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CTP Panel Presentation:  
What Is Psychotherapy?

Reflections inspired by Thomas Ogden's article  
"What I Would Not Part With"

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## CTP Panel Presentation: What Is Psychotherapy?

Reflections inspired by Thomas Ogden's article "What I Would Not Part With"

**Presenter: Susan Chernin**

*"It is fatal to reason whilst observing," Darwin said, "though necessary before and so useful afterwards."*

Thomas Mails writing about his meetings with Fools Crow, the Ceremonial Chief of the Teton Sioux reported that *"(a)mong the matters he and I discussed was that of people having closed minds which keep them from seeing marvelous things. In conjunction with this I told him a story I'd heard about a hunter who had been given a dog that could walk on water. When he wanted a witness that could support this fantastic claim, the only person available was an elderly farmer who seemed oblivious to what the dog was doing. After the dog had performed his amazing feat several times and the farmer said nothing, the frustrated hunter asked him if he hadn't noticed anything special about the dog. "Well," he drawled, "now that you mention it, that mutt can't swim!" (Mails, Fools Crow, 29)*

On reading Ogden's article, "What I would Not Part With", I initially wondered about a "sub-text". Although couching his thoughts in the poetic frame of Robert Frost (a favourite of his, one might conclude from his earlier writing), I noticed an edge: some of his words and images were sharp and his examples, even extreme. I imagined Ogden, perhaps something of an outlier, himself, outraged when he heard about the analyst who expressed his hostility towards his client by opening his mail during the session or those who discontinue an analysis of a patient with a serious physical illness. Did this build up over months or years? Had he become so riled up, as the image in my mind unfolded, that he took pen to hand and, in the tradition of Emile Zola, crafted his "J'Accuse".

Or was I reading (projecting) all this into it? I remembered being similarly incensed when CTP had a guest lecturer visiting a few years ago. I had felt like a hostage possibly not unlike the lecturer himself when he was in the presence of his oppressive father (as he described). I wanted to walk away but stayed until the bitter end wondering whether something redemptive would take place and not wanting to miss it. I was aware that a number of people were enjoying the day and there were those that were mildly irritated or even frustrated. But for me it was as if I was witnessing an analyst opening mail during a session with a client. I experienced a growing uneasiness, a discomfort with thoughts themselves, especially those that could be considered unpleasant, disruptive or hurtful. I experienced something Judy Dales spoke about in October: conflict. And it was an almost impossible place to communicate from, let alone relate. I saw people leaving – letting their feet do the talking. But I was unable to extricate myself. Why? What really held me hostage? In the intense uneasiness, I could see interspersed within this reactivity – even at the time, glimpses of myself, and a familiar struggle. I was trying to hold on to my mind.

On re-reading Ogden's article, the experience of sharpness did not subside. But this time, what I saw as the focus of the inhumane behaviour was not just the insensitive analyst, but also that of the patient. Referring to "the patient's relentless self-debasing thoughts and actions" as inhumane brought something new into focus for me. I re-read it and paused. Did he really mean to suggest that the undermining barrage of negative thoughts and self-criticisms that trail many of our clients, daily (as well as ourselves) was inhumane: without compassion, sympathy, or consideration (Webster) for ourselves?

Among Anna Freud's descriptions of defenses, is the one she calls "Turning Against Oneself". Like the many other defenses it is an unconscious response to not simply a very painful experience, but an unbearable one. We have some appreciation that this defense is available to an infant in the earliest weeks and months of its life. It is a way to manage unbearable feelings and, as the child becomes older, his or her unbearable thoughts. We are separated from ourselves whenever this defense is in place, because, by definition, we are separated from the truth.

Robert Caper in his dense but captivating book, *A Mind of One's Own, A Kleinian View of Self and Other*, captures this when he describes that the aim of psychoanalysis is not to "massage a patient towards a pre-determined idea of 'better mental health', but to enable him (...) to find out who he is and isn't." (Caper, 1) "The mind needs reliable information about itself – truth, if you will –just as much as the body needs food." (Caper, 55)

The "truth, if you will", what an idea. What a wonderful, and difficult ideal!

And whenever I think about "truth", I immediately think of two other ideals, honesty and courage, which, for me, are almost always in the service of truth. But it seems to me, and what I think I was experiencing at the time of the guest lecturer's talk, is that these values are in competition/conflict with other ideals that we also have come to value and cherish: to care for and help others and to do no harm. I experienced the lecturer (in phantasy) as fragile and homeless. He was a guest after all. He was also, very likely, a figure (or figures) from my past. As Caper explains, "(C)ontact with one's psychic reality (puts) one in contact with one's relationship to the external world ---how one reacts (in phantasy) to the events that present themselves to one's experience". (Caper, 55) My uneasiness, it seems to me, but it is still under study, was a signal that I was under some pressure to lose contact with my own psychic reality, to turn away from myself and potentially against myself. In other words, "not to see." And the uneasiness is a sign that I don't want to do that, again.

It is this separation from our selves, I think, which underlies and makes possible the inhumanity that Ogden is referring to when he speaks of "the patient's relentless self-debasing thoughts and actions". It may well be a lie and an illusion. It is also, the human condition.

