

Commencement Address
Santa Barbara Graduate Institute
July 14, 2007

A Call to Remember

It is a privilege to be with you this evening and address you at your commencement ceremony. I am under no illusion that anything I say here this evening will be remembered. The only person making a speech who was wrong about a statement like that was Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address when he said, "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here but can never forget what they did here." You will soon forget what I say here but I hope you never forget who you are and what you have accomplished here.

I have found in my fifty years as a professional counselor that it is not easy to stay focused on or remember the commitment of my heart when I am busy making a living. It is easy to become complacent or doubtful about the meaning of what I am doing when I face my uncertainty and inadequacy. Over these years there have been certain experiences, quotations, expressions and poems that have helped me keep in touch with my heart and to remember the meaning of the profession and life's journey I have chosen. The poet David Whyte says that the function of poetry is to help us remember. All great art helps us to keep in contact with our "real self"; the spontaneous gesture of life, which we had to crush in our need for survival and which we desperately hope we can revive again. Everyone who comes to see me as a therapist has a conscious or unconscious cry that says, "I want my life back. Help me remember and recover what I have lost."

This reminds me of the story of a family who brought home a new baby girl from the hospital and her 3-year-old brother kept insisting that he wanted to be with the baby by himself. The parents were rather skeptical about his desire to see her alone but one day allowed him to go to her crib while they peered around the door to see what would happen. He leaned over the crib and said to her, "Tell me about God I am starting to forget."

I want to share with you this evening some of those expressions, quotations and poems that have helped me over the years to not forget who I am and why I am here. Since the kind of work I do I call Relational Somatic

Psychotherapy I would like to address my remarks around these three categories: Relational, Somatic and Psychotherapy.

Relational

The first comment that often comes to my mind that helps me to remember the meaning of the theme of relationship in psychotherapy is a quotation from Harry Guntrip the English psychoanalyst in his book *Personal Relations Therapy*.

“If it is bad human relations that created the problem then it must be good human relations that can provide the cure.” (1)

Another comment that I like on the theme of relations is:

“Theories and techniques are what we use until the therapist shows up.”

I took the training in EMDR when Francine Shapiro was teaching it in one of her first seminars in Oakland. For those of you unfamiliar with the terms EMDR it stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. It is helpful in working with shock trauma. At that time one part of the therapy involved having the client recall a trauma in his life and while having the movie of the traumatic event playing in the back of his mind he was to follow the therapist’s hand as the therapist moved his fingers in front of the client’s eyes. The theory is that this creates a bilateral stimulation in the brain thus helping the client to process otherwise unprocessed emotional material.

At the end of the seminar I asked Francine about the importance of the therapeutic relationship in this process. She replied that of course it was important and that the hand movement of the therapist was of no more value than the person attached to the hand. Otherwise, she said you could cure yourself by watching your windshield wipers.

A few years ago I was using EMDR with a client. At the end of the session I asked if he thought it was helpful. He looked at me rather sheepishly and said, “Not really. But what is helping is how hard you are trying to help”

So it is not what we say or do but who we are that is the ultimate healing factor in therapy. Again Guntrip has a statement that I print in large letters on a blackboard before I teach a seminar. He says, “

“One can teach a technique, but cannot teach anyone to be a therapeutic person. The point of the training analysis is not to teach theory or technique but to free the real person in the candidate” (2)

My first supervisor in graduate school was a Freudian analyst. There were four of us graduate students in a small group who would work with clients and then present our cases to him for supervision. On one occasion he said to me. “Bob, you think your clients would be better served if they had me or Freud for a therapist. Well they don’t have me or Freud they only have you and the problem is you are not giving them who you are. You are trying to be someone else.” At that time I had no idea that who I was in my authenticity could possibly be a healing agent.

A few years later I began my private practice at a clinic and on one occasion was asked to cover for the senior therapist while he was on vacation. This particular Saturday I received an emergency call from the answering service saying that one of his patients was suicidal and needed to see someone right away. I went to the office and met with an elderly woman approximately ten years younger than I am now. However, 30 years older than I was at that time. I will save you the math. I was 35 and she 65.

