

**A Talk at Graduation: May 27, 2013
by Cathleen Hoskins**

Tonight marks an annual celebration at CTP, a joyous occasion, which this year honours six women who, each in her own way, has climbed the Mount Everest of her own living world.... That may sound grandiose, but I assure you, families, friends, fellow students and graduates, this is an apt metaphor for what those who graduate from CTP have accomplished. And the metaphor continues, of course, because, in whatever world we're talking about, there are always more mountains to climb....

Addressing especially our graduates -- Kerri and Elizabeth, Gitte and Heather, Maggie and Valerie – what I'd like us to keep in mind tonight is all those ongoing mountains the work of psychotherapy calls us to explore. And the valleys, too -- since every mountain must also own its deep surrounding plunge....

This year's graduates arrived, like all of us who come to learn at CTP, already trailing long hours of personal therapy. Why do we come to therapy? Because we suffer and because we want to change. If we're lucky, the combination of therapy and suffering brings at least the change of increasing clarity and deepening honesty with ourselves and with those whose lives we intertwine. *This doesn't necessarily make life easier for any one.* But it does, I believe, make Life *better* for all of us who, at any given moment, share the challenge we call human existence....

At CTP, many (at times, it feels endless) years of academic study, experiential learning and individual & group therapy provide a background culture for each student to

flourish as the unique being she actually already is. In terms of Gestalt psychology, each of us becomes a unique figure in a shared ground. But how this happens is always most mysterious. People come to study here because they already have at least a glimmer of the possibilities of change in their lives. They come, too, because they have been helped and want to give help back to others. I believe that this is, at heart, what we as therapists are doing. We are trying to help. Via various theories and understandings, we help uncover wounds that in some magical, ideal world would never have happened. But we actually live in the all-too-real world, where pain, abuse, trauma, neglect, impoverishment and what Emmanuel Levinas called “all the anti-Semitismisms” happen over and over again.

Perhaps helping is our way of hoping. Humans need a sense of future, which is where hope shines its light. One of the things that overwhelming suffering does is rob us of a sense of future. Sometimes, when we work as therapists, we have to do all the hoping in the world. Our client cannot hope at all. It’s a big job, but so many of the people sitting here tonight have gladly taken up this work. To be a psychotherapist requires years of training. Tonight’s graduates know that in their bones. And after graduation, the “training” keeps on going, because every client is a challenge literally never met before.

Overarching understandings of the human bodymind are essential to psychotherapy, and yet no general theory ever explains the particularity of any human being or human interaction. Each session we show up on time, focus as best we can given the demands of our own personal lives, and listen and respond to whatever is happening at that

moment with this one particular person. Our theories help us help, but the interplay of person with person is always unique. In my first year at CTP, I heard Adam Crabtree say, "We were harmed by others; we can be helped by others." His words opened a world of possibilities.... And recently I learned that Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, whose analytic work was with particularly disturbed patients, began each therapy, no matter how troubled the person seemed, with a simple greeting: "How can I help you?"

In past years I've spoken three times at CTP graduations. Once I spoke to a graduating class about the word "threshold", since in a few short minutes each of our graduates steps over the threshold from years of study and client work as a student therapist into the wide world of self-employed practise. Another time I spoke about "courage", outlining several of the kinds of courage I believe this work insists upon. And the first time I spoke was two decades ago at my own graduation. In that talk I thanked my husband for companionship through six years of study. And I mentioned that I'd actually added up what it had cost us as a couple for me to train as a psychotherapist. Many years of individual therapy, sometimes twice a week; CTP courses; books; office rental; supervision; lost income as a freelance editor. I never revealed the actual dollar amount, but simply said that with it we could have bought a small island in Georgian Bay. Without skipping a beat, my husband replied, "Honey, I'd rather live in this little house in East Toronto with the woman you are now, than on the largest island in Georgian Bay with the woman you were then."

I tell this because you who gather here tonight all probably have your own versions of this story. The woman you are

here to celebrate -- your wife, mother, sister, daughter, colleague or friend -- has changed, and you know in your heart that your life has changed with her. We humans are so deeply, constantly interconnected that transformation in one always affects many.

Some of you know of my interest in the thinking of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Writing in Paris through the desperate days of the Nazi occupation, Merleau-Ponty kept alive a tremendous faith in the inevitable, transforming influence of one person upon another, an influence he described as a “being-shared-by-two”. “We are,” he writes, “for each other, collaborators in perfect reciprocity: our perspectives slip into each other, we coexist through a single world... and even the objection raised by my interlocutor draws from me thoughts I did not know I possessed such that if I lend him thoughts, he makes me think in return.” (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 370-71/412)

Of course, this reciprocity is complex. And it’s not just about the “good” things in the world. It’s about everything that ever happens between human beings. As I said, every mountain has its valleys. Tonight, we’re mostly on the joyous side of reciprocity – the mutual giving and taking of respect, cherishment, congratulations. For though the mountains these six women climbed were their own, those of you here tonight to honour them have shared in the journey....

Kerri, Elizabeth, Gitte, Heather, Maggie, Valerie, tonight belongs to you -- and to your heartfelt collaborators. Congratulations!