Ogden clearly recognizes this and demonstrates compassion by understanding that "the patient's inhumane behaviour (often directed against himself) is usually a reflection of psychological illness for which he came to the analyst for help." Ogden is aware that in the course of the analysis, demands will be made on the patient, and no less on himself: to face the music and to be accountable. It is a shared endeavor at so many levels. In this work we are invited to witness an "awful reality" that lies at the source of a client's catastrophe, what Ogden calls the "loss of a part of one's humanness": "the capacity to be alive to one's experience."

How could we begin to hold this space for a client "to dream oneself into being" if we are not familiar in some very profound way with this experience ourselves. It would be like listening to a client's dream having never had a dream of one's own, or being a therapist having never been a client. With each and every value, Ogden is sharing something of himself, as a person and as an analyst. He feels real to me using language that is "alive", that "serves to communicate, not obfuscate; to generate understandings, not confusion; to say what is true to one's emotional experience, not to pervert the truth." And, most importantly, designed "to lead to actual changes in the way the patient lives his/her life..."

“Rather than gaining insight into a single Absolute Truth”, the Buddhist writer Stephen Batchelor explains in his extraordinary book, ‘Living With The Devil’, “Buddha awoke to a complex of truths that embraced the conflicts of human existence as well as their resolution. This awakening did not leave him stranded in a permanent mystical enlightenment, but opened up for him a path to follow in the midst of the world’s vicissitudes.” (Batchelor, 122) “(I)n the sensuous, painful flux of the here and now, Buddha is neither silent nor alone but in endless conversation with the devil. Mara is not rejected or condemned but embraced and transformed. Buddha accepts his incarnation in the diabolic stuff of existence. He knows that every moment “Mara’s stream” is slipping away and in the end will destroy him. But he neither gets entangled in it nor recoils from it. Thus are fears and desires, frustrations and doubts transformed from hindrances into catalysts of understanding and freedom.” (Batchelor, 125)

As therapists and as clients we get to know something about this ‘diabolic stuff of existence.’ We become very familiar with the dilemma of which Ogden speaks –“the incompatibility of safety and generativity” and the “role of the analyst to “(hold) the tension between the patient’s need for safety and his need for truth”. We have come to see that from time to time, the truth can be terrible. It can lead to loss.

And that’s only part of it. It is also true that because of our tendency “to see”, as Henry James reminds us, “what we bring” even our effort to free ourselves through reflection on our desires and impulses can be an expression of our “unfreedom”.” (Lear, 12) Jonathan Lear writing about the Rat Man, in his book, Freud, comments: “as he reflects on his reasons for feeling guilty, he digs himself ever deeper into a crabbed and constraining world. Self conscious reflection is being deployed as a defense, one which helps sustain the guilty world.” (Lear, 12)

Thinking, therefore, is a double-edged sword. Winnicott (New Light on Children’s Thinking) recognized well that it was both “an aspect of the individual’s creative imagination, but also subject to being exploited as a defense” against among other things, archaic anxiety and disintegrative tendencies. (Winnicott, Psychoanalytic Explorations, 157)

Not all thoughts are created equal, we must conclude. When are we ‘grasping for the truth’ and when are we actively turning away, or worse, burying it? How do we go about seeing things as they really are, who we are and who we are not? This, for me, is at the center of what psychotherapy is all about. It is a life long commitment, not for anyone in a hurry. It does take time; and sometimes, a very long time. Fortunately, an enduring aspect of Truth (i.e. Reality) is that it waits patiently and, one might say, lovingly, to be found.

To conclude, I have tried in the writing of this paper to stay ‘alive to my experience’ as I read and re-read Ogden’s own reflections. I’ll call it my ‘grasping for the truth’, a phrase Martin Buber once used to describe ‘redemption’. To see things as they really are. And this I would not part with...

## CTP Panel Presentation: What Is Psychotherapy?

Reflections inspired by Thomas Ogden's article "What I Would Not Part With"

**Presenter: Barbara Milroy**

At the beginning of each New Year, it is a long-standing CTP tradition to gather and collectively linger with the question – "What is Psychotherapy?"

Within this context we have invited each other to hold ourselves open to musing about what it is that we would not part with.

Since volunteering in late November to speak today, many paths of exploration have opened up for me. Words kept coming to me, whole phrases, lines or refrains from poetry, literature, lyrics from songs, dream images, the language and metaphors of different people. There was no end to what kept coming. Quite exhilarating, actually. Some of it I'd rush to jot down, other parts I'd let wash over me as I glided along on my bicycle. What became increasingly evident to me over the passing days and weeks was that I was in conversation – with myself, with you, with authors and theorists, with sources of inspiration. The steady stream of associative links would at once coalesce into nodal points and I'd tell myself to go in that direction. Start writing about that. And yet as plainly as the next day dawned, there I was reaching beyond myself for something more, something evanescent, ineffable. The conversation was endless. Language gave me wings. Where I have landed for the time being is with the word *conversation*.

Jonathan Lear refers to psychotherapy as "the peculiar conversation" – the one "in which one can succeed in genuinely taking oneself into account" (2005, p.16).

It is this that I would not part with.

