

Psychotherapy and Global Transformation

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ABSTRACT *This article very briefly reviews the past 100 years of psychotherapy and then looks forward to the next 100 years. It suggests that while psychotherapy can continue to aspire to save the planet “one person at a time”, it must also scale up its efforts to work therapeutically with larger numbers of people on a larger playing field which includes all of the urgent social, political, cultural and ecological issues of this new century. A new politics of indigeneity is needed which recognizes locality and localism, is deeply respectful of the unique contribution and leadership of indigenous and First Nations people and peoples, but is also bold enough to claim that we are all indigenous to the universe and, therefore, share responsibility to learn how to be better stewards and caretakers of ourselves and each other on the Garden Planet. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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The publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in the year 1900 introduced the results of Freud's remarkable research to the world and launched the 20th century practice of psychoanalysis, an intimate investigative and contemplative partnership. (Freud, 1900/1955) Since then, psychoanalysis has changed and grown, evolved and expanded into the family of practices we know today as psychotherapy. The trajectory of this tradition and the limitations of its theory and practice are only now becoming somewhat clearer some 115 years later as the 21st century gets underway.

Freud developed and formalized the recognition that the human mind is like an onion: each set of fresh life experiences creates another layer which is laid down upon all previous life experiences. Even though earlier life experiences get covered over, appearing to disappear, they are still there underneath, functioning as the template for later life experiences.

At first Freud tried gaining access to the unconscious by being directive, pressing on patients' heads and urging them to recall forgotten memories. Then he discovered it was more efficient to encourage people to engage in a process of free floating attention and enter a state of reverie that takes them to their repetitive concerns and then progressively to earlier versions of these same troublesome basic conflicts.

By following the workings of the mind in free association, early psychoanalysis discovered that appearances can be deceiving. It discovered that adults are children in disguise. It discovered that within each woman lives a warrior and within each man there dwells a hidden woman of tenderness and deep feeling. It discovered that human beings are very adept at disowning and concealing their fears and anxieties but continue to suffer them nonetheless.

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Psychoanalysis discovered that human beings learn early in life to be afraid, afraid of being small and weak: afraid of being threatened or terrorized by someone who needs to feel powerful. It discovered the catalogue of fears that remain alive inside us, fears of inadequacy, of losing control, of being humiliated, or rejected, shunned, excluded, cast out. It learned how to help people notice, express, and re-evaluate the fear of being shamed, or exploited and used, or made to feel guilty or bad. It learned how to help people travel back in time and to re-visit confusing and difficult early life experiences, to make some sense of these experiences and to be more at peace with them.

The first wave of psychotherapy focused on inner conflict; not only the conflict between consciousness and the unconscious, but also on the structural differences between nature and society, desire and prohibition, pleasure in familiar repetition, and the requirement to leave the familiar in order to adapt and change.

Psychoanalysis made models of the mind that offered simple but powerful diagrammatic understandings of these conflicts, as if tectonic psychic plates were grinding against each other. It found ingenious ways of helping people notice and then tame the intensity of their unsocialized impulses as well as softening their harsh moral judgments towards themselves and others.

The second wave of psychotherapy incorporated another tradition, that of behaviourism, with its aspiration of a scientific psychology, and its emphasis on models of learning and of human beings as learners. Now psychotherapy could include learning and habit formation alongside drives and defences. We learn as we do, and by copying our role models, but, most importantly, whatever gets reinforced tends to occur more often and more strongly while whatever does not get reinforced tends to fizzle out and fade away.

The engagement between psychoanalysis and behaviourism nourished the development of a new ego psychology, a conception of human beings as continuously adapting to the outward circumstances of culture and society as well as to the inner promptings of nature. People grow and develop throughout the entirety of the human lifecycle via the imaginative capacity to dream and to develop aspirations, and then to work diligently, delaying gratification and enduring frustration in the service of long-term goals. Attachment and autonomy, play and work, identity and intimacy, generativity and the mature faith and worldly wisdom of later life can all be thought of as developmental tracks running separately and yet parallel to each other throughout life, each with its own set of dangers of negative resolution and opportunities for positive resolution.

The third wave of psychotherapy discovered the uses of empathy. It is remarkable how little need remain unconscious in a climate of genuine safety and receptivity. Psychotherapists learned to demonstrate more clearly their accurate attunement and unconditional acceptance. Emphasis shifted from the drives and defences of the intrapsychic world to the interpersonal realm of object relations and self-psychology. Psychotherapists claimed the humanistic and democratic traditions of the Enlightenment as their own, emphasizing, in addition to care, the values of justice, fairness, and equality. The Romantic tradition was woven into this tapestry as well: psychotherapy becoming understood as the vehicle by which each person might express the uniqueness of his or her true, authentic self.

