

The Threshold and the Shard:
GRADUATION TALK AT CTP, MAY 2005

In the next few minutes of this special evening, I will speak, on behalf of the entire faculty of the Centre for Training in Psychotherapy, to honour the nine women and three men who are graduating in 2005. This is a privilege, a delight and a challenge. The challenge lies in the many and various ways that I have grown to know every one of you twelve over the years you have been at CTP. As therapist, as supervisor, as teacher virtually every one of you has touched my life and allowed me to touch yours. These knowings of each other have affected me far too deeply to speak of in public. And yet I do not want to speak anything tonight that is not somehow offered to each of you individually.

When I began, several weeks ago, to think what I might say tonight, my sense of how to begin and how to end came clear. What seemed less clear was the middle, the all-important in-between. On a long walk along the shore of Lake Ontario, it occurred to me that the in-between tonight might actually be just that, an in-between. And so, I ask all of us to think together tonight two images. First, a threshold....

A threshold is the in-between place, where one is neither drawn in nor stepping out, where one is held in a place, a space, a moment that holds. Threshold. Holds what? The possibility of being held, perhaps. Or the possibility of leaving. The possibility of arriving. The possibility of stillness or of movement. All these and more are held in the threshold. And arching over every meaning, what the threshold holds is a kind of tension. The possibility of bearing tension. The willingness to simply be there, neither in nor out, but somewhere nonetheless.

Tonight, I believe, is such a threshold, where we all pause together as twelve people keep faith for an hour or so with the threshold between years of life as a CTP student and years of life, god willing, as a graduate therapist. The transition is literally happening as I speak, and it will continue as each graduate speaks and as we all offer our listening, which is an essential aspect of this threshold we are creating together. What is extraordinary about most thresholds in life is how ordinary they are. We simply step over or step back, without thinking. So I ask us tonight to think.

Now those of you who know me well will not be surprised that at some point in preparing this talk I looked up the word "threshold" in several dictionaries to discover its lineage and various significances. Turns out it's a good old-fashioned English word, drawn from Old English and linked to the sense of threshing—the act of separating out the seed from the chaff. I think anyone who has been even a little while at CTP will know something about feeling well threshed. "Threshold" literally refers to the plank, stone or piece of timber that lies under a door. More figuratively, it has come to refer to what I pay attention to tonight: the place or point of entering or beginning – which necessarily also means the line one crosses in leaving or ending. Like the new beginnings of seeds separated from the older containing, sustaining chaff.

Earlier I suggested that the purpose of a threshold experience is to bear the tension of just being

there, neither stepping out nor drawing in. The twelve men and women we honour here tonight have trained to offer themselves in an unusual profession, a kind of holding open to threshold hour by hour, day by day. I think of each therapy session as its own threshold, for therapist and client, a place or point of entering or beginning, each time the possibility of change. If you have never worked as a therapist, it may be hard to imagine what it means to balance, week after week, month after month, year after year, on the threshold of change. To bear the tension of desiring change. We all know, whether we like it or not, that the one sure thing about being human is that we must witness and experience change. And many people spend a great deal of time and energy attempting to forget this truth. The remarkable thing about these twelve is that they not only witness and experience change as human beings, as therapists, they desire it. In 1994, when I graduated from CTP, I expressed my gratitude to all those who had made my life difficult in the years of my training and to all those who had allowed me to make life difficult for them. I was not being coy. In this training, we each repeatedly experience the difficulties of being thrust out of protective, habitual modes of thought and behaviour and into new, previously unacknowledged aspects of who we are yet to become. If you can't bear change – sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic – as your primary job description, then the therapist's tasks are unlikely to suit you. It's an uncomfortable position for someone set in her or his ways. That's what I mean by desiring change.

Over the past several years, the twelve therapists we honour tonight, each in his or her particular way, have found the humility, compassion, curiosity and courage to sit, hour by hour, with the unknown. Each session is its own version of the threshold. Both client and therapist step out of the office different from who they were stepping in. If Heraclitus had been a psychotherapist rather than a remarkable early Greek philosopher, he might have said: "You cannot step into the same therapy office twice." And keep in mind that these changes, these differences, though always transformative, are never guaranteed to feel good or lead steadily out of the darkness or effortlessly exchange sorrow for joy. Therapy often disturbs: therapist as well as client. I do not think anyone, client or therapist, can tell how deep our words, looks, gestures go to change -- and be changed by -- the other. But only someone committed to the possibility of change – and willing to not know what kind of change the next hour will bring – would choose this profession.

So, our image of threshold ... bearing tension ... just being there ... desiring change....

Now, there is a second image of in-between that I want us to think about, and this is a shard. A fragment of pottery or porcelain that tells a tale of another earlier life. Tonight I met briefly with the graduands and offered each of them a shard, taken at random from a small cloth bag. As part of my meditations on what I might say tonight, I wandered several times along the beach of Lake Ontario. It is there, over time, that I gathered these fragments along the shore, itself a kind of threshold between the land and the water. My best shard-gathering over the years has come after storms. Broken bits of plates, bowls, cups, saucers – most of them antique – are thrown by the turbulence of waves onto the sand. Apparently some are connected to shipwrecks on the lake, others to the all too human tendency to dump unwanted goods into deep water. All are old, having spent long decades in the depths. All are smooth -- jagged edges tumbled, during the journey toward shore, in the shifting power of currents, waves, wind and the subtle tide on

freshwater seas called the seiche. All are, to my eye, beautiful: sudden small stabs of colour and graceful design among the stones and sands at the water's edge. No longer conventional platters or cups, but unique fragments become new and whole again in surrender to the depths.

Years ago I found a quote attributed to American playwright Eugene O'Neill that felt extremely important to me. Over the years, however, I've lost whether the quote was "We are born whole and live by breaking" or "We are born broken and live by mending." I've probably forgotten because I've come to understand that both are true. No one can remain a perfect porcelain plate or pottery bowl in this life of ours. Humans crack, fragment, split, shatter, break apart. The question of therapy is What then? What now? Can two unfinished human beings make a new whole from their broken bits? I believe it is possible. And I believe that these twelve therapists, each in utterly unique ways, are dedicated to this amazing project.

So, to close: Barb, David, Diana, Gloria, Jan, Lynda, Magdalena, Margery, Rob, Susan, Susan, Terry: In the words of a prayer from the Hebrew tradition -- "May you continue to become who you are..."

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, please stand with me to honour the CTP graduating class of 2005.

- Cathleen Hoskins
30 May 2005