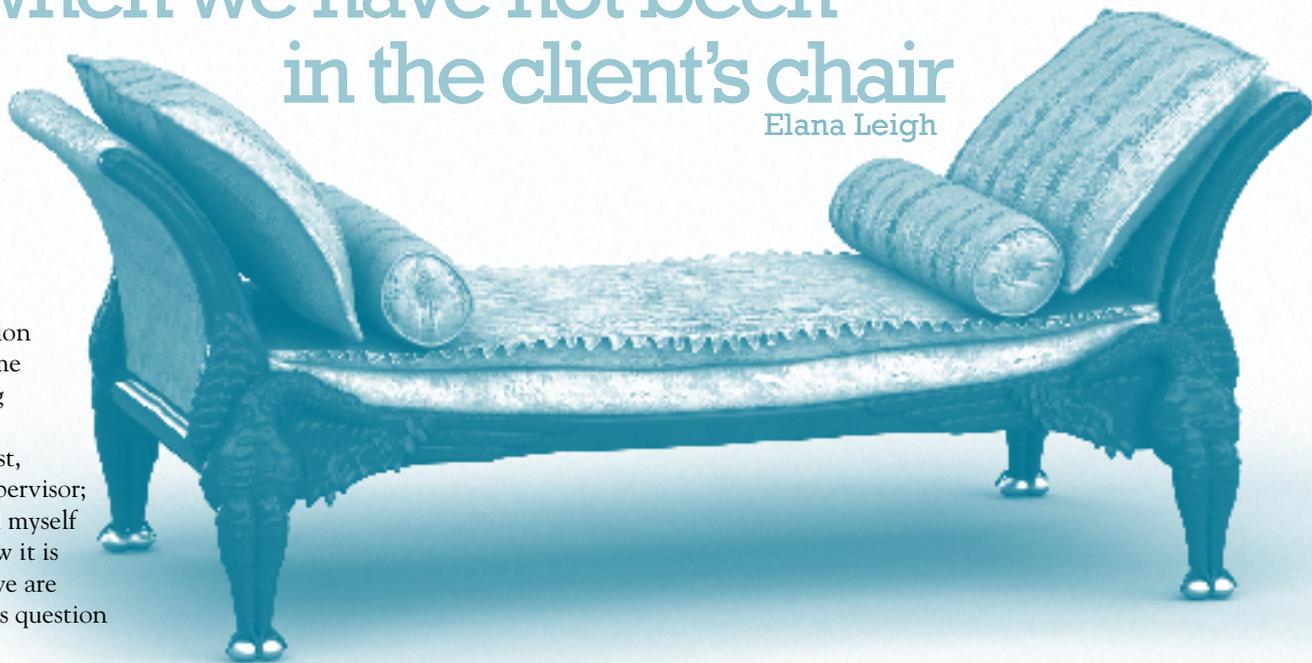


can we be in the counsellor's or psychotherapist's chair when we have not been in the client's chair

Elana Leigh



This question has engaged me through a long journey as a psychotherapist, trainer and supervisor; however I find myself wondering how it is possible that we are still posing this question in 2008.

To be eligible for membership to professional associations and to maintain membership, counsellors and psychotherapists are required to have regular supervision, ongoing professional development and at some time to have been in their own personal counselling or psychotherapy. In this journey I have bumped into counsellors resisting entering their own psychotherapy and counselling.

With this demand and encouragement, however, professionals are often entering their own psychotherapy from an enforced position as opposed to one that is driven by an inner curiosity and desire. Do training institutions have the right to demand that trainees undergo their own personal psychotherapy? I have found myself questioning my own and others' positions on the controversial

question of whether counselling and psychotherapy should be compulsory for every trainee.

Compulsory counselling/therapy for trainees?

I still stand not knowing the truth, that is, if there is one truth. What I certainly do know is that there is a profound quality difference between those counsellors and psychotherapists who have experienced an in-depth psychotherapy and those who have not.

In this paper I will explore the value of the psychotherapist/counsellor who has dared to enter into their own personal journey of psychotherapy. Since this journal is read by both counsellors and psychotherapists, I will be using the terms counsellor and psychotherapist interchangeably.

Neville Symington in his book, *The Making of a Psychotherapist* (Symington 1996) explores the centrality of empathy in our work. My understanding of this rather loosely defined term is that empathy is to have "the capacity to walk in another's shoes" but it is not the walker who defines whether a transaction has been empathic, but the owner of the shoes. It is the client who is the recipient of the transaction. Only the client will know whether he or she feels attuned to.

Whilst the content of a transaction is important, empathy is usually being gauged by the client on the unspoken process level. This process level requires the psychotherapist to understand the inside world of being a client. Being a client is a complex multilayered experience and embraces many primitive needs, usually relating to

issues of dependency and all that encapsulates. How can we, the psychotherapist, know or attempt to understand this if we have never been in the client chair? So if empathy is determined by the client and if we, as therapists, are required to have the capacity or ability to enter the phenomenological world of the client, then it requires of us an exploration of self that can only be provided through being a client. Symington elucidates the point that his main credential as a psychotherapist is that he has been a client.

