

Existential Child Therapy

**The
Existentialist
Movement**

Clark Moustakas

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Introduction

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The Existential Moment

Clark Moustakas

In each life, there are moments that leave an imprint in the mind and heart and spirit, moments that transcend lesser times and enable a person to stretch beyond what he has known, into a new realm of discovery. In such moments, the person feels his feelings; he hears his own inner dialogue; he feels his footsteps and knows them to be his own. The individual trusts his senses to guide him in the right direction. He forms words that build bridges to deeper regions of his own being and strengthen his relatedness to others. What he says and what he does and what he feels really matter.

In place of the habitual dead happenings, in place of the routine patterns and habits, in place of systems of definition and function bounded by proper time and proper place and proper role, a real person emerges who is suddenly present in the world, ready to collaborate with life, ready to use his resources for self-growth and for fundamental ties to nature and the universe. The individual no longer gets in the way of himself; he knows what he wants; he is aware.

It is this moment of awareness and discovery and presence that I call the existential moment; it is the moment when a person recognizes his own existence in the world and the unique and incomparable nature of that

existence.

The existential moment does not refer to a time dimension. It may be of brief or of long duration, but the time element is not the crucial factor. Rather, it is the living, growing self of the person, the authenticity of the individual, that takes on a meaning and a value. It may be a moment of realization of who one is, a sudden understanding of life, an awareness of the rightness of a value or conviction or decision. It may be a moment so utterly revealing that it will alter one's destiny or a moment when an apparently enduring value is destroyed.

The existential moment is a time of discovery that life may be a form of death or that death is not the end or terminal point, but a point in the process of life. It is a moment of self disclosure in which a new and distinct feeling emerges, in which a beginning identity is formed, in which the inner self is experienced in depth; or it is a moment of awareness of the emptiness and futility of a life without value.

The existential moment is a moment of pure feeling, a moment of reflection and solitude, a moment of wonder, joy or grief, an experience centered in a particular self; it is my sorrow, my elation, my despair, my excitement, it is a feeling which infuses my entire being.

The existential moment is sometimes the beginning of a new conviction

or commitment emerging from a distinctive and particular identity. Such moments provide substance for searching, struggling, feeling, asserting, yielding, facing, and choosing a direction that challenges and enhances realization of potentialities both in the individual and in his growing relationships.

In therapy, it is a moment when the child and the therapist are in full communion. Martin Buber describes the kind of communion that enables the child to develop his creative powers:

Because this human being exists: therefore, he must be really there, really facing the child, not merely there in spirit... In order to be and to remain truly present to the child he must have gathered the child's presence into his own store as one of the bearers of his communion with the world, one of the focuses of his responsibilities for the world. Of course he cannot be continually concerned with the child, either in thought or in deed, nor ought he to be. But if he has really gathered the child into his life then that subterranean dialogic, that steady potential presence of the one to the other is established and endures. Then there is reality *between* them, there is mutuality.¹

The therapist living existentially with children transcends schools of thought and adheres primarily to value and to discovery of the meaning inherent in evolving life. Such a person is sensitive to the growing nature of his own self and his own real feelings. He is willing to plunge deeply into life with a child, to venture into new and unknown regions of experience, to risk his own identity while searching and struggling and inquiring into the depths

of a troubled mind and heart. He is willing to live the moment and believe in the creative value of spontaneous, emerging life, long before he fully understands what he lives and long before the hidden pieces of the puzzle are revealed. Crisis, shock, confrontation, resistance, struggle, rejection, defeat as well as joy, silence, the excitement of discovery, the peaceful smile, the gestures of affirmation and growth—all these enter into the process of therapy in which real persons rather than ghosts engage in the challenging struggle of wills and the ennobling pursuit of meaning and value in living.

The therapist is sensitive to the self of the child, to the healthy and sick components of behavior, to the means that suddenly emerge and enable a particular child to stop fighting against his own unique selfhood, to stop battling himself and the world, and to begin to actualize his own special potentialities. At times, there are deep issues between therapist and child as they reach from the depths of hostility and despair to discover a healthy way of life. The therapist must be willing to face the child in these moments. He must be willing to take the path with the child and not be defeated by the severe feelings of hatred and hostility that the child expresses along the way. The therapist who lives in the existential sense maintains his own uniqueness, meets the requirements as they emerge, faces life openly with a willingness to recognize his own limitations and his own uncertain, groping nature in a life that has never existed before, with a child who is entirely new, no matter how much his behavior may appear like that of other children. Such

a therapist remains with himself, utilizes his own being as the central resource. He does not adhere to vested schools, although in practice he reflects his background and his affiliation. But this reflection is incorporated as one dimension of the self. He, the therapist, stands out on his own firm ground, not in terms of ideas, content, material, not in terms of facts and figures from a dead record, not in terms of concepts and theory; but he stands out, exists, present to his self as a whole, integrated being, present to his own resources as they emerge and unfold in his experiences with the child. He is committed to spontaneous, flowing, human processes and potentialities that are engendered and sparked in the communion of a significant relationship. I am not speaking of course of the existential analyst or of existentialism as such, which too often has been a system of unreal (though often imaginative) happenings and events, of odd stresses and strains, of weird themes, of behavior more thoroughly examined and analyzed than the impulses and instincts of traditional analysis.

