

C.T.P. Orientation 2008

Dear friends, there are a few occasions each year when the whole school – students, graduates and faculty are invited to gather together – Graduation, What is Psychotherapy day and Orientation. The focus of tonight's gathering, as the name indicates, is to welcome our new students and share with them something of the spirit and orientation of our school.

Orientation evokes the idea of our place in space and the purposeful direction of our journey. Charles Taylor in his classic 'The Sources of the Self' defines the human self as the one who orients him or herself in relation to questions about the good.

Now the C.T.P. twenty years on has an orientation that is the result – our glory and our burden – of innumerable choices of the faculty towards a good. Our purpose has been to create an essential and best possible training for psychodynamic therapists.

We stated at the beginning that we ourselves are a group of life- long learners. We continue to work with clients of our own and all of us are reading and thinking, talking and arguing about the human condition and the work of therapy. So you new students are the latest to be invited into a collegiality with a group of life- long learners.

I will mention two signature characteristics of your learning at C.T.P. One is the emphasis we place on group therapy. The other is that we study directly the texts of selected important therapists and theoreticians.

I will highlight one particular intentionality that lies behind these two choices.

Human beings love to generalize and they love a system of generalized knowledge. Naturally enough! Because we can't begin to make our way in the world without learning from others the words for things (general ideas) and the way everybody knows how things hang together and make sense. We can't survive or mature humanly without categories and without a shared view of the world.

History shows us however that this necessity can lead us astray into the assumption that with a few general ideas or words (a definition) we have grasped the *essence* of something. Secondly we can be led astray into a love of a conceptual/language system for its own beautiful sake.

Besides, faced with the overwhelming riches and complexity of what has gone before in human culture, the stoutest individual learner can easily quail and be tempted to beg for a quick simplified summary of the Truth.

The therapy group is able to be a wonderful corrective to all these perils. Firstly it changes the paradigm of knowledge itself.

Our forefathers put a lock on what knowledge is, by looking at astronomical objects and generalizing about their motions. (Now there's a generalization for you).

What the experience of the group does is subversively restore a different view of human knowledge as coming from the encounter of two human beings, something every mother knows.

We offer our narrative to the other with the use of general words and we hear the others' words. But we are constantly reminded that the particular and unique person who speaks is always more than her words or your words express.

So in a group we are each held to the particular, to the unique person, and we are constantly reminded to stay open, to leave room for the new, the unexpected, the unknowable. Every word we use stays *open* for expansion and never closes off as if adequate to what is named or referred to.

We are not cast down into skepticism here. We have the confidence we gained as children that we are truly connecting, uniting with this other person, for we are present to them as they are in their fullness and we hold our words lightly and open.

Besides the group therapy your first two years at C.T.P. introduce you to classic texts by selected major therapists and theoreticians.

The perils I mentioned earlier, over confident generalization, the seduction of system for its own sake, the frightened wish for a simple summary of what's true, all of them press upon us here in a more powerful way. And we are dealing with writers who are passionately trying to achieve systematic thinking about the human condition and its suffering.

The learner finds they often disagree or at least are worlds apart in their language and way of thinking.

Furthermore we can only read a little of each. Are we trying to drive you crazy? No.

The disagreements remind us to avoid closed conviction, to hold conviction open to amendment or completion. Besides disagreements that seem irreconcilable in 1914 (Freud-Jung), 1940 (Anna Freud-Klein), 1970 (Freudians-Self Psychology), after decades of controversy and some ecumenical writing of the kind that a Stephen Mitchell did, seem to yield a great deal if not totally to complementarity.

Opponents in controversy tend to oversimplify and even caricature the opposing view, so it is important for us to go to the classic texts directly.

Now as I said we read only a little of each. This keeps us humble for we must read a great deal more than is possible in two years, to have a developed and nuanced sense of

any one author. So you are reminded that you are beginning a life- long journey of learning.

But the overriding reason for our use of ordinary or classic texts brings us back to what I said about group therapy. For in the classic texts we see not only the passion for synthesis and systematic knowledge, we see theoreticians in live contact with their therapeutic work, their encounters with their clients, out of which their theory flows.

As in the group where we are constantly reminded that the persons and the encounters have an existential fullness that cannot be contained in words, so as we read Freud on Dora we remind ourselves that the existential fullness of these two persons and their encounters, far transcend the words and interpretations that Freud struggles to write for us. We find ourselves arguing with him as if we were there and then fall silent because we were not.

Even the theoreticians who were not therapists, Heidegger and W. James are trying with all their might to hold themselves to what is phenomenologically present and is immediate to experience. And both know our words fail us.

So welcome old friends to this reminder of why we chose group therapy and the study of many classic texts. And welcome new students to the beginning of a unique and exciting life-long journey of heart and mind.

Philip McKenna
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