

CTP ORIENTATION 2016

Gayle Burns

TRANSITION, TRANSFORMATION AND CARE OF ONE'S SELF AS A TRAINING PSYCHOTHERAPIST AND AFTER

Many thoughts crowded in every time I came to consider how to be with you today. These three ideas predominated: transition, transformation and attention to one's life, as in care of one's self, while a training psychotherapist and beyond.

First, transition and transformation, since as we transition, we are transforming.

Studying to be a psychotherapist inevitably involves a transition process; traversing the liminal space between what was and what will be. A transition engages who you are now, as you are becoming the psychotherapist you want to be, for the person who has just walked into the room.

The nature of your current phase of transition will be where you are now: whether you are in the program beginning your first year, preparing for clinical work, immersed in clinical work, preparing to graduate or you have completed the program, and are a graduate with considerable experience. Inevitably your transition continues dialectically as you encounter each phase of the program and eventually offer a therapeutic relationship to a person who will want to be met by you where they are, as they work to make you the therapist they need.

How could it not evoke other transitional experiences you have had in life, with all the inevitable excitement, anticipation, and trepidation?

Although the transition process has a weighted unconscious element, you may give yourself clues that it is actively engaged when early on in a lecture seminar or in the training group, you have thoughts like, "So, this is what this program is about" or "How will I ever get through all the reading for the lectures?" Or a couple of years later during a Clinical Applications seminar, you are with the awkwardness of your first role-play sitting in the therapist's chair. And later still, as you write your notes after the session with a client, you become aware that what Stephen Mitchell (1988) meant by "the therapist's struggle", was alive between you and the client in that hour; "the therapist's struggle to find an authentic voice in which to speak to the client... a voice less shaped by... the client's relational matrix... offering the

person ... [an experience they can use] ... to broaden ... expand that relational matrix" (p. 295).

Your response to being in transition may be even more blatant when you share with your primary supervisor in your first year of clinical work that "Three clients are more than enough at the moment" or "When will I know what I'm doing?" or "I can't see how I'm doing any good!" Then one day you share with your supervisor, "Something happens for me as I find the words that reach the client, who then drops to another level in herself and begins speaking about what has been on her mind".

The choice in mature adult life to embark on the self-exploration inherent in the CTP training is an optimistic, hopeful, and creative gesture. We engage our imagination as we propel ourselves from the client's chair into the therapist's chair with all the good will that implies. And we anticipate realizing a potential sense of self yet to be known.

Donald Winnicott (1971) writes, "It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living" (p.76). Apperception: that "active mental process of assimilating an idea (especially one newly perceived) to a body of ideas already possessed, and thereby comprehending it" (Oxford English Dictionary, p. 99).

Winnicott again, "The creativity that concerns me here is universal. It belongs to being alive... The creativity that we are studying belongs to the approach of the individual to external reality" (p.79); a reality to which we bring our curiosity and imagination.

Donald Winnicott locates creativity emerging out of that approach, out of how a person plays in the space that holds potential between their inner psychic reality, and their external environmental reality (p. 62). In effect, you invite yourself to engage your inner world and the program in an effort to realize that creative potential.

Having opened yourself to this experience can be of use in your life, and for the rest of your life, as you continue to flourish regardless of how long you are in the program or are engaged in ongoing work as a psychotherapist.

Each of you has come here via your own route; brought yourself here in your own unique way. With your history, your individual resources, and your talents to draw upon, you will begin or already have begun, to engage what

the program offers for your use to become the therapist you will be or not. It is what you do with what is offered, it is how you integrate, within yourself, the academic, the experiential training group psychotherapy and your individual psychotherapy, that enables you to make meaningful preparation for clinical work. Your reflexivity, - all the ways you consciously and unconsciously reflect on your engagement of the program's experiences, - facilitates the process through which you prepare yourself to be available to, to be an instrument through which, another person may experience the opportunity to explore their troubles, to ameliorate their suffering.

During the full six years you may inherently embrace a transition that is open to transformation. As you venture into the unknown of the process, it is the listening to yourself that can be the stabilizing default. Listening to oneself with others, as you individually together assimilate what makes sense and discover how it can be used in the service of your psychotherapy training.

Studying to be a psychotherapist is a very human endeavour that unfolds as you experience the program and have all too human responses to the material and to each other.

A situation in lecture seminar, a concentration or in group may be being experienced as if someone or something else is causing you dissonance. Not until you listen to how it is for you and reflect on what it is about, does the nature of the internal discord become clearer. Sometimes it's the other person or the situation, or surprise elements in the theory, or your own inner conflict; it can be all of these. It is the meaning that you make of these encounters and of your reflections that is the crux.

