

## The Paradox of Presence

Myrtle Heery, Ph.D.

The present moment is all there is ..... this moment right now is the only moment we have. Yet we have thoughts about the past and or the future, but NOW is the only accessible moment. Yet the paradox of presence continues as our minds wonder to the past and future within the now.

And we ask as clinicians, psychotherapists, what can we do with this precious moment? We walk between the now, the present moment and our inner and outer assignment to serve another human. The question is: How does life want me to serve this human in need, distress, trauma?

Of course, we need to ask the client questions concerning their past and their future, so there in lies the paradox of presence – in psychotherapy we “talk about” the past or future yet we “live” the moment with each of our clients. The living experience is how the client responds to our questions. We are vigilant to the client’s physical, emotional and cognitive responses and least we forget our own physical, emotional, and cognitive responses to the client in the moment.

What if your mind “wonders” to the grocery store as the client answers one of your questions. Seems you are not paying attention to the moment, right? What if the client’s mind wonders to the same grocery store as he or she is answering your question, yes, the mind can wonder as one speaks especially to an answer you have said

many times. So both of you are really in the same grocery store as the client speaks looking for the same item on the same aisle? And the client reports to a researcher that was the best session they ever had. They felt heard and seen yet both parties were in the grocery store together, unknown to each of them until the researcher asked, where were you when you the client told your answer and where were you the therapist when you listened to the client? Both on the same aisle of grocery store looking for same item and would not dare to tell the other where they were. Paradoxically, the client felt accompanied by the therapist. What meaning do you give this experience to presence?

I will tell you this research actually happened regrettably I cannot quote it direct but it did happen. What the researcher made of this incident is there are many levels of communication between two people not just one level of cognitive information. If this is true, what do we do with this multi layered communications or paradoxical presence?

Simple answer, Use It! How?

Know when you are sitting with another person you are sitting with multilayers of communication including but not limited to verbal, nonverbal, and unknowns that impact CONNECTION - BE CURIOUS!

Your mind will be eager to pass judgment as that is the easiest to do and most ineffective way to connect with another human being.

CONNECTION is on the road to healing not judgment of another.

Your assignment is to connect to the present moment no matter what it holds for you whether pleasant or unpleasant.

Many years ago in my private practice, I saw a mother whose daughter had been murdered. What can any therapist say or do in such a tragedy? I gave her my heart full of care, compassion and love. Yes, I say love in psychotherapy. The love I had for this woman's suffering infused her with hope. Once she asked me:

"Do you have a child?"

"Yes, I do."

"I could feel you did by the way you look at me with, what shall I say, love?"

"Yes, it is love."

"I hope this never happens to you." "If it does, I will come see you."

Tears moved slowly down our cheeks as we gazed with love deep into each other's motherly eyes.

I remember this mother and how much our loving, therapeutic relationship supported her in becoming more than she or I ever expected. She later started a non-profit for children from the inner city and organized many acts of service.

I say to present and becoming existential-humanistic therapists, do not underestimate the healing power of love and kindness. You are apart of and apart from always with love and kindness.

In teaching there is “talk about” a subject and a “lived experience” of a teaching. In a teaching experience in Russia many years ago, I remember a tall, well-dressed Russian woman who attended a training I led in Russia. The suit she wore every day was the same and in perfect order. I noticed her physical appearance each day and wondered about her. I recall her certainty and her quiet manner. I trusted she would speak in time, which she did, and there was the surprise.

On the second day of the training, I had begun speaking to the given of finitude and how each of us carry the fact of our death. She raised her hand and said with certainty that she had cancer and might be dead in a few months. She continued to share that she was making the best of each moment, which included looking her best and being as honest as possible in all relationships. She actually felt grateful to her cancer for her present depth of appreciation in living each moment.

I shared through my translator how deeply moved I was by her honesty and courage. Since I do not speak Russian, I relied on my intuitive sense to connect with her and the participants at this vulnerable moment. I was sensitive to the depth of her sharing, looking closely into her eyes and gently moving my eyes to each participant. The caring from participants was palpable in the room. Some eyes were moistened and all were obviously moved.

I invited the participants to share their feelings with her if they felt moved to do so. One of the participants who knew her and her health crisis spoke with great depth of appreciation. First, she thanked her for her honesty with the group about her health. Then with great emotion she shared how important she was to her in deciding to stop complaining about her life and begin appreciating her life. By watching her friend face her cancer with dignity, she had gained a new life. Others followed with stories that were moving, and the group drew closer.

The experience of sharing a life-threatening illness with a group is powerful no matter what country or circumstance. In this teaching situation, the students immediately experienced the connection of sharing the possibility of an individual death. I do not know if this participant lived or died. I do know that her vulnerability brought the group into an immediate depth of authenticity

The possibility of her death brought us each into the reality of death. Even now I can still see her in my mind and hold this experience close to my being. The courage to share her confrontation with her own death with me, whom she did not know, and with others who were mostly strangers to her, has been engraved on my heart.

Teaching in different countries can be enriched by being a part of different students' and therapists' journeys in learning. When I complete a training and wave good-bye to my colleagues at the airport or now on Zoom, I turn to myself. I sit alone. I remember all

the shared moments of honesty, vulnerability, and courage. I may or may not ever see these individuals again. There is a sharp aloneness to these moments, which I recognize.

I, along with everyone else here and now, ultimately arrive in this world alone and leave alone. Life is with others, yet each of us is ultimately alone. This paradox of being *a part of* and *apart from* follows each of us no matter where we live (Heery, 2001).

May the paradox of the lived present moment be with you always and bring each of you deep inner peace as you walk your life's journey apart of and apart from.

And may this closing poem by Roger Keyes, 1990,  
sustain you.

Hokusai says, Roger S. Keyes, 1990

Hokusai says look carefully.  
He says pay attention, notice.  
He says keep looking, stay curious.  
He says there is no end to seeing.

He says look forward to getting old.  
He says keep changing,  
you just get more who you really are.  
He says get stuck, accept it, repeat  
yourself as long as it is interesting.

He says keep doing what you love.

He says keep praying.

He says everyone of us is a child,  
everyone of us is ancient,  
everyone of us has a body.  
He says everyone of us is frightened.  
He says everyone of us has to find  
a way to live with fear.

He says everything is alive—  
shells, buildings, people, fish,  
mountains, trees, wood is alive.  
Water is alive.

Everything has its own life.

Everything lives inside us.

He says live with the world inside you.

He says it doesn't matter if you draw,  
or write books. It doesn't matter  
if you saw wood, or catch fish.  
It doesn't matter if you sit at home  
and stare at the ants on your veranda  
or the shadows of the trees  
and grasses in your garden.  
It matters that you care.

It matters that you feel.

It matters that you notice.

It matters that life lives through you.

Contentment is life living through you.  
Joy is life living through you.  
Satisfaction and strength  
is life living through you.

Peace is life living through you.

He says don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid.

Look, feel, let life take you by the hand.

Let life live through you.