

GRACE IN THERAPY: WHAT A THERAPIST MUST TRUST IN

by Martin Schulmeister

Martin Schulmeister is a Certified Hakomi Therapist and Trainer working in both Germany and Switzerland. He is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist with a private practice in Heidelberg. He has done specialized work with Hakomi in therapy groups (see his article on group encounter in the *Hakomi Forum*, Issue 6, Summer 1988). His article here on the uncontrollable grace we encounter in therapy is an English translation of a talk he gave in German at the Breitensteiner Therapy Congress at Ermatingen, Switzerland in July 1989.

Standing here in front of you to give a talk makes me a little nervous. One reason for this nervousness is my wondering about my ability to express my thoughts in an appropriate way. My insecurity relates to my precarious subject: linking *grace*, a term from the spiritual and religious field, with psychotherapy, which we academics usually describe in scientific terms.

A few weeks ago I was still wondering if I shouldn't tackle the same subject from a completely different angle. Referring to the latest findings in modern systems theory and chaos research, I would have talked about the organization of living systems. It has been discovered that when a living system moves to its next level of organization, it follows the properties of self-organizing living systems, ie self-directed, holistic, and spontaneous. On the other hand, when we try to change these self-organizing living systems from without (and this is true of every living being, down to the amoeba), they try to maintain their integrity and stability. They resist. They actually become hyper-stable. However, when the pressure from without gets too strong, they break down and from that point it is unclear whether re-organization on a higher level is even possible in an organic way.

Transferring these observations to our domain of psychotherapy, we must take seriously these findings about the spontaneity of the re-organization of living systems, especially when we deal with questions of client-centeredness, resistance, and "trying to make things happen." Rather than deal with this subject from this theoretical point of view, I want to draw from my own experience and use my own practise oriented words.

First of all, a short version: Two days ago I gave Franz Kob, of the Austrian Broadcasting Corpora-

tion (ORF) a short interview on the subject of grace in therapy. He hosts a weekly radio program addressed primarily to housewives on the fundamental questions of life. I wanted to answer his questions as precisely and clearly as possible, and one of my replies was:

"We therapists are usually well-trained and well-prepared to work with human beings who are in all sorts of psychological crises. We help them through short term work or in long term therapy. But there are limits to what can be done deliberately. Often we are aware of this when therapy goes well. There is a new dawning in the client's life; or the client takes charge of their life in a new way. We terminate with the client, and find ourselves grateful. But we wonder if we made it happen, or if something greater helped us. Let's be honest: we therapists are often in danger of overvaluing ourselves or of being overvalued. We know how crucial it can be when, at an important moment, a friend takes the time to listen to us, not giving us ready-made answers, but opening their heart to our problem. We know how decisive it can be when someone holds the hand of a person in trouble or says a prayer from the heart. In those instances, we receive grace through another human being in the midst of everyday life and without a session with a therapist." This was the radio version and now I will offer a more detailed account.

The German word for grace, "Gnade", comes from the original meaning of "coming close to", as in: something higher comes toward and close to us. In a "state of grace" something from a higher realm, something greater which lies beyond our power and control, comes ineffably near to us.

I would like to direct your attention to the point in the therapeutic process when you, as a therapist are

unable to do anything anymore. This is where, in my opinion, only the knowledge and experience of grace can help you. What I want to say here transcends the usual therapeutic methods, because I am talking about the place in the process when you can't rely on any kind of method at all.

What inspired me to choose this particular subject for a talk? In the last fifteen years, I have been involved with many different kinds of therapy, especially with humanistic and transpersonal psychology. Again and again the question has come up: What is healing? What really heals?

It has struck me many times that nearly all therapies contain either an open or hidden promise of salvation. That is why the client has a lot of expectations and is then very often disappointed. Somehow, so it seems and so it is suggested, you can be made whole again through the use of a certain method, and in some of the therapies of the seventies and the eighties, it seems to be only a matter of technique: You exchange a bad program in the psyche for a good program—no problem at all, just a matter of clever engineering. One immediately feels reminded of the modern computer hack who is capable of entering into any program and changing it.