In experiential therapy, there is a time of crisis and a time of tranquility, a time of confrontation, and a time of encounter. In the confrontation, there is an open facing of a painful issue or conflict between two persons. The child must be free, must even be encouraged to maintain his own identity, his own ideas, his own perceptions of reality, no matter how distorted they may appear to the therapist. The resources and talents and potentialities of the therapist, his entire being, must be present, facing the child, encouraging him

to unleash deeper and deeper feelings, to express his anger, his rejection, rage, sarcasm, belittlement, to express all of the negative components of a frightened and angry self. In such a moment, the therapist is present as a real human being, feeling and experiencing with the child. As powerful as the altercation may be, as violent as the child's attack may be, the therapist never loses touch with himself as a person, never fails to stay within the relationship, never surrenders his conviction that the child has capacities and resources for healthy self-emergence. He remains with the child and enables him to come to terms with his own rejection, immorality, or hatred, not by utilizing a dialectical maneuver or a professional technique, but by bringing to the child the full resources of a real self, interested and committed to the child's well being. In this moment of crucial meaning, the relationship unfolds into more and more meaningful and deeper regions of communal life. There is a release of feeling and tension, a movement toward growing awareness and insight, and a sense of responsibility. The confrontation is a way to deeper intimacy and relatedness, to authentic life between persons. The therapist must be courageous enough to live through the suffering and unknown factors in the confrontation with the child, trusting enough to let the breach heal through silent presence and communion when words and dialogue fail, strong enough to maintain his love and respect for the child whatever else may be canceled out in the issue or dispute. The therapist never loses sight of the fact that the child is seeking in his own way, however fragmentary or

futile or destructive it may appear, to find an authentic existence, to find a life of meaning and value, and to express the truth as he sees it.

In the encounter, child and therapist meet in full harmony and communion. The encounter may be an exchange of brief duration. Yet, in the moment, there is full human expression and depth. Sometimes, it is a simple sharing, a feeling of intimacy and unity between the therapist and the child where all subject-object, self-other, and individual-universal dichotomies disappear. It is an immediate, imminent reality. However alienated or detached a child may be, there remains within him an entirely unique and particular substance that is his own, intact and inviolate, an individuality that can be recognized and called forth in the encounter. Such a moment is a creative experience in which there is a dropping-off of conventions, systems, and rubrics and a letting-go so that the child reveals his real self openly and directly and the therapist enters the reality of this self disclosure in a living sense, in terms of the conditions and requirements intrinsic to the situation. Openness, receptiveness, commitment, involvement, relatedness are all significant aspects of the encounter. In the encounter between therapist and child, each person enters into a meaningful tie, where mental power and compassion mingle. No matter how complicated, how discouraging or frightening, no matter how uncertain the therapeutic process, even during the most prolonged plateau, the possibility for encounter is present if the therapist's courage and strength and perceptiveness are available, if his

resources for spontaneous engagement are present. The life of therapeutic encounter is a two-way process. It is a person-to-person meeting in which child and therapist collaborate in their search to unravel the hidden meanings; to clarify the distortions and confusion; to disclose real feelings and thoughts in a closed and fragmented self; to create a climate of learning, where conflicts, challenge, and emerging insight and awareness integrate with sensitivity and compassion in restoring a child to mature and healthy self-hood. New potentialities are actualized in the solitary inner dialogue and in the exquisite fullness of communal life.

The therapists in this book come out of different experiences and disciplines. When they speak about therapy and therapeutic process, they hold different views and different theories, but their own integrity and daring are more important than schools of thought and professional ties. In the living encounter with the child they are not bounded by any theory or system, but they live in accordance with self values and are open to spontaneous perceptions and insights, open to the unexpected, to new awareness and awakening. They stand out uniquely, individually, personally, living spontaneously and arbitrarily. They follow no rule or custom or technique but only the guiding spirit of the integrated self and the direction of their own senses. They are willing to accept the inspirations and the creative developments as well as the consequences of a life based on meaning and value and the emerging, unknown dimensions of real experience.

Notes

- 1 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1947), p. 98.