
The Unconscious—The Real McCoy of Psychotherapy

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Abstract

What follows may be described as my 'free association' on the subject matter of the NZAP Conference 1999, *The Unconscious - the real McCoy of Psychotherapy?* Since I practise from an integrative and holistic perspective, I scoured many sources that have guided and influenced my being a psychotherapist, seeking in them what may be identified as the 'real McCoy'. My sourcing was not exhaustive. I offer an entree and look forward to the feast we may savour together as we begin to reflect on our individual and collective practice and chosen interpretations of many psychotherapeutic narratives.

Introduction

The letter of invitation to speak at the 1999 Conference came with the brief to 'excite and ignite' discussion. It also came with a comment that the Titanic sized theme had been chosen 'in innocence'. Given that the Titanic has been named in relation to the theme 'the unconscious', could the question mark alongside the theme be a possible measure of the sinkability of its 'McCoy' under certain circumstances?

When I received the registration form for this conference I was somewhat taken aback to see my name written as John Dalloway. The *h* had been struck through and an *a* inserted. How could the organisers possibly have known? I pondered. I was born the third of four daughters, I was to have been the son, John, son of John. Clearly I wasn't, so at my birth the *b* was struck out and the *a* put in. Was this an exercise of unconscious process, or coincidence? How do we interpret events and experiences?

Experiences and Interpretations

If the 'real McCoy' of psychotherapy is 'the unconscious', then of profound significance are our interpretations. I am informed that Winnicott when asked about interpretation replied: "I interpret to show the patient that I am awake, and to show the patient that I might be wrong." As I think in this way I am reminded of the childhood game of whispers and how we laughed at the distortions we created as the message was passed from one to another. Some will remember the classic misinterpretation, as "send reinforcements, we're going to advance" eventually became "send three and fourpence, we're going to a dance."

The processes of postmodern deconstructionism invite us to view again the maps we have used for interpreting our world and the nature of being human. 'The Unconscious - the real McCoy of psychotherapy'? Does the question mark indicate our readiness to deconstruct the pathologically focused maps of our psychotherapeutic past, face the possibility that the interpretations of 100 years may have been incomplete and that another McCoy may be emerging amongst us?

As a consequence of his reflections on the human condition Freud created a map based on the 'pleasure principle', later called the 'reality principle'. But whose reality? The society of which he was part was dualistic, paternalistic, moralistic and reductionist. Dualism split time and space, eros and thanatos, good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, sickness and health, and therefore conscious and unconscious. Truths, religious/moral, medical and educational, were dictated by experts. There was a belief in the supremacy of the mind over the body. Humans were born flawed and sinful, their souls had to be saved and their pathologies identified. What Freud heard, saw and experienced was filtered through these culturally and socially conditioned hierarchical lenses.

Our psychotherapeutic whakapapa is riddled with stories of conflicting interpretations of the nature of human experience. Freud's truth or Jung's, maybe Lacan's? Klein's or Ego Psychologists' interpretations of Oedipal issues? Kernberg and Kohut debated the aetiology of Narcissism, one describing it as "a plant stunted by too little water", the other "a plant mutated into a hybrid". Many others before and since have entered into factious arguments. The jury is still out on definitive conclusions. Whose reality? What reality?

Following the discoveries of quantum physics, Woolfe (1981) stated:

...there is no reality until that reality is perceived... reality depends upon our choices of what and how we choose to observe. These choices in turn depend on our minds, or more specifically the contents of our minds. And our thoughts in turn, depend upon our expectations, our desire for continuity.

Could our desires for continuity prompt us to retain our conserved realities as 'the McCoy' rather than excite us into co-creating with others new 'McCoy's' for a new generation of the human story?

What are we talking about anyway when we speak of *the unconscious*? Are we agreeing that it is an entity, a process, collective or individual? Whose unconscious? Do we muddle and mix unconscious and unawareness?

A long term client of mine recently completed therapy. We complimented ourselves on the good work we had done; he then undertook to write a book, a novel based on his therapeutic experience. Humbly, I read what I had been unaware of during our work together.

At the time of our alliance I lived in the country and my therapy room was in an outbuilding adjacent to our home. As my client came and went he saw or met my husband. The contacts were brief passings of time. In his novel however, he had woven a story of two parents, my husband supporting me so that I could appropriately care for him. My husband had, unbeknown to me, become as much a therapist as I was. I was unaware of this, but this was no unconscious process. It was rather an intentional and deliberate action of a man creating a *good enough* ending to the current chapter of his story. I/we were there and my client used the relationships he had with us to project his story into existence.

