

The Role of Love in the Discovery of the True Self and Healing in Psychotherapy

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THE THOUGHTS that I wish to share today represent an attempt to engage in a personal dialogue with the Divine nature of Love as it manifests itself in psychotherapy with physically, emotionally, and spiritually damaged children. Most of these children have experienced a level of violence and neglect in their young lives that few of us can truly imagine. While the experiential foundation for this paper derives from a highly specialized mental health practice, the insights and wisdom that these children offer are universal, speaking to us regardless of our particular life circumstances.

For the past eight years I have been blessed to work as a staff psychologist alongside a gifted and compassionate group of professionals at the Denver Children's Home, a residential treatment center whose mission over the last 125 years has been to serve the indigent children and families of the Denver metropolitan area. In coming to know the children who pass through our care, I have been challenged to respond to the spiritual questions and concerns that inevitably arise during the course of their treatment. These realities are frequently only thinly disguised within their desperate and self-destructive attempts to make sense of and cope with overwhelming life experiences, and to establish meaningful connections with others while protecting themselves from further harm. It has been here, in the midst of such extreme violence and chaos, that the transformative power of Love in healing from trauma has somewhat unexpectedly announced itself.

What I have gradually learned is that the presence of Divine Love shapes in mysterious and wonderful ways the relationship between therapist and client, becoming a third silent presence in the room if we are but willing to open ourselves carefully and reverently to its

call. Once we become still and responsive to the voice of Love, our efforts at reaching across the gulf separating children whose lives have been disfigured by abuse and neglect from those of us who would walk alongside them in their healing are altered in subtle and mysterious ways.

The therapeutic process, as is true of all authentic human encounters, is ultimately a call to love one's neighbour in her brokenness. Through seeking to love in this manner, we discover that it is impossible to approach another's suffering in genuine care and compassion without first having learned to love ourselves in our own brokenness and shame, our own feeling of being damaged and 'dirty.' If genuine healing is to occur, we must confront in solitude our sadness and grief, mourn our lost possibilities, and, finally, let go of the false hope that we can through our own efforts transform these aspects of our human existence. This process ultimately allows us to transcend the false self, that shadowy and illusory ego construction which doggedly follows us throughout life. The person who embraces another's pain and suffering, whilst not simply identifying them with his own experience, in Merton's words, 'finds himself simply in the ground of life.' He continues:

He is "in Love." He lives, then, as a seed planted in the ground. As Christ said, the seed planted in the ground must die. To be as a seed in the ground of one's life is to dissolve in the ground in order to become fruitful. One disappears into Love, in order to "be Love."¹

What Merton is referring to in this passage is that process by which each of us works out our true identity in communion with others through the unity of Love. As the illusory differences of the false self which distract us from union with our sisters and brothers gradually fall away, we gain an appreciation for what Merton was referring to when he wrote in 'The Inner Experience' that one's 'inner self is, in fact, inseparable from Christ and hence in a mysterious and unique way inseparable from all the other "I"s who live in Christ, so that they all form one "mystical person" which is "Christ."²

As is apparent by now, my talk also addresses the process of becoming fully human, which means becoming the person God wills as a physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual being. The psychologist James Garbarino, writing in his book *Lost Boys*, reminds us:

The process of kindling the divine flame begins with connection. Child development is fundamentally social: a human infant can neither survive physically nor develop normally on its own. This is why there is no such thing as "a baby"; there is only "a baby in relation to someone else."³

I would contend that Garbarino's words are as true for each of us as they are for the infant gazing into her mother's eyes in a dance of two souls united through Love.

We are slowly realizing that the very notion of mind itself makes sense only within the context of sustaining and transforming relationships with other persons, and that the long-cherished ideal of the autonomous, independently existing self is a fiction. Garbarino's words therefore represent a major paradigm shift in our understanding of the self, one which moves us away from the predominant view of self as an entity to be discovered, or as a psychic 'prize' that is somehow wrested away from the world through a titanic, though solitary, struggle.

Throughout his writings Merton develops a sophisticated theory of self, one that is conversational, communal, and dialectical in nature. His thought poses a serious challenge not only to the field of psychology, but also to Christianity as it has developed over the centuries in the West. Both Merton and Garbarino, in highlighting the *interpenetration* of the true self in the larger human community, provide a necessary corrective to the excessively self-focused, self-preoccupied view that has long dominated our intellectual tradition. While a detailed exploration into the nature of the true self is beyond the scope of the present talk, I would argue that the uniquely Christian gospel of Love contains within it a fully developed and vital psychology of the self which avoids the major limitations of both psychoanalysis and Buddhism, which until now have played the most critical roles in this productive cross-cultural encounter. The Christian voice has been largely and strangely missing from the ensuing dialogue, and Merton's thought brings to the conversation a truly revolutionary element, one which we ignore at our peril.