Genuinely taking ourselves into account involves, I believe, consciously and intentionally choosing to pick up the dropped threads of our own narratives and deciding to familiarize ourselves with our own conscious and unconscious trains of thought. According to Lear, developing the ability to recognize our "own unconscious mental activity in the here and now" is what enables us to "begin to acquire the practical ability to intervene. It is the acquisition of this practical ability that is the truth that can set a person free" (2005, p.133). Truth, like language, is subjective, personal, idiomatic. The therapeutic conversation offers us the opportunity to learn our own language, to personalize, claim and assert our mother tongue. Lead protagonist on our own stage, we remain nonetheless at times stuck in the dark, off temporarily in the side wings, struggling to decipher the plotline to our narratives. In our conflicts, contradictions, our dreams, yearnings and desires we are a mystery to ourselves. 'What's going on? How did I get here? Why did I say that? Who am I?' As long as we are engaged in the peculiar conversation, our responses are endlessly shifting, perpetually calling us out, beckoning us to further articulate ourselves into being. In conversation with our therapists we begin over time to internalize this genuine taking of ourselves into account and our capacity to speak our own truth begins to more firmly find its bearings in more of our relationships in the world at large.

The freedom to which Lear refers stands in juxtaposition to seeking refuge in elusive and illusory notions of once and for all being *normal* or being *cured*, notions I have always had difficulty squaring with my own lived experience of the human condition. In his book entitled *Hysteria*, Christopher Bollas writes, "normal means richly conflicted, or ill temporarily in so

many ways that the self is free to articulate its form of being and relating”(p.5). This definition speaks to me. With freedom then comes responsibility. Responsibility to keep choosing to genuinely take ourselves into account and persevere at nurturing what I am going to call the *Unbearable Bare-ing of Being.*  
*Unbare-able Bearing of Being.*

From the very beginning, from our always being-in-the-world with others, we learn through ongoing conversation – preverbal, spoken and unspoken language – what it is about ourselves we are free to bear – to endure, to tolerate, to be accountable for – as well as what is bare-able – what it is about ourselves we are free to uncover, expose, reveal. Through how we are handled and held, received and responded to we learn about the parts of ourselves that are, and are not, bearable / bare-able. The quality of the ancestral and intergenerational conversation that preceded us contributed to our first receiving blankets being more or less capable of holding the integrity of our being. We are born out of what was able to be borne.

We cannot tolerate something about ourselves, about each other, about our lives, about the ontological over which we have no control, and so, selectively, aspects of the conversation must be foreclosed and disavowed. Our very survival depends on this; these are not capricious flights of fancy. Generally speaking, we are survivors. Like theatre stage lights going dark on different parts of the set, the dialogue goes quiet, hopefully only temporarily, and the overall fabric of our being remains more threadbare, the tapestry that we are reveals fewer of our vibrant knots and idiosyncrasies.

In her book *Fugitive Pieces*, Anne Michaels writes, “no one is born just once. If you’re lucky, you’ll emerge again in someone’s arms; or unlucky, wake when the long tail of terror brushes the inside of your skull” (p.5). These metaphors evoke for me different aspects of the journey of becoming human that the psychotherapeutic conversation can encompass, aspects which, to my mind, have only something to do with luck, or with our undeniable thrownness. The rest, I believe, has a great deal to do with hard work and with what Winnicott calls playing. It is out of the playing, the floundering together that we grow more able to bear / bare, to suffer, what is ours to be suffered. This is what enables us to further constitute and reveal ourselves. The relief we can experience, the relaxation, the feeling real as Winnicott puts it, are hard won and exquisitely unbearable delicacies.

Life’s slow emergencies.

In a darkroom photographic images gradually coming into view.

We begin to come into focus for ourselves.

At other times, the psychotherapeutic conversation can feel more like rude awakenings. As we all know, genuinely taking ourselves into account, persevering at articulating ourselves into view, relating our own form of being out loud can be unbearably painful and terrifying. Over time however, through the therapeutic conversation, a sense of debilitating shame can begin to encompass less known compassion for ourselves and a more deeply felt experience of equanimity. I quote Anne Michaels again. She writes, “I learned to tolerate images rising in me like bruises” (p.19). Our childhood recollections come into fuller focus. A once hilarious family story becomes increasingly painful with each subsequent retelling. Dissociated threads related to neglect and abuse and developmental trauma are felt for the first time and reintegrated, each revisited strand now braided back into the whole.

‘He is frantically knitting himself into being’ is what wandered through my thoughts as a client kept frenetically crossing his right leg over his left, his left over his right as he weighed the possibility of ending his 10 year relationship with his partner. Back and forth again, time after

time throughout our ongoing conversation - knit one, purl one - a richly conflicted *unbearable bare-ing of being// unbare-able bearing of being*.

Sitting with him, in the eye of his anxiety, I found myself experiencing an almost unbearable sadness, a sense of desolate solitude. I felt as though I wanted to jump out of my own skin. As his therapist, these feelings were mine to bear. What he was looking to me for was in fact much more than to help him to decide whether or not to end his relationship with his partner. He needed me to bear with him as he found his bearings and learned to suffer what he could not as yet word into conversation. This in turn called upon me to bear both the ongoing struggle we have as therapists of coming to know when to speak and what precisely to say, as well as to suffer what it was in me, in my own conscious and unconscious narrative, my client's conversation was stirring. It was this richly layered conversation in its weaving of the explicit and the implicit between us that was ultimately moving and changing us both.

Deep down, he knew on the one hand – or with the crossing of one leg - he could resolve it all by acting on an impulse. And yet, more deeply still, he knew there was something he needed to be ill with and to go through in order to be true to himself. It is this particular client and his embodied bearing/ bare-ing of being with whom I entered back into conversation when reading Bollas' words in his new book *The Freudian Moment*, “the conflicts of the mind are deployed unconsciously. We think them unconsciously” (p.51).

