

REALIZING THE "BETWEEN" IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

James V. DeLeo, Ph. D.

James V. Deleo, Ph.D. is a clinical and consulting psychologist in private practice, a member of the core faculty at the California School of Professional Psychology-San Diego, and a co-director of the Institute for Dialogical Psychotherapy in San Diego.

In the Spring of 1988, I was facilitating a support group that had been meeting bi-weekly for eighteen months. During these eighteen months, the eight men and myself had talked, cried, and laughed together. We thought of ourselves as a group. The members had a conscious identification with each other, a sense of shared purpose, an interdependence, and a unique ability to influence and respond to one another. But all of this was shaken one sunny Friday afternoon when John said: "I have an incurable cancer... ." Four months later John died.

As John's words penetrated our individual and collective being, we came to realize that we were *not* infinite, *not* perfect, *not*-God. This realization was, however, hard earned, hard won, and hard kept. There were no ponderous theological or philosophical discussions leading to this self-evident truth. But there were fights over group process, and arguments over the sorry state of science, politics, and medicine. There was also caretaking and advice giving—lots of advice giving. But ever so slowly, we came to understand that some of our feelings were in reaction to our powerlessness; and that some of our behaviors were stubborn, childish attempts to maintain the illusion of control—an understandable human control—but control nevertheless. We were angry, pouting because we were not omnipotent. Feeling and acting somewhat like junior high-school boys caught ditching classes, we recognized that we had been claiming God-like powers.

During the four months that we reacted and responded to John, each of us addressed our powerlessness, our essential limitation, our personal and collective mortality. Our individual reactions and responses varied, but what characterized our collective response were long moments of silence, interrupted now and then by hugs and tears. It was within the quiet of those

moments that we also experienced our fundamental connectedness to each other. It was, as if, in the recognition of this common bond there was only astonishment. With this quiet acceptance of the human condition and our confirmation of each other, our healing and journey to wholeness began.

There are many psychological theories and much empirical research to organize and explain the dynamics of these four months. These theories and research offer the practicing psychotherapist a plethora of metapsychological points of view i.e. genetic, economic, adaptive, dynamic, topographical, or structural. Most of these points of view are, however, imbedded in a positivistic, mechanistic image of the person.

The purpose of this paper is to discern the meaning of this experience by approaching it utilizing the image of the person provided by Martin Buber's (1878-1965) philosophical anthropology. Buber's image of the person is contained in his statement: "All real living is meeting". For Buber, a person becomes fully human through the process of meeting nature, other people or the eternal. This process, however, goes beyond the realm of the interpersonal. The interpersonal is characterized by stimulus and response reactions within a context of shared meanings. The "interhuman" flows from the fact that we separate the other from ourselves no longer making them an object of our experience and use. It is this act of distancing that makes possible the act of entering-in-relation. When a person as-a-whole meets another as-a-whole, the "interhuman" is experienced and realized. According to Buber, this "between" is not definable. It is, however, ineffable and critical. The dialogical is the unfolding of the sphere of the "between" while the psychological is that which happens within the individual.

Martin Buber's philosophical anthropology, as expanded upon by Maurice Friedman, suggests an approach to the practice of psychotherapy. Buber is most commonly looked upon as a philosopher who devoted most of his attention to the way in which the person relates to the world, to others and to God. His interest in psychotherapy is well documented in Friedman's (1960) study *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*.

In saying "I have an incurable cancer", John was addressing himself to the group and its members. As each of us reacted and responded to the "I" who spoke those words, John came to realize in his confrontation with death that he was and was not alone in the world. Our reactions and responses to his address helped shape his very sense of himself during those four months. We *reacted* to him when we attempted to observe and classify his experience. We *reacted* by resorting to psychological explanations about the various stages of death and dying. We *reacted* by giving advice. These were reactions precisely because they were not addressed to the "I" that spoke those words. On some occasions, they were said to a conceived other i.e. what we thought someone who is terminally ill must be experiencing. On other occasions, they were said to ourselves in an effort to quell whatever anxiety and tension those words produced within us. Struggling mightily against our individual and collective anxiety, we employed all the identifiable defense mechanisms of contemporary psychology: denial, rationalization, intellectualization, isolation. We became, in our reactions, isolated selves, withdrawing into our individual psyches.

During those four months, we also *responded* to John. In our acts of responding, we set him at a distance and entered into relation with his uniqueness as a person. We *responded* by turning to him as a whole person and confirming him as a Thou. We confirmed him when we accepted the reality that he was dying and that we were to go on living. In those moments, we stood, in Buber's words, "over against" him. These were mostly moments of silence.

At first, it appeared that we were solely frightened about our mortality and hence running away from accepting death. But, as we confronted our death anxiety, it became evident that there was yet another issue that we were railing against. Slowly, it became apparent that we were also terrified of our powerlessness over life itself. We shrank back from any slight reminder of our

fundamental impotence. As time, manifesting itself in John's deteriorating condition, encroached upon us, we gradually admitted our powerlessness and came to accept our fundamental finitude. We had to confront the existential reality that a human being is a limited being. Accepting this essential human limitation meant acknowledging what we could not do and could not be for John. This acknowledgement was accompanied by feelings of sadness and loneliness. These feelings were, in Friedman's words, "the sacred accompaniment to the dialogue." As we participated in the unfolding of this reality, we realized that our individual finitude was at the very core of all humanity. Reflecting on our common experience, we understood that our individual reactions came from this human core where positive and negative forces interpenetrate. This meant that for each of us our fear coexisted with our fearlessness, our feelings with our thoughts, our being with our non-being.

There was, however, another dimension, another anxiety, another realization. In those moments of distance and silence, we became present to each other. All of our effort enabled us to be there at the moments of meeting. These moments of meeting were unanticipated occurrences. They rose as spontaneous responses to the address of other group members. There was a hug or smile that grew out of the "between." But these moments, these encounters with another were filled with trepidation and wonder. And it was because of these moments that each of us came to know what is meant by human intimacy. They were moments of existential grace. Buber has said that relation is the spiritual tie that comes into existence when I-Thou is spoken. We experienced and realized that spiritual tie.

This experience of partnership provided for us a unique knowledge of what is really real. Reality, for Buber, is unity. Reality occurs as we participate in the act of relating to the world. It is dynamic not static. It cannot be fixed in time and space. Reality is between the I and Thou.

Buber's ontology presents an opportunity for psychotherapists and psychology to go beyond what Nietzsche has called our "groveling before facts" in our search for human truth and human reality. It tears at the very foundation upon which our science of the person and theories of personality are built. Accepting the uniqueness of the person and the elusiveness of the "between" may mean that we must give up our quest for

immutable universal laws that govern human change and behavior. Such an ontology suggests that psychology, first having lost its soul, then its mind, then its consciousness must now return to its roots and rediscover the mystery of the human soul. Perhaps, in the anxiety of our efforts at rediscovery, we can find comfort in Einstein's words: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science."

References

- Buber, M. (1958) *I and Thou*, 2nd rev. ed. Trans. R.G. Smith. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Buber, M. (1965) *Between Man and Man*. Trans. R.G. Smith. New York: Macmillan.
- Buber, M. (1966) *The Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman*. Trans. M.S. Friedman and ed. R.G. Smith. New York: Harper & Row. (Torchbooks).
- Friedman, M. (1960) *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*. New York: Harper & Row. (Torchbooks).
- Friedman, M. (1985) *The Healing Dialogue in Psychotherapy*. New York: Jason Aronson, Inc.