Thus the beginnings of an integrative approach to the work began to emerge, melding scientific, analytic, humanistic, and existential traditions. Intrapsychic and interpersonal understandings were joined by social and cultural analysis. Radical psychotherapy extended psychodynamics into the political and social arena. Emancipatory psychotherapies were born from the critique of an unsafe and unhealthy status quo that included a critique of psychotherapy itself.

WHAT NOW?

It is tempting to “rest on our laurels” in the conviction that the craft of therapy has at last come of age. It is true that therapists need no longer make all or nothing choices between their art and their science. The contemplative wisdom of psychoanalytic understanding and the pragmatics of solution-focused and outcome-oriented psychotherapy can both contribute to the dialectic of raising awareness and taking action.

Therapy has learned how to move with elegance and effectiveness back and forth along the continuum of raising awareness and taking action. As a result, clients can learn to access more of the width and depth of their personal history, take notice of these experiences, express their emotional truth, assess their personal significance and meaning, decide to set goals and develop aspirations based on these meanings, plan how these decisions might be realized, practice by experimenting in action, and perform what has been practiced. Access, notice, express, assess, decide, plan, practice, and perform.

Therapists have the verbal fluency to move both towards and away from experience. Their empathy will allow them to sensitively explore, warmly approach, join and stand beside, co-experience and share. Equally, therapists can offset or minimize the impact of negative or harmful experience, strategically displacing and distancing, re-locating and re-framing, so as to make space for what is more salient and salutary.

Therapists can direct, manage, and control from above, influence and guide from beside, lead from in front, follow from behind, and support from below, providing the surround in which to hold and the containment from which to facilitate. We can use as much or as little authority as is needed, speaking in the imperative mode of “must” “when we must”, as when crisis demands it, or dialling back our authority by degrees to employ the influencing mode of “should”, the guiding mode of “could”, the supportive mode of “might”, the receptive mode of “may” or the permission-giving mode of “may enjoy” whenever permission is able to perform the work that authority, power, and control can only envy.

In the powerful as-if enactments that relational therapy is embracing and learning to dance with, therapists and their clients may be an aggressive couple, a sexual couple, or a nursing couple. They may be like parent and child or like two siblings, they may pair as workmates or as soulmates. If therapy were scored like music, each of these modes of engagement would be scored in a different key: each would foreground unique types of content; each would lend itself and be appropriate to particular clinical conditions, situations, and needs.

However, just as individual one-to-one therapy is poised to celebrate its newfound maturity and the full flowering of its art and skill, the world of the 21st century has become a radically different place from the world in which psychotherapy was first conceived. Now humanity finds itself caught in what has been described as the clash of fundamentalisms: trapped between a violently reactive and reactionary religious fundamentalism, be it Christendom or Islam, and the State-sponsored religion of secular materialism, the fetishism of the shopping mall, an empty consumerism designed to serve the interests of billionaires and their lobbyists, the apostles of neo-conservative and neo-liberal market ideology.

Our modern, consumptive lifestyle turns out to cast a longer shadow over the world than we could ever have imagined. The extractive economics that fuel our modern way of life did not set out to upset the balance of nature on which human life, and indeed all life, depends. It did not intend to undermine community life and erode natural and social health and well-being. Yet

every day it becomes more obvious that this is its legacy. Corporations lack a conscience or moral compass. They are legally required by their charter to maximize short-term economic returns regardless of the longer-term social and ecological costs. The corporation is, in fact, an instrument deliberately created for the exploitation of human and natural resources without constraint.

In the 21st century, large-scale corporate capitalism has come to occupy a position of unrivalled dominance around the planet. Capitalism promises a wonder world and delivers a waste world: predatory and parasitic managers, exploited workers, environmental degradation, basic precepts of human health and happiness ignored and trampled on.

Unfortunately, we cannot rely on our elected officials to guide us through these troubled waters. Despite mass dissatisfaction and protest amongst ordinary people, our politicians and status quo political structures demonstrate neither the commitment nor the capability to alter or offset the power of transnational corporations. Our leaders have too often and too convincingly demonstrated their eager collusion with an economic elite that neither knows nor cares to learn how to preserve the Earth and advance the cause of humanity.

Systems of representative democracy on which we have depended for the past several hundred years for the preservation of the virtues and values of the enlightenment have broken down. We the people are now in dire need of sovereignty, equity, equality, and justice for all. Most importantly, we need and lack the means to resolve conflict non-violently in an increasingly conflicted and violent world.

Both conservative and liberal politics collude with an unhappy status quo by assuming a radical separation between public and private life. The moment this artificial division is challenged, however, questions arise regarding the nature of power and the possibilities of empowerment. Is a psychotherapy without politics even possible in this modern age?

