

## **What is Good Therapy?**

Although trained as a Gestalt therapist I began my professional journey as an early childhood educator. For 15 years I worked with children from a wide range of physical, intellectual and socio economic backgrounds.

Those years helped me to lay the foundations that would become my philosophy around good therapy.

1. Maintain a child's sense of curiosity and wonder.
2. Every person's life is worth a novel
3. Offer as much support as is required and no more than is needed.
4. Remember it takes one to know one
5. Travel at the Speed of Light-Heartedness

Notwithstanding the many years of learning theory and training experientially to become a therapist those 5 lessons became the foundation of how I understand good therapy.

### **Maintain a Child's Sense of Curiosity and Wonder**

Whether it is a short walk to the shops, a game of chasings, a fat brush full of bright paint or an ant farm brought in for 'show and tell', a child's experience of her world is embodied in curiosity and wonder. Observing children whilst they are playing, talking, eating, and even resting reveals how they are true Masters of being present.

Children have taught me to listen with my body not only with my ears. Have you ever watched a child as he is being read a favorite story? She melts into the images, the sounds the smells of the narrative and each moment becomes the next penultimate experience. Just as the child listens with wonder and curiosity so too does he relishes being heard in the same way.

We all do.

The moment of pure meeting as described by Martin Buber in his work entitled I-Thou is where wonder and curiosity melt and the act of seeing, hearing, speaking, listening and understanding transform into an act of Love.

### **Every Person's Life is Worth a Novel**

As the title of Dr. Erving Polster's book states no one can escape *being* interesting, although people are often the last ones to recognize the drama in their own lives. They marvel at other people's adventure, successes and experiences and don't look within to see the richness of their own lives.

Taking the abstractions so often used in conversation and therapy, (I feel challenged, She was cruel, I was lazy, He abandoned me...) and unraveling the stories hidden behind the abstraction always reveals part of the rich and colorful tapestry of the individual's life.

People often camouflage themselves through minimization. As Marianne Williams wrote in Nelson Mandela's inaugural speech, 'our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure'.

By telling our stories we find meaning to our lives. Jean Paul Satre recognized the remarkable gift of meaningfulness and adventures that story offers to all people.

### **Offer as much support as is needed and no more than is necessary**

As a teacher I would set up the play ground with planks and ladders, balancing beams and other equipment that would foster their imagination whilst also challenging them.

Usually I knew that if a child could climb up to a certain level they would be able to climb down. It may require timing, patience and some courage and occasionally a steadying hand but rarely did I ever see a child unable to get out of a place they had put themselves into.

As I work with my clients that philosophy still holds true. I have often found that if I offer more help or support than is required my client will walk away without the gift of insight. The inevitable result of over support is a diminished ability to self support.

### **Remember it takes one to know one**

In my opinion, an "unhealthy" person is one who, among other things, is locked into his/her projections. A lot of disowned qualities (good and bad) of that person's self are unrecognized by the person, and are seen by the person as existing outside of one, especially in other persons who are emotionally important to him/her, either positively or negatively. The projected qualities are perceived as literally, unambiguously outside of the perceiver, other than the perceiver, just as clearly as seeing a piece of furniture outside of one.

As a person becomes healthier, s/he learns to withdraw the projections. This takes moral effort, and the willingness to endure the embarrassment of realizing that what I have accused others of, is also in myself.

The well-known Gestalt technique of the empty chair is, among other things, directly aimed at helping a person re-own projections. For example, a person who complains that his mother is too critical is asked to speak to his mother in the empty chair. Then--and this is the crucial moment, and the one clients "resist" the most--the client is asked to sit in the empty chair and be the critical mother, to act out the body language, the tone of voice, the words of the critical mother. The client often says at that point, "I can't do that! That's just what I don't want to be!" This is because the person doesn't want to acknowledge his or her own criticalness that was probably originally formed by the critical mother, but is now an unconscious part of the client. If the person can perform the experiment and be critical as the mother, the therapist may then ask if any of this critical energy is recognizable as being in the client as well. The client is also guided to see that his own internal critical mother--part of his own energy--is within him, that he, in the present, criticizes himself just as harshly as his mother ever did.

To me, it is the hallmark of integrity, both personally and professionally, to own one's projections, and to be open in principle to owning all of them. This makes a person whole. Importantly for therapist/client relationships, it makes a therapist safer for a client to open up to. If I as a therapist have re-owned a lot of my projections, I will be less likely to project onto my clients (counter-transference) and make them bear the brunt of my own self-alienation. I will have compassion for the human condition, and acknowledge myself as a human being with strengths and weaknesses, just like my clients.

### **Travel at the Speed of Light-Heartedness**

Being a therapist is serious business. Doing 'good therapy' is even more serious. How we address the ethical, therapeutic, healing, relational, appropriate or inappropriate aspects of our work takes years of learning theory, methodology and practice. Rarely however do we learn the wisdom that is held in the heart of Spontaneous Stupidity.

Spontaneous Stupidity is the true gift of children and the one thing we forget to practice when we most need to. Osho said: "Be a joke unto yourself". Spontaneous Stupidity is recognizing the absurdity in our reaction to people and events. It is skipping down the street in the rain simply because you can. It is tossing a box of corn flakes around the room when things get too tough and all the children are crying at once ( I did this once and it was fantastic)

Recently I said to a friend, "I realise I have spent the first half of my life trying not to look like an idiot and the second half of my life embracing my ability to be one."

Traveling at the Speed of Light Heartedness reminds me not to take myself so seriously. If I can laugh at myself eventually my client will laugh at me too. In time he may learn to also laugh at himself. That surely is what true healing is all about. To look at the drama of our life and to laugh with an unbearable lightness of being.