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Clients as poets: reflections on personal writing in the process of psychological change.

In my work as a psychologist in adult mental health, I receive all kinds of referrals from GPs. I almost always ask clients to write because, after a number of years, I have seen how writing can be a great help in the therapeutic process, and one never knows what will emerge.

First of all I suggest a diary. I explain this to clients by saying that I will never see them at home, that it sometimes gives a different perspective on their everyday life, that it helps us look for patterns in their problems, and so on. People respond very differently to such a suggestion. Some find it difficult to write at all, some see it as some sort of test and worry that it will not be “good enough”, some instinctively feel it would give too much away and make their problems “too real”, and some can only write about practical details with no emotional content. Others however, find the task of writing immensely liberating, even though they may not have been encouraged to express themselves this way in the past. Whatever the response and content, it always reveals fascinating glimpses, for me, into how that person thinks and such writing can be used in a collaborative way both by myself and the client.

Once encouraged to write, clients often continue to do so for themselves. The diary records important events, significant thoughts or suddenly recovered memories. Clients often begin to use this “work book” in quite individual ways: as a tool to look at their own selves (particularly the extent that they can inhabit very different selves at different time and on different days), and for looking at the patterns in their own lives and relationships, and their own psychological change.

With what seems to me amazing frequency, suddenly there is a poem! Perhaps I find it so amazing because I have never written one myself and assume some special talent is necessary. Here are “ordinary” people with no particular literary background, and without any particular suggestion from me, who write, quite spontaneously, very powerful and varied poems about their own psychological distress and change. One person used to write almost every week – short poems but each written on a card with a carefully chosen illustration. Another client, a sexual abuse survivor, has written two books of poems about her anguish and despair – such a rich variety, so much personal pain which I have felt privileged and humbled to read. Many seem to me quite equal to much that is commercially published.

I should like to use two of Mandy’s poems (with permission) as illustrations of the depth and power of such personal writing. The first, “Far Removed”, concerns a dream that Mandy had as a child and continued to dream as an adult. Her telling me about the dream and writing about it was the beginning of her being able to acknowledge her pain and her “unacceptability” to her

family, particularly her mother. The second, "Kiss me Goodbye" was written at the end of therapy.

Far Removed

*She stands across the bridge from me
A figure so familiar within closed eyes.
She calls my name, so oft heard before,
It rings like a tolling bell: the same.
I walk towards her, tiny arms outstretched
'till the wood beneath my feet collapses
and in one awful moment I am trapped.
Each way I step, boards fall away,
Blue gushing water far, far beneath.
My doom is sealed, blindly still she calls
I cry backbut she does not move.
She stands across the bridge from me,
So distant and removed.
A sleeping child awakes and cries
A father's voice soothes a fevered brow
The child's eyes close, sleep comes once more
But still it haunts in darkened dreams
The memory of it can never fade.*

Kiss me goodbye

*We've been together for all of my life
Two of us joined but so different.
You reflect all that is in me that is bad,
And when I am you I am drowning.
Every time you come back I am haunted
And every time you go I am relieved.
Not a year has gone by in ten,
That you haven't visited and
Twisted my soul and torn me apart.
I've tried to understand you....
In dark dreams and quiet moments
I despaired your return
And when I look back,
I can't remember who you were!
You hurt me so much,
Cause me pain, anger and fear.
I've begged you never to re-kindle
That me I can't control.
I've begged you, implored you
To stop the inner turmoil.
No good can come of us
Being back together in misery.
So once again I ask*

*Kiss me goodbye
And live only in my nightmares.
I have learnt from you
And now it is time for me to move on
And I leave you behind.
"I" have returned, refreshed,
in control now of "I"
and you can no longer belong.
We can no longer share the same pillow or flesh
So now it is your turn
To leave me alone..... forever,
Because with you in my heart
I can only move in circles
My head bowed and low.*

*So having listened, she kissed
Me goodbye, and I watched
Silently, as she walked away
Smiling once more, knowing that
We would probably meet again.*

Where do such poems come from? When I ask clients, they usually say something like "well it just came out, in a whole piece". There is no doubt in my mind that such writing can be immensely important in the process of psychological change. Do we have any understanding of how this creative process occurs? It seems obvious to me that there is so much in the psychotherapeutic encounter that is beyond our capacity to fully understand or fully experience.

We "trade in the unknown and partly known" (Mair, 1989, p 280) all the time. There was nothing in my official clinical psychology training curriculum that even glanced in the direction of the potential healing properties of self generated writing. Nor was I encouraged even to acknowledge the extent to which we do not understand and do not have the language to describe so much of the experience of therapy for both client and therapist. Was that simply the function of one particular course? I have spoken to recent trainees, and the "application of techniques approach" still seems alive and thriving. My presentation of cases in my department where I regularly share clients' writing, is certainly greeted with considerable scepticism and surprise. Are there any training courses which do address the place of writing in the therapeutic process? If I had not initially specifically suggested to clients that they express themselves in this way, it seems likely that, for most, the poems would not have been written.

Mandy is now "cured". She no longer compulsively pulls her hair out as she has done for the last ten years. All previous interventions had failed – another success for psychology! But what do I say to the GP? How do I explain what I have done? How do I explain what has happened? Of course it is not what I have done at all. It is what has happened between us, much of I would have

difficulty putting into words, and much would have taken place without either of us being consciously aware of what it was. It is certainly clear to me what I have **not** done. I did not set up any kind of behavioural programme for Mandy's hair pulling, I did not re-structure her cognitions, I did not analyse the transference, examine the workings of her id, ego, superego, or her parent, adult, child. I feel I **did** stand beside her in her struggles (Smail, 1993) and I did attempt to stand with her in her worlds within my own limitations. I feel I did help her to explore, often very painfully, previously feared and often only dimly known or unknown ground (Mair, 1989). She was then able to stand in a different place and tell a different story about herself and her family – an apparently more painful but more real story, the telling of which made the escape into her symptoms increasingly unnecessary.

Smail (1993) questions whether there has to be such a huge discrepancy between what we actually do and what we say we do. I am sure there are many therapists who are familiar with the poetic writing I am describing, and who struggle to describe with any degree of reality and truth what it is they are actually engaged in with clients. Mair (1989) suggests that the realm of the poetic is crucial for any understanding of human experience, and that a psychology of psychotherapy has to attend to imagination and imaginative participation. However, psychologists so often deny the poetic nature of being human and the unendingly complex and unknowable aspects of human interaction, seeming to prefer the simplicity of applying techniques or designing programmes. Only when, to me, the real elements and difficulties in understanding the processes of therapy are specifically acknowledged by psychologists themselves, can they confront the huge challenge of communicating to other professions something of the “art”, the poetry and the spirit involved in the processes of psychological change.

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References

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