

# Relational Psychotherapy and the Wounded Healer

## An Invitation to the CABP Conference 'The Client and I: Relational Dilemmas and Opportunities in Psychotherapy'

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*"The easiest kind of relationship is with ten thousand people, the hardest is with one." - Joan Baez*

Traditionally, the field of psychotherapy, including psychoanalysis, has been fragmented and riddled with factions and specialities and different modalities. This has always left both users and referrers with a bewildering variety of therapies and with the question: which is the most effective for making clients better? There have been many attempts to answer this question, and many serious researchers have studied a variety of outcomes. Every first-year student knows that pretty much all of these studies have yielded the one answer: It's All In The Relationship. Psychotherapy modalities appear to be more or less equally effective, and clients working with therapists from different modalities emphasise that the therapeutic relationship has been the main factor that made a difference to their wellbeing.

So what about the Therapeutic Relationship? It would seem that for the past several decades, clinicians of a range of different modalities have been thinking hard about what makes for an effective therapeutic relationship. To some extent, they have come up with different answers depending on their modalities. But, finally, in the last few years, it looks as though many practitioners of various modalities are beginning to compare notes and realise that they can talk to each other, that the field is showing signs of convergence. And this melting pot that allows a meeting of different psychotherapeutic orientations is the field of Relational Psychotherapy.

### **What is Relational Psychotherapy?**

The term Relational Psychotherapy, in the way it is understood nowadays, was first used in the US by Greenberg and Mitchell in 1983<sup>1</sup>, and they saw it as a bridge between the traditions of interpersonal relations and object relations.

For relational theorists, mind always emerges and develops in the context of interpersonal relationships. In their view, our internal world acts as a kind of filter through which we experience ourselves and the world around us. It arises out of external experience by a process of internalisation. This filter helps us to function in the world, but it is also a limitation, especially if the experience it was built from originally was limited or damaging. Such 'bad' early experience will then lead to a compulsion to re-enact it in an effort to try and make it better. Forming relationships with others offers us an opportunity to widen our perspective by giving us a deeper sense of our own and the other's humanity, and this experience can enable us to transcend our early introjects. It is in precisely this experience

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<sup>1</sup> *Relational Psychoanalysis The Emergence of a Tradition*, Stephen A Mitchell and Lewis Aron The Analytic Press 1999

that the transformative potential of psychotherapy rests. Thus the drive to form relationships, to connect to others, is a developmental impulse.

## **Implications for Psychotherapy**

Relational psychotherapy focuses on individual development from early attachment and a use of other people as tools for emotional self-regulation to the recognition of the other as another subject. Paradoxically, the transformation from one to the other often happens in moments that look like failures, but that effectively allow for the relationship to behave almost like a third person and make things possible that either participant alone would not have been capable of.

We are talking here about work that involves taking risks. It requires courage and honesty, as well as sound clinical judgement. It is a radical departure from the idea that we can be experts who have certain skills that we can apply to make our clients better. It ceases to think of clients as having problems that can be solved if we can just get it right. It takes clients seriously, in their full humanity and with all their excruciating suffering. It recognises that both our clients and we are compelled to repeat forever what has gone wrong in our lives. And the only tool we can bring to these repetitions is ourselves, our ability to sink deeply into our joint suffering, our willingness to fail. One thing that helps in this is our own experience of receiving therapy, of being able to be in contact with our own hurts. We can bring about therapeutic change only to the extent that we dare allow it in ourselves, and let ourselves become a slightly different person from who we thought we were.

This is no easy option for a therapist, no cuddly and happy-ever-after world to live in. It tends to challenge all our beliefs and assumptions about ourselves, personal and professional. It exposes all our pet neuroses, our embarrassing little bad habits, our most cherished rose-tinted self-images. And it really challenges the belief that we are nice and helpful people. Instead we end up having to embrace the fact that we are wounding our clients, that we are abusers as much as helpers.

It is here, perhaps strongest, that body psychotherapy comes into the picture, specifically the body psychotherapy that has been taught at the Chiron Centre. Because it rests on the foundation of the Wounded Healer, and on the notion that a relationship involves the contact between two wounds, two people that are hurting. The Wounded Healer also embodies the insight that we can only be useful to our clients to the extent that we can bear being unable to help them.

As Chiron Psychotherapists, we have a passion for attending to both the relationships with our clients in the here and now and also the relationships between the different fragments within the client and ourselves. One of our most powerful tools for this is a finely honed sense for the qualities of contact that we make with our clients, for which we use our own body awareness. In addition to this, we tend to share a commitment to addressing the relationship between body and mind along with the relationship between therapist and client, and we find it useful to view one as a reflection of the other.

## **Psychotherapists relating to each other**

Therapists from the Chiron Association for Body Psychotherapists have got together to organise a conference on relational psychotherapy. Entitled 'The Client and I: Relational Dilemmas and Opportunities in Psychotherapy', it takes place in Cambridge from

September 7 to September 9, 2007. It encompasses a diverse spectrum of speakers, and participants from all modalities of psychotherapy are welcome. Relational Analysis, Attachment-Based Psychotherapy, Body Psychotherapy, Humanistic Psychotherapy, Jungian Analysis, and more are going to be represented, not to mention the Developmental Sciences.

The fact that such a conference is happening at all is remarkable and exciting. We are hoping that it will unfold in a spirit of exploring differences and common ground, and of promoting for our work to happen at greater depth. We also hope that participants can leave their 'You're wrong and I'm right' at home and relate to each other in an open-minded and open-hearted way. Relational work is perhaps a chance to address how we relate to each other as well as how we relate to our clients. We feel that the work that requires us to be so vulnerable is best done in a space where we ourselves guard the boundaries to make this vulnerability possible.

The conference was conceived as retracing a development from theoretical grounding (dialogue between Michael Soth and Joseph Schwartz) to aliveness in clinical practice (dialogue between Shoshi Asheri and Barbara Pizer), ending with spontaneous playfulness (dialogue between Roz Carroll and Colwyn Trevarthen), thus recreating human development as seen by relational psychotherapy.

Another development will be retraced in the large group process, which will start with a brief exchange between one client and one therapist and then gradually widen out to include the facilitator, then a small group of therapists, and finally the whole audience.

We are hoping that the conference can celebrate the power and the glory of relational work: the moments when we are at the end of our tether, all buttons pushed, and somehow our clients and we rise above ourselves, and let something different happen. Then we break out of an established groove, and the whole world may change. At such moments we realise that a good relationship can indeed create something new that transcends both of us. These moments make it all seem worthwhile, and we can be inspired by them, and we are sad that they are so few and far between. A bit like life, really...

The CABP conference 'The Client and I' takes place in Cambridge from September 7 to September 9, 2007. For more information see [www.body-psychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.body-psychotherapy.org.uk), or e-mail [conference@body-psychotherapy.org.uk](mailto:conference@body-psychotherapy.org.uk)