I'd like to quote from a piece written about the late journalist, Carroll Allen Dale (Armstrong, 2016). She was in an editorial meeting that was discussing a comment from a woman who had said, "Do you ever wonder if you have started to collect barnacles - like ships?" Carroll chewed over that comment briefly and a few days later turned in a ... piece called "Hidden Cargo". She wrote: "Our mental and emotional barnacles - grudges, slights, regrets, worries, guilt, indignities, remorse, resentments - are prickly, ugly, abrasive little crusts of misery that lodge in the dim back walls of our minds where they dig in, settle down like barbed wire, for a long and pesky life. Every time our thoughts run up against one of them we shrink from their sharp

edges. Some of our barnacles are so big and encrusted they can actually make us sick. Ships have no say when barnacles attach themselves, and play no part in getting rid of them. We do.” (p.58)

Of course, the potential for barnacles abounds in the sea of life. Ordinarily, human barnacles can materialize at any time, so why wouldn't they in a program where you are learning with other people how to be with a person who is struggling with their life.

Throughout the program you are invited to play with the academic material and with the experiential engagements...; it is in the playing in your own way that you create meaning (Winnicott, 1971, p. 63). Being open to what will unfold for you as you use the program, as you listen to and attend to the barnacles that may materialize along the way, is what is significant, because your feelings, these feelings, are inevitably going to be experienced in your work with any client.

Studying to be a psychotherapist is an honourable endeavour that occurs here in a training program designed by individuals experienced in psychotherapy and the humanities, with faculty who are also practicing psychotherapists.

In this human endeavour, as a student or graduate, faculty are with you in familiar territory. The faculty too are perennially working in a state of transition as the school evolves with the times and with ongoing experiences with you, the students. Currently, faculty are offering an established and tried program with well-known parameters while engaging with the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO) regulations. As the faculty hold their usual focus on what is in the best interest of the student, they concurrently are articulating how that knowledge is maintained in meeting the College's mandated competencies and other legislated requirements.

Throughout your transitional process, while in the program and beyond, you are not complacent because, this being adult life, you can count on being offered adult opportunities that keep transitional flexibility alive.

Mary Oliver in her Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Dream Work*, offers these words, titled 'The Journey' (p. 38). It begins,

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,

though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice ---
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations ---
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice,
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do ---
determined to save
the only life you could save.

As you reflect on your life, unless how you are living personally and professionally is in your best interest, it is not likely to be in anyone else's: your family's, friend's, colleague's or your clients'. If it is not in your best

interest, you are not likely to be of much use to anyone else, able to benefit anyone else, or be responsibly available to others the way you want to be.

Karen Saakvitne (2002), clinical director of a traumatic stress centre in Connecticut, acknowledges the vulnerability of the therapist in psychotherapy work, and both she and Ken Corbett (2013), an analyst on faculty in the New York University Program in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy, offer wise counsel. I would like to share with you some of their words (Saakvitne, pp. 446-447; Corbett, pp. 36-37) mingled with mine, since I believe they apply both long before, and as well, after graduation.

All of these things will happen:

Your final report for the two-year project at work is due the same day as your CTP paper;

Your daughter is teething, feeling miserable - she is only comforted if you hold her - the same day as you are scheduled to lead your lecture seminar;

Your in-laws from the west coast are arriving for an impromptu visit the weekend of your group marathon;

A ceiling unexpectedly falls in during the kitchen renovation, just as you are leaving for the Clinical Applications seminar;

Your father gets lost on his way home from the grocery store and your next client is in the waiting room;

A distressed client calls, urgent for a session, as you're heading out the door for the Saturday Concentration;

All in all, it's been a day of holding loss and grief with no relief.

Karen Saakvitne (2002) reminds us, "When your client reports a source of anxiety you have not yet considered, when your client describes the known or imagined experience of a particular survivor [of abuse or trauma] that was hitherto unknown to you, when your client's adaptations conflict with your defenses or coincide with your greatest anxieties, your emotional load and the task of psychological coping increases" (p. 446).

"How am I doing?" is an essential question.

All of these things can be sources for replenishing:

Seeking a reasonable balance among work, rest and play.

Nurturing ongoing connection with others who support you in your work.

Good self-care through engaging in activities you enjoy and find pleasurable.
Run a marathon. Paint. Dance. Carve a piece of wood.

Create meaning and infuse daily activities with meaning.

Audition for a play. Attend a live music concert. Do the maintenance on your niece's bike.

Keep Tylenol and a bar of good chocolate in your office table drawer.
Have handy strong coffee, peppermint tea, and a bottle of good scotch.
Oh, and cashews, as well as almonds.

Keep your massage therapist, your trusted collegial consultants, and a friend who is sure to make you laugh on speed dial.

Take a walk around the block. Soak up the sun. Play the piano. Buy flowers.

Schedule in your son's afternoon soccer game.

When a client cancels read Alice Munro instead of Lacan.

Stretch.

Form a study group even if you sit around and chat.

Call each other in the middle of the day.

And you already know all these things.

But I mention them, so that you will continue to nurture your own life and to look out for one another, as you engage this meaningful work.

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