The vocation of healing the psyche of the world one person at a time is now faced with the challenge to extend itself on multiple fronts. Therapists have many opportunities to increase the breadth and depth of their theory and practice by including more of the political, social, cultural, ecological, and spiritual dimensions of life.

FROM GLOBALIZATION TO GLOBAL AWARENESS

If we understand globalization as, among other things, the newest form of colonization, then a global and globalized psychotherapy will be at risk of colluding with and contributing to the colonial project – surely not how we would wish to see ourselves in the world. The 21st century is challenging our 20th century Eurocentric cultural assumptions. Exporting modern, Western lifestyles, economic practices, and forms of consciousness – that’s us! – to the rest of humanity will not be what the world most needs.

A psychotherapy that is truly international rather than global is what is needed. Psychotherapies can be culturally diverse and culturally specific. They can be adapted to local conditions and local customs, extending the range and enriching the menu of therapeutic possibilities. The onus is on us to work towards ensuring that the internationalization of psychotherapy is as much about our learning as our teaching, a two-way street rather than a one-way street, bicultural and multicultural rather than monocultural in its approach.

Each of us has – and needs – a “wego” (Klein, 1976) as well as an ego. Perhaps now psychotherapy can grow beyond its familiar, self-orientated self-consciousness, and we, its

practitioners, can rise to the challenge of accurately representing all the collective determinants of our personal world and personal identity and our absolute mutual interdependence.

That interdependence extends out beyond the boundaries of the social world to include the interconnected web of all life of which we are but a part. Increasing numbers of people, including our clients, are concerned about the threats to human health and sanity posed by the careless application of human technology to the delicate balance of nature. Recognition of the wider ecological context in which the human social matrix is embedded and upon which human life depends is changing the scope and focus of psychotherapy, and eco-therapy has become a part of the therapy landscape.

Moreover, and perhaps most profoundly, after more than 500 years, the embedded assumptions of secular materialism have finally begun to lose their scientific credibility. The new data available from quantum physics, astrophysics, and scientific cosmology supports the understanding of a dynamic, evolving universe that is more organism than mechanism. In future, psychotherapy will take more notice of the spiritual dimension of existence and the presence of the sacred in everyday life. Awareness of the cosmos as a whole and of ourselves as bits of stardust in it may offer a nascent spiritual awareness that is crucial to our future survival and well-being.

In this context, it is timely to ask ourselves: what can the values and practices of psychotherapy bring to the clash of fundamentalisms, these dilemmas of modern times, this crossroads in the evolution of the human species? We have a unique opportunity in this time and place to hold fast to our values and refine our skills, but also, to “scale up” our psychotherapeutic thinking to meet the challenge of our times.

I would suggest the concept of a “cultural continuum” as a new way of thinking about and linking the full spectrum of human relations, identifying social orders of magnitude from the individual to the Earth community. Every social size scale can be included in this cultural continuum, from the microculture of individual persons and their self parts, to the miniculture of the family, to the culture of communities and peoples, to the macroculture of nations, the human species as a unity, and the entire diverse abundant magnificence of all the life forms on Mother Earth, the Garden Planet.

If 20th century psychotherapy was governed by a particle theory of the self with one individual space-time address for each human person, 21st century psychotherapy will be governed by a wave theory of the self in which each person is understood as the nexus of their relationships: subject relations as well as object relations, i.e., all the social, political, cultural, ecological, and spiritual experiences that connect us to other people and the wider world.

Relationships have always made up the background of psychotherapy; now they come to the fore as the very fabric of the self: the threads from which an individual is woven. This is a profound reversal of figure and ground. Interdependence joins autonomy as the signature of a healthy, mature ego. Psychotherapy can operate from the outside in as well as from the inside out – for it turns out that the politics of the outer world are not so different from those of the inner world. Lack of recognition and acknowledgement contributes to psychic injury. Empathic attunement, realistic recognition and acknowledgement of what has happened, and the willingness to witness and stand in solidarity with those who suffer unnecessary and unjust suffering helps to heal their psychic injury. In the movement from explanation to

understanding, we discover an epistemology of the heart, a thoughtful mode of feeling that personifies the world and joins it.

As psychotherapists, we can appreciate the benefits of approach where avoidance would seem the more sensible consensus. Psychotherapy practitioners understand the need to get beneath rational intention and conscious belief, to work at a level that is deeper than the known, to find the place where implicit memory is held and out-of-awareness beliefs and intentions reside.