The capacity to freely associate and to adhere to Freud's fundamental rule, is directly linked to the peculiar conversation in which we become more able to genuinely take ourselves into account. It is when we are able to relax our usual muscular alertness and bear what we meet in ourselves and to claim it as our own that the peculiar conversation is at its zenith. Lear talks about free speech becoming possible within the context of the peculiar conversation: “it is constitutive of neurosis that there will always be some [...] restriction on my speech. The aim of psychoanalytic conversation is to undo this restriction. Somehow a conversation between two people is meant to restore conversation inside the soul.” (2005, p.222). As with any art form that is informed by unconscious process – be it painting, poetry, papier-mâché or photography, to name but a few –, it is through free speech, through being in freely associated conversation that we begin to make out what it is we are trying to tell ourselves. When we pay attention, we begin to decipher recurring themes and patterns. Within the context of the therapeutic relationship we are forever reaching beyond our own limits, however tenaciously we may cling to our own identities. We are constantly deepening our capacity to bear revealing ourselves, to tell ourselves the truth. We are also simultaneously working on honing our receptive capabilities to be able to more frequently be in a position to live out of a dynamic intermingling of conscious and unconscious conversation. We catch glimpses into the fullness of our beings - past, present and future – and access a myriad of ways of knowing and being we never dreamed possible. We surprise, delight and disappoint ourselves: “Wow, I never knew I thought that.” We continue to get to know ourselves. It is this peculiar conversation then that makes leading meaningful and creative lives possible; lives in which we are freer to be more intimately alive in the present moment. In varying degrees throughout life, we move back and forth between feeling wary of revealing ourselves and feeling compelled to express ourselves. My sense is that this latter urgency is heightened to the extent to which we have developed what Winnicott refers to as the capacity to be alone and to nurture the private self. Through feeling increasingly real, we begin to access what it is we have to articulate, and feel we must author. I am reminded of Winnicott's important insight: “it is a joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found.”

As I linger with my experience of the therapeutic conversation both as client and as therapist, I feel profound gratitude for the opportunity in life to be able to embrace the exquisitely and the

excruciatingly unbearable bearing of being /unbare-able bearing of being. As I think of the process of bearing – as in birthing – oneself into being, I am reminded of those dreams I have had in which I come upon rooms in my house of which I had previously had no knowledge. This bearing / bare-ing is ultimately a lifelong journey – we are forever becoming who we are becoming.

In closing, I will echo the words of R.D. Laing when he writes, “psychotherapy must remain an obstinate attempt of two people to recover the wholeness of being human through the relationship between them” (p.45).

This being human is quite the experience and feels to me sometimes as exhilarating and at other times as excruciating as a ride can be on what Robert Lindner called "The Jet Propelled Couch".

It is vast, and mysterious and fortunately not something we have to do alone.

As Heidegger reminds us, we are “bound together by “the burden of being.”

I look forward to remaining in peculiar conversation with you all.

Lyrics come to mind, lyrics from a favourite 1970s Quebecois group called ‘Harmonium’:

‘On a mis quelqu’un au monde  
On devrait peut-être l’écouter.’

This could be translated as:

‘One has given birth to an Other  
Perhaps One might want to take this Other into account.’

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## CTP Panel Presentation: What Is Psychotherapy?

Reflections inspired by Thomas Ogden's article "What I Would Not Part With"

### **Presenter: John Neumin**

I would not part with the words of men and women who have expressed what I want to say, better than I ever could.

Martin Buber said,

*Each of us is encased in an armour whose task is to ward off signs. Signs happen to us without respite, living means being addressed; we would need only to present ourselves and to perceive. But the risk is too dangerous for us, the soundless thunderings seem to threaten us with annihilation and from generation to generation we perfect the defence apparatus. All of our knowledge assures us "Be calm, everything happens as it must happen, but nothing is directed at you, you are not meant: it is just 'the world', you can experience it as you like, but whatever you make of it in yourself proceeds from you alone, nothing is required of you, you are not addressed, all is quiet." The signs of address are not something extraordinary, something that steps out of the order of things; they are just what goes on time and time again.*

A client, a seeker, possibly in a last desperate hope, comes to my office and asks me for help. I offer myself as a psychotherapist, as a partner, someone who professes to have skill in helping them with their struggles. Over the past few nights I have been asking myself, what - when I am sitting with a client, for the first time with someone new, or the 300th time with someone I have come to know well; what - when I struggle to "do psychotherapy" - would I not part with.

More than anything, what feels to me to be the foundational bedrock of my work, is what, for lack of a better word, I will call faith. I would not part with the layered tapestry of trust, hope, confidence, experience, and wonder that allows me to sit with a fellow human being, and be comfortable with the startlingly belief that their talking to me, has at least the possibility of helping them. This complex thing that I am calling faith is, I believe, the antithesis of blind faith, or hubris, or delusion, but is a faith gleaned from experience, nurtured by community, and developed in practice.

Kierkegaard said,

*"Would it not be best to stop with faith and is it not disturbing that everyone wants to go further. When people nowadays will not stop with love, where is it they are going?"*

I may have first become aware of the centrality of faith in my own experiences as a client. My journey in therapy has transformed my world, and I know that transformation is a possibility for others with every fibre of my being. I know that the process we call psychotherapy (as impossible as it is to define, as varied as it may be) has the potential to catalyze profound changes, because I have experienced those changes, and I have witnessed others experience them.

