that is what is needed, in short, to refine the use of oneself as an instrument.

Our aim is always to empower the student as well as the client, principally through the refinement of a greater awareness of who and how they are. We teach them a powerful set of tools, but more

importantly, we try to impart a sense of the purpose and overview that gives meaning and direction to their journey. In this respect, George Sweet, once again, makes the point very well:

“We counsel in a day when people are taking back their lives from specialists. We can be in the forefront of this change as people seek wholeness through meeting a whole counsellor. People are ready for a still counsellor, with the Empty Mind, who seeks for Choiceless Awareness, who opens people to themselves.” (p. 7)

What could be more worth doing?

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