

CONNECTING

Healthy Information from the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center  July/August 2008

PSYCHOTHERAPY AS A SPIRITUAL CAREER PATH

Psychotherapy is not an easy occupation. Rather, it is extremely challenging work. We live in a time of disconnection, polarization, alienation, increasing incivility and worsening economic conditions. This environment impacts both clients and therapists. Clients come to therapy more wounded and with fewer resources, internal and external, than ever before. Much of modern life requires overriding or eliminating emotions, thus creating disconnection from the embodied self. Managed care and, often, clients want quick fixes to deep-seated, complex problems. Our culture has an entrenched belief that people should rely on themselves by taking action, and that the reflective, relational process of therapy will breed dependency. It is not well understood that the sometimes long and arduous therapy process results in the development of a stronger more solid sense of self capable of living fully and relationally in the world. Psychotherapy as a profession goes against the grain of our current culture. As a result, therapists can easily feel isolated, underappreciated, and overwhelmed.

The academic training therapists receive, whether in psychology, social work, or mental health counseling, only begins to prepare them for the work of therapy.

While the science and theories of psychotherapy provide a knowledge base, these alone are not enough. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh writes, *“On the path of practice, knowledge is an obstacle that must be overcome. We must be ready to abandon our knowledge at any moment in order to get to a higher level of understanding.”*¹

In the practice of psychotherapy, getting beyond book learning to be able to be present with and of real help to clients, it is beneficial to look at the work of the therapist as a path of service for the good of all beings – in other words, a spiritual path. There are some obvious parallels between the work of therapists in today’s culture and the work of spiritual healers in other historical cultures.

Shaman: The word *shaman* is a Siberian word for tribal members who heal through their capacity to work within the spiritual realm, and today refers to aboriginal healers in general. The healing capacity of these individuals frequently begins with an initiatory experience, often an illness of some sort. If the ordeal is survived, the shaman emerges as a wounded healer with a capacity to interact with the realm of spirits and help others.

Many therapists today fit with this archetype of the wounded healer, for it has been through personal difficulty that they have learned something about how to help others. It is through human suffering – both personal and universal – that individuals/therapists become healers, not through education and training alone. In the shamanic view, suffering an emotional or physical trauma results in the loss of part of one’s soul or essence. The shaman is able to help recover this lost essence/soul-part via a shamanic journey where enhanced awareness and listening provide access to spiritual guidance. Similarly, therapists journey with clients to help them reclaim lost aspects of themselves.

Guru: *Guru* is a Sanskrit word that means *heavy*. To be a guru is to be a person of substance or weight, a teacher.

When taking on a student, a guru takes on a commitment for that person’s total salvation, and there is on the part of the student a devotion to the guru. While there are limits certainly to the devotion therapists deserve and to the commitment they can give to their clients, there is a parallel in the therapist-client relationship.

This relationship is not confined to just 50-minute sessions. Therapists often think about clients in between sessions.

Many therapists may pray for their clients and certainly hope and intend for their well being. Therapists, like gurus, help clients claim what knowledge/wisdom lies within. This is not unlike the story of Dumbo the Flying Elephant who needed at first to hold the magic feather in order to fly, until he learned that the capacity for flight resided in himself and not in the feather. Therapists/gurus hold in trust for their clients their clients’ wholeness until the clients become capable of holding it for themselves. To do this therapists don’t have to be all-knowing super humans, but they do need to have enough connection with their own wholeness and full humanity that clients can project wholeness onto them and then claim it back as their own.

The Healer: Healers of old believed that every disease is, at least in part, a spiritual problem. This means the disease, or dis-ease, cannot be understood apart from its context. Healing is about understanding the context and restoring harmony and balance, not just about curing a symptom. As therapists and healers, the task is to see the whole person in his/her life context.



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Psychotherapists are healers when they help their clients know themselves on the levels of mind, emotion, spirit, and body. It is the therapist's capacity to be fully present to all aspects of the whole and holy individual before him/her that creates healing.

Bodhisattva: In Buddhism a *bodhisattva* is an archetypal figure who has vowed to work tirelessly to end the suffering of all beings. The Sanskrit term *bodhichitta* is often translated as “awakened heart” and refers to an intense desire to alleviate suffering. Bodhichitta is sort of a “mission impossible” – the desire to end the suffering of all beings, including those never met as well as those loathed.