What would I do without my own experience of paralysis in group, when I am faced with a client who feels hopelessly stuck? When a client panics, and pleads that they feel worse than when they started, it's vital that I remember the two years of therapy that felt like a chainsaw through my chest. When a client struggles with me, my personality, my limitations and foibles, it helps me to remember my own struggles with my often very difficult self. I would not part with my experiences as a client and the therapists who were my partners in that process. I can't imagine doing this work without it, and I feel for the therapists, and even more, for the clients of the therapists, who have not done this work themselves (an unfortunately large number).

My experience tells me that I don't need special powers to be a therapist. It's true, the men and women who have been mine have been very patient and wise, insightful and kind, but they have also been flawed and limited, conflicted and vulnerable, in other words, human like me. I would not part with the profound kindness and generosity of spirit I have received from them and the contributions each of them have made to help me on my path and I would not part with the inspiration they have helped to develop in me to pass those things forward.

The transformative power of deep engagement with others has been a crucial thread of the tapestry of faith that I would not part with. The years I spent in group have helped to revolutionize my understanding of what it means to be human. Experiencing and witnessing the radical healing and growth that spring from simply being open and honest with each other, was a revelation. My experiences with my children and the innumerable ways I have grown by being a father has not only informed who I am as a therapist directly, but also shown me the depth and fundamental significance of life. My children have inspired me to be more patient, forced me to think long term, required me to persevere, called me to give generously, and most of all taught me the central importance of love in living a good life, and the central importance of awareness in learning how to love. I would not part with the wonderful challenge and honour of being responsible for them, and the leaps of faith required to help them find their way in this world. This thing I would not part with, this faith I am talking about, is in this way, and in many ways much deeper and broader than faith in therapy. It's also a faith in what it means to be a person. It's also a faith in what is possible in the world.

Jonathon Lear, in his wonderful book *Love and Its Place in Nature*, says

*The very presence of love in the world demands a response from man. In fact, the individual I is in essence, a response to love: it is from the internalization of love that an I is constituted. We develop in structure by repeated internalizations of a good-enough world. For me to develop into a good enough person, there must be enough goodness running through the world: it is this which we internalize and use to constitute ourselves. In this sense to love is meaningful. . . and love has a developmental thrust: healthy development is toward individuation and autonomy. One of the manifestations of love is that the good enough world always outstrips my ability to develop . . . and that there is no upper bound to human development set by the world. However much I have grown, a good enough world is calling out to me to respond by growing in depth and structure.*

But the people who come to me, come, because of experiences of a world that is not, and was not, nearly good enough. In this sense, my task as a therapist, is to help them to discover and

create a good enough world that they can then use to constitute stronger healthier, good enough selves. I cannot do this without the faith that there IS, at least in potential, a good enough world for us all. A good enough world whose touchstones are good enough work, and good enough love. As a therapist I have seen time and time again people finding and developing their capacities to work, and to love, and to engage the world more meaningfully. Through listening to themselves openly, and responding to what they have heard honestly, they have learned to have faith that what they are in some sense telling themselves, is helping to lead them to a better life. Freud might have called it an instinct for health.

But the faith I would not part with cannot stop here. My life, and working with my clients has forced me to go deeper.

How do I sit with my client who has lost his young son in a car accident? The pain is so thick I can barely breathe. How do I engage my client who is painfully dying of cancer, who fears that he will be extinguished before ever having fully lived? How do I help the client who despairingly asks me "what's the point?", and who is contemplating ending her life if her unbearable suffering doesn't stop. There are times that our client's world is not good enough. There are occasions when the horrifying actualities of our world overwhelm who we are, and there is not enough strength, time, opportunity or possibility to discover or build a good enough life. The core of what I would not part with is here, in this darkness.

The Theologian and Philosopher Abraham Heschel said, *...things not only are what they are, but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme. Our awe is a sense for the transcendent, for the reference everywhere to mystery beyond all things. It enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine...to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple: to feel in the rush of the passing ... the stillness of the eternal.*

What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe.

There is a divine substratum that underpins who, what and why we are. I cannot imagine doing this work without at least an awareness of this. I do not know how I could sit with someone whose life and self have been devastated by years of trauma, abuse and torturous betrayal, and meet their agony without some sense of a deeper, fuller, and transcendent reality. I don't know how I could daily hold the pain that permeates many of the men and women who come to me, without it feeling unshakeably meaningful. I would not part with the radical awareness that we are all much more than we can comprehend, and that if we keep listening, honestly and openly, we may not understand exactly what this world is asking of us, or exactly what our lives mean, but we will experience that they mean, we will experience 'being addressed', and that experience will change our relation to ourselves and the world in undeniably profound ways. More than anything, my children, my therapists, and my clients have helped to open me to the ultimate significance of our lives, and the underpinning of that significance in something unfathomably transcendent.

The Talmud says *"He who saves a life, saves the world."* As therapists we are in the privileged position of possibly helping our clients save their lives, deepen them and transform them. I would not part with this.