As she began telling me her story I could feel the anxiety mounting in me. What was I going to say that could help? I was partly listening and partly desperately searching my brain for some kind of diagnosis and possible therapeutic suggestion. Overcome with this process plus her horrendous story my body told the truth of this situation as tears came to my eyes, She looked at me and said, “ Are you crying?” I put my hand to my eyes, felt the tears and shamefully said, “I guess so.” She said, “Why are you crying?” As I look back now I am not sure what allowed me to be authentic and honest in that moment but I said, “Because I have never heard a more horrendous story than the one you are telling me and I have no idea how to help you.” She said, “It really is terrible isn’t it?” I said “Oh yes, it is terrible.” She broke and began to sob. The depression and suicidal ideation lifted, as she felt someone experienced her dilemma, understood her and did not shame her for her fear and sadness.

This experience reminds me of another saying that I often repeat to my students.

“When the therapist experiences what he is trying to get the patient to experience, the patient gets better.”

Another statement I pass on to my students is that when you feel stuck with a client; ask yourself the question what feelings does this client create in me that I am resisting acknowledging. Is it fear, anger, sadness, longing? And almost always that is the feeling that the patient is resisting experiencing with you.

I was reading a recent study that showed that therapists that get attacked by patients have at some time in the therapy denied that they were frightened. The patient then feels impotent to impact the therapist with his reality and increases his negative assault. A colleague of mine, a psychiatrist in New York, reported how one day a patient of his brought a little paper bag to the session. My friend thought it was the patient's lunch. At one time during the session the patient reached in to the bag and pulled out a gun. My very expressive colleague began to shout in fear “Don't shoot, don't shoot.” The patient calmly put the gun down and said, “ I just wanted to know if you could become as frightened as I feel everyday.”

Another important truth I find myself stating over and over to my clients in regard to the relational aspect of therapy is that in relation to others we are constantly forced to face our love and our helplessness at the same time. However, before clients will acknowledge this truth they need to know that we can accept this dilemma in regard to them. I had a client who came to me for therapy and asked that I not use bioenergetics or body work with her. She had already been through a therapy with a Bioenergetics' therapist and in fact had become a local trainer in this field. However, she knew she needed something else of which she was not sure but she was sure that it was not bodywork. Yet, she was also coming to me knowing my commitment to the importance of the somatic aspect of the therapeutic process.

I accepted her challenge and she began to teach me what she needed. Basically it was for me to become thoroughly familiar with object relations theory and practice. I read the books she recommended and attended conferences on this subject. One day she came to the session very depressed. She had been exploring the use of various antidepressants and they did not seem to be working. I felt deeply for her and I also felt that I had many ways of helping her by using my understanding of the body and its relationship to her depression. I knew for instance that if she could reach out toward me and allow me to contact her that it would break the cycle of her aloneness. Each

time I suggested a somatic technique she would remind me that I was doing that for me and not for her. I finally said, “You are asking me to sit here and watch you drown” She said, “Yes, Can you do that?” I replied, “I don’t know if I can.”

I found myself sitting back in my chair with my eyes closed and became aware of what she was asking. She simply wanted me to be with her. I was aware that I had many techniques that could save her and me from this moment. I also felt how little I believed that my presence alone would be of any help. But I also felt I must stay with her in the way she needed me to be. When I looked up I saw that her face had changed. Instead of the torment of depression there was a smile and a gentle feeling of love in her eyes. From this place she slowly reached out to me to make contact. She said she had witnessed my struggle to give up everything I knew and was sure of in order to be with her. She now felt safe, loved and loving. I hardly knew how to accept her accepting me in my humanness. I was being loved and healed by her as I surrendered to my love and my helplessness.

I needed to remember the Guntrip quote: “If it is bad human relations that created the problem then it must be good human relations that can provide the cure.” (3)

Somatic

From Relational we now turn to Somatic. Of all the audiences I could speak to you certainly need no persuasion about the importance of the somatic aspect of psychotherapy and the developmental process. However, three quotes that I refer to that keep me in touch with the importance of the body in the therapeutic process are from Donald Winnicott the British pediatrician and psychoanalyst.

