
THE PSYCHOTHERAPIST AS FAITH AGENT

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Psychotherapists are faith agents in a similar way to those we call preachers. That is, psychotherapists, through the various aspects of their work, are promulgating and inviting people into particular "faith stances", "world views", "values", "belief systems", or whatever your preferred term may be.

An Example

This issue seems so clear to me coming from my particular background that I am normally desensitized to it, and feel disinclined to say much about it because, "it would be so obvious." Recurring experiences however, have convinced me that the obvious is sometimes the one thing that most needs saying.

For instance, I was once involved in a training experience in which the leader asked us to physically locate ourselves on a line representing a value continuum. One pole reflected a belief something like, "I have an idea about what is going on with people and what they need." The other end expressed, "I don't have any particular ideas."

I remember feeling a bit self conscious about letting it be known that I had some know-it-all in me, but I dutifully shuffled off toward the 76th percentile mark of claiming that, "yes, I did have some ideas all right." When I got there and turned around I felt an immediate flash of surprise, anger, and betrayal. I saw the great majority of the group, many of whom I knew

well and with whom I had discussed this very subject, lounging down around the far opposite end. So I blurted out to the leader: "Hey, what do those donkeys think they are doing down there?" He replied with grating, professional, non-emotional involvement at such a momentous issue, "Why don't you ask them?" So I did.

The response was, "We don't have anything we impose on people. We just think that people should (1) get in touch with what they are experiencing, (2) explore the options open to them, and (3) make their own decisions." (Parenthetical numbers mine.) They had no conception they were making normative statements right along with the best of down home country stump preachers; those who might think in contrast that people should (1) put their personal feelings aside, (2) explore how they can best serve their neighbor, and (3) commit themselves unreservedly to the discipline and welfare of Christ's kingdom on earth.

In a sense, the most obvious difference between these two approaches might be that the stump preacher is much more honest and out front in selling his wares, and the mental health therapists are more sneaky, subtle, or unconscious about what they are promoting.

None of these therapist friends of mine, in addition to others from further examples I could cite, were lacking in intellectual capabilities or good training. My tentative conclusion is simply that most therapists are not conscious of standing on common, value

laden ground with practicing theologians. There is something a bit strange or even suspicious about it, perhaps.

The Function of Imagination

I don't think it takes much to make the basic issue of our role as faith agents clear, but I find myself always on the lookout for helpful attempts to elucidate the subject more clearly. In recent years I have been pleased to notice two books, one from the realm of theology and one from psychotherapy, which taken together, do provide a decent overview. The one is by Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. titled Introduction to Theology: An Invitation to Reflection Upon the Christian Mythos. The other is The Structure of Magic, a basic Neurolinguistic Programming text, by Richard Bandler and John Grinder.

Both books agree with William James that an unstructured, unpatterned experience of reality, devoid of all categories of belief, value, and meaning would be a "blooming buzzing confusion." Further, they agree that it is we ourselves who subjectively provide the patterns and structures of experience through the way we filter and transform the givens of reality to make them available to consciousness.

The "givens" of reality that are "out there" provide limits on how much transformation can take place, at least for most of us, but it is clear that we do not experience the world just as it is. What can be called our imaginations or mapmaking capacities must function to represent, bring to expression, make available, and orient us within the ranges of our experience.

So, a blur of physical sensations are transformed into comprehensible mental images of flowers blowing in the wind. Various experiences of the self are transformed into dreams of climbing a never ending succession of pearly mountains. Images are transformed or symbolized into language. Impressions of early interpersonal experiences transform and filter present relational encounters into modes of experiencing that make sense with our history.

Every day we see examples of people experiencing the same stimuli differently

which reveals the presence of editing or filtering processes. One person sees a black man walk off a new job after two days and simultaneously "sees" that some people just don't want to work, and would rather mooch off of society while the rest of us work our tails off. Another sees the same event and senses that a person's need for self respect is hard pressed when he is the low person on the totem pole at work, and is underqualified because of previous discrimination in job and educational opportunities. At least there is the possibility of salvaging some pride on the streets where one is good at fighting or gambling. One psychotherapist responds in a group to a client getting in touch with the feeling that "the world owes me a living" by saying, "you had better divest yourself of that illusion." Another responds to the same situation by saying, "that's wonderful that you are in touch with that. You will generate a lot of wisdom in relation to yourself and others from that bit of knowledge."