## CTP Panel Presentation: What Is Psychotherapy?

Reflections inspired by Thomas Ogden's article "What I Would Not Part With"

**Presenter: John Gross**

*I could give all to Time except - except  
What I myself have held. But why declare  
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept  
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There,  
And what I would not part with I have kept.*

-Robert Frost, quoted in Ogden (2005)

Today, as we consider our perennial question—what is psychotherapy?—we do so reflecting further on ‘what I would not part with’, the proposition inspired by Thomas Ogden’s (*Ibid.*) chapter of that title. The matter might be understood in many ways, positively as ‘what I believe’ or ‘what I value as a therapist’. But riffing on a line from Frost’s poem, Ogden put it in the negative subjunctive: ‘what I *would* not part with’ is different from ‘what I am determined not to give up’ or ‘what I did not surrender’. A subjoined wish or desire underwrites Ogden’s pledge to be humane, to face the music, and to dream himself into being. Frost’s poem too gives every hint of the lightness with which he holds onto what he has kept. Like the dream, “things forbidden” are provisional and can only cross to safety while the censor sleeps.

In the same spirit of reaching for what cannot be fully grasped, I declare (out of custom’s earshot) that what I would not part with is freedom. Much proclaimed freedom is oft-forbidden. Like the dream that evaporates in waking to the everyday, freedom is always at risk of being overtaken by customs and conventions. The best I can say is that it is my *relationship* with freedom—my struggle to live in the light of freedom—that I would wish to keep.

The thought of this “one thing necessary”, as Philip called it at our dinner back in October, came to me only some time after agreeing to speak in today’s session. Initially, I didn’t have a clear articulation of what I would not part with. Moreover, I knew that sharing whatever it was meant risking self-disclosure—most especially the risk of revealing to others what I am unable to see in myself. Subsequent reading on the subject of ‘freedom’ confirmed these fears. Psychoanalytic author Guy Thompson (2004) writes that “[a]cts of disclosure invariably elicit anxiety because the content of one’s mind say a great deal about the person who confides them. Free association wouldn’t arouse anxiety in the first place if patients weren’t reluctant to discover what they harbor.” (p. 28) My worries about exposure (not unlike the fears of being found holding forbidden goods at the border) placed me about a million miles from the shining light of freedom. In fact, I was in the grips of its very opposite—something familiar that I clumsily call ‘un-freedom’. I wondered if I would ever be free of it.

It was at this point that I sought comfort in a marvelous book my son Andrew gave me—Camille Paglia’s *Break, Blow, Burn* (2006)—her loving and wonderfully erotic reading of some of the world’s great English-language poems. There I discovered her presentation and treatment of a piece by George Herbert entitled “Love” (*Ibid.* p. 43):

*Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
If I lack'd any thing.*

*A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:  
Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
Who made the eyes but I?*

*Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?  
My deare, then I will serve.  
You must sit downe, sayes Love, and taste my meat:  
So I did sit and eat.*

Paglia wants us to notice the curiously seductive atmosphere of this encounter between the speaker and his beloved—Jesus. “In the poem’s master metaphor,” she explains, “a host is graciously reassuring an awkward guest who feels embarrassed and out of place.” (p. 44) By twists and turns that include self-reproach, solicitation, sparring, sabotage, and finally a direct injunction, God and man are finally joined in a sacred rite of giving and receiving; on the erotic plane—of pursuit and ravishment.

Despite its patently religious themes, I realized this poem by a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Anglican minister was revealing to me something about what I would not part with in the practice of what, four hundred years later, we call psychotherapy. I decided to recast Herbert’s “Love” as a meeting between a man and his therapist:

*My therapist welcomed me: yet I drew back  
Unclean and guilty as sin.  
But her quick eye, spotting my withdrawal  
From the moment I first entered,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly asking,  
if there were some thing lacking.*

*That I were a guest, said I, worthy of hospitality:  
“No such thing!” my host exclaimed,  
But I am unkind, ungrateful,  
How can I look you in the eye?  
She held me in her gaze and said,  
Looking not, you see me glower.*

*It's true, yet I have veiled my sight: let my shame  
Go where it deserves.  
It was I, she swore, was seeing things, the mad person is myself.  
Perhaps, I chided, it's you we should be serving?*

*Open wide, she said, and taste what you have chosen:  
So I did, and surrendered unto freedom.*

The poem introduces a client we know well: guilty, withdrawing, unworthy, self-castigating, ashamed, mocking and, finally, brave. The therapist too is familiar: by turns welcoming, observant, solicitous, laconic, ironic, paradoxical and even provocative. Perhaps the encounter reported here never happened. Or maybe it took place late in a long therapy. Or was happening all the time? Whatever the case and without aspiring to any kind of rigor, I ask your leave to exploit this lyrical fancy to highlight certain themes that I believe are at the heart of our work as clients and therapists.

What does it take to make a 'good enough' therapy? A wise colleague once told me she thought there were three essential ingredients: first, you have to long for things to be different; second, you have to be ready to hang in there and dedicate yourself to the work; and finally, you've got to be able somehow to hear and receive what's given and what comes to you. I have come to see that that single word 'somehow' embraces a lifetime of art and effort and that the earnestness and freedom with which we approach it can bring fresh energy and vitality to the tired dictum that 'life must be gotten through somehow'.

It occurred to me that my colleague's trenchant advice could be further condensed into three words: desire, commitment, and openness. For me these are the three building blocks of every important relationship we have, be it with a partner, a client, a therapist, with God—and God with us.

