

THE PSYCHOTHERAPY OF THE WEST MEETS THE PSYCHOTHERAPY OF THE EAST

A plenary presentation offered to the 10th EAP Conference in Moscow, July 2001

*East is East and West is West
And never the Twain shall meet
Till Earth & Sky, and Sea & Air,
Come to God's Great Judgement Seat.*

About 100 years ago, Rudyard Kipling wrote these words, and as we truly begin the new millennium, I want to use these words as an analogy for psychotherapy. We frequently deal with polarities: Earth, Sky; Fire, Water; Black, White; Good, Evil; East, West; seemingly irreconcilable opposites. We cannot possibly bring these together. We are not God. Water and air just do not mix. Somewhere between Black & White is just grey. Somewhere in between East & West is neither - their unique identity is lost. To unify these is seemingly paradoxical - impossible. Indeed this Conference, 50 or even 20 years ago today would have also seemed impossible, yet we are here today. How ?

When a client comes with their familial conflict - "I cannot be what my parents want me to be." When we work with couples - "He is a brute." "She never listens." When we try to help someone caught in an existential crisis - it is a crisis of their very existence - there is no real solution presented, just opposites. I suggest that this is true - there is no solution, within these polarities, without some sort of dissolution. We have to transform the medium in which these two polarities exist. We may even have to transcend it. In the analogy of the poem, East & West will never meet - until they come before God.

Coming before God, even allegorically is a transformational process - our souls become involved. It is not a resolving of psychological neuroses; a tweaking of the intellect; or a massaging of the spirit. In a transformation process, we are picked up and turned around, whipped inside out, and then totally exposed. At the moment of "God's judgement" I am reduced to absolute nothingness. The Bible says: "No-one can see God, and live." We deeply fear this process. And, this moment is what we all fear, and this fear is the ultimate void. To escape this void, we create images of heaven and hell, but these are just different polarities. We cannot face that void, that nothingness: and yet it is inevitable. Death comes to us all, sooner or later: we cannot escape it. There is no other way. And when we do this thing, when we submit and surrender, and enter the void - what happens ? This is the Great Question - and within it it is the Answer to Life, the Universe and Everything.

We are not just concerned here with the Judgement of God that happens via St Peter at the Gate of Heaven; nor are we concerned about the Final Judgement of Mankind at the sounding of the Last Trump. We are concerned much more about an individual's process that can happen at any moment of our lives. At many times we all have a moment when we come "face to face with God" and get a moment of truth. We sometimes even seek this out, and one way is to go into psychotherapy, or we can instead try the easier route and read the Tarot cards, or go to a medium to have our fortune told. Maybe these are also ways of avoiding the truth.

However what we are concerned with is a process of fundamental change. This is the Living Mystery that grips us and intrigues us. And it is a real Mystery as we do not know what we will be like afterwards. Most of our myths and fairy stories

are about this process. The young woman or man, prince or princess, gets changed. Maybe they make mistakes and the story doesn't end "happily ever after", but the theme is; "what happens when life circumstances force me towards a situation of fundamental change - and how do I cope with it ?" This is the Mystery - and this is what psychotherapy also tries to address.

We have terrestrial models for this transformational process. If I come to a crossroads, one way goes East, one way goes West. Which way do I go? Maybe I could go forward, or back as well, but we are still stuck with polarities? No one single way may be the Right Way. However, what if I transform the decision point? What if there are no roads? What if I am standing all by myself in the middle of an open field? I can then move in any direction I want to, I can explore. Then every way is the right way, because I will discover something. So I have stepped outside the limitations of the choice.

We also have relationship models for this process. If I, a man, interact with a woman, then I am biologically more primed for conquest because of my testosterone. Your female right brain works better than mine and you can listen more than I do. I am biologically unable to give birth. We remain separate, and mostly divided. There is no biological or physiological true meeting place. However, if we choose to get married, then the "I" and the "You" becomes a "We". We are transformed through an emotional process into a functioning unit that can communicate, live and dance together, and even perhaps procreate.

So what is this transformational process? We know some things about it. There has to be a proper formal dissolution process of the two separate identities. We do this in the marriage ceremony. Thereafter things are different. A priest can say a few words over a couple being married, and then, when we go to bed, if I just - fuck - you, the person who is now my wife, that is a marital oppression and there is no true marriage. If you constantly criticise me, that is no true marriage. We both need to melt, to surrender, to blend - and I am not just talking about melting into sexual ecstasy.

A mythic fictional example is the Steven Spielberg film *2001 - A Space Odyssey* and this is, after all, the year 2001, had as a theme of people, humanity, going further and further out into the far edges of the Solar System, only for the main character to be dissolved, returned to an unimagined, non-existent place and almost cosmic peri-natal state. This was ultimately transformational, for the world, as well as for himself.

