Self-Understanding

The Path to Empathy

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Dimensions of Empathic Therapy

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

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Table of Contents

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Describing the concept of self-understanding is excruciatingly difficult for me, because it is a delicate issue with which I struggle daily. I have known so many others who seem to instinctively understand and love themselves. They walk with a distinctive air; their voice resonates with authority and self-confidence. By contrast, I have always doubted myself. While I was never critical to the point of self-loathing, neither was I mercifully kind to myself. Like a perfectionistic plastic surgeon or psychologist, I could always find a part of my inner or outer self that could be reshaped or reinvented in a more appealing way. It took many years for me to understand and appreciate myself. My path to genuine empathy—to deeply understanding and appreciating others—was detoured by this inability to understand and appreciate myself.

Unlike Narcissus of Greek mythology, who would fall hopelessly in love with his own reflection, whenever I saw my profile reflected in a mirror or store window, a shudder ran down my spine. I saw a bespectacled young man, timid and a little too gentle, whose eyebrows were knotted in concentration upon some weighty concern, so unlike the strong, handsome blade I fantasized myself to be. Occasionally, I noticed a warm smile across my face, like the Cheshire cat's smile, that I took great pride in, because it radiated the humor and love of life that simmered inside. My smile was the feature of my appearance that I most appreciated. I would see myself in a reflection and wonder who that person was; I whimsically regretted that I did not see a presence as distinguished as Gregory Peck or as hip as Brad Pitt. I saw me—and with some disappointment.

I remember one of my friends sharing her honest opinion of me in a heated argument. Each of her statements was so critical that it brought me to the verge of tears. I could not bear to hear that at times I am overly sensitive to the point of being girlish, unsuccessful in financial pursuits, and so novel in my opinions that I was puzzling to my peers. She enumerated some of my many wonderful qualities to buffer the assault of hearing all of my frailties revealed, but I could not appreciate them, because my mind was so fixated on assimilating my inadequacies. I realized then that I did not know myself because if I had, I

would not have been shocked at hearing the inevitable litany of positive and negative traits that we all possess. In fact, when I heard myself described, just as I did not recognize my own profile in a reflection, I could not believe that I was the person to whom my friend referred.

After I earned my doctorate in counseling, I thought I had been anointed with a special understanding of human psychology, only to discover that I was no more enlightened. I acquired reams of factual information on diagnosis, counseling techniques, normal and abnormal development, statistics, research methods, and the like, but I had learned so little about myself I began to feel like an imposter. How could I help a client gain insight and self-love when I had not myself achieved these attributes? Somehow my capacity to empathize with my clients was tied to my ability to understand myself, but the connection was intellectually fuzzy. My intuition prompted me to seek my own psychotherapy, because emotionally I knew that I had to know and love myself before I could claim to understand and soothe another's psyche and to bring them to a similar place of self-love.

Each time I sat with my psychotherapist, I learned something new about myself and came to recognize further mysteries to be explored. I welled up with sadness whenever I was confronted in therapy by a behavior of my own that may have caused pain to others or brought about my own suffering. I came to realize that I created distortions about myself in order to accept and love myself, but my true growth and self-love came when I accepted myself as I am, in all my contradictions. The greatest article of self-understanding was the realization that I, like everyone else, am fallible and inconsistent; I share with others this imperfection and inconsistency of personality as a core characteristic. Accepting the inconsistency in my own character allowed my deeper understanding of this once puzzling phenomenon in my clients and friends.

From Self-Understanding to Empathy

Self-understanding for me began in an exploration of my childhood. While I am not a staunch advocate of Freudian technique, reviewing my childhood in therapy helped me to gain insight into who I am. I realized that I am in part an inexact mixture of my mother's and father's qualities, both good and bad. It was enlightening to accept this fact, which I had so long denied. I was humbled to relearn the lessons of high school biology books in my own therapy: so much of me was a reflection of my genes and

parenting. Yet there was an area of my personality that could not be traced to genes or parents. There was a huge part of me that was made by me.

So many of my clients fall into the trap of using psychotherapy as a place to assign blame to parents, siblings, or others for their current suffering. As a therapist, I was once their willing coconspirator in this endeavor, until I saw in my own life that the number of persons and circumstances who I could assign blame for my current personality was so numerous that the whole universe could conceivably be guilty for causing me to become me. I learned that in true empathy for both self and others, we must withhold blame; for blame diminishes our ability to see a balanced reality, even ennobling self-blame. We move through life touched by manifold persons and forces, often beyond our control, with different intentions for us.

In psychotherapy, we do best when we chronicle life's complexity, forgive, and move on. I saw in the complexity of my own life the futility of explaining me or anyone else by any one person or element. Ultimately, I saw the futility and simplicity of blaming.