The work of therapy teaches us something of what the world needs. We understand that what is needed first is to wake up to our pain; to find our way to the place where we most hurt, and then, by degrees, gradually, gently, to wake up from our pain. Then and only then are we able to dismount from the tightrope of our ambivalences, turn away from the battlefield of our conflicts, replant the fallow ground of our deficits, come home from the long march of grief, and wake at last from the recurring nightmare of trauma: mourning, integration, working through, reconciliation, new hope, new life.

The ethos of psychotherapy is the ethos of wisdom: non-violence, love and loyalty, care and generosity, justice and solidarity. Would that this made us immune to temptation and foolishness. Alas, we succumb to the same idolatries as anyone else, indulging the fantasy that the good life might consist of getting more and spending more: more money, power, prestige, fame, glamour, luxury, and comfort – but in our hearts we know better. Happiness is emotional satisfaction, the by-product of a life lived consciously and intentionally with care and skill in accordance with life-enhancing values. The good life orients itself to attachment and belonging, vitality and self-determination, spontaneity and humour, collaborative work and lasting contribution, self-knowledge and the appreciation of others, protection and provision for those who depend upon us, loyalty and devotion, commitment and fidelity, spiritual awareness, and the wisdom to grow our capacity for gratitude and celebration. At full maturity, human beings hold, if but for an instant, the possibility of an intimate partnership with the cosmos, the whole of creation as playground, worksite, cathedral and marriage bed.

Despite being located at the centre of post-modern civilization, unbalanced in its indoor, urban, predominantly mental orientation, psychotherapy is nevertheless inherently countercultural. Its aims and aspirations differ markedly from those of the dominant culture. It does not seek a global market or an information highway. It envisions and then works towards a gentle revolution, first within ourselves, and then by extension, within our society – and here it finds, unexpectedly, a partner very different from itself. At the extreme other end of the cultural spectrum, psychotherapy discovers its resonance with indigenous culture. In every corner of the planet can still be found the original inhabitants of the local landscape: people of the land who regard themselves as spiritual guardians of the places they hold dear and with whom their identities are intertwined.

INDIGENOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

The defining feature of indigenous consciousness is a holographic, relational mind that holds the symbolic in the literal and the literal in the symbolic. Everything is genealogically connected by what we know as evolution. The social world, the natural world, and the cosmic world are linked,

inseparable, isomorphic, connected through a lineage that stretches back to the very foundations of creation.

Indigenous spirituality is eco-spirituality. Indigenous consciousness locates itself as entirely part of and involved with this world, yet at the same time is profoundly non-materialistic. The interdependence between humankind and the world has both material and spiritual significance, for example, with the vegetation with whom we exchange life-giving oxygen and carbon dioxide, or with the animal world, on whom we depend both for our bodily sustenance and for self-understanding of our complex animal nature and personal characteristics.

In indigenous thinking, every material thing is assumed to hold psychic and spiritual energy and to manifest its own particular forms of consciousness. The modern mind might appreciate this scientifically as sub-atomic quantum energy, the frequency vibration that hums below the surface of apparent stability and inertia.

An ancient indigenous South American prophecy once predicted that in the time in which we now live, the future that has now arrived, the North American eagle and the South American condor will share the skies. A partnership between modern and indigenous understanding is perhaps the best hope for human species survival beyond this century or this millennium. If we married holistic wisdom and creative imagination to scientific understanding and technological sophistication, what might this union produce?

Psychotherapy holds a deep appreciation of the symbolic at the microcultural level where personal and interpersonal meaning resides. This symbolic understanding has the potential to be extended outward, with both an indigenous and a scientific, holistic understanding of nature and the cosmos and our place in it. Belonging as it does to an extended family of contemplative and mindfulness practices that work to develop personal insight, and thus responsiveness and responsibility, psychotherapy has the opportunity to hold a special place in this new partnership.

Ultimately, the aim of this partnership is to dream and then to do, to develop a non-violent world, a world in which every person is given the opportunity to discover their unique potential and the tools to contribute to their community and the world at large. The healing work of psychotherapy and the reduction of conflict, violence, and environmental degradation are two sides of a single coin. For violence and destruction are rooted in fear, and fear is an unwanted awareness that leads to denial and to the projection of what is denied onto others, whether they be other people, other beings, or entire ecosystems.

The more accurately we can understand ourselves, others, and our relationship with the external environment, the better equipped we will be to overcome the denials, distortions, and projections that fuel acts of destruction, interpersonal or environmental.

How might this larger partnership in which psychotherapy could play a small but significant part evolve? I would say, through a sociotherapy that understands the therapy space as a place where inside realities and outside realities intersect and meet, collide and coincide; through a political psychotherapy that understands psychotherapy and democracy as linked practices; and through an ecological psychotherapy that understands that psychotherapists are not just specialists or professionals, but citizens, members of communities who want and need to care not only for human beings, but also for the Earth itself and all its creatures.

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