“At the beginning the child has a blueprint for normality which is largely a matter of the shape and functioning of his or her own body.” (4)

“The child’s task is to inhabit its body. The psyche and soma have to come to terms with each other. This coming to terms, this finding a shared language is the developmental process.” (5)

“The true self comes from the aliveness of the body tissues and the working functions, including the heart’s action and breathing.” (6)

To say that the child's task is to inhabit its body is one thing and providing the supportive and holding environment for that to occur is another. We are certainly aware that for us to know that our true self comes from the spontaneous expression of our heart's action and breathing is one thing and to risk allowing ourselves to experience that is another.

I want to read a poem entitled Wild Geese by Mary Oliver to illustrate this point.

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your
knees
for a hundred miles through the
desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal
of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I
will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear
pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the
clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how
lonely,
the world offers itself to your
imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh
and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things. (7)

In my essay "Recovering the Root of our Identity: Embodying our Love" I mention that when I first heard this poem read by David Whyte I felt angry

that Mary Oliver had made it sound so simple. After all she says, “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves” Then David reread the poem and stopped at this line and began to repeat over and over the words, “you only”, “you only”, “you only”, “you only.” And then stated that this “only” takes a lifetime. It is so simple and yet so complicated. It is absolutely right and yet so hard to do. The spontaneous expression of our true self is in that phrase and yet unless we have experienced that kind of love from another we cannot seem to get there. And if we have experienced it and lost it we have built up such armoring in our bodies to ward off further pain that our bodies are no longer a “soft animal” but a more rigid and machine like structure that operates efficiently for survival but not love.

The great task that we have chosen is how to allow that softness to return so that we can once again love what we love.

Among many others there are at least three powerful somatic processes that I wish to mention that need to be experienced in order for our softness to return and our love to be realized. The first is acknowledgement and expression of our anger, the second is establishing the ability to mourn and the third is the recovery and embodiment of our longing.

First anger.

Why is it so hard to recover our soft animal body in the world? What keeps us holding on to our rigidity, isolation and dissociation? I discussed this in detail in the essay, Ending with and Open Heart but here I want to center on something Kalsched said.

“We now know that the energy for dissociation comes from ...aggression.” (8)

And speaking of the diabolical way we turn our anger against ourselves he says,

“In effect, the diabolical figure traumatizes the inner object world in order to prevent re-traumatization in the outer one.” (9)

I remember also what Guntrip said speaking of a patient.

“In order to possess himself of an ego strong enough to live by, he rejects himself and substitutes by identification the personality of his persecutors.” (10)

We need to understand how through repressed anger we are perpetuating our earliest trauma. Repressed rage becomes the super glue that sustains our adhesions to the tight muscles in our body’s armor and thus to the bad objects in our life. Without the recognition and expression of our anger we cannot move on to the next stage of recovering the soft animal of our body; which is grieving our loss.

Another quotation from the *The Inner World of Trauma*:

“The inability to mourn is the single most telling symptom of a patient’s early trauma.” (11)

And from *The Forgiving Self* by Robert Karen.

“...we get caught up in repeating the wounding relationship, repetition being the inevitable alternative to mourning.” (12)

I recall in my early days as a therapist, I worked with a client for several years and finally we came to a place where she suggested that we stop. I had a mixture of feelings. I knew she wanted something that somehow I could not give and there was a certain relief in her leaving since I would not then have to face whatever in me felt inadequate. She stayed away for perhaps a year and then came back one day. During our first session, she broke into sobs saying, “You let me go.” I knew in my belly exactly what she meant. I had to admit that I did, and hearing her cry was like hearing me cry out to my own mother. I had become my mother to her and she was crying my tears. We sat on the floor and I held her as we both sobbed. In not having been able to fully mourn my own loss I had not been able to help her face that same loss when she left. Her courage in coming back and confronting that loss was now giving us both a chance to be with and eventually to leave each other in a different way than we did with our parents as children.

I cannot over emphasize the importance of having the capacity to mourn and then surrendering to it. Early in my therapy I was told that my tears were my life. In order to mourn you must have had an internalized good object. You cannot mourn what you have never had.