We also have socio-political models for this process. We can sit across from each other with a table between us: Communist versus Capitalist; East versus West; North (rich) versus South (poor); Black versus White. Christian or Jew versus Arab: there exists a total polarisation. We can wage verbal war, trade war, propaganda war - or worse. We never properly meet.

But what happens if I happen to travel to your country, and - possibly - drop my political orientations a little bit, so that some change is possible. You may see me not as a person in opposition, but as a traveller. Then what actually happens?

What has or has not changed? You are still capable of behaving as I imagine that all Russians, or Muslims, or Chinese, or Africans will behave and I am capable of translating any aspect of my perception of your behaviour into my archetype. And I am also capable, as an Englishman, of acting as the arrogant, upper-class, oppressive, racially-biased, sexist, and colonially-exploitative person that you might expect from such a person. We will still never meet properly because our views have not changed one iota.

Alternatively I, Courtenay, might just possibly be able to meet with you, Victor, or you Natasha, or you, Hamid, or you, Shen, or you, Makumbi, as a humble traveller and, as such, you might just invite me into your house and give me a glass of water, and maybe even feed me. We might be able to meet properly. What is this difference? What has happened to change the situation? I maintain that we have transformed the field in which these opposing and conflictual polarities exist. In a new and different medium, they have no meaning.

We can also meet, and exchange views as equals in this sort of Conference forum. And this sort of forum is, I believe, a coming together in a different medium - possibly even before God. A greater wisdom prevails at events such as these and we can meet in a more normal situation, more in an everyday medium, which is why we come. At these sorts of Conferences, I believe, we can also transform ourselves, and our profession, quite profoundly. We do not polarise ourselves in such a Conference - we confer, we meet properly. There is a measure of equality and respect. We have transformed the medium and therefore got rid of the polarities. We are "before God".

The same sort of process can also apply in the therapeutic relationship, whatever form it takes. If we remain polarised as client - therapist; psychiatrist - patient; teacher - student; counsellor - counselled; seeker - seer; mystified - mystic; we will be stuck in these polarities forever. Now I may be able to earn money or status by sticking to my side of the polarity, but you - the other - will then have to pay me - one way or another, through fees, premiums, or taxes. And I can maintain that duality as long as you will let me. Alternatively, as a client, I can maintain my dependency, my illness, or hang onto my neurosis, and remain seeing you as the un-neurotic, know-all, professional person. There is an English expression: "It takes two to tango". If I do this, you do that. This is co-dependency. We will transfer and counter-transfer our neurotic patterns endlessly onto each other, by choice. Eventually I will get tired and you will get bored; or I will want to continue and you will feel oppressed. At some point we will need to find a way to work our way out of and transform these dualities. So how do we dissolve this polarity? What are the mechanics of this process?

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I see that some of you are becoming interested. Maybe you are thinking, "If he is not going to tell us the Answer to the Universe, Life and Everything; then maybe he will tell us the answer to all our professional problems and dilemmas." Wait a little bit longer please, and try to imagine that, since it is the same question that we are faced with, that it is possibly also the same answer. And it is such an important question, that I want to explore a little bit more about it first.

In the same way as we transformed the cross-roads into an open field; and the political confrontation into caring for a traveller; and the battle of the sexes into a union of love; and an East-West polarity of differences into a Conference such as this, we can transform the therapeutic process. What I believe is crucial to this process, and is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition, is respect for another human being. Now most of us will say that we do respect other human beings. And on one level this is true; we try not to exploit; not to oppress; we try to empathise and understand; but in so doing we still often maintain the polarity; we are still trying to do this from our position of power, or of greater influence.

True, deep and fundamental respect involves a process of stepping down out of these powerful or hierarchical roles. Martin Buber talks about an "I - Thou" relationship, which is close to what I mean. But there is possibly more to it than that. Respect - deep, profound respect, is not enough. The ego state of separation,

the “I”, the identity, has to begin to disappear. There is a deep humility that goes with this surrender - it is a total surrender of the Self. We are giving up something, very precious to us, totally bound up with us, in the hope - just the feint hope - of something better, a dream, an ideal, nothing tangible at all.

So there is fear and courage, hope and dream, as well as respect and humility. There are not many examples of what I mean, as it is not a commonly met process, otherwise we would be all doing it. In the terms of the Bible again, It is a “road less travelled” and we see “though the glass darkly”. And just as we either all drive on the right hand side of the road (or on the left, if you are in Britain or Ireland), or we either use credit cards and bank accounts (or we keep our money under the bed), the stepping out of these tried and tested methods, is not common.

It is not a commonly known phenomenon, but it is also surprisingly universal. This is paradoxical and therefore maybe we know we are on the right path. The Path to Truth and Wisdom lies often in resolving the Paradox. The old stories & myths are full of this.