While my family was normal in many respects, it was also very unusual. I was brought up with a very idealistic value system, steeped in an intellectual curiosity, in a seemingly materialistic and anti-intellectual society. While this might sound like a fortunate circumstance, it was also a source of misunderstanding with others. I kept encountering people who experienced my intellectual qualities and generosity negatively. I was completely perplexed, for my parents had always taught me that learning and giving to others were two of the highest virtues. Ironically, it was in my own moral and intellectual loneliness that I learned to appreciate the loneliness of others who, while unlike myself in other ways, choose or appear to be different.

Interestingly, in my solitude I learned an important lesson: To learn to be happy by yourself is the greatest article of personal growth. Learning to be emotionally self-sufficient helps remove the "neediness" for others, but not the desire for them. Ironically, as soon as I learned to be happy on my own, my choice of friends and companions improved, because I was suddenly guided by wisdom instead of the desperate need to fill the void of loneliness.

When I attempt to understand others, I try to draw from my own personal struggle to understand

myself. It is important for me to recall the depth and intensity of my own feelings in order to truly appreciate a client's similar issues. I have come to a simple realization about empathy: The more we can understand ourselves, in both our imperfections and inconsistencies, the more we can empathize with others. Genuine empathy begins in self- understanding.

What I Learned From Myself that I Share

When I counsel others, I try to assume their perspective—to fathom their pain as they see it. For me, this is the heart of empathy. But psychotherapy cannot stop at my own understanding of the client's issues—that would make it an empty academic enterprise. The client's self-understanding and eventual self-love is paramount. Once I understand the client, I strive to help the client understand himself or herself. I want to become a mirror that reflects to the client as much of his or her unseen goodness and struggle as I can.

Often I hear clients relate a litany of self-criticism—they are too fat, too plain, too short, too naive, and so on. Ironically, the clients who share this with me are often in other ways very attractive and intelligent people, but someone along the way a parent or other intimate used their one vulnerability or imperfection as a way to hurt or reject them. I suspect that because we are all imperfect in some way, we each harbor an Achilles heel, a psychological vulnerability that others can use to hurt us.

Many therapists focus on the issue the client brings instead of on the client. I have found that over-dissection of an issue often gives the issue greater importance than it is worth. What most clients yearn is not resolution of an issue per se, but to acquire the ability to feel love and empathy from others. I remember distinctly one young woman who I assessed for suicidal ideation. I will never forget her blue and expressive eyes. She was truly beautiful; and I remember listening with a nervous awe how much she hated herself, how much of a failure she thought she was, and how life had brought her nothing but heartache. Her parents were both alcoholics; and her boyfriend was an abusive cocaine addict who once knocked her down in anger. Contrary to all my training and sense of professionalism, I remarked, "You are so beautiful and charming, I know so many people must love you and are going to love you. I feel so sorry you feel the way you do." As a male therapist, I initially regretted what I had said, thinking it could be taken the wrong way. But the client started crying and then a serenity came over her. I had said

exactly what she needed to hear—that somebody would love her.

I like to focus at some point in therapy on what's special about the client, irrespective of what brought the client to me. I am often surprised at how many handsome people think they are ugly, how many of the gifted think they are ordinary, and how many especially kind and caring people think they are too selfish.

We are living in a highly critical culture: praising others with sincerity does not come as easily to us as tearing them down. With so many negative messages circulating, it has become commonplace for many people to carry around a distorted image of themselves. They cannot understand themselves, because those in their world did not accurately reflect to them their good attributes and, perhaps, overemphasized their failings. A course of therapy with a strong, healing emphasis on positive regard often counterbalances the negative messages received in the home, workplace, and street.

I urge my clients to ignore the messages of our culture that put undue emphasis on the most superficial aspects of human life—youth, beauty, sexuality, wealth, and fame. Our culture virtually sets us up for unhappiness, as great wealth will only be attained by the few; and youthful beauty and fame are only transient states. Sexuality is not the same as love and it grows empty without love as its motive. When all is said and done, acts of pure love, whether love of a person, a noble cause, or of humanity, bring us the most enduring happiness. I also believe that measures we take to show love for ourselves, such as further education, exercise, or even psychotherapy, are paths to greater contentment.

Clients fail to understand that the path to happiness is often paved with painful self-discovery. We often consciously and unconsciously impede happiness from entering our lives by erecting the defense mechanisms that once protected us from pain, but are now only archaic remnants of a world that no longer exists. I remember one client who was abandoned by his mother as child. His mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia and drowned her delusions and hallucinations in alcohol as the only humane self-medication. My client, in his craving for love, would aggressively attempt to meet women. But, then, after a date or two, would become elusive and drop the relationship, only to start the pattern over—a self-made Sisyphus.

