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## TRANSFORMATION AND DIALECTIC

Let us try to relate what happens in psychotherapy to what happens in organizations and the world generally.

In humanistic psychotherapy, where we are always so interested in growth and development, we continually find ourselves pushing matters towards a crisis. And the reason for this is that most of the people we work with are crisis-phobic. They would rather do anything rather than meet what they most need to meet.

Often this is totally understandable. I saw the film of **Sybil** the other day, and for her to avoid facing the torture of her upbringing was elementary commonsense. Who would want to face that terror, that pain? And yet her therapist insisted and insisted, with gentle continuous pressure that ultimately would not be gainsaid, that she had to go back to the green kitchen and encounter that terrible treatment. That until she faced the pain and dealt with it, Sybil would be forced to carry it around and defend against it for ever.

Yet in a strange way, that is the easy one. If someone is in real pain and danger every day, as Sybil was, something has to be done, and it is easy to see what has to be done, even though it may be difficult to do it.

What about the kind of person who damps it all down and doesn't feel the pain, the danger - doesn't feel anything very much? Walkenstein talks of:

*... these dull, bored, boring, half-asleep, half-dead mini-souls  
eking out the remnants of their heartbeats, waiting for the  
penultimate blood burst before the ultimate slow decay?*

Clients like this can drain a therapist and make the sessions almost unendurable. Sometimes we just have to confront this. Conflict, struggle, anxiety, risk, are all part of and necessary to life - and for good therapy. As Walkenstein puts it ; sometimes we have to force the moment to its crisis. And we have to care enough to do it, even if it seems harsh and angry.

But it is Mahrer who explains why this is necessary, and why it works. He says that parts of ourselves are on the surface, and parts of us are in the depths beneath. Many therapists have some such notion, as the table shows:

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**Table showing surface and depth in various therapists**

THERAPIST	SURFACE	DEPTH
Mahrer	Operating potential	Deeper potential
Freud	Ego	Repressed material
Perls	Contact & fantasy	Unfinished business
Assagioli	Conscious subpersonalities	Unconscious subpersonalities
Berne	Adult ego states	Other ego states
Janov	Defences	Primal material
Guntrip et al	Object relations	Internal objects
Jung	Persona	Archetypes, complexes

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Mahrer says that when we get into certain evocative situations the deeper material starts rising to the surface and demanding some kind of expression. This makes us feel anxious, if we hate or fear the deeper material, as is often the case. We then have three choices - three ways of dealing with the anxiety:

1. Escape to another operating potential.
2. Escape to the zone of unfeeling.
3. Embrace the deeper potential.

Let us look at each of these in turn, to see what they mean.

1. We can simply change the subject. We leave the room, or talk to someone else, or spill the glass - anything to get out of the evocative situation. This is a very external form of avoidance. Its advantage is that it does not entail any real recognition of what is going on. Its disadvantage is that we may have to go on switching from one situation to another as each one becomes untenable - this can result in the familiar circles of frustration which Laing has satirised in **Knots**. We may move from one impossible position to another in a regular sequence, never becoming aware of anything other than the external discomforts of doing so.

2. When we cannot leave the uncomfortable situation bodily, we can cut out mentally, and go into the zone of indifference, of unfeeling. Mahrer says:

*It is like being asleep, behaving automatically, without knowing what you are doing, moving about in a hypnotic-like state, not fully present, spending one's life in a fog, not experiencing that one is not experiencing. Persons know the state of unfeeling only **after** they have emerged **out of** that state.*

It is when we are in the zone of unfeeling that all the psychological defences come into play. We may rationalise the situation, putting a more euphemistic label on it; we may project our feelings on to someone else, and deal with them out there rather than in here; we may withdraw and almost not be there mentally.

But what can also happen, as Mahrer points out, is that the deeper material can take over, and take the place of the surface character. When that happens, we find ourselves doing things which afterwards we may very much regret, and which confirm us in our view that the deeper material **is** dangerous, **should** be hated and feared, **does** need to be buried and kept under. This is the big disadvantage of recourse to the zone of unfeeling.

3. So the only real answer is to embrace the deeper material, plunge into it, receive it and own it. At that point, promises Mahrer, it turns into its good form. The positive energies which were concealed within it become available and can be used. What was disowned becomes integrated, and takes its proper place in our inner world.

There is a marvellous story which I read recently, **A Wizard of Earthsea** by Ursula Le Guin, which is all about this process. The wizard unlooses an evil creature from beyond death, which proceeds to haunt him and pursue him. If he could find out the creature's name, he could control it, but the creature is nameless. He tries to escape, using every path he can find, but the creature seems to know his every move. After a narrow escape, he meets his teacher and talks with him. His teacher tells him that the only way is to turn around, to turn around and face the shadow, to pursue it and hunt it down. The wizard starts to do this, and ultimately, in the furthest, darkest, riskiest, scariest place of all, meets the creature, and calls it by name - by **his own** secret name. And now all its strength, all its energy, become his. He becomes the Archmage of Earthsea.

If we can accept that therapy works like this, can we also see how the same principle applies more generally?

Growth always takes place through crises. Erikson talks about the eight crises which we all have to go through. At each crisis, something

is learned, some basic decision is made. Gail Sheehy, in her book **Passages**, put together a lot of research and information on the predictable crises of adult life. Ken Wilber talks deeply and eloquently about the crises we all have to go through in our psychological and spiritual development. As we learn more, as we go deeper, more and more writers urge us to think in terms of transformation and crisis, rather than in terms of smooth evolution.

In groups and organizations, the same principles apply. The recent book by Boydell & Pedler makes it clear that certain levels of management development can only be reached by a radical leap, by encountering a crisis, by making a sharp break with what went before - even opposing what went before.

This kind of thinking is called dialectical, and most of us blench when faced with a word like this. But really dialectics is a way of turning the intellect back on itself so that it has to let go of its hold on its favourite categories. It is a process of continual self-questioning. It is a logic of paradox. We need to learn about it if we are to handle crisis and transformation well.

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### **Books referred to**

- Flora Rheta Schreiber **Sybil** Penguin 1975.  
Eileen Walkenstein **Shrunk to fit** Coventure 1975.  
Alvin R. Mahrer **Experiencing** Burnner/Mazel 1978.  
R.D. Laing **Knots** Penguin.  
Gail Sheehy **Passages** Bantam 1977.  
Erik Erikson **Childhood and society** Penguin 1956.  
Ursula Le Guin A **Wizard of Earthsea** Puffin 1971.  
Tom Boydell & Mike Pedler **Management self-development** Gower 1981.
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