

## **CTP Orientation Evening Address, 5 September 2012**

### **By Cathleen Hoskins**

Tonight I want to speak especially to the new students, for whom an *Orientation* Evening is most apt, and I'd like to speak about beginnings. Daniel Stern, one of the developmental theorists we study at CTP, describes the newborn's original, initiating arc of life as the experiences of an "emergent" sense of self. He then proposes that however this first emerging happens, it lays down patterns, out of our awareness, for all subsequent beginnings in life. We continue, according to Stern, to body-forth our first beginnings....

So let's roll back the clock 25 years to September 1987, when I sat, in the back row of this room, for my beginning gambit as a first-year student at CTP. Joel Whitton, one of the founding faculty members at CTP, was lecturing that opening Saturday, elaborating on several variations of "borderline" personality.

Now, CTP had not yet developed an Orientation Evening for my generation of students, and I know that new students in 1987 didn't speak with mentors, because I set the mentoring programme in motion after I graduated. So on that Saturday, I walked into this room, where I had never been before, to hear Joel's perspectives on "borderline" personality. At that time, as a student not of psychology but of English language and literature, I only knew the word "borderline" as a geographical term, describing a kind of boundary. The borderline between Canada and the U.S., for instance.

But at some point in his lecture, Joel spoke of a person whose life resembled a ping-pong ball – a smooth, shiny, reactive surface but empty inside. As he spoke, I, sitting in the back row, doubled over involuntarily and found it hard to breathe for

several seconds. To this day I have many questions about what actually happened for me in those moments, but what's most important for tonight is what happened in the break for lunch that Saturday. As I was gathering up my belongings, Joel quietly appeared at my side and simply indicated that he had noticed and that he hoped I was OK. Years later I realised that that brief but caring interaction somehow enabled me slowly, gradually, with years of personal therapy, to begin to look more steadily at my own insistent patterns around beginnings. I'm still exploring this today, and though there have certainly been important changes for me, I still prefer to sit in the back row....

I mention this personal story for two reasons. First, to give you, new students, a glimpse of how I hope you will find people at this school ready to help you shift and question and begin anew. We tend to proceed relationally at CTP. And that is not necessarily an easy passage. Secondly, I've talked at length about my own experience to signal my belief that all descriptions, all thinkings, all theories are *autobiographical*. When you read a case study or essay, when you study a theorist or thinker, when you engage in conversation with a faculty member, a graduate or a student colleague, try to remember that the words you are hearing -- and the words you are speaking -- are telling something about the actual lives you and these other people live. And that, despite our powerful human similarities, each of us is, from the beginning, unique.

It is the unique, the truly *autobiographical* that asks to be seen, to be heard in therapy. Theories tend to generalise; they have to. And much of human culture and society would prove impossible if we couldn't agree on thousands of generalised knowings, if we didn't develop ways of fitting in, if we couldn't

find a sense of belonging. But in order to become a coherent, recognizable *theory*, knowledge must form precisely by *inattention to what it does not know*. That is how it becomes knowledge. And all that is not known yet or cannot ever be known is somehow held outside the circumscribed area of knowledge or expertise.

But what we seek in therapy, both as patients and as patient therapists, is to know and be known as that particular human being that no generalisation can ever capture. It seems we are always seeking both to belong and to re-emerge as the original self we were born to be. But because we live in a world with others, this “original” can never be absolute. From the beginning, we each must shape to the world and to the formative others around us. We are, necessarily, com-pliant: *pliant with, shapeable to* the world we inhabit. But fortunately, humans don’t have to become “com-rigid” – rigidly stuck with the way people, thoughts and experiences were in our beginnings. That’s the hope of therapy, I believe, and the passion of this school you are joining tonight.

Faculty, graduates, students in all phases of the programme, we are here together to challenge each other to grow, to make it difficult for each other *not to continually outgrow* the patterns that repeat our old, familiar ways of being in the world, patterns that often deplete and disorient our longed-for discovery of the fresh, the original, the emerging....

This year our new students come from many beginnings -- a patchwork quilt of lives, languages and cultures, all living here in Toronto as part of what it means to be Canadian. I find this exciting as together we begin a new year, the 26<sup>th</sup> year of this school’s mission to introduce students to the art and the practise of psychotherapy.

And so to close, I would invite you, the new students, if your ways of beginning will allow it, to rise together and turn so that others in the room -- especially perhaps those in the back row -- can welcome you and begin to see who you are at this beginning....

Welcome to CTP.