The imagined meeting in the poem makes reference to each of these essentials. The client expresses his deep desire to be a guest, to be worthy of the hospitality of his host. He commits himself to staying in the room despite a withering shame. And he opens himself at last to the possibility of receiving nourishment and of being served. What about the therapist? She too is desirous of change—a deepening of the communication that goes between them. Her commitment to the process allows her to abide and even parlay to mutual advantage the rejection of her client. As a 'good enough' host, she openly admits her part in the shame and madness her guest endures. And she continues to work with him.

References to 'guest' and 'host' in our reconstruction of Herbert's poem are apposite in respect of psychotherapy. If you look them up in an etymological dictionary (Partridge, 1961), you will discover that 'guest' and 'host' are cognate words, both born of a more ancient word meaning 'stranger'. As 'strange bedfellows' guest and host are reciprocally bound to one another. You cannot be a guest without having a host and a host is never without a guest. The therapist's declaration in the poem, "No such thing," picks up on this theme with its echoes of Winnicott's insistence that, in the mutual dependency of the mother-infant set-up, there is no such thing as a baby.

Winnicott also gave us a warning: the baby is not always so loveable (1947/1975). It might incur mother's hatred, especially when she experiences his cupboard love and is tossed aside like an unwanted fruit peeling. Guest and host, though united in a relationship of hospitality, are equally at risk of undoing one another. Note here the etymological connection of a whole family of words that we ordinarily consider antithetical: friendly encounters between strangers can degenerate into a deadly clash between enemy 'hosts', 'hostage' taking, the outbreak of 'hostilities', even the possibility of human sacrifice—an echo of which can be heard in the name we give to the eucharistic wafer—the 'host' (Partridge, 1961, p. 297). The roof of every house of healing or habitation—be it the 'hospital', the 'hostel', the 'hospice', or the 'hotel',

covers a place where strangers meet to care and receive care. But herein host and guest are at the greatest risk of wounding, exposure, and shame. Wilfred Bion once warned that though ensconced in the civilized confines of the therapy room, analyst and patient are two frightened and dangerous animals.

“But I am unkind, ungrateful, / How can I look you in the eye?” Commitment is severely tested by the prospect of disgust and its physiological counterpart—shame. Shame brings blood to the face, causes us to withdraw and avert the eyes in order to avoid the other’s real or imagined disgust—literally, the foul taste on the tongue that caused the same kindly host of Herbert’s poem to pronounce, now with eyes flaming like fire, “I will spit you out of my mouth.” (Revelation 3:16). When clients leave the therapy precipitously it is often because they cannot endure the sense of shame, the perception that they are disgusting in the eyes of the other, even when their host is a benevolent and well-meaning therapist.

“It was *I*, she swore, was seeing things, the mad person is *myself*.” The poem makes reference again to Winnicott (1971/1990) who reported saying to his male patient, “I know perfectly well that you are a man but I am... talking to a girl.” (p. 73) The surprised patient experienced an unaccountable moment of relief at this revelation before realizing to his shame that were he to talk about this ‘girl’ to another, he would be called mad (or what is nowadays more humiliating, a ‘girly-man’.) Winnicott responded, “It was not that *you* told this to anyone; it is I who see the girl and hear a girl talking when actually there is a man on my couch. The mad person is *myself*.” (p. 74)

The poem alerts us that divulgence—on the part of either the client or the therapist—is always a high stakes proposition. After confessing her own madness at seeing things that others would gladly overlook, the therapist hears the hostile retort of her client: “Perhaps it’s *you* we should be serving?” The reference to ‘service’ and the client’s ‘turning of the tables’ on his host is a reminder that in therapy we are present at a meal. As at the Last Supper, questions arise about who will serve and who will be served. The client hides his fear of dependency behind a mocking offer of service. But who can say that he’s wrong? Eating food prepared by a stranger exposes us to the risk of ingesting all manner of poison. Can the guest trust that, opening himself up, he will receive nourishment this time?

The therapist-host is equally vulnerable in offering her food for thought: it may well be met with accusations of poor taste or even sarcasm (etymologically understood as the action of ‘biting one’s lips in rage’). (The poet-psychoanalyst, Salman Akhtar writes about a patient who, in response to his words of intended empathy at her terrible losses, spurned his efforts saying, “I have drowned in a river and you are telling me about rain?” (2000, p. 238) Shaken by her stunning remark, Akhtar later became aware of its defensive purpose and the poverty of his own offering.)

Reference in our poem to what the client ‘deserves’ and who should be doing the ‘serving’ suggest loftier notions of ‘service’, a word that is used to describe the sacred rituals of all faiths. Sometimes we say about our practice that we are providing a ‘service’. In doing so the good host is ever mindful of who is being served: sometimes the client, sometimes the therapist, often both.

Desire, commitment, and openness—I would not part with these three in my therapeutic work. Desire is the hope of both therapist and client that a kernel or seed buried in a dark place still holds the prospect of future fruition. Commitment is akin to faith, the belief that with time an enduring relationship will support growth and transformation. Openness is, as I see it, another name for love, an acceptance of and a surrender to what is. With this formulation I can say

with St. Paul: 'Desire, commitment and openness—these three abideth, but the greatest of these is openness.'