In Buddhism, the path to alleviating suffering involves understanding, compassion, and *unconditional presence* - the ability to be fully present to one's own and/or another's experience without any agenda or judgment. In the therapeutic process, this is a transforming force. For therapists to act as a bodhisattva means to cultivate compassion and unconditional presence and to hold in their work the intention to reduce the suffering in the lives of their clients and in all the lives touched by their clients' lives.

When I can hold the vision that my work fits into the lineage of shamans, gurus, healers, and bodhisattvas, I am better able to embrace the challenges of being a therapist.

Recently a client who has been lost to herself for a long time has finally begun to deeply grieve the many losses of her life. She said to me: “*It's your presence; how you are with me, not necessarily what you say (though you say some helpful things, too). I trust you. I feel seen. I don't think anyone has ever understood me before.*” I thought about how often I fail to be truly present, and am instead too quick to use knowledge and theory to advise, intervene, or question. It was a good reminder of what a gift true presence really is.

When therapists recognize their own and others' suffering as integral to the human condition; when they work with the intention of a bodhisattva to reduce the suffering of their clients and all beings; when they sit with clients with true presence, knowing something holy is taking place - therapists will benefit along with their clients through the process. And for this therapist, a career becomes my calling, my work becomes a spiritual path.

Susan J. Ackelson, M.S.W.

Susan is a licensed independent social worker and the Director of Clinical Services at the Center.

Susan is trained in the use of E.M.D.R. (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), a process for resolving trauma.

Susan's areas of expertise include trauma-related issues and dissociation.

Susan has a special interest in utilizing a holistic approach to working with clients.

C.O.O.L. Corner

Children Overcoming the Obstacles of Life
Innovative services for children and adolescents



Counselors Being Present with Children at C.O.O.L.

- Seeing, hearing, feeling each individual child in the ways they walk (or skip) down the hall, what they choose to play with, their energy... in addition to any words they might use
- Sitting on the floor or in a bean bag rather than on a chair
- Moving rather than sitting
- Suspending or changing rules in games at the whim of the child
- Creating a sense of belonging and an ongoing presence by hanging child creations throughout hallways and offices of COOL
- Providing many avenues for each child's expression of self - from sidewalk chalk drawings to throwing paint at “the Wall” to sand tray stories to magical animals out of modeling clay to popsicle stick sculptures
- Reflecting, validating, supporting by our facial expressions as well as in our words
- Sitting close, giving a hug, putting an arm around a shoulder, patting a back
- Promoting the child's use of imagination and opening to possibilities

References

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh. *Transformation at the Base: Fifty Verses on the Nature of Consciousness*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2001.

Suggested Reading

Bien, Thomas. *Mindful Therapy: A Guide for Therapists and Helping Professionals*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, Inc., 2003.

Chodron, Pema. *No Time to Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2005.

Church, Dawson. *The Heart of Healing: Inspired Ideas, Wisdom and Comfort from Today's Leading Voices*. Santa Rosa, CA: Elite Books, 2004.

Welwood, John. *Toward a Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy, and the Path of Personal and Spiritual Transformation*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2000.

Introduction to Psychodynamic Psychotherapy – A 10-week Course

Dates: September 12 – November 21, 2008
(class will not meet 11/7/08)

Time: Fridays, 8:15 - 9:45 a.m.

Location: Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center
2929 Westown Pkwy., Ste. 110, West Des Moines

Cost: \$200

CEUs: *This course provides 15.00 hours towards the continuing education requirements of the Iowa Board of Social Work Examiners and the Iowa Board of Behavioral Science Examiners.*

Registration Deadline: September 5, 2008

Instructor: Lisa Streyffeler, Ph.D.

Psychodynamic psychotherapy is an approach to therapy that views human beings as complex organisms motivated by unconscious as well as conscious forces. Psychological symptoms are seen as having meaning, and a central aspect of healing is the search for understanding that meaning in the context of a caring therapeutic relationship. Understanding the meaning of psychological pain and having the support to try living in new ways can help individuals live healthier, more satisfying lives.

The course will cover the basic concepts in psychodynamic work, including therapeutic stance, factors involved in psychological healing, establishing a working alliance, and transference and countertransference. The focus will be more on the practicalities of conducting psychodynamic psychotherapy than on theory. Presentations, readings, and class discussion will form the basis of the course. The course is appropriate for therapists and others interested in an entry-level grounding in psychodynamic thought and practice. For more information or to register, call (515) 274-4006.