For the traumatized child tears only lead to further isolation. We as therapists must provide the contact and the bridge to the deepest loss of our clients. Grieving is the body's way of renewing and maintaining our love and allowing the our softness to return.

In addition to being able to express our anger and to mourn, both of which are a deeply somatic process, we need to embody our longing. Again, a poem by Mary Oliver entitled Ghosts, helps us out.

“Once only, and then in a dream
I watched, while, secretly
and with the tenderness of any caring woman,
a cow gave birth
to a red calf
tongued him dry and nursed him
in a warm corner
of the clear night
in the fragrant grass
in the wild domains
of the prairie spring, and I asked them,
in my dream I knelt down and asked them
to make room for me.” (13)

Our longing needs to be embodied. We need to allow it to find expression in our eyes, mouth, face and arms. When you watch a newborn nurse you discover that his whole body is involved from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. As he nurses over time he eventually makes eye contact with the mother and in the contact he begins to experience how safe it is to be so vulnerable and needy. He also tests her commitment over and over to know if this contact that is so essential for his life is really for him and not for her. The mother needs to have a belly love in order to allow herself to give without demanding that it be returned.

According to the authors of *A General Theory of Love*,

“When a person starts therapy, he isn't beginning a pale conversation; he is stepping into a somatic state of relatedness.” (14) They also state, “Therapy is a living embodiment of limbic processes as corporeal as digestion or respiration.” (15)

We have thus far spoken about the Relational and Somatic aspects of Psychotherapy. Now I would like to share with you some thoughts about psychotherapy in general that help me as I said in the beginning, not to forget who I am and why I have chosen this journey in my life.

Psychotherapy

My first quotation is one attributed to Mother Teresa.

“We serve people not because they are broken but because they are holy”

When I think of this statement and take it in, my shoulders and head drop, I take a breath and contact a deep part of my being that I can only describe as my soul. I feel sobered and thoughtful. I am no longer the healer or doctor or for that matter “the therapist.” I am a privileged partner in another person’s journey of life. My task is to wait, watch and wonder at the mystery of another being like myself in their struggles to be who they are or want to be. From this perspective I have a deep felt body compassion for my fellow sojourner, which I describe as love. Again, I think of the quotation from *A General Theory of Love* where the authors say, “Loving is mutuality, synchronous attunement and modulation. *In Love*, requires only a brief acquaintance; loving derives from intimacy, the prolonged and detailed surveillance of a foreign soul.” (16)

They go on to say, “People do come to therapy unable to love and leave with that skill restored. But love is not only an end for therapy; it is also the means whereby every end is reached.” (17))

Even Freud in a letter to Jung said, “Psychoanalysis is in essence a cure through love.” (18))

Irving Feldman reminds me of one of my favorite poems.

Not the god, though it might have been,
savoring some notion of me
and exciting the cloud where he was hidden
with impetuous thunder strokes of summoning
- it was merely you who recognized me,
speaking my name in such a tone

I knew you had been thinking it
 a long, long time, and now revealed yourself
 in this way. Because of this, suddenly
 who I was was precious to me. (19)

Guntrip says it this way, “The kind of love the patient needs is the kind of love that he may well feel in due course that the psychotherapist is the first person ever to give to him. It involves taking him seriously as a person in his difficulties, respecting him as an individual in his own right even in his anxieties, treating him as someone with a right to be understood and not merely blamed, put off, pressed and molded to suit other people’s convenience, regarding him as a valuable human being with a nature of his own that needs a good human environment to grow in, showing him genuine human interest, real sympathy, believing in him so that in the course of time he can become capable of believing in himself. All these are ingredients of true parental love (agape not Eros), and if the psychotherapist cannot love his patients in that way he had better give up psychotherapy.” (20)

The above statement may discourage many would be therapists from trying to be adequate enough for their clients. However, four years ago Daniel Stern and I were speaking at a Bioenergetic Conference in Italy where I had the opportunity to ask him about a statistic I had heard in regard to his work with infants. I told him that I had heard that a “good enough” bonding could occur between an infant and its caretakers if the caretakers were able to respond to 30 % of the infant’s cues for contact. He thought for a moment and then said, “I did not say that but in fact that is about right.” This gives hope to all of us who are parents, grandparents and therapists. If we are able to be adequately attuned 30% of the time that is good enough.