The midrash tradition of Judeo-Christian history tells us that many stories can be told simultaneously, in parallel fashion, one amplifying, complementing and bringing out the significance of the other. These stories are told within a time-space *continuum*, what was *there and then* is *here and now*, holistically present, time is Kairos not Kronos. The midrash tradition also contains the knowing that these stories can have an infinite number of endings and that an ending is being sought in here and now relationships that is *good enough*. The most important issue is how the human story will end today. Belkin confirms that it is only what is happening at the time that is important. The 'real McCoy'?

I recently asked a client on completion of her therapeutic alliance what she believed was the most effective contribution a therapist made, the 'real McCoy' if you like. She pondered only a moment before she replied: "Be there".

A review of psychological and psychotherapeutic literature undertaken by Richard Erskine (1989) revealed that "the single most consistent concept identified is that of relationship". The 'real McCoy'? In 1923 Buber introduced his I-Thou philosophy of relationship; in 1944 Frederick and Laura Perls their theory of contact; in 1950 Fairburn the relationship seeking other; in 1951 Rogers his client centred understandings; in 1953 Sullivan the interpersonal contact. In 1960 Kelly spoke of behaviour as the human question to the world, a person seeking relationship. At the same time the theologian Tillich saw behaviour as a person seeking community. In 1961 Berne introduced his theories of interpersonal transactions. By 1965 and 1971 Winnicott and Guntrip were developing their relationship theories and corresponding clinical implications. In 1971 Kohut introduced us to the processes of sustained empathic enquiry, Surrey (1985), Miller (1986) and Bergman (1991) all focused on relationship theories. Since 1995 Stern and others have spoken of vitality affects and attunement and given us a review of the powerful impact of relationship on therapeutic outcomes.

Erskine (1996) describes *relationship* as "full awareness of sensations, feelings, needs, sensory motor activity, thoughts, memories, internal and full awareness of external events as registered by each of the sensory organs". A subtle but powerful shift from mind focused to total *body to body* relationship. From filters which gave a hierarchical preference to the mind, we come to an holistic understanding, a knowing that through its energy flows, the flutterings of its unique rhythms, breathing, heartbeat, eye movements, varying speeds of thought patterns, a body conveys its story as clearly as any spoken word. The story of our evolutionary journey is being told through the communication means available at that point of a person's life and experience. Through free association, cellular, brain stem, midbrain, limbic cortex, parallel stories are being told within the therapeutic relationship; the new ending is of profound importance. The 'real McCoy'?

Within an holistic perspective body and mind is not split, disciplines are no longer divided, one informs the other. Grotstein's and Schore's research on Projective Identification, Perry and associates' (1998) research on Post Trauma victims, the chiropractic research of Hazelbauer, Morter (1998) and others on cellular communication, the offerings of postmodern theologian Walter

Bruggeman, (1994) all tell parallel stories of a new territory of human relationships and of a new language emerging.

Bruggemann (1994) reflects on the de-structuring of today's society and says that what is before us is 'unknown territory' which we attempt to interpret and negotiate with old maps. We desperately seek to make the old maps fit and end up distressed as we fail. He describes our position as 'in exile'. He goes on to say that when people are in exile they do not know the ways or language of the land they are in. They lament and regress to their 'mother tongue' to communicate their distress and their need. Is what Lacan named "semiotic" and Nancy McWilliams described as "the background music of emotional experience", the 'mother tongues' by which the human story is most profoundly communicated?

It may be said that when we meet with our clients, we do face new territories. We bring to those territories the maps of our known perspectives. We determine the sign posts by what we have heard from other places and other times. We may perceive the phenomenology that is before us, cross reference this with our various culturally shaped theoretical frameworks and still misinterpret what is before us.

So what is the 'real McCoy' of psychotherapy?

As we know, interpretation of unconscious processes requires expert skill; without focus on the nature of the relationship between us and our clients we may well perpetuate the very hierarchies which have perpetrated abuse and distress. Interpretation can be a dangerous pastime, and, as we are reminded, *we might just get it wrong*. A misuse of our power and we have distorted the other's story into our own, cloning the other into our creation.

The Greek word *therapea* translated means the *lowliest servant*, the one who is willing to *be there*, be involved and attuned, *be with* another in a strange land, experience the confusion and terror of *exile*, share 'mother tongues' and be irrevocably changed.

The life space of clients and therapists intermix in the quantum sense of indeterminacy. No one is ever the same after being emotionally and intellectually 'touched' by another, the change is always reciprocal, so that not only are the two individuals different but the relationship is different as well. (Belkin, 1988)

Could *this* be the 'real McCoy'?

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