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Presence in Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy and in the Shamanic Journey

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What comes to mind when you hear the word “presence”? In the common vernacular, it can mean a physical form is at a given place. The form is objective, tangible, and manifest. Presence can also imply a quality of close relationship or a heightened state of awareness. In this use, it is a subjective experience of here and now. Presence also can refer to “something (as a spirit) felt or believed to be present (Mish, 1993, p. 921).” or, more specifically, “a divine or supernatural spirit felt to be present ...” (Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, 1996, p. 1529). Presence, as a state where the material and the invisible meet, can transcend the boundaries of each, retrieve us from isolation, and enliven us.

Bugental (1987, pp. 26-27; 1978, pp. 36-37) describes presence as the level of openness to influence and willingness to disclose subjective experience in the psychotherapy session. He considers it essential for psychotherapy. Four of his rules of ten for therapists specifically refer to presence (Bugental, 1990, p. 143). Two are so important that he repeats them: “Be there!” and “Insist that the client be there.” Further, two underlying assumptions from Bugental’s existential-humanistic perspective directly address presence in the therapist’s work. One is that therapists maintain full presence to the client’s experience in the moment. Another is that therapists closely attend to “clients’ immediate inner flow of experience” (Bugental, 1994). In

shamanism, an ancient way of healing and knowledge, the presence of spirits is a core assumption.

Just as the much of objective world goes on beyond our direct knowledge, especially in these days of vast communication technologies and networks, so our subjective inner worlds are largely imperceptible to ourselves and to those outside of us. For all our resources, comprehension of the exigencies of our lives remains fairly limited. Presence extends our modest capabilities to attend to the subjective and objective realms.

As individuals, each of us plays out the drama within our own limitations. Opportunities arise that offer the possibility of enlarging our scope of experience. To what degree are we present? Seeing the opportunity as an opening, an unblinding, is rejected by some and welcomed by others. How to know if it is an illusion, an imposter, or the “real thing”? Presence is our friend; time, its companion. Because of time, we are often forced to make choices. Even choosing not to choose becomes a choice, by default, for living continues. Change is ceaseless. In moments of choice we may come to see ourselves, and the living force around us, more fully.

Presence in both existential-humanistic psychotherapy and shamanic practice opens new possibilities of choice and discovery. Although their starting points and emphases differ, both urge us into the unknown. They share some fundamental principles and they, also, differ in some quite basic assumptions. Consistent with our culture, which prizes the “objective,” mainstream psychology generally assumes an objective, materialistic stance that emphasizes the *inner* life of the self. It largely considers altered states of consciousness to be inner experiences, psychological manifestations of the mind-brain interface and social-behavioral influences. For shamanism, on the other hand, the altered state of consciousness is a defining experience undertaken deliberately in order to access sources of wisdom and help in another, *outer*, reality

of spirits. Both shamanism and existential-humanistic psychotherapy are partnerships in lived experience; few choose either. Both require presence.

Psychotherapy usually takes place in a normal waking state of consciousness for both therapist and client. Of course, hypnotherapy, sonic-driving, or drug-facilitated therapy (such as with sodium pentathol, entheogens, LSD, MDMA or other substances), are exceptions. The results are framed as *inner* experiences of the person requesting help. The psychotherapist's role in existential-humanistic psychotherapy is largely that of guide and companion with "technical knowledge ... so thoroughly incorporated as to be implicit in the therapist's whole way of being (Bugental, 1978, p. 33).

Bugental (1978) effectively uses the concept of "journey" with traveler and guide as an analogy by which to describe the psychotherapy process from the perspective of his existential-humanistic approach. In it, the relationship between the therapist and client is prominent. They pursue their mutual objective imbedded in presence and communication, employing such tools as working with resistance, the actual moment, searching and exploring, and intentionality (Bugental, 1978, p. 8 and pp. 83-92; 1999). Responsibility for choices and their consequences, for actualizing the lessons learned, rests with psychotherapy client.

The shamanic journey is undertaken in an altered consciousness that the shaman enters in order to experience a reality based on shamanic methods and direct knowledge obtained while in that state, also understood as the Shamanic State of Consciousness (Harner, 1980/1990, pp. 20-21). The shaman is in an altered state of consciousness during the journey and the client remains in an ordinary state of consciousness. This process is a primary tool of discovery demanding full presence of the shaman who may provide access to direct spiritual healing and who conveys to the client the information obtained in the course of the journey. It is the client's choice to act or not to act on that information.

In psychotherapy and in the shamanic journey, there are missions or intentions. Existential-humanistic psychotherapy “seeks to decrease anxiety and pain ... going beyond that important function to evoke the potentialities that are latent within each of us” (Bugental, 1978, p. 15). For the existential-humanistic psychotherapist, the goal is to provide access to the mystery that is the client, to potentiate the client’s healthful growth, and to support the client’s developing autonomy. The psychotherapist must remain disciplined and true to his or her own experience with acute awareness of the unique needs of the client. The degree to which the client is willing to engage, moving to action, is critical to the process.

A primary goal of the shaman, also, is to ease or empower the lives of their clients. The shamanic practitioner is traditionally at the service of those in the community, for purposes of healing, divination, and psychopomp services, even healing the dead. In the shamanic journey, healing and help come from another reality *outside* of the person. It is as real as the more familiar objective, consensus reality of the senses. It is a private reality, however. Its specific *details* are not available for objective validation by others. Those who enter this alternate reality discover a world rarely glimpsed in daily life. The triad – shamanic practitioner, client, and spirits – is the necessary complement of active forces, each with its own role. Three-party communication is the structure. It requires presence, in the fullest sense of the word, with courage, discipline and attention to the details of the journey as well as the client’s needs.

