

Address to the CTP Graduates of 2012

By Jackie Herner

Dear Graduates, family and friends of graduates, Faculty Club hosts and colleagues. It is with great pleasure that I have the privilege of speaking tonight on the occasion of the graduation of these five accomplished individuals, Kristin, Kristina, Philip, Linden and Susan.

Tonight I want to talk with you about just what an accomplishment it is that these five have attained. Psychotherapy has been called “the impossible profession”. Why is that?

I submit that it is in large part due to the paradoxical nature of psychotherapy.

Philip Bromberg speaks of the task that our clients demand of us – to help them to change while at the same time staying the same. That is, to assist in the shift of perceptions and beliefs, the understanding and regulation of feelings, the growth and development of relationship with self and others while all the time remaining true and attuned to the self-experience of the client.

How do we train to do this? By undergoing the same process ourselves - our own personal therapy, both individual and group.

Another paradox is the recognition that we are all different – unique and yet it is equally true that we are all the same. As Harry Stack Sullivan famously wrote, “All of us are much more human than otherwise.”

Although we will never find a description and process of psychotherapy that fits any one of our clients exactly, there is an underlying quality of humanness that must never be forgotten.

At the same time, any assumptions we may have that there is only one way, one truth or one perspective are constantly challenged by the variety of views and experiences that our clients bring to remind us of the diversity of human experience and its challenges.

Another paradox is that although our clients may come to us with the desire and expectation that we will change them or cure them or fix them, we cannot do anything of the sort – and even if we could, it would be ill-advised of us to do so. And why is that? In our training as psychotherapists, particularly through our own personal work, it becomes clear that true and lasting change comes from within. How could it be otherwise? Just as the body transforms itself cell by cell – changing while staying the same – so do we through our felt experience and our conscious perception. So what do we do for our clients?

Part of what we do is to lend ourselves to a representation and personification of an agent for growth and change in development that can foster something more than the individual's capacity to gain knowledge and insight by themselves.

All the time we are remaining true to our own selves, aware that we are not this representation or person. The dynamics of transference and counter-transference (positive and negative) fall under this category.

At the same time we provide an opportunity for a special kind of relationship – one that gives our client a chance to experience the difference between this and important relationships both current and from the past. This relationship includes collaboration in the work of therapy, attentiveness to and understanding of the unique person of the client, and the privilege of being admitted into the world of another. Moreover, this therapeutic relationship is mutual in the sense that both therapist and client are affected and changed by the other. The therapy with this particular therapist and this particular client will be uniquely different from that of any other pairing of therapist and client.

Yet another paradox is that in its essence, psychotherapy is a profession that can't be taught. What can't be taught is the heart for this work. The passion and love we bring to it is something we ourselves must find deep within. However, to borrow a phrase from Philip McKenna, the heart can be informed - trained and educated. This is the work each of us undertakes in our training at CTP. We attend lectures, read, write and discuss psychodynamic theories and we also develop and mature as human beings through the deep work we undertake on ourselves, through the medium of the very art we are training in – psychotherapy. A therapist is not formed so much as forged in the depths of one's own reclamation of the marriage of heart and mind.

In most professions a professional is expected to be certain and definitive in their dealings with their clients. They provide expert advice and counsel. As psychotherapists we are asked to wait and to not know. We await the signs and signals from the client to guide the way and we endeavour to follow with great interest to see what may emerge to show itself from within the client. This often surprises and enlightens both client and therapist, and since it comes from within the client's own person, it provides not merely knowledge but the wisdom of one's own experience.

As psychotherapists we are often called upon to uphold the qualities of hope, faith and trust. Especially at those times when our clients cannot, we hold this for them and for ourselves. Hope holds the sense that despite disappointment, depression and loss there is still meaning and a future to be found. It can be a fragile light that must be protected and kept from going out, for it is connected to the will to live, not to our plans and expectations. Hope is a profound and mysterious thing. It can transcend anything life can offer in the way of catastrophe and it can radically alter our response to difficulties. It can give us the strength to wait with faith that the dawn will come. This inner feeling of faith and meaning sometimes makes all the difference.

However, lest one get the impression that support, gentleness, hope, kindness and a loving fostering of our clients is all that our work encompasses, I hasten to add another paradox to the nature of this work we do.

In order to assist our clients in their growth and development, it is a very important part of the transition and change we call psychotherapy to attend to the dark and shadowy parts within – aggression, hate, fear, anxiety, despair, shame, self-hatred, envy etc. These feelings and urges must come to consciousness in order to be integrated, guided and directed by the conscious will. The conflicting urges within are full of our own vitality but are not yet in harmony. They must be faced with strength and firmness, not repressed or broken or we lose the potency needed to live. Courage and will are necessary. The challenge is the creative harnessing and integration of the urges of our instinctual nature. This contributes to maturity. Conflict and struggle are necessary experiences. Our survival urges and strategies do not die. If they are disowned and driven into the unconscious they can re-emerge as illness or be projected onto others.

The struggle is to integrate, contain and direct them. This fosters the development of the whole personality. It is our shadow side that forces us to explore more deeply and honestly our own emotions and our emotional dealings with others. Eventually we may even appreciate and thank our discontent and emotional dissatisfaction, for this is what urges us onward and challenges our assumptions and fantasies.

I would like to end with this thought. The death of an old way of life must be acknowledged and mourned. This applies to the therapeutic experience; even as we are enjoying a new found sense of competency and maturity, we may also find ourselves saddened by our leave-taking of the past. A phase of life has died at the same time a new one is being born. Endings are as important as beginnings and must be recognized and felt.

Modern rituals, such as graduation ceremonies, exist to acknowledge times of ending. It is a necessary ending and one that is filled with joy and sadness, hope and fear. Kristin, Kristina, Philip, Linden and Susan, as you stand on the threshold of a new life and a new path, I hope that you will trust in the inner guide that knows what directions to take and what choices to make. You have reached a stage of initial completion, but there is more to follow, you are not finished yet. You stand on the edge of unexplored possibilities. Good foundations have been laid and this is indeed a cause for celebration.

As you go forward from this occasion, my wish for you is that your inspiration be ever nurtured, that you continue to cultivate the spirit of enthusiasm and strength that you have demonstrated in your training at CTP, and that you retain the wisdom and courage of a balanced heart – the true measure of emotional intelligence.