I think that with each client, in each session, and maybe in each moment of each session, we have to forget everything we have ever learnt, forget how we were trained, and enter into the eternal void of the “I really don’t know” space. This is the space where things can happen - can change. We do not know what this change will look like. We really do NOT know. Please remember that for a moment. It’s important.

So here is another example: almost exactly a year ago many of us were at the last EAP Conference in Dublin, entitled “Traditions & Transitions”. On way home from the Congress, I had already started to think about this paper, and came across a little book in the airport, synchronistically you might say, called “Anam `Cara - Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World” by John O’Donohue. He writes this:

The Celtic mind is not burdened with dualism. It does not separate out that which belongs together. The Celtic imagination articulated the inner friendship, which embraces nature, divinity, underworld, and the human world as one. The dualism that separates the visible from the invisible, time from eternity, light from dark, us from them, is totally alien to the Celt. The Celt tries to befriend the worlds that come to balance within one. Each of us is both doomed and privileged to to be an inner artist that shapes a unique world. So the central archetype of early Western culture - the Celts who swept across Europe in successive waves three to four thousand years ago from the centre of Europe and the plains of Asia- is this unification of the dualities.

How interesting !

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And how does this reflect on the therapeutic relationship in psychotherapy? I would plead that we adopt the following concept. The high point of this Celtic culture and the title of the little book is the concept of “anam `cara”, which translates as “soul friend”. It is not a metaphor or an idea, it is a soul bond which exists as a recognised and admitted social construct in Celtic society. It is the heart of the true marriage; it is the unity beyond time and space, where man and woman, human and nature are all one. To have a “soul friend” - and we all do, even if they are not embodied yet in a single person that we know - alters the meaning of identity and perception. What is now different between you and me, if we are soul friends?

This love - for that is what it is - infects your / my intellect. We embrace new possibilities, either together or separately as a result of this meeting. This process of transformation - finding and using a soul friend - exposing yourself to the sight of God and being judged as to who you are and what you do with love and compassion - brings epistemological integration and also healing. You look and see and understand and act differently, and with compassion. This unity is at the heart of all Western religions and philosophies. It is also very risky, and quite obscure. To get to the point where we can accept a soul friend, we have to dissolve ourselves, forget everything, enter the void, and become nothing. This is not easy.

Meister Eckhart, in the 14th century, says that all human life stands in the shadows of nothingness, the “umbra nihili”. We cannot fill up our inner emptiness with objects, possessions, or people even. We have to go deeper into that emptiness, then we will find beneath and beyond nothingness, what we truly seek. He is talking of the same thing, I think.

Martin Heidegger speaks about the “ontological priority” of possibility. Boris Pasternak says: *“When a great moment knocks on the door of your life, it is often no louder than the beating of your heart, and it is very easy to miss it.”*

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Celtic journeys are in circles. We come out of the darkness into Light - the darkness of the womb that nourished our bodies, into the light of this world. Our lives, our minds, our thoughts, our inner processes lie hidden within our bodies - the effort and risk of expression bring them out into the light - brief sparks, most of them, but sometimes they catch fire. But for the growth of the soul, it demands that we go back into the dark, before a new light can grow. And the companion for this journey is the “anam `cara”.

Approaching someone, in the Celtic tradition, is a blessing. There is no “Hullo”. Instead one says: “May God be with you” - “Dia dhuit”. When one leaves, you say “May God keep you” - “go gcoinne Dia thú”. The Divine is always present - in others, and in you. The hand of the stranger is the hand of God. He does not come accidentally; he brings a particular gift and illumination, designed for you. This is part of the judgement. This is part of the delight. Gregory Bateson writes:

The individual mind is imminent, but not only in the body. It is imminent also in pathways and messages outside the body, and there is a larger mind of which the individual mind is only a sub-system. This larger mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by God, but it is still imminent in the total interconnected social systems and planetary ecology.

Can we turn this concept into our therapeutic relationship with our clients. I believe so. Patrick Casement writes delightfully about “Learning from the Patient”. This process goes beyond the psychiatrist - patient relationship. This is about “Learning to Love with the Other Person” - who you pretend is your patient, but is really your “anam `cara” - your soul friend, and a part of the Divine. Our patients are our teachers: together we are doing soul work. We are transforming the field of the polarity; doctor, patient; therapist, client. We see the other person as a soul friend. This is often true for the way in which we, as clients, see our former therapist, or the person who really helps us transform. But how often do we allow ourselves to see this in our clients? And how can we help the person transform, if we are not prepared to step down from our hierarchical position.