So, too, in existential-humanistic psychotherapy one enters an unknown, privileged realm. Presence in both the therapist and the client are required on this journey which, as it progresses, is likely to be challenged to adapt to change. The therapist is present to the client and the client is present to his or her own felt experience in the moment and available to engage with the therapist. The client has the responsibility of acquainting himself or herself with his or her own inner world, of exploring it and searching for that which is meaningful to him or her. The

therapist acts as guide and refuge, if need be, as the client discovers an amazing world that resides within. In individual psychotherapy, the dyad or two-party communication is the usual operant force. In both systems, the journeyer may complete the journey with increased knowledge; there are discoveries beyond the initial, specified purpose. It is also the journeyer who chooses how to act in daily life after the journey.

Harner Method Shamanic Counseling (Harner, 1988) is a contemporary adaptation of shamanic methods, principles, and practices. It is a hybrid system developed for teaching skills to individuals so that they may journey on their own behalf and work autonomously. It is based on core shamanic universals or near-universals that occur cross-culturally. Journeying to solve problems oneself, and seek answers to personal questions, draws on some of the themes discussed above that apply to both shamanic practice and to existential-humanistic psychotherapy. Intention and intentionality are critical as the person clarifies the question of most pertinent current concern that will be the purpose of the journey. The journeyer must determine what is most important personally at this moment. During the journey, the person must be present to the experience without resistance. The journeyer must choose to bring into action the information gathered in the journey.

In the training process, the shamanic counselor is a teacher of method, a coach and a mentor, prescribing a series of five specific preliminary journeys for the trainee to practice in order to become acquainted with a personal map of the journey territories and resources. In order, they are (1) Journey to the Lower World to meet a waiting animal; (2) Journey to the Lower World to the same animal and ask an important question; (3) Journey to the Upper World to a tutelary spirit; (4) Journey to the Upper World to meet that Teacher and ask an important question; and (5) Journey to the Upper World (or Lower World) and ask how to implement one of the answers given in the second or fourth journey. In the context of preparing the trainee for

each new journey's tasks, the shamanic counselor provides instruction on how to journey to the Upper and Lower Worlds, maintain presence, and ask questions; and gives feedback on the trainee's adherence to the methodology; and supports the client's autonomy in interpreting the content of the journeys. The "real" counselors of content are those the trainee meets in the journeys. The training process, itself, needs presence on the part of both trainee/journeyer and the counselor.

The fundamentals of the shamanic journey and existential-humanistic psychotherapy share some common elements, such as presence, the quality discussed here; intention; and a collaborative relationship with client autonomy as a goal. The shamanic journey and existential-humanistic psychotherapy differ significantly in the states of consciousness involved and in the necessity of acknowledging spirits as an integral part of the shamanic system.

With extensive training and experience in both shamanic journeying and existential-humanistic psychotherapy, I have come to the conclusion, at this time, that each has its distinct place. While the shamanic journey *can* provide practice in developing skills for presence, so can many other practices.

To use the shamanic journey or other shamanic practices as vehicles by which to hone proficiency in presence does an injustice to both psychotherapy and shamanism. Both systems provide valuable, often closely parallel, legitimate means for helping others live more fully. Each system is internally consistent. The most obvious disparity lies in the secular nature of psychology and the sacred or spiritual nature of shamanism. Yet there are points of cross-over and continuity between them. They address human needs in different ways that may or may not be reconcilable for given individuals.

Is shamanism psychotherapy? I think not, although research indicates the journey's positive psychological effect (S. Harner, 1995, 2001, 2003, 2004; M. Harner and S. Harner,

2000; Harner and Tryon, 1992, 1996, 1997). Is psychotherapy shamanism? Likewise, I think not. My position on possibly integrating them into one service is a work in progress. Bugental's (1978, p. 146) concern about the wide array and levels of preparation brought to the public in the name of therapy remains pertinent to this discussion.

I know that many kinds of experiences can be *therapeutic*, but I feel that a distinction needs to be made as to what is truly *therapy*. To be sure, there are many legitimately trained, fully credentialed bunglers in this work, but that does not equate to saying that just anyone should set up shop to be a therapist. If one, no matter what her or his education, intends to offer psychotherapy, that person should in respect for human dignity seek preparation that is thorough and meaningful.

Psychology as a field is becoming increasingly aware of the importance of spiritual aspects of life and is making some early responses to biological, psychological, and spiritual connections. For example, the DSM IV has a diagnostic category for spiritual problems and an appendix with culture-bound syndromes steeped in spiritual explanations. With growing recognition of indigenous healing practices, medical students are increasingly being exposed to folk remedies and traditional, spiritual healing modalities. How complementary, alternative, and native practices will eventually integrate with conventional medical practice remains to be seen. Those who would also offer such specialties need thorough training, preparation, and direct experience. Fully integrating the spiritual into psychotherapy practice is a courageous and relatively pioneering practice with fruitful potential (Heery, n.d.). Exciting possibilities of change are emerging.

In the face of changing paradigms, it is important to remain open to the potentialities they offer, while recognizing our responsibilities to respect individual differences and provide the

services requested and expected; to know the limits of our scope of practice and our training; to honor community standards of practice, as well as the law and ethics for that practice. Genuine communication relies on tolerance of differences and acknowledgment of shared interests. The secular, in psychotherapy, and the sacred, in shamanism, unite through a common word – presence. Perhaps more than a happy accident of semantics underpins these various meanings.

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