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Fragments From A Therapist's Journal:

On Being An Ally

by

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Running Head: Peavy, Fragments...

About The Author

During my first twenty years, I was growing-up on a Colorado mountain ranch. Then I became an urban migrant as I tried to move from the 19th to the 20th century in a few short years. Now, I am a university professor living on an island off the west coast of Canada. I practice, research and write to advance, in whatever manner I can, compassionate ways of being. 1244 Woodway Road, Victoria, B.C., Canada
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Abstract

Therapeutic moments combining with moments of reflection. What does it mean to be an ally to one who stands on the "narrow ridge" between life and death. How can one be that ally? Fragments on the struggle to "open the window of the future".

...to be lost in spiritlessness is the most terrible thing of all.

- Kierkegaard

Like the strife of lovers are the dissonances of the world. In the midst of conflict is reconciliation, and all things that are parted find one another again. The veins separate from and return into the heart, and all is one eternal glowing life.

- Hegel

You sat before me this afternoon and sentences fell from your pale and trembling lips. Yesterday's anger, remembered turmoils and despair of years gone by told with tears and choking sounds of slow and painful recognition. Later, light danced in your eyes as you spoke of a future, another job, a distant place, a new mate, a new beam of light to cast upon a shadowed life. Silences, questions, answers, tears, one hand upon another, a challenge to fight for a life that is slipping away. A face hardened in anger, wrinkled in pain, softened in tears, rising to signs of hope. Oh God, yes; a decision, but what a price to pay! The echo of Santa Teresa of Ávila saying, "Muero porque no muero." (I am dying because I cannot die).

Later in the night light of my study I remember and reflect on these things and others, too. Kierkegaard, for instance, confes-

sing: "philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backwards." Yes, the problem arises, however, when philosophers, [and, from my point of contemplation, therapists] "forget the other clause - that it must be lived forwards"¹.

Yes, here you stand. This is your place in the world - we both understand how you have come to be here, although our understanding is hardly perfect. Yet the forward movement, the bridge from here to there, from now to the future, the all-too-narrow path between life and death - this can only be realized by your willing - by your making a contingent leap as a free individual.

For my part, what can I take as guidelines for helping - for becoming your ally? Existential therapists are notoriously wary of "techniques" yet it cannot be that I believe nothing, do nothing, that I remain indifferent as you stretch your hand out toward that distant "glowing life". No, I am not merely "an accepting vessel" into which you pour your life. In fact, in my being with you and my doing toward you, I am one of the pre-conditions out of which your willing, deciding, and acting arises. I am part of the chance and circumstance which may constrain the freedom of your existence as you lay it out between us moment by moment in your search for resolve within the hour of our meeting. Yes, resolve: "Thy will be done!"

or "My will be done!" In whose hands is your destiny? In the "rag-bone shop" of your heart, who places your hand upon the first rung, the place where all ladders start?

What are my policies, those understandings which guide me, the convictions by means of which I am sustained in our moments of therapy together, and which tell me I neither deceive you nor am deceived by you? Must we not say, as Nietzsche said, that "All great problems demand great love, and of that only strong, round secure spirits who have a firm grip on themselves are capable..."². And is this "firm grip" other than ideas and knowledge "borne of experience, in pain, uncertainty and happiness, illumined by the sharp eye of reflection?"

As an ally, I have policies³, policies which shape the boundaries, but not the substance, or our therapeutic moments. Consequently, I will use declarative sentences in order to assemble reminders and give instructions in how to use the policies to guide action in the therapy hour. In keeping with my belief in the primacy of Person-concepts over Category-concepts in therapy, I will use the word "Person" instead of "client" or "patient".

Policies For Being An Ally

Be on the Person's side! What occurs in therapy is for the benefit of the Person over and above all other considerations.

Be the Person's ally! Attention is necessary but insufficient. Being an ally is to be present-at-hand, to be actively involved in the other's project; to refrain from becoming an adversary and to leave behind neutrality and indifference.

Value inward subjectivity!⁴ Reverence for the inner conscious core of the person as being eternally dignified and infinitely precious is a high principle of existential morality. "The true connection among people is spiritual (Maritain)."

Build on contradictions! Ambiguities and contradictions are an inescapable part of the human condition. Decisions arise from uncertainties. Commitments hold without the mortar of absolute truth. "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring, will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time (T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding)."

Accept pain! Pain is unavoidable; death is certain and a natural part of life. Help Persons to face and live through pain; to take lessons from the experience of pain; but not to glory or languish in pain.

Affirm the Person's strengths! This means to show the Person the sense that he or she does make. See the Person as one who is already in charge of some part of his or her life and who is successful in some important way. Challenge the victim ideology. The Person who descends the stairs to my study was, just a few years ago, a world class athlete, an Olympic champion. His great body quivers now, and he clings to the wall. "I am an invalid", he whispers, and his cavernous eyes brim with tears. This Person a Victim? No! No! - I cannot accept his self-assignment. I must fight that somehow, and urge him to fight the darkness which is dimming his life. I must treat this one before me as a Person and not a classification, nor a syndrome - nor even as a client, but as a Person. The word "Person" names "a center for re-orientation (Mounier)."

Don't expect this Person to be somebody else! Don't abdicate responsibility for this Person's projects. Stay with him or her as the real and only one before you now. Accept that the Person's limits and restrictions may be more stubborn than you can imagine and that they may survive your best attempts - yet work on! Use failure as the beginning of progress. Don't be afraid to change tactics. Above all, don't compare: "You are so different from..."

why can't you be like...?" "Comparison is a base disease of the mind (Suzuki)."

Don't pretend! Never offer more than you can deliver. To confess ignorance is to disclose an intimate truth. When you appraise, stay with things that really matter. Direct yourself to the particulars of this Person, to his or her actions, values, meanings, experiences, sentences and silences. Leave speculations and theory on the book shelf.

Provide! To do counselling or therapy is to enter into a personal contract of co-responsibility for the welfare of this Person. The therapist is an educator in the sense of influencing how a Person acts, means and feels by providing knowledge and information, especially self-knowledge. As an educator the therapist:

- a. clarifies perceptions, concepts and meanings;
- b. conveys information, especially practical knowledge which will build up the Person's self-knowledge, knowledge of alternate ways of being and doing, circumstances, consequences and relationships, forever moving toward a purposeful future;
- c. uses ordinary language precisely, fully and richly; illustrates, restates, demonstrates, applies distinctions,

appeals to all sense modes, utilizes graphics and guides practical learning exercises, i.e., role-playing, imaginative run-throughs, etc., to help the Person construct and re-construct a coherent sense of self capable of saying Yea to life as well as Nay to death.

Thesenine policies help me to remember what it means to be a therapeutic ally. They do not include all of my guiding convictions, but they are an existential foundation which affords me a "firm grip" and the occasion for what Binswanger referred to as "educational loving".

Not to keep men from error is the duty of the educator of men, but to guide the erring one, even to let him swill his error out of full cups - that is the wisdom of teachers.

- Goethe -

Footnotes

- ¹Kierkegaard, S. Journals and Papers. Edited by Howard and Edna Hong. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967, p. 1030.
- ²Nietzsche, F. The Gay Science. Trans. by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage books, 1974, p. 283.
- ³This policy, and the next two, I have adapted from Peter Koestenbaum's The New Image of the Person. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978, pp. 511-516.
- ⁴I have borrowed the concept of therapeutic "policies" from Robert Driscoll's article "Policies for Pragmatic Psychotherapy" in Davis, K. Advances in Descriptive Psychology (Vol. 1). Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1981, pp. 273-277.