Plato has something of the concept of “anam `cara” in his dialogue on the nature of love written in “The Symposium”. He says that you spend your life

looking for your other half - your soul partner. Now in earlier days, in more simplistic times, one might translate this literally. Your soul gets born into two bodies and you spend your life looking for your other half in that person. The Jewish concept of *Bershertha* - your soul mate - is very similar to this. But consider these transformed into modern times. What is the appropriate metaphor?

I would like to suggest that everyone we meet - wherever, whenever we meet them - accidentally or otherwise - carries a part of your "anam `cara". And when we meet them, the purpose of that meeting, despite our intellectual agendas, or therapeutic roles, or politics, or whatever, is to reflect something of that other person's soul, back to them lovingly - in order to help them transform. This continual process then becomes a part of life, a way of life, instead of being something supernatural or out of the ordinary. Meister Eckhart (again) writes that: "many people wonder where they should be and what they should do. They should be much more concerned about how to be". And this process of really meeting people, of caring for them and with them, is an existential issue.

Now this Conference is about the Psychotherapy of the East and the Psychotherapy of the West. And I have used some examples from Western philosophy. There are many more, once your eyes start to look for them and I am, I regret, not so familiar with such examples from the Slavic or Russian philosophy. But I am convinced that there will be many similarities. I believe this is a universal concept. We should find these examples everywhere.

If we go back to the Dawn of Time, and examine the mythology of the Australian aborigine, that has existed for certainly 40,000 years and perhaps as much as 120,000 years, we find that:

The Dreamtime stories extended a universal and psychic consciousness not only to every living creature, but also the earth and the primary elements, forces and principles. Each component of creation acts out of dreams, attractions, and repulsions, just as we humans do. Therefore the entrance into the larger world of space, time, and universal energies and fields was the same as the entrance into the inner world of consciousness and dreaming. The exploration of the vast universe and a knowledge of the meaning of creation was experienced through an internal and external knowledge of self.

And we also find these concepts in the East - not surprisingly. In Buddhism we have the concept of the "noble friend" - Kalya-na-mitra - almost identical to the anam `cara. This person will not accept pretension, but will gently and firmly confront you with your own blindness. As there is a blind spot in the retina of our eye, so there is a blind spot in our soul, where we need outside help to see ourselves. You must therefore depend on whom you love to see clearly for you, and you must open yourself to that person. None of what we risk in this process of opening is really very important. In Eastern (Hindu) philosophy, nothing is real. We are all dreams in the mind of the eternal Vishnu. Everything is thus a dream of God. Nothing is real. It doesn't exist. The only purpose for life is to ascend the ladder of incarnation and purify oneself.

In Buddhism we have the concept of "Mara" - everything you can touch, see, hear, taste, feel is an illusion. There are only certain precepts - principles, and these require one to surrender your identity, your Self. In Taoism, we have that wonderful text - the Tao Te Ching, supposedly written by Lao Tzu, in one night, who in reality may or may not have ever existed sometime in the 5th century BC. The book is not really a book, but a collection of sayings (81 chapters) written like a set of pearls, each one perfectly rounded, strung on a string together. Within the

chapters there are perfectly balanced characters and sayings, many of them paradoxical, yet forming a harmonious whole. Here is how it opens:

*The Tao that can be talked about is not the true Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.
Everything in the Universe comes out of Nothing.*

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*Even if you cannot grasp this Nothingness,
you can still see something of the Tao in everything.
These two are the same, only called by different names
- and both are mysterious and wonderful.*

Later, in the Tao Te Ching, we find this:

*The path that is bright seems dull,
And the one who is going towards the Tao
Seems, in fact, to be going backwards -
And those who think that the Way is easy
Will find it extremely hard.
The greatest Virtue is to be empty like a valley.
Those who think they are perfect never are -
Those who feel that they are, feel inadequate to the task,
And morals seem to be no more than a contrivance. (Cpt 41)*

The principle of Yin and Yang, polarised opposites, is paramount. Together they make the whole. And the force that binds them together is the Life Force - Chi. And the art of living is to understand this and do nothing. It is the art of being - "Wu-wei". Finally we find, in Chapter 67:

*I have three priceless treasures:
The first is Compassion,
The second Thrift, or Never Too Much
And the third is that I never want to be ahead of you,
to be first in the World.*

So, you see, they are all saying the same thing. And we can use these Priceless Treasures as our practice as psychotherapists. We can love our clients. We can see them as our "soul friends" - they have gifts for us. They mirror our souls. We cannot do too much. We can just allow their process. We can restrain our knowledge and interventions - and allow them to grow. We can just "Be".

We can practice humility. We can get rid of the selfish and self-interested Self. We can be as if we are in the sight of God. We can surrender to the void of NOT knowing; NOT doing; NOT being different; and we can transform our profession by utilising and combining the ancient knowledge that underpins these psychotherapies of the East and the West.

Courtenay Young
Findhorn, Scotland, 2001

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