Symington goes on to state that: "When we try to understand we start to theorize. Theory shall always be the servant of the phenomena and not the other way around" (xiv introduction). In other words, I believe that what he is proposing is that theorising provides a safety for the therapist in the moments of uncertainty, where trust needs to be the internal container as opposed to theory. I believe that Symington is referring to the requirement that we as therapists learn stay in the terrain of "not knowing and uncertainty". This does not exclude thinking, learning one's theories and techniques, but more what Jung suggested which was to know your theories well but to leave them behind when two souls meet (Clarkson 1992).

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In order to achieve this, we as therapists need to work with psychological processes at a metatheoretical level as well as from the inside world of the psychotherapist to the inside world of the client. When we engage with this we are usually working in the world of not knowing and co-creating meaning through a shared experience. Much of this work is evoked by feelings of dependency and all that this evokes. To have navigated

these waters we will be equipped as competent psychotherapists.

Venturing into the unknown caves of our psyche we gain more of an inner strength to stay with these mysteries that are ever present in the therapeutic relationship. This perhaps is where the inner world of the client and the psychotherapist meet and what ultimately becomes one of the most curative factors. In learning to tolerate the anxiety of not knowing we are freed from the shackles of the story of the wounded healer (Clarkson 1994).

The wounded healer in the counsellor/psychotherapist

We are sometimes posed with the question: "Why did you become a counsellor or psychotherapist?" or "When did you know that this was your chosen career?" The answers to these questions are of course unique to every psychotherapist, but there does seem to be a common thread running through many counsellors' responses to this question. Carl Jung coined the phrase "the wounded healer" to describe a phenomenon that takes place between the analyst and the patient. He further refers to those moments when the wounds of the patient and the analyst coincide and healing takes place in both parties. This can be both a conscious

and unconscious process. He warned us of this process and articulated that if the analyst's wounds were not consciously known to him or her then it could lead to a grandiose sense of self in the healer and the question of whose needs are being served would surface.

We have subsequently read many accounts of the wounded healer and Clarkson quoted how Ferenczi spoke of the natural desire in all children to heal their families. Searles (in

Clarkson 1994) confirmed this in his writings, where he stated that whilst this is an innate drive it can lead to a precocious maturity as opposed to integration in oneself. Knowing the difference between identification with the other and being a separate other, as opposed to having a fused experience where there is an ongoing enactment from the grandiose self, is imperative when our focus needs to be in the service of the client.

Clarkson reiterates this in her statement "the concept of the wounded healer should provide no excuse for us as healers to bleed all over our patients" (p102). As counsellors and psychotherapist we should be engaged in constant soul searching in order to secure the boundaries between one's own problems and those of the people that we are serving. Theories and stories of the wounded healers evolve out of authentic case histories which support the hypothesis that there are few healers without their wounds. There is truth in this old adage and it is this knowledge that potentially can keep us humble and knowing that we cannot escape the pain of the human existence.

Classical analysis was an analysis of an analysis. This meant that the analyst analyzed their patient and their countertransference within their own analysis. This was probably the original way to work intensively with the transference and countertransference. Contemporary literature concentrates and illuminates themes like: there are two patients in the therapy room - for psychotherapy to be curative the analyst needs to allow the client to impact them; and the most profound manner in which we can know the inner world of a client is through our own understanding of the impact the client has on us. None of this can be achieved without access to our own unconscious process, and this in itself is a process that belongs to the life of a psychotherapy and counselling journey.

The great masters of meditation,

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and in fact any discipline, will always say that it takes regular practice to learn about our inner worlds. It takes practice to learn about meditation and knowing how to enter into the unexplored areas of self. The same is true for counselling and psychotherapy. We can so often miss a client's experience of being a client and how hard it is to surrender into this somewhat unnatural therapeutic relationship and all that this provokes. How many times have we heard clients say: "I do not know what to do in these sessions; I do not know how to use this space; I do not know what is expected in these sessions; I do not know what to bring to these sessions"?

Many interpretations about these statements are made but it is not often that we perhaps understand and know from the inside what this means or how true it is. Learning about entering into the exploration of the unconscious or even the conscious is a process that requires a great deal of trust. Often this knowledge can only be imparted by someone who too has sat in that unknowing space and felt the primitive feelings and experiences that are provoked from this unfamiliar and strange place. How can we do this if we have not sat on the other side?

Symington (2002) wrote poetically about what he referred to as the therapist's inner task. He spoke about the more primitive aspects of the process of the counselling and psychotherapy journey. In this profound road the therapist is required to hold unbearable feelings that the client is unable to process and hold. He named these "proto-feelings" (feelings in a primitive form). These proto-feelings are required to be transformed into feelings (feelings with form and meaning). During this complex journey it is "difficult for the therapist to be the servant of these feelings as opposed to the master who uses his/her theories and techniques to make sense of them" (Symington 1996

p30). It is an arduous task whereby the therapist is required to pass through and hold the "flood tide of anxiety". During this flood therapists must find their own feelings. If and when this occurs the client emerges and grows and together they flourish. This requirement of tolerating the angst of the unknown space requires us as therapists and counsellors to have our own therapeutic space as a client; to have experienced the process and capacity of another tolerating this for us; and to have tolerated surrendering to this process.

