

International Institute for Humanistic Studies

Unearthing the Moment

by Myrtle Heery, Ph.D. and James F. T. Bugental, Ph.D., A.B.P.P.

The actual landscape

When individuals reach out for help in psychotherapy, boldly or hesitantly, they are attempting to unearth their full life. Just as protected land areas thrive, individuals can blossom in a therapeutic environment. An unhappy marriage, a life-threatening illness, or an aging parent, are all familiar concerns brought to psychotherapy and each varies in texture and color every time the concern is visited.

It is this changing or moving the concern, which points to the fullness of the client's capacity for living. It is through experiencing the moment that the client begins to unearth his or her full capacities for living. The focus needs to remain in the immediate moment. The client may react in a myriad of ways: confusion, resistance, silence, frustration, anger, to name a few. The client may express frustration, especially when the therapist persists in focusing on the client's experience despite the client's insistence that the "problem" lies in the concern they are expressing. These reactions and expressions are familiar to the landscape of psychotherapy yet what the therapist attends to in the landscapes is different. What is actual is not the problem, but the client sitting with the therapist is the actual focus.

Whatever the client does in the moment is the work, for psychotherapy is work. It is a working partnership, exploring the moment for all it may offer. It is the therapist's job to bring into awareness this actuality. Such awareness may often include somatic observations by the therapist such as, 'I notice you are holding your breath' or 'You are swinging your foot.' Switching our focus to the in-the-moment experience of the client opens new territory for including the here-and-now relationship between client and therapist.

What is alive is what is now

It is important to distinguish sharply between experiencing and information about experience. Experiencing happens now. Information may speak about life but is

not itself living. Information is once removed from experiencing. What is alive is moving, is choosing, is changing, is breathing, is active. In some measure, what is alive is always unpredictable, beyond certainty. Life is incessant movement, always going forward into the next moment. Bodies change, thoughts, change, emotions flow — there is no final form of any aspect of life. Without flow, an organism is dead. Psychological reality is always the present, the ever-moving, never-repeatable present. As one client so poignantly phrased her grief over the loss of her sister. "I do not know if the next moment will be a tear of longing to see her or a laugh over a joke we shared."

Change is happening every moment

Psychodynamic theory fixes a client in space yet the client sitting in the psychotherapeutic room is never static. The impression of the client formed by the therapist in the first ten minutes of a session might differ from the last ten minutes of the session. Change occurs each moment: a client is never inert. It is of paramount importance to remember that each client is a unique territory with a singular topography, and no client is one-dimensional. We embark on a new adventure with each client in each session. The therapist joins the client on the latter's journey toward greater fulfillment in life. A truly human psychotherapy celebrates the uniqueness of each human, just as an ecological effort in one part of the earth cannot be automatically applied to another.

This article can be found in Heery, M. & Bugental, James F.T. (1999). Unearthing the Moment. *Self and Society*, 27(3), 26-27

Myrtle Heery, Ph.D. and James F. T. Bugental, Ph.D., A.B.P.P. are instructors of IIHS two year training program.

© 2003 by Myrtle Heery, Ph.D. and James F. T. Bugental, Ph.D. All rights reserved