Merton dares us to re-capture the original message behind the Gospel's call to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. He emphasizes that our true self can only be discovered in and through others, as individually we are incomplete. In a particularly revealing note recorded in one of his reading notebooks from 1955, Merton

foreshadows this understanding of the communal, dialectical self as it has evolved:

This gift (the psychic gift of the self to another) makes us in fact receptive to others, and this enables us to be ourselves in the true self integrated with God and other men—and thus our own self is achieved by contact with others.⁴

In I Corinthians, St Paul writes of the human members who make up the living body of the Church, comparing them to the various parts of the body in a beautifully vivid metaphor celebrating the diverse gifts and identities that God has collectively given us. He emphasizes that the body is not identified with any one of its parts, and the fact that these are different from one another in no way detracts from their importance to the overall functioning of the organism. What is perhaps most revealing in this passage is the constitutive nature of the relationship between members of the body. It is only by means of the relationship existing between the eye and the ear, for example, that either of them is capable of realizing its essential nature. Furthermore, the relationships amongst the members of the body are *dialectical* in nature, as it is only through this interrelatedness that we can properly speak of the individual members of the body as being arms or hands or eyes in the first place. Not only are such relationships essential in bringing forth and defining the individual members of the body, but they are *transformative* as well. The loss or diminution of a function in one sense, such as sight, leads oftentimes to a heightened degree of sensitivity in another, such as hearing. Weakness and strength, wholeness and fragmentation cannot be considered in isolation from one another, but are utterly dependent upon a shifting relational context for their very being.

What St Paul is suggesting in this oft-quoted passage does not sound to me like the notion of the self as cultivated by traditional academic psychology, but rather more closely resembles an understanding arising out of the Eastern tradition. The implications of this teaching for our daily interactions seem profound, if unsettling, and have posed particular emotional and spiritual challenges in my work with the children we treat. If their burning sense of rejection and isolation are an essential aspect of my developing self, and cannot exist apart from this process of becoming, how do I respond in a manner that understands and respects their experience, yet which nonetheless seeks to transcend it in a truly loving manner? My strength

must then somehow be theirs, and their journey of healing mine, just as my invested presence in the psychotherapy process is in fact an investment in my own transformation and healing, for only thus can each of us develop as God intends. I must be open to my clients loving me as I seek to love them from within a dialectic which transforms each according to St Paul's words, 'I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me' (Galatians 2:20).

To realize our true self, we must remain in communion with other persons. Apart from this sustaining connectedness, we grow increasingly preoccupied and even obsessed with, though unable to truly love, ourselves—a dynamic that many feel lies at the root of the narcissistic disorders so common in our age. We grow to believe that love of both self and other flows out from our own efforts, and learn very quickly to experience shame and a deep, burning inadequacy over our perceived shortcomings and faults.

It is as though we view life through the lens of a microscope, which provides an exquisitely detailed image of a limited aspect of the ever-changing panorama unfolding around us. As we dare shift our gaze away from the eyepiece and attend to the interpenetration of self and other that constitutes the core of our true self, we discover that our collective efforts at working out our unique identity in the communal Body of Christ are necessary for each of us to have any hope of attaining our own salvation:

Every other man is a piece of myself, for I am a part and a member of mankind...What I do is also done for them and with them and by them. What they do is done in me and by me and for me. But each one of us remains responsible for his own share in the life of the whole body. Charity cannot be what it is supposed to be as long as I do not see that my life represents my own allotment in the life of a whole supernatural organism to which I belong.⁵

Ordinarily, one does not find the healing process within psychotherapy described as an attempt to love the person of our client, but rather we find references to the role of 'reparative experiences,' 'working through' and 'mutative interpretations.' What has become obvious to me through the stories of the children I have known in treatment is that these explanations fail to embrace the richness of the overall movement that transpires within therapy. While these concepts address important technical aspects that characterize a healing relationship, they fail to take into consideration that which is

most central: the power of Love as it is lived out in the here-and-now of a genuine encounter between two souls.

The concept of empathy as developed by the founder of the humanistic movement in psychology, Carl Rogers, provides us with the most productive entrée into the present thesis. When this most familiar concept is approached anew, we find that empathy is most properly understood as *love lived in the world*, as a way of being that transcends the boundaries of our individual concerns. Rather than being synonymous with a vague if reassuring feeling of compassion, or a sympathetic identification with another's suffering, empathy challenges us to act so as to facilitate the realization of the other's innermost potential for becoming. That which remains at the level of a cognitive and affective understanding of the subjective experience of another, no matter how accurate, misses the mark and cannot truly be considered empathy.