Also this kind of love is full of failures. The therapist must learn to bear the pain of loving when it is not received. In fact, the therapist must come to understand that his love may be seen as harmful or hurtful to someone who has been deeply traumatized. The therapist has to also face the loss of his “specialness” and narcissistic need to be right. In marriage counseling I have often past on the cliché to a couple arguing “Do you want to be happy or do you want to be right.” W.H. Auden has a couplet that says, “

If you want to keep you love alive and fill your loving cup
 When you are wrong admit it and when you are right shut up.

Winnicott states, "...It appalls me to think how much deep change I have prevented or delayed in patients *in a certain category* by my personal need to interpret. If only we can wait, the patient arrives at the understanding creatively and with immense joy, and I now enjoy this joy more than I used to enjoy the sense of being clever. The principle is that it is the patient and only the patient who has the answers." (21)

Another expression that helps me avoid becoming too narcissistic about the type of therapy I do.

"All therapies work for awhile it is what happens when they fail that makes a difference."

A great deal of therapy time is spent in repairing ruptured relationships. In fact if 30% of the time we are in attunement and resonating than the other 70% of the time is spent in repairing empathic disjunctions. It is in the possibility of rapprochement that healing takes place. This is where the client was failed as a child and it is here that renewed faith in relationship is established. The client will always bring you back to his original relational failure and then use his old, child like, defenses to try and resolve the loss. I often remind my clients of a Warren Zevon song entitled, "If you won't leave me I will find someone who will." Of course I also like the country western song, "I have been so miserable sense you have been gone that it is almost like having you around."

Conclusion

My goal this evening was to share with you some thoughts, expressions, quotations and poems that help me remember and stay focused and centered on who I am and my place as a therapist in Relational Somatic Psychotherapy. All of our interactions with each other are relational and somatic; it can be no other way. However, not all of our interactions are therapeutic. They become therapeutic when we are able to incorporate the experience of love within them. To get there we must constantly open ourselves to the expression of our anger, grief and longing. We can only do that if in fact someone cares deeply enough about us to join us in that journey.

The journey is perilous. However, Winnicott reminds us that whatever we fear has already happened and we are now seeking to live

through the phenomenal death we experienced as a child in another way other than the use of our primitive and archaic defenses. (22) We seek within the transference of our therapeutic relationships an acceptance that helps us reestablish the root of our identity and therefore grounding upon which to face our deepest losses. Our bodies are love bodies. We will never cease our exploration until as T.S. Eliot says, we “...arrive where we started and know it for the first time.” (23) When with another’s help I can make that journey, confronting my anger, and grief and embodying my longing, then I find my self-expression is quite similar to that of David Whyte in his poem Self-Portrait.

In doesn't interest me if there is one God
 or many gods.
 I want to know if you belong or feel
 abandoned,
 if you can know despair or see it in others.
 I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world
 with its harsh need
 to change you. If you can look back
 with firm eyes,
 saying this is where I stand. I want to know
 if you know
 how to melt into that fierce heat of living,
 falling toward
 the center of your longing. I want to know
 if you are willing
 to live, day by day, with the consequence of love
 and the bitter
 unwanted passion of your sure defeat.

I have heard, in *that* fierce embrace, even
 the gods, speak of God. (24)

Winnicott also speaks for me when he says, “Naturally, if what I say has truth in it, it will already have been dealt with by the world’s poets, but flashes of insight that come from poetry cannot absolve us from our painful task of getting step by step away from ignorance toward our goal.”⁽²⁵⁾ That goal of recovery spoken of so clearly in David’s poem begins tonight by remembering who we are and why we are here. To paraphrase Winston Churchill on D-day, tonight is not the end of your journey, it is not even the

beginning of the end but it is the end of your commencement. And my final admonition can be found in the refrain of an old song from the musical *Fantasticks*, “Try to remember and if you remember than follow, follow, follow.”

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