Lisa L. Streyffeler, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist at the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center. In addition to her interest in psychodynamic psychotherapy, she has interests in maternal mental health during the prenatal and postpartum periods, the intersection of theology and personality, and professional development.

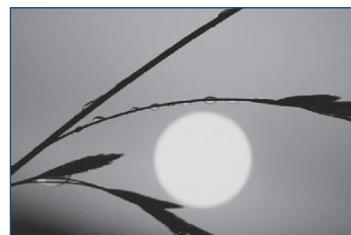
Our Mission

To bring understanding, hope and healing to persons of all ages through counseling and education.

PrairieFire

A New Program of Spiritual Renewal and Formation

PrairieFire is designed for people who desire to live each day prayerfully and intentionally, who long to respond fully to God's call. All who seek companionship in their spiritual journeying are encouraged to apply. Applicants may include clergy and chaplains, counselors and social workers, healthcare professionals, spiritual directors, parish nurses, Stephen Ministers, hospice staff, and/or lay persons.



PrairieFire is a two-year program that will meet monthly, September through June, beginning September 2008. Grounded in the Christian contemplative tradition, the classes will feature didactic and experiential elements.

Kathy Reardon, RN, MS, and Kay Riley, MA, are the Co-Directors of PrairieFire. Contact J. Jeffrey Means, Ph.D., at the Center to request an application packet.

Pastoral Care Specialist Program

The Pastoral Care Specialist Program is a competency-enhancing two-year program designed for the professional development and renewal of pastors, chaplains, and other persons involved in ministries of pastoral care. The program provides an enriching blend of psychology and theology, as well as theory and practice, while encouraging the sharing of learned lessons.

Participants meet once each month to learn about areas critical to effective pastoral care, and to receive support, encouragement, and consultation on their work. Participants can solidify what they already do well and integrate new knowledge and skills into their ministries. Seminar topics vary each year.

This year's program begins the second Tuesday of September (September 9, 2008) and runs through the second Tuesday of June (June 9, 2009). Participants meet from 8:45 a.m. to noon. Tuition for the program is \$500 for each of the two years. Registration is limited. The deadline for registrations is September 3, 2008.

For additional information or to obtain a registration form, contact J. Jeffrey Means, Ph.D., Director of Professional Education, (515) 274-4006 or jmeans@dmpcc.org.

Board of Directors

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center welcomes six new members to the board of directors: Carla Cain, *Pioneer Hi-Bred International*; Dr. Julius Conner, *Retired, Polk County Public Health Dept.*; John D. DeVries, *Retired, Colorfx, Inc.*; Douglas Fick, *Principal Financial Group*; Barb Hirsch-Giller, *Polk County Crisis and Advocacy*; and Cherry Shogren, *Iowa Health – Des Moines*.

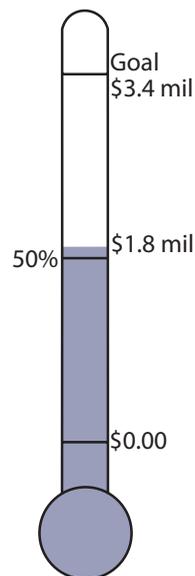
New board officers for 2008 are: Laura Sands, President; Cheryl Rigler, President Elect; Jeannie Latenser, Secretary; and Peter Percival, Treasurer.

The Center thanks retiring board members Bonnie Campbell, Mark Haverland, Jane Knaack-Esbeck, Sid Ramsey, Gail Stilwill Allen, and Phil Stoffregen for their years of service and dedication to the work of the Center.

The integrity and diligence of these individuals ensure the Center's continuing capacity to meet the community's increasing need for quality affordable counseling for all.

Campaign for Hope and Healing

This is one of the most important times in the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center's history. As mentioned in our last newsletter, the Center's decision to build for the future is an awesome dream that will make a significant difference in the quality of lives throughout our greater Des Moines community. The bricks and mortar of a capital campaign represent the longer-term investment in increased opportunity to serve the need for quality affordable counseling services.



Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation

Leaving a legacy is more than passing funds to the next generation. Leaving your legacy is also about an opportunity to send a message that reflects your values and continues your commitments. We encourage you to consider a bequest or planned gift to the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation. Contact Kathleen Murrin at the Center for further information.

www.dmpcc.org

Visit the Center's website for more information on the Center's counseling services and staff, special events and classes.

CONNECTING

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