The transcendent power of empathy is perhaps most evident when we consider a parent's interactions with an infant, who is not only utterly dependent upon others for an accurate understanding of her internal needs and affective states for her physical survival, but is equally reliant upon their continuing responsiveness. Good-enough parenting requires, for example, not only an accurate discrimination from amongst the various possible nuances in an infant's cries, but also that this understanding lead to action which helps realize the meaning inherent in the infant's experience. Our understanding of another's experiential world must translate into an active participation in that person's journey of becoming, whether this entails changing a wet diaper, helping a young child pronounce a printed word, or sitting with a suicidal teen who cannot make sense of the sexual abuse she has known at the hands of her father.

Rogers wrote long and eloquently on the nature and role of empathy in human growth and development, summarizing much of his thinking on the subject in an essay written toward the end of his life in which he states:

It [empathy] means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever that he or she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in the other's life, moving about in it delicately

without making judgments; it means sensing meanings of which he or she is scarcely aware. . . It includes communicating your sensings of the person's world as you look with fresh and unfrightened eyes at elements of which he or she is fearful. It means frequently checking with the person as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you receive... By pointing to the possible meanings in the flow of another person's experiencing, you help the other to focus on this useful type of referent, to experience the meanings more fully, and to move forward in the experiencing.⁶

Several elements of this view of empathy are central to our considerations here. First, empathy involves an immersion within the felt subjective world of the other, seeking to understand the experience of that person from within their perspective, without taking on that view as one's own. Empathy further requires that one accurately communicate this understanding to the other person. Empathy therefore serves to dissolve to some degree the alienation that defines the human condition. Second, empathy entails our joining the other person along their trek of self-discovery, by helping bring together and integrate meanings that are not currently available to them at a level of conscious awareness. Third, empathy involves a complete acceptance of the totality of the other person's subjective experience, including that which they find most frightful, anxiety-provoking, or repulsive in themselves. In seeing beyond those aspects of the other's experiential world that serve to distract and distance them from the essential core of their true self, we in effect accept the person in a manner that they may be unable to do for themselves. Fourth, our empathic immersion and subsequent responsiveness are guided by the degree of 'fit' between our understanding and the organic process of becoming residing within the other. The 'rightness' of our efforts is assessed by their correspondence with this organic process. Finally, empathy transforms the person who participates in the other's journey of becoming as surely as it does the recipient of our empathic strivings. Essentially, if we consider each of these aspects of empathy as they interact with one another, what we arrive at is an operational definition of love of both self and other.

The essence of genuine human freedom lies in discerning that our true self is to be found far beyond the countless external distractions that surround us. We grow up in Western culture taught, as Merton

notes in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, that people 'can only find themselves by asserting their own desires and appetites in a struggle with the rest of the world. . . [and] can only conceive one way of becoming real: cutting themselves off from other people and building a barrier of contrast and distinction between themselves and other men.'⁷ Our senses are constantly impinged upon by messages that imply that we will complete ourselves, find happiness and true satisfaction, and achieve 'fulfillment' by embracing the world of material beings. We remain frenzied, driven to ever-greater activity and a deeper immersion in the addictive world of these distractions. Again, as Merton describes the false self in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

I have what you have not. I am what you are not. I have taken what you have failed to take and I have seized what you could never get. Therefore you suffer and I am happy, you are despised and I am praised, you die and I live; you are nothing and I am something, and I am all the more something because you are nothing. And thus I spend my life admiring the distance between you and me; at times this even helps me to forget the other men who have what I have not and who have taken what I was too slow to take and who have seized what was beyond my reach, who are praised as I cannot be praised and who live on my death.⁸

The self thus understood is a 'zero-sum game,' where there are clear winners and losers, and where my satisfaction comes at your expense. Given this backdrop, the commonly observed allure of these external distractions becomes more readily understood, for to step out of this exhausting frenzy of doing and acquiring is to risk an existential encounter with one's inner world. This may be terribly threatening to someone who has not known the loving presence of another person willing to accompany them in their journey of becoming, with its inherent anxieties and uncertainties. Many of the self-destructive, illegal, and problematic behaviors displayed by the children we treat, such as drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuous sexuality, gang activity, violence, depression and anxiety, extreme difficulty falling asleep at night, the need for constant activity—all may be understood as attempts at escaping from the false self, and the nagging sense of unworthiness that is its hallmark.

To slow down and become familiar with their internal experience is to confront the terrible fear that they are in fact abnormal and 'crazy,' and that others can clearly discern the deep sense of shame that

they mistakenly believe represents their true self. The feverish activity of their lives reflects the urgency with which they avoid the gnawing fear that they are fundamentally lacking, inadequate, unworthy, and unlovable. For on some unconscious level they understand all-too-well that to be unworthy of love is to be isolated and alone, with no hope for union with others. And such is the nature of the hell that these children seek to avoid, that they tragically continue to sacrifice the possibility of others coming to know them in their pain and brokenness, which is the one thing that would allow them to see through the deceptions of the false self.