Openness and love are also closely joined, in my view, with freedom—that which, invoking Frost, I declared I would not part with. It seems Frost too thought something similar. In a rich nugget of writing entitled "The Figure a Poem Makes" (1939/2007), Frost affirmed that only the poem itself can tell us the mystery of how it could have "tune" within the confines of meter and "wildness" that nonetheless carries a theme. The "telling" of the poem is what he calls, "[t]he figure a poem makes." He says, "It begins in delight and ends in wisdom", (*Ibid.* pp. 132-3). In its shape and contours, the figure equates for him to love: "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove [it] must ride on its own melting." (*Ibid.* p. 133) The wildness of that image tells us all we need to know and all we are likely to learn about love and freedom.

We have heard several responses to the question—what is it I would not part with in my work as a therapist?: beliefs, principles, values, morals, formative experiences, relationships with colleagues and families. We hold these dear; they are part of us much as our arms, our eyes, our lives. But in the end no such commitment can be everlasting. We all know moments, as does the client in the poem, when we would happily part with our eyes that we might be spared the glower of another's disgust. We are going to die and will part with all earthly vestiges of what we now treasure. Parting is embedded in the human condition; it is where we come from; it is where, as the departed, we are going.

What can I reliably say I would not part with? For St. Paul the answer lies in faith: "Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (1 Corinthians 13:12) When I hear these words, I find it hard to put behind me my own childish thinking about heaven and hell. As a man, I want to speak instead about a grown-up understanding of what it means to be free, a condition that I did not always experience in my religious formation in the teachings of St. Paul. In large part, it was therapy that acquainted me with freedom.

In the index of most any psychoanalytic monograph, right there before the predictable reference to 'Freud', you will sometimes find the word 'freedom' and more reliably the term 'free association'. In *The Ethic of Honesty*, author Guy Thompson (2004) devotes a seminal chapter to 'thinking through free association', an act that he insists Freud saw as issuing from an ethical pledge to be honest. Free association is not, in these terms, merely a means to psychological insight or the alleviation of suffering; it is an end in itself. Thus, Thompson understands Freud to be insisting that, "[t]o genuinely free associate is an act of revelation by which the inner recesses of one's being are bared to another person." (pp. 27-8) It is the capacity to free associate that has mutative value.

Because we live in a culture that defines freedom as individual autonomy, independence and the unbridled exercise of one's will, I might easily think of freedom as *my* freedom—emanating from *my* conscious choices. Freedom is thereby made into an attribute that belongs to me or a right to which I am entitled. But as we know from our work, so much of what we do and say and think is not consciously chosen; it is determined by unconscious processes. "In my view," says Thompson, "the fact that emotions, attitudes, and behavior are 'determined' by unconscious wishes simply indicates that the unconscious is freedom in its essence." (*Ibid.* p. 30) Freedom, in other words, is not something we have; it is who we *are*.

In *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Stephen Batchelor writes that "...freedom is possible because the changing, contingent, ambiguous, and creative character of reality is *by its very nature free*." (1998, p. 94) Our share in reality, in who we really are, is a life in and of freedom. Writing in the Buddhist tradition but wary of the proclivity of all religions to turn beliefs into rigid



constructs, Batchelor describes freedom in a manner that aligns with the psychoanalytic understanding that Thompson offers. Batchelor explains:

Reality is intrinsically free because it is changing, uncertain, contingent, and empty. It is a dynamic play of relationships. Awakening to this reveals our own intrinsic freedom, for we too are by nature a dynamic play of relationships. An authentic vision of this freedom is the ground of individual freedom and creative autonomy. (p. 99)

In the essay cited earlier, Robert Frost also invites us to see the freedom that inheres in reality; it is revealed in the poem, he says—for both the poet and the reader: “For it to be that,” he argues, “there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity.” (1939/2007, p. 132) One senses in its ‘post-destined’ meandering the freedom of the melting ice cube to find the path it creates for itself. No wonder Frost asserts, foreshadowing the line that has inspired our thoughts today, “All I would keep for myself is the freedom of my material—the condition of body and mind now and then to summons aptly from the vast chaos of all I have lived through.” (1939/2007, p. 132) Freedom, he is telling us, is not something we hold onto—it is something we hold ourselves open to.

But sooner or later I find myself in the position of the client in our poem—fixated on a view of self that enslaves me, that separates me from the freedom I am and the freedom that is. Hence I cannot say that I will never part with freedom—I do it all the time! In the words of St. Paul: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do.” (Romans 7: 15).

Since it is inevitable that I will stumble and fall, I must include in the freedom I would not part with the possibility that I may at times part with freedom itself! As Batchelor observes, “...[I]n practice, life cannot be so neatly split into the dualities of ‘free’ and ‘unfree’... While such categories are clear-cut, life is ambiguous. Freedom can be both recovered *and* lost again.” (*Ibid.* p. 99)

As with the dialectical relationship of guest and host, the freedom to lose and then to regain are joined to one another—both connect us to our humanity. “Awakening” writes Batchelor, “is the recovery of that awesome freedom into which we were born but for which we have substituted the pseudo-independence of a separate self.” (p. 99) And that, it seems to me in melting moments of ‘ice-cube’ openness, is the glory and mystery of being human. Our lives are not sublime, nor perfect, nor predictable—those are the lives of angels. We are humans who by nature share in freedom but who lose our way—in order that we may find it. True freedom includes the capacity to part with the stale ‘freedoms’ we hold onto. That I believe is the basis of our humanity, of all religion, all redemption, all recovery and reparation. And that’s what I would not ever wish to part with.

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