I tried to point out this pattern to him, at first delicately and then with some resolve. He would resist

my comments and always find the problem in the woman. She was always lacking in some way and not worthy of his love. Of course, deep in his psyche the problem was the woman—the first woman in his life, his mother, who abandoned him. He rejected these women because he could not bear to allow them to hurt him as his mother had. His actions were a defense mechanism that originally enabled him to psychologically survive his painful relationship with his mother, but now this pattern of defensive behavior was interfering with his attaining the love he craved. Facing this self-destructive pattern caused a great deal of pain because it uncovered an imperfection in him. But his self-knowledge enabled him to enter relationships for longer periods of time and, finally, to achieve the love and happiness he desired.

Self-understanding is never a linear process. The "self" is an intricate labyrinth in which we often lose our way on the path to self-understanding. When we have gained an understanding of one dimension, another becomes mysterious. This is especially likely to happen when we find ourselves enmeshed in a crisis or when we encounter a new or unexpected experience, such as birth, death, or betrayal, and discover that we are surprised by our reaction to it. I do not expect my clients to exhaustively understand themselves, as of course I have not myself reached anything like a state of perfected self-understanding. Nor do I believe that I, or anyone else, is capable of reaching a static state of complete self-understanding. Some aspects of ourselves remain a mystery forever and are probably better left that way. It is perhaps the mystery of ourselves that peaks our lifelong introspection and growth. A state of absolute self-knowledge would be stagnant and boring.

Our scientific culture gives us the false optimism that everything can be reduced to logical rules or postulates; and some psychotherapists gravitate to this rigidly scientific, simplistic worldview. I believe that mystery is our eternal companion. While I have a passionate desire to explain some aspects of human behavior, especially those that may hurt or intrigue me, it can be very healing to chalk them up to mystery. In all living systems there is an irrationality or "chaos" that cannot be translated into a logical theorem of science. I believe that there are aspects of ourselves and our loved ones that cannot be known or accurately predicted, but must be accepted as mysterious and unpredictable.

I was trying to help a client understand why her teenage sister had committed suicide in a ghastly manner by slashing her wrists. We explored the theory that the sister did not really want to die, but wanted someone to find her "barely living" as a way to symbolize the intensity of her inner pain. My

client believed that her sister had always been happy until a recent break up with her boyfriend. She was puzzled that her sister had abruptly killed herself at a time when she seemed to be recovering from the loss and betrayal. I explained that sometimes the resolution to die gives a transient serenity before one commits suicide—at least that is what the textbooks say.

Then, I realized that neither I nor anyone else really knew why previously happy-go-lucky teenager would react so tragically to the breakup of a relationship. Clearly, many adolescents survive these crises, especially when they seem to have had a happy childhood. It was a mystery that could not be done justice by the theories of psychology.

A psychiatrist had told my client that she believed a "biological imbalance" was responsible for her sister's suicide. I recall the psychiatrist making that pronouncement while wearing a white lab coat and speaking with the precision and demeanor of a scientist. The explanation seemed to be comforting to my client, who now had something concrete to hold onto that seemed "logical." A beloved sister, with so much potential, committing suicide because of a broken heart was too "illogical" for my client to fathom. I, too, felt comforted that an irrational act could be attributed to a malfunctioning brain, freeing the survivors from guilt and freeing those of us with a "normal" brain from the vulnerability that a passing irrational impulse could endanger us. But I also sensed that the notion of a "biological imbalance" was too convenient to be true. I would stick with the mystery of the suicide despite the discomfort of living with unanswered questions and wonderment.

I discourage clients from conceptualizing the events of their lives from a single theory, whether biological, sociological or philosophical. All human behaviors are influenced simultaneously by a multitude of factors, encompassing many dimensions of the person and environment, both known and unknown. Our difficulty in explaining behavioral phenomena may reside in the poverty of our language, cognition, and memory to integrate and summarize all the forces that impinge on the person. I consider the acronym "biopsychosocial" as the best and most expedient summary of the multiple factors influencing human behavior. Yet, given our mind's inclination to assume one paradigm at a time—the way that we can only wear one pair of glasses at a time—I can understand why many seemingly espouse a "biopsychosocial" outlook while retreating to that single paradigm their mind can most comfortably handle.

CONCLUSION

The struggle to attain self-knowledge enhances our ability to empathize with others. I am very wary of psychotherapists who have never undergone painful soul-searching on their own, in therapy, or through other means. Our own struggle for self-understanding makes us more sensitive to the painful process that others must also go through toward the goal of self-understanding. I have often awakened in the middle of the night wondering about my purpose in life, worrying about aging and death, attempting to define love and friendship, and mulling over countless other problems of existence. At moments that I have faced life's mystery in new ways, my work as a psychotherapist has been enhanced. I can then face my own clients with the humility that comes from peering into the mystery of myself and knowing that I, like they, are a work in progress.