While the presenting issues, the life histories and the diagnoses accompanying these children vary significantly, a common theme is their core experience of self. This refers to whether or not each of them has, again in Garbarino's words, been 'connected rather than abandoned, accepted rather than rejected, and nurtured rather than neglected and abused.'⁹ In each instance one is drawn to the manner in which these youths have grown up lacking the experience of care-taking adults who have responded consistently to the Spark of the Divine residing within them. Those who were responsible for their care have often literally as well as metaphorically not seen them. They have become invisible to those around them, being related to as mere psychic extensions of their caregivers, and as a way of satisfying their own numerous and unmet needs. Where their unique gifts called out for reverence and respect, they have instead been rejected and devalued, and where love should have been shown them, they have known instead the searing pain of shame. They subsequently suffer from a profound inability to reach out to others and attain union with them, because, as Merton notes in 'The Inner Experience,'

We are not capable of union with one another on the deepest level until the inner self in each one of us is sufficiently awakened to confront the inmost spirit of the other.¹⁰ (*italics added*).

When children are exposed to an interpersonal environment incapable of recognizing and responding to the manner in which they manifest the Divine, they become objectified, devalued, and shamed. Their soul increasingly 'covers itself with layers of insulation. As the years pass, this protective shell may harden to the point where eventually the soul seems dormant, so out of touch with the day-to-day self it becomes so even to the tormented individual himself.'¹¹

These children in essence 'become' a false self. Our task is to recognize and respond to the still-glowing embers of the true self before these extinguish altogether, and to coax this elusive 'inmost spirit' back into the world of genuine human relatedness.

In spite of the numerous traumas and repeated failures of caretaking adults to respond sensitively to their needs, the tenacity with which the Indwelling Divinity perseveres in the midst of nearly constant attack announces itself clearly in each of these children. The courage that they display is humbling. As we appreciate how such damaged children cautiously approach life, alert to the ever-present dangers inherent in revealing themselves to others, we develop an abiding appreciation and respect for the 'logic' and wisdom that their behaviors demonstrate.

We discern the soul's resolute, though often muted, quest for connection and recognition, the way in which it seeks to become visible once more in the world of interpersonal relationships. Deep within the 'layers of insulation' that slowly come to cover the souls of these children, there lies, in Merton's words from *Hagia Sophia*, 'the Child who is prisoner in all the people, and who says nothing. She smiles, for though they have bound her, she cannot be a prisoner. . . she does not understand imprisonment.'¹² It is in freeing this Child, that we come to free ourselves as well.

In truly opening ourselves to these children's experiences, we come to understand that their pain is our pain, their brokenness ours, and that it is not in spite of these qualities that they and we are ultimately worthy of love and care, but *because* of them. And this is a difficult yet tremendously liberating lesson for each of us. In loving another person, we achieve an intimate knowledge of that person as a unique Echo of the Divine, and thereby come not only to understand but also to facilitate the other's attaining 'his own spiritual reality, his own personal identity.'¹³

Love, if it is genuine, loves not in spite of the other person's shortcomings, faults, and failures, nor does it demand that the other somehow become worthy of our love. Rather, we are called to emulate the example of Christ, who loved all those he encountered regardless of considerations of worth.

There is no way under the sun to make a man worthy of love except by loving him. As soon as he realizes himself loved – if he is not so weak that he can no longer bear to be loved – he will feel himself

instantly worthy of love. He will respond by drawing a mysterious spiritual value out of his own depth, a new identity called into being by the love that is addressed to him.¹⁴

Merton's words are particularly poignant in clinical work with traumatized children, who frequently do not feel themselves worthy of love and care, and who strenuously resist those who would suggest otherwise. And yet, their recovery and healing require that they experience love, so that they may come to love themselves and ultimately, other persons.

To close, the children whose stories have informed these thoughts teach us that what is ultimately healing and transformative in the therapeutic process is the power of love. Merton captures this truth simply yet powerfully when he writes in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

One of the paradoxes of the mystical life is this: that a man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love.¹⁵

To be truly able to 'pass entirely out of' the external self, and 'empty' the self of life's many distractions requires an intimacy, courage, and faith that seems exceedingly rare. Rather than being characterized by an excessive concern with one's own independence and self-sufficiency, the self that is capable of genuine love has as its hallmark a true interdependence, allowing the self to simultaneously delight in shared experiencing, while appreciating the distinctiveness of the other.

Notes and References

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