Contrary to this is the experience found in daily therapeutic practice, in workshops, in team-work with colleagues, and in interdisciplinary supervision. In these situations, it becomes very clear how important a sound professional and methodological training can be, to say nothing of creative and refined techniques. But it also becomes clear how essential the role of the individual who uses the method is. That is to say, how a human being with both wisdom and imperfections works within the method and how the character of the therapist harmonizes with the chosen method.

In my experience, the actual moment of healing, the actual process of healing, always transcends by far every method and every specialized know-how, as well as my character as a therapist, and leaves me silent, grateful, and humble. This is an immediate and sometimes very moving experience. I feel that something other than myself or my client comes to help—a tangible, distinct force triggers a happening in which not only my client is healed, but I, myself, am taken a step further toward wholeness. Any possibility of self-aggrandizement on my part is dissolved.

The questions arise: How much can we as therapists "make things happen"? In what ways can we best facilitate healing? How important is our therapeutic competence and at what point does it become useless? To approach and speak to these questions, a model of transformation from Hakomi Therapy can show in a simplified manner how far our influence as therapists reaches and where it ends.

Hakomi Therapy is based on the idea that we organize our lives, our relationship to ourselves and others, our bodies, and all other essential realms of life according to belief patterns and attitudes that we are mostly unaware of.

Let me suggest that you take on one of those basic beliefs for the sake of an experiment to see how it would affect you. I sometimes do this kind of experiment in my workshops for a demonstration. It offers a very convincing experience of how strongly such a belief can influence a whole life.

Let's take, for example the sensitive/analytic character pattern, which is also called the withdrawal or schizoid strategy. I will give you words for the basic belief: "The world is very dangerous; You don't belong here. You are not welcome." If you take this attitude on and let it sink into your body, you will notice its effect on your body, in your breathing, in your energy flow. Now begin to fantasize a whole life lived according to this belief (choice of partner, of profession, etc.) Imagine a life in which the results seem logical, nearly automatic, and necessary from the perspective of this belief. A lot becomes evident even through this fantasy experiment.

If someone has formed such a basic belief at the beginning of life, then it usually has been ingrained over decades and confirmed in many different ways. It has, so to speak, sunk into cell-consciousness and the memory of the original dangerous event which triggered the belief is no longer conscious.

A healing or a transformation, according to Hakomi, is always connected with change in the belief system; a new or expanded perception on a deep level which affects all areas of life. A change such as this can also be experienced to a certain extent in fantasy. For example, when I suggest that you now imagine that you are totally welcome, you will probably feel, as you take in this changed percep-

tion, that your hands and feet slowly become warm again, your breathing becomes deeper...and so on. Healing, and this is my thesis here, is always accompanied by a change in the belief system and consequently, a change in perception.

What does the Hakomi Therapist do to bring basic belief systems, core material, into consciousness? There are four basic strategies that the Hakomi Therapist uses in tracking down core beliefs. First, the therapist, along with the client, traces the withdrawal strategy in the essential realms of life, and then examines this strategy in present experience: withdrawal from feelings, from body (which manifests in muscle contraction, and tension in the eyes, joints, stomach); withdrawal from contact through fantasies, day-dreaming, tiredness, etc. In this process the therapist needs precise information about the self-organization in this particular client's body; knowledge of character strategies and maps of psychological development; and skill in the use of therapeutic techniques for directing consciousness and accessing psychological material.

Second, the therapist attends to issues within the therapist/client relationship. Warmth and empathy encourage the client to open up. A deep knowledge of, and wide experience with different character strategies can enable the therapist to respond in a flexible way. The therapist will be careful not to miss important points (for example, a warm welcome at the door, a gentle comment at a break in contact during the session; experiments around exploring the fear of being in contact with the therapist, etc.) Knowledge about the ways systems function, and personal supervision (in which the therapist can sort out questions of interpersonal entanglement and get to know their own blind spots) will further help in the therapeutic process.

