

STEPPING THROUGH BEAUTY

The Art of Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy

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“‘Carrying forward’ and ‘crossing’ are two more-than-logical concepts I have introduced. In the crossing of two intricacies, each becomes implicit in the other insofar as it can. This is an extremely precise implicit process. When we enter into this implicit effect, we find that the new possibilities are much more precisely differentiated than what we had before.” —Eugene Gendlin

INTRODUCTION

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” —Marcel Proust

My passion for drawing and painting began in the late 1960's, in my early teens. Needing solitude, I sought refuge in the woods and fields surrounding my school, and began studying and drawing the trees that both protected me and kept me company. I found connection and nurturance in nature. In a similar vein, in the late 1980's I was inspired by a deeply meaningful and beautiful psychotherapy experience. As I entered the professional field, my aim was to use my life experience to assist others in ways similar to how my therapist had helped to meet my relational needs and create a more satisfying adult life.

What motivated me to initiate a crossing of the intricacies of relational Focusing-oriented psychotherapy and creative process is my desire and need to integrate my personal and professional passions and interests. While learning to draw and paint realistically, I find fundamental concepts, questions and experiences related to art, creativity and beauty applicable to my work as a psychotherapist. Life itself is creative, and beauty is one of the most significant inspirations for creativity in art and psychotherapy. In both art and the art of psychotherapy there is the possibility for gaining connection, understanding and knowledge and creating something new, valuable and beautiful, in familiar and unfamiliar terrain.

IMPLICIT BEAUTY

“Beauty: the quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit.”
—Miriam-Webster Dictionary

Creative phenomenon, possibilities, and beauty are all around and within us. However, when obscured from our awareness, we consider ourselves to be less-than-beautiful, living in a less-than-beautiful world. When in dark places, this essential part of our natures lie dormant, out of the creative flow implicit in living, but when creative, we feel ourselves to be living most fully, with a greater sense of health, wholeness, balance, harmony and meaning. Guided by our bodily felt aesthetic sense, we create and move forward towards fresh interactions and experiences.

Leonardo da Vinci said: “Learn how to see. Realize that everything connects to everything else.” We *see* beauty when we experience it: viscerally and instinctively (by how things look, feel, and sound), behaviorally (by how things perform and are learned), and reflectively (through what things mean, as infused with experience). Beauty is an essential and deeply nurturing ingredient in human connection, nature, and every deeply meaningful creative and relational experience.

BEAUTIFUL ESSENCE

“Look closely. The beautiful may be small.”— Immanuel Kant

The beautiful Yin/Yang symbol comes to mind. It is a wholly balanced, symmetrical, harmonic, creative representation of the universe. “The love of the beauty of the world...involves...the love of all the truly precious things that bad fortune can destroy. The truly precious things are those forming ladders reaching toward the beauty of the world, openings onto it.” (Weil, 1951, p.116) It is “out of the question” to experience a balanced universe or “the love of the beauty of the world” when we are in distress, reeling at the discordant qualities of ugly, destructive, traumatic things, events and experiences. And still, the potential is available to find balance, and create meaning and beauty, even in its smallest forms, as we move forward.

I use my 2011 blog entry here as an illustration:

“I am reminded of one of the very worst days of my life: 9/11/01. I was living in the West Village in New York City, getting ready to see a client in my near-by office. I am sometimes preoccupied with thoughts and projects and do not pay particular attention to the weather. However, before “it” all happened, this was a not-to-be-missed early morning. The air and light were as crystal clear and colorful as could be, there was a delightful quietude in my morning and the hush in the air as the day began felt just right. A friend called me on the phone and, as always, I was delighted to hear his voice.

However, he had called to alert me to the events that were beginning to rupture the world. I ran down my street to the place where 6th Avenue, 8th Street and Greenwich Avenue meet, a well-known crossroads. While I stared up at the World Trade Center, to observe where the first plane had struck just minutes before, I also looked over to see people staring up in shock with me. As I recall

now, there was already a sense of confusion and bewilderment at how the trauma of what was happening and the beautiful day that held us in sunlight were there all at once.

I am still awed by the people I experienced those first moments and days after the events. Like the sun that day, we were kind and respectful to one another in such generous and gentle ways. People cared for each other without question. At this most painful of times, we found nurturance in each other's presence; the meaning of beauty. Through all of life's terrible experiences and disconnections, though we may often forget, this deeply meaningful and beautiful essence of our connection with one another is present in our humanness."