Our imaginations affect our thinking, feeling, values, and the very way our bodies form and move. This is true of all of us, clients and parishioners, therapists and theologians. So, it is a given that healers will be bringing their most basic beliefs, values, and ways of viewing things to professional encounters with others. To assert that we can consciously let go and suspend all our values while being with another is to say we can let go and suspend who we are and be someone we are not; a rather pretentious or grandiose assertion. The values and beliefs we are able to suspend at will are not the essential ones that organize our being before our doing is ever set in motion.

Theory to Practice

The point at which therapists, theologians, politicians, and sociologists become interested in all this theory as professionals who work with others, is the realization that different imaginative sets of filters do make different experiences and expressions of life possible. Imaginations which work in impoverished or underdeveloped ways through processes of false or selective generalization, distortion, and deletion can result in corresponding distortions and

deprivations of experienced reality.

Two friends go to a party with people they know. One has an enjoyable time. The other's imagination filters the givens and evokes the experience that "nobody is ever here for me or cares for me". Sure enough, an outside impression is that the person is starving in the midst of a banquet and will surely go home unhappy. In the case of Martin Luther King, Jr., it is clear that the way he filtered the experience of racial discrimination and prejudice somehow transcended the belief that, "that's life," or "how else could it be?" When he communicated to others that he had a dream, a vision that tomorrow did not have to be like yesterday, he was able to influence the consciousness of others - the way they experienced the reality of their situation. He and his followers then mobilized, not to change their consciousness to bring it more in line with present reality, but to change the external limits they were living in through the power of hope, induced by the promise of the future King mapped out.

Common Ground

The common ground then, that psychotherapists, theologians, and others share, each in their own way, is the endeavor to work with imaginations that have led to truncated, distorted ways of modeling the world, which in turn have led to impaired sensitivities, blockages of growth processes, and characterologically rigid and hurtful ways of relating to the world. Whether they are working in their classic roles of relating directly to "sin" or "pain", or whether they are working in educative or preventative roles, healers are trying to get at that part of us which determines, organizes, and mobilizes our thoughts, feelings, and actions before we think, feel, or move; trying to get at that pre-characterological map room within us that Ron Kurtz speaks of. Once a person's map room is accessed, the goal is to then expand and enrich the maps, models, and images so that life is experienced as richer, inclusive of more options and possibilities, and generally as more worthwhile.

Phenomenologically then, a common element can be seen in a host of psychotherapeutic approaches. A verbal therapist challenges a client's

generalization, stops falling asleep when some energy comes into the client's voice, invites the person to look at the logic of what they just said, to consider the antecedents and consequences of their action, or asks a person to stay with the immediacy of what they are experiencing. A body oriented therapist asks someone with longing-dependent character traits to fall backwards off a table into their arms. The overall effort and effect is to challenge the person's world view as the true key to present reality; to help them expand their model of the world and its possibilities through greater awareness.

Again, from a phenomenological point of view, theologians work in a parallel way to cultivate increased awareness. They work in particular to help a person's imagination bring to expression the experience of the Sacred, the Divine, the Ultimate, The Ground of Being, that Which Is or Lets Be, that which sustains us in meaning and being, or simply - The Holy. Depending on the tradition, these religious aims might or might not include or be the same as the psychotherapist's aim of turning the person toward that which is good, meaningful, enriching, worthwhile, less hurtful, more authentic and genuine, etc.

So, when we see religious leaders giving sermons, inviting people to read scriptures, having them contemplate icons or meditate, enlisting them in social concerns and fellowship groups, asking them to sell what they have and give it to the poor, or having them experiment with what kind of luck they have pushing a rope or spitting on the ceiling - the common element can be seen of attempting to confront and expand the impoverished or distorted world views people have, and to guide them into expanded experiences of reality.

Some Assumptions

There is an implicit assumption in the above accounts that when healers are at work, their own world views are open and broad enough to pick up the distortions of others, and that they have certain abilities to guide others into more satisfying relationships with reality. Whether psychotherapists or theologians themselves are guided or misguided, or have any luck with what they are attempting, is of course, another story.