A client once reported to me about the "awful" feelings she experienced whilst sitting in the waiting area before her psychotherapy session. We worked in many interesting ways on this ongoing experience but it was not until I too had the experience of one day quite uncharacteristically finding myself in my own therapist's waiting room that I really knew what these words from my client actually meant. I too experienced the utter vulnerability of being a client in a waiting room and the sense of exposure, the nakedness that one can feel and the projections that can be provoked by something that perhaps can seem so benign. This example reiterates the point that it is through the journey of being in one's own psychotherapy that we learn the inner map that guides us through the intricate psychological journeys of others - namely our clients.

The wounded healer in the counsellor/psychotherapist trainee

Many therapists enter the profession through sheer curiosity of their own psychological material, or perhaps because they have been practising as the family of origin's "therapist" for years. "If I have been the family and community therapist why not make it my profession?" This is a common theme in the stories

of wounded healers, and it is those same individuals who become trainee counsellors and psychotherapists and who later potentially become highly skilled and talented in the profession. It is often because of this role that they originally took on in their family of origin coupled with their highly developed intuition and ability to listen empathically that facilitates them becoming healers in one way or another.

Like many tales there is always the other side. Some call this the shadow, some call it the flip side of the coin but what is being referred to here, is that it is often these very same people that shy away from being in the client's chair and therefore choose the softer option of entering training programs. They have learnt to be available for others and their sense of self has evolved through this role. Their hunger to discover more insight into themselves can often only be met in vicarious ways as opposed to being direct and therefore available to being a vulnerable client. The survival of their sense of self has been in being in the therapist or helping role. They have been internally organised through their experience of themselves as the "knower"; as the "problem solver"; as the sane one amongst the insane; the one who creates order through the chaos and through ensuring that no-one gets to know the fear that underpins this role.

The fear of what if they, and others, ever discovered that underneath this mask or role lived a frightened individual who held inappropriate power. An all-knowing self masking an unprotected young self. The world would feel as if it were crumbling if this defence began to melt. How can this vulnerable self appear scared to another, especially if the other is part of a familiar system? Here I am referring to the metaphor of the counselling and psychotherapy world being the new-founded family. The truth must be hidden at all costs.

I am proposing that the natural desire and curiosity to enter into personal psychotherapy is stunted through a highly developed and

legitimate fear of being found, being seen and being known. This fear may not deny the longing to be seen and known, not to mention the longing to be held by someone competent, someone safe and who takes on the role the original parents failed to do.

They will come to know and integrate their training journey from the inside which defines a successful training in the art of psychotherapy and counselling as opposed to being a well- trained technician.

This dynamic is a contributing factor to the power of the transference in training arenas. When a trainee enters the training with these longings and habitual role, then the story may be that they are secretly entering the training to meet their needs. In writing this I am making conscious that which I believe is unconscious in many trainees and training systems. These talented individuals can only get their primitive needs met in a secretive, un-owned way. Transference is alive and well in the training room and in many ways it needs to be, in order for the learning to take place from the inside world of the trainee. The problem arises when trainers are not aware of this syndrome and instead of facilitating a healthy outcome get caught in the unconscious enactment.

The process of psychotherapy training is a process of deconstruction and then reconstruction. It is through this process that the psychotherapy trainee develops their new hopefully integrated professional and personal identity. What is imperative here is how this is managed and worked with. It is the fine line and the sensitive grey area that exists between the trainee's personal psychotherapy needs and their training needs that is required to

be made more explicit and managed. These dynamics in a training room are complex and multilayered and bring in many more complexities than that which exists in the privacy of an intimate individual psychotherapy. It raises issues of siblings and family dynamics that create richness of psychotherapy and counselling trainings.

Trainees, in their own personal psychotherapy, are able to have a container outside the training room to process and work with the conscious and unconscious processes that are evoked in the training. In this journey they will meet all the gifts that have been described in the former section of this article.

They will come to know and integrate their training journey from the inside which defines a successful training in the art of psychotherapy and counselling as opposed to being a well- trained technician. They will have hopefully grappled with and learnt the difference between knowing their theories and as Jung suggested knowing the moments when these need to be cast aside in the service of staying in the unknowing space.

Conclusion

Casement (2002) writes: "In Sanskrit the word for certainty is the same as the word for imprisonment and the word for non-certainty is the same as the word for freedom." The journey of the wounded healer from a compulsive need to know, arising from a life-saving fantasy, to a state of

knowing without needing to save, is fundamental to the development of a therapist. It requires us to develop the ability to tolerate not knowing, and to remain secure in the role of a healer. This implicit awareness, a consequence of personal therapy, leaves the wounded healer conscious and unencumbered, and thus available to the client. ♥

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