ART AND PSYCHOTHERAPY LESSONS

"Creativity involves turning one's attention from the well-articulated explicit form in which one interprets something, to ones as yet unformulated felt sense of the whole situation—exactly what effective psychotherapy involves."
—Gendlin (1968)

My excellent painting teachers taught me a very important lesson about painting anything well (portraits, landscapes, still lives, abstractions): the implicit beauty of the underlying design in a composition is the most essential ingredient. I was taught to work from "the general to the specific": the larger design, masses and composition set the place for smaller details in a work of art. There is a well-balanced pattern of lights and darks in the most successful paintings and, while creating a realistic drawing or painting, it is important to give one's full attention to the larger masses of interacting shapes, edges, values and colors before focusing on smaller details. The believability of a realistic painting does not come solely from its subject. Instead, it is the larger relationships between the subject, the space around it, the light and shadows that grace its forms, and the manner in which the entire picture is expressed through the artist's skilled-facility and aesthetic felt-sense, that brings life to a painting.

In a Caravaggio, for example, figures, compositional elements, details and highlights are placed within the context of the relationships of larger forms and the edges of the canvas as a whole. In some passages the darks define the lights and in others the lights define the darks. Forms relate, moving in and out of each other softly, organically, and beautifully. Caravaggio interacts with the viewers and their felt senses through the world of the painting. For many, this is a beautiful experience.

Such artistic lessons serve me well as a psychotherapist. My starting point for a drawing or painting begins with interacting with the beauty of what I am seeing and experiencing relationally. The balance of lights and darks define the forms. I begin by being present, observing and experiencing the whole of my subject in relation to the setting and to myself. I am seeking to gain understanding as I am observing. Having spent many hours drawing and

painting, along with developing conceptual and technical facility, my felt-sense is my most consistent and important medium. When learning to paint or draw realistically, relationships between angles, shapes, colors and edges are approached very academically. Having gained enough technical skills to better reflect my perceptual experience, my felt sense enables me to *carry forward* something of the beauty and implicit intricacy of the relational experience.

“In psychoanalytic language, we are not isolated minds, but the river of human inter-subjectivity. Psychotherapy is then a new “inter-being,” a new relatedness, a new living, a “new us.” (Preston, p. 16). As a psychotherapist, I engage in a process much like art making; I am opening to and reflecting the beauty of another human being and their needs and co-creating a “new relatedness” out of our inter-subjectivity. A person’s language, narrative, and the “light and dark” aspects of their experience gives shape to the larger forms and “composition” of each session and the psychotherapy as a whole. Details unfold in the context of the wholeness of the psychotherapeutic relationship, as the relational needs of both client and therapist are met.

Psychotherapy is an art: it engages skills acquired through practice, imagination and a mutually creative process to adapt to and meet each person’s relational needs. Marshall Rosenberg, an American psychologist and creator of Nonviolent Communication, states that all actions are (though sometimes tragic) attempts to meet innocent, benevolent, universal, “beautiful” underlying needs. I much appreciate his including beauty as an implicit value of the nature of human needs. From his work as a psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut, an Austrian-born American psychoanalyst best known for his development of Self Psychology, outlined three major areas of human needs and motivation: the need to be admired and to bask in the appreciation of the other, i.e. “the gleam in mother’s eye” (Mirroring Need), the need to idealize and feel close to and supported by a powerful, beautiful, all-knowing other (Idealizing Need), and the need to be with like-minded souls (Twinship Need). Psychotherapeutic interactions meet our need for beauty through positive mirroring (experiencing ourselves as beautiful), idealization (experiencing the other as beautiful) and twinship (experiencing the beauty of relating). Along with learned skills and natural human compassion, my felt-sense is my most consistent and important creative medium when meeting my client’s “beautiful needs”; it allows a carrying forward of the implicit intricacies of familiar and new relational experiences.

BEAUTIFUL INTERACTIONS

“The experience of “beauty” often involves an interpretation of some entity as being in balance and harmony with nature, which may lead to feelings of attraction and emotional well-being.” —Wikipedia

In his book *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution*, Denis Dutton “presents a compelling theory on beauty—that art, music and other beautiful things, far from being simply ‘in the eye of the beholder,’ are a core part of human nature with deep evolutionary origins.” (TED). He states: “People in very different cultures around the world

gravitate toward the same general type of pictorial representation: a landscape with trees and open areas, water, human figures, and animals.” (Dutton, 2010, p.14). When we step back and look at the whole picture, we see our worlds are made up of beautiful patterns and designs that invite and carry us forward (often through very dark passages) towards a broad range of creative edges and relational experiences. In Focusing-oriented psychotherapy, reflecting upon implicit knowing and the beauty of meaning and forward movement nourishes the person and the therapeutic relationship. Sometimes, something “new and valuable” is created and brings a greater sense of balance and harmony, creativity and beauty.