Third, the therapist helps the client to deepen whatever comes up in present felt experience and to follow it to its roots. It is typical in this process for feelings of panic and hypersensitivity, as well as feelings of intense hate, pain, and joy to emerge. Memories of complete isolation and traumatic shock, images of distorted faces, demons, and threatening eyes, etc. may surface. Here, the therapist's skill in dealing appropriately with psychic material is needed, in addition to the ability to give space to feelings with great intensity. In the same areas where the therapist blocks their own feelings, they will, consciously or unconsciously, support an avoidance strategy in the client.

I remember how, some years ago, when I was about to leave to lead my evening therapy group, I felt strange and different. So I stopped and sat down on the edge of my bed and took some moments to access the feeling. I realized that the usual light nervousness was missing. Somehow I had gotten into the habit of compensating a bit before leaving for the group as if I were gearing up to go into battle on a subtle level. Now I found myself completely composed, unusually calm, relaxed, and in a state of trust. There I sat, looking back on how much I had strained until now, how automatically I had guarded myself against possible attacks, how much effort I had unconsciously put into being welcome. At that moment, a flood of sadness accompanied some painful memories, but also a great joy. On that evening, I went to group, and without mentioning my experience, I worked with three clients on the theme of "being welcome" at a deep, previously untouched level. The client's unconscious seems to sense when there is room for a certain matter, when there are receptive antennae and genuine understanding for a particular issue.

I know a therapist who told me he had done good therapy over the years, but never had a single tear flowed in his therapy office. He realized that when he had made enough progress in his own therapy to be able to cry, suddenly his clients started crying too. I wonder how many therapist interpret every spiritual experience as a defense mechanism, simply because they themselves are blocked on that level. On the other hand, if the therapist is open to their own feelings and experiences and to the fundamental questions of life, then this openness is an invitation and a model for clients to be free to feel, to experience, to ask, and to really live.

Fourth, on the way to experiencing the core belief, the therapist will often encounter distrust, contradiction, resistance, etc. and that will give them the opportunity to show understanding, compassion, and their own human imperfection. To me, it seems absolutely essential that the therapist acquires an attitude of non-violence. With this attitude, the therapist doesn't need to fight the defenses of the client with their own concepts or, more subtly, to use tricks to get around them. These defenses should be treated with respect and supported, and in this way they tend to become superfluous.

So, there are quite a number of qualities, a large range of knowledge, and several skills needed on the part of the therapist. These might be developed

by participating in advanced training and by giving a lot of attention to one's own inner growth. These tools help the therapist smooth the way for the client and open up new possibilities for them. We as therapists cannot take away the pain, but we may save clients from unnecessary suffering, if we take heed of the above-mentioned four points. We don't want to be putting on the brakes when the client is ready to take the next step in unfolding. I also want to pay tribute to all colleagues present who seriously endeavor to improve their therapeutic skills and who don't forget their own growth.

Now, when you, the therapist, are doing a good job, your client very probably will reach the point where they face their core belief, really feel it, and see how they formed body, life, and relationships according to this fundamental conviction. Often a deeply felt bodily experience is accompanied by a memory and its meaning. Your client, for example, may have reached the conclusion: "I can hardly bear to live". The core belief is no longer a theoretical concept, but a deeply felt reality. Your client opens and shows their deepest wound, having given up all defenses. Experiencing this deep hurt, your client can, at the same time, notice your warm presence and humanness. At this desperate place, you hold the door open. Maybe by simply being quiet, maybe by maintaining contact with a gentle touch, maybe by offering some words like, "It's safe here." Somehow you offer a new choice at this crucial moment more by being than by doing. Often the room becomes very still and for some minutes or seconds time seems suspended. It is in this important moment that nourishment is really taken in (or not) and a new belief about the self and the world sinks in (or not). It is the moment when a new self-organization begins and affects all areas of life (or not). But, it is exactly this moment that is totally out of your hands. You cannot do anything good at this moment. You can only be—be in the same grace as your client.