It is clear from the perspective taken here however, that no person, theologian or therapist, actually has the power to give or create faith. We can only provide experiences and symbols in which persons will or will not be able to recognize the truth of their own existence reflected to them in a self authenticating way. The authority of what we do as therapists and theologians then, derives phenomenologically from whether or not our work works in terms of accomplishing its intentions; that of opening, orienting, and transforming people in relation to the experience of the good, the worthwhile, the authentic, the Sacred, or whatever we chose to call it.

It is also clear that whatever we do, whether it works or not, is loaded with values or certain faith-full views of reality. Whitehead has said that it is helpful to look at the assumptions held by a person, culture, or science without there being enough self consciousness to realize the possibility of debate.

If we attempted Whitehead's suggestion as practitioners of psychological or religious therapy, we might discover that the bulk of what we do in our work implies that the genuine, the enriching, the helpful, or Sacred is in the dimension of "inwardness and decision", or "intimacy and contact", or perhaps "political action and praxis" or some combination. The general point is that our work is carried on in a value laden context which the persons we work with might or might not share with us initially.

Even the way we work in addition to the direction we are working reveals a wealth about how we see reality and communicate that vision to our clients or parishioners. Is getting to the meaningful or the Holy more a matter of work or play, a matter of intention and struggle, or giving up and letting go? Can we save or cure ourselves, or does it require the benefit of another, and if so how so?

There are different responses to these issues imbedded in different approaches. A classically trained bioenergetic therapist might say to a person, "you have a holding block in your shoulders. Let me see if I can put my fists in your tendons and break through the holding to whatever you are defending against underneath." One trained in the body centered psychotherapy of Ron

Kurtz, now called Hakomi Therapy, embodies a different philosophy when she approaches the same person by saying, "It looks like you are holding your shoulders in tight. How about you noticing for curiosity's sake what comes into your awareness if I take over the tension and hold your shoulders in for you?"

A Prejudice & Personal View

My basic prejudice is simply that professional practitioners should be aware of the "faith" they carry to the greatest extent possible, and not imagine themselves to be completely free or suspended from all value judgments. The more aware we are, the better position we are in to use who we are and not simply be used by it.

Since I am a clergy person in the Judeo-Christian heritage as well as a psychotherapist, I find my own reflections on my faith and the values I communicate to be in dialogue with that specific tradition. This means that in general I will be turning a person's awareness towards the dimensions of time and history, the concrete and definite, the passionate and loving, since these are definitive forms of the Judeo-Christian imagination reflected in the Hebrew and Greek Testaments.

Specific doctrines or church dogma are reflected throughout my work. When I am saying to someone with or without words, "we are all in this together, there are no good guys or bad guys, strong people or weak people," I am expounding the traditional faith that there is one God and Maker of us all. When a person begins to pick up the idea that I think they have the resources within them to make it, they are picking up in my view the doctrine of the creation as being good. The feeling people experience that growth is possible is a feeling I am supporting through my own understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation, the idea that God or the Sacred is with us, in us, for us, and works through us.

I don't apologize for or advertise these values when I'm working with someone. They can not be readily or summarily suspended or they would not be true values, true elements of faith, but only intellectual abstractions. I'm not self conscious about them most of the time, just as a psychoanalyst is not self conscious of the entire classical Freudian

meta-psychology when he or she is in the immediacy of a clinical situation.

And I am aware, as pointed out above, that I have no real power to assert or impose these values on an essential level. A person will only pick them up in a helpful way if they prove to have self authenticating authority for him/her through the various experiences we might go through together.

Also, my own faith or world view remains in open dialogue with many elements of the Judeo-Christian heritage, of other religions, secular sources, my personal therapeutic experiences, etc. The basic beliefs of all of us grow as we go through new experiences and stages of life, and they either hamper or facilitate that growth.

What seems obvious to me in an overall way then, is that without being intellectually or self consciously didactic, our thousand different responses and ways of relating to people experientially communicates a certain understanding of reality we profess or hope to be helpful. In the closeness and power of the therapeutic

situation this understanding may ring true with the reality of our clients's, at the same time that we leave them free to use different formulations from their own traditions to conceptualize it. When this happens, smoothly or roughly, consciously or unconsciously, and even when it does not, we have been functioning as agents of faith.

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