I recall a transformative experience I had several years ago. When starting my first on-site landscape paintings. I set out in search of a place to set up my easel and paint for a few hours. I found a lovely spot, perused the valley scene, and got to work in speedy fashion. However, I did not know how to be present in the landscape or to compose a good design on my canvas. Because I had little experience or guidance, over the course of a few hours my painting became a very uninteresting and muddled version of the scene. I felt stuck in frustration. I finally paused my battle with my paints and quietly observed the vast landscape before me. It was as though the world suddenly turned from a still, dull, monochrome tone to an animated, living world. Colorful flowers that had been there all along appeared to me everywhere I looked, trees seemed to dance in wonderful gestures, shapes and shadows made interesting designs on the trees and earth. All at once I understood that my narrow perspective had limited and isolated me. I stood in reverent awe.

“Every bit of human experience has a further possible movement implicit in it” (Gendlin, p. 13). Various kinds of psychotherapeutic interactions may carry a person through obscured “stuck places” to a broader view and realization of one’s aesthetically beautiful human qualities and values: relatedness, wholeness, connection, vulnerability, empowerment, innocence, openness, curiosity, respect, empathy, appreciation...

My client, J.B., woke up in the middle of the night last night, and his heart was racing. His is a daily struggle: he appears “fine” and “normal” on the outside, but feels physically ill, personally “abnormal,” and misunderstood on the inside. His mental and emotional patterns got the best of him again last night: he browsed the internet mindlessly into late hours, looking at sports scores, munching on snacks, avoiding tasks that seem too hard to do, thinking about his failures, losses and sadness.

And yet, here he is in my office this morning, reaching out, knowing he needs to talk to someone about it all, to connect, be heard, receive some help, and find a glimmer of hope that he can find a way through all of this seemingly physical and emotional distress. He talks about how powerless he feels to perform well at his job as an accountant because his boss’s voice has a strict, critical tone that unnerves him. I silently find beauty in his reaching out, our interaction, the larger view I have of him as a whole person, and his values, potentials, vulnerabilities, strivings and growth. As he talks about his work situation and related concerns, he becomes self-conscious, as he does halfway through most sessions, feeling “self-indulgent” in speaking of himself.

As he continues Focusing, my words and compassion are implicit in my tone and

reflections, *making room* for his shame and acceptance of his feelings. He begins to experience a shift. Our interaction invites us to create a threshold of space where he can have a broader sense of the complexity of his situation and a kind attitude towards his “stuckness.” He has an “aha moment,” realizing that he does a “good enough” job at work after all, even if his boss does not recognize him. He metabolizes the shift and tells me he has a sense of the knot in his solar plexus “moving from a tight to a releasing place.” Like water to a plant, J.B. senses my appreciation and tells me that he plans to try to approach his day with less pressure to “be excellent.” At the end of the session he leaves my office emotionally lighter, nurtured and hydrated. Our “creative relating” had helped J.B. to step back from the details of his troubles, to place them in a larger context, and meet his need for a “new” and creative relational experience.

CONCLUSION

“The object isn’t to make art, it’s to be in that wonderful state which makes art inevitable.” —Robert Henri

We live as neighbors in one whole, big, chaotic, creative, vulnerable, often very messy, ugly, light, dark, sometimes destructive, beautiful world. When experiencing pain, fear, trauma or neglect, our very survival is at stake, and all of our attention is consumed. Still, beauty is implicit in and around us, with its potential to absorb pain, ugliness and destruction, and carry us forward creatively over time. Humanity needs beauty for survival: it attracts us to nurturing things and, in the worst of times, tips our balance of attention in new and life-forward directions.

Both art and psychotherapy facilitate balance and an understanding of complex and relative values. Both artists and Focusing-oriented psychotherapists employ skill, techniques, presence and their bodily felt-sense to carry their work forward towards beautiful highlights. Each brings the potential to awaken us to the realities and beauty of life. When the pain and depth of dark and isolated places provides spare respite, art and psychotherapy each offer the possibility to elevate our spirits and unite us with nature and each other.

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