If you don't need to prove yourself as a Fix-it-all, then it is perfectly alright to feel completely powerless, and in my opinion it is good to know it, admit it, and accept it. Yes, you must leave completely to the process the if, how, and when that a client reorganizes and develops a new, wider perspective. You must be able to get completely out of the way, giving up any real or imagined importance. At this stage, you must demonstrate trust.

I remember a workshop that took place a few weeks ago. During lunch we talked about ambition and

career. One of the participants, a psychotherapist, felt very sad in the afternoon. At first, it seemed to be about her career that somehow had gotten stuck. Some assistants and I were sitting around her, and she let herself be guided by this sadness. Soon it painfully dawned on her that under the sadness was a need for being joyfully and heartfully welcomed. She realized that in her past there had been nobody who was looking forward to seeing her. Memories of her parents came up along with great sadness and a lot of pain because of this unmet yearning. She also felt some shame in letting herself, a therapist, be seen so nakedly and admitting her miserable situation so starkly. We were moved by her pain, but also by her courage in showing her vulnerability. We acknowledged her bravery in bearing the difficult time with her parents without giving up. And we showed our understanding for the "secret" desire that she hid in her role as therapist. As she was sharing the pain of what she felt, suddenly she said: "Martin, don't you have to take care of the other participants now? I think you are neglecting them." Spontaneously I answered: "But you are important too!" There was a special stillness for a moment. And then the great pain really broke out, but now it had a new quality which made us happy. The pain had released something deep inside her. There was something positive, a new openness, something forward-looking that was touching to see. We burst into tears at being witnesses to a very important moment in the life of this human being. Just by being present, we were strengthened in our own trust. The woman lay among us for awhile, quite surrendered and trusting, almost like a little child.

I would like to give you another example in which I felt strongly that the core belief system was touched. Recently, I worked with a client who had been coming to therapy for quite some time. We were exploring the tension in his neck when he became aware of an unspecified fear. It became clearer when he began to see images of his father who had given him the feeling of not being wanted. After dealing thoroughly with the images and feelings towards his father, and the signals which he had received from him, I suggested that I take over the role of his father as an experiment. Then I talked to his father through the client, or, more precisely, I talked to his inner image of his father and explored his disposition. This is a standard technique that is suited to gathering information in the therapeutic process and is sometimes helpful in integrating different and conflicting parts of the personality. I had just exchanged a few sentences with the

overstrained “father” who was longing desperately for some rest and for some time on his own, when suddenly it became still for a moment. Then, simultaneously, we both had tears in our eyes. Even before the client had said anything, I knew, because it was tangible in the room, that a deep feeling of compassion had risen in him that enabled him to see his father from a completely new perspective.

For me those are the things we cannot make happen. Neither the technique nor my sympathetic words caused this change of view. You know that in such moments. That is why the thanks of the client seem somehow out of place. On the other hand, when I return the thanks and say: “It is due to you. You opened yourself to it”, it is called “empowering the person”. But this is not really true, either, for when you ask your client how it came about, it becomes clear that it happened without the client doing anything in particular.

It is always a mystery, a miracle, when we witness healing. I hope I was able to show you turning points at the core-belief level and then explain them as moments of grace. That does not mean that all the preparatory work that leads to contact with core experience is outside the domain of grace. No, on the contrary, it is only that in those stages of the process we don’t notice the intervention of grace so clearly.

Coming to the end of my talk, I would like to say that I am very happy to have been able to share all this with you. I stand here with my experience as a helper, many times as a helpless helper, and with the typical self-importance and easily-seduced ego of a therapist. But above all I stand here as a human being who has seen the power of love intervening, divine love healing others and myself, the higher power we can completely trust.

This is why I want to close my talk a little differently from how I began it. At the start I said: “Grace in therapy, what a therapist must trust in.”. Now I want to go one step further and say: “Grace in therapy, what a therapist may trust in”. We are safe to put our trust in this power. Isn’t that wonderful? Thank you very much.