

INTEGRATION - FROM THE INSIDE

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The closest I can get to describing my experience of being all-of-me together is in physical terms: warm in my belly, full, in the sense that no-one's missing, all of me is at home, safely contained inside myself. The image of Russian dolls comes to mind. With 'all of me at home,' present physically, mentally and emotionally simultaneously, I communicate freely with my younger selves so I can respond to people and situations from the adult person I've become. Meeting the outside world thus I feel substantial. Knowing how to manage moments of temporary separation, or part-absence - and there are plenty of these - I feel confident.

This calls for celebration. And reflection on my process of return so I may come closer to defining what I do, who I am, in my work with clients. To be present, to be the adult I am, rather than living 'as if,' to be back in my body after a life-time's absence with all systems flowing and inter-relating comes from years of therapeutic work, deliberately and carefully bringing past-me into the present for the attention and encouragement needed to come back into myself. Picture a lorry steaming ahead with its cargo falling off the back piece by piece, the driver either not noticing or insisting 'forget about it... it's done now... got to get on' until there was nothing left, the journey reduced to meaningless activity.

What made the process of gathering myself in possible?

First - registering discomfort. In my case, non-specific dissatisfaction

came through as 'something's missing.' Mostly I reacted in the tradition I grew up in - by plugging (with food,) placating (with busyness) and ignoring, for surely I had nothing to complain about - home, husband, children, what more could I want? I was afraid of the world outside; adventure held no excitement, only terror.

I had no idea it was great chunks of me I was missing, that what would fill me up was more of myself, that I had a whole lot of catching up to do. I had no idea of what I needed. But I did gradually respond to my own increasing insistence that to merely exist, sticking to safe and familiar, wasn't enough.

My instinctive drive to grow had remained intact.

Second - courage to risk action. Anxious and mistrustful, I stepped beyond what I knew, and discovered

that strangers weren't the baddies I'd been led to believe, til my cautious creeping adventuring brought me to counselling. My terror in such alien territory came out as criticism and scorn - all that hugging - yet I was intrigued. Who were these people, and what was my place among them? I quickly became engrossed, fascinated in what counselling training was turning out to be - the study of me.

Next - how I was received by my tutors was as important in those early days as it became later by my therapist. Above all, I was welcomed, prejudice - my prime defence - lack of awareness 'n all. Warmth quickly thawed my outer layers, tears streamed at most sessions though I'd little idea of their source. Having my tears accepted quickly turned this alien place into home; it was back where I lived that I belonged less and less.

It took three years to identify two core issues that needed special attention but no time at all to choose who I wanted to work with - the man who'd already received my apologetic tears in supervision; the man I'd watched hugging one of my colleagues with a longing that related directly to core issue 1; the man who'd come to my assistance in a humiliating situation that related directly to core issue 2.

The process I call my second childhood began.

The man whose door I knocked on may have been taken by surprise by the speed with which my need of him grew - he instantly became the centre of my universe - but he found a corresponding want in himself to take me on. His interest and attention was irresistible - out spilled all that I'd been holding in torrents of words that began to make sense of my

tears, which overflowed between sessions into letters that he gathered up, read and kept safely.

Telling was not a conscious choice, it was my natural response to the particular quality of his presence. Neither did I decide after a while to appear one at a time as distinct ages of myself; I was simply responding to the way I'd been received so far. Without realising, I'd been continually testing him for trustworthiness.

Arriving in this way to be named was a turning point. I was still in pieces, but pieces I could identify as me. Introducing my left-behind children to my therapist and the way he related to whichever younger part of myself I inhabited, finding space to accommodate each one, encouraged me to continue venturing inward and gradually form internal relationships.

There I was, being babied, toddlered, greeted as child, teenager, woman - asking to be appreciated, admired, enjoyed then desired, being met appropriately at each stage. Not a smooth ride, of course, since I didn't appear in chronological order, and switched positions from moment to moment. Not a smooth ride, either, because a taste of his attention activated insatiable longing for more, yet more; and my desperate attempts to monopolise every aspect of his life were inevitably met with 'no's.

Each 'no' hurt a particular part of me, and each one in turn hated him. How I hated, how I wanted to smash and shatter. How glad I was to be stopped from inflicting damage - more 'no's - to him or myself. Being allowed to hate was essential to my process, a peculiarly special gift.

I'm sure he gave of himself because he could afford to be generous; this was nothing to do with sacrifice. He answered my early desperate, and

shame-filled, pleas for contact between sessions with a willingness to experiment til we found what helped and to continue renegotiating as my needs changed and gradually lessened. And he said 'no' when he did because he could afford that too. He could survive my hatred, he didn't depend on my devotion for his existence.

Gradually I learned his 'no's weren't intended to punish ie didn't come from his own chidly hate. He was teaching me that we could both exist, both have what we needed; that to relate to another there has to be that other to relate to.

A needy client is as much at the mercy of a therapist as a child is of its mother. To be met this time by an adult - by which I mean someone who's open to learning, for whom self-enquiry is ongoing, whose own process of self-recognition, relationship and integration is central to being available to meet the needs of another - provided the chance for me to bring myself up to date.

Above all, what I needed for this work was a real person who'd engage fully with commitment to match my own, whose absorption of theories and techniques was part of who he'd become rather than 'things he did,' who'd relate to each me with interest, enjoyment, wonder, so I could gradually let myself surrender and experience being held as safe, and so find my own feet.

How I related to my therapist was how I replaced family myths - in

which everyone was judged as goodie or baddie - with my own story. To reject the myths meant rejecting my mother, the key-holder, and that meant feeling motherless; meant longing for the mother she hadn't been; meant trying to replace her with my therapist, meant suffering when I couldn't; meant realizing that not being my perfect fantasy mum didn't make her bad; meant an end to my fight with the reality of who she was and how she'd mothered me - this last because I could now afford to.

What comes directly out of working towards integration is this generosity, being big enough to contain differing emotions and able to move between rather than have to decide between them. And it feels good to be familiar with myself, move increasingly comfortably between what used to be disjointed segments. They're all me!

The phrase that most sticks in my mind is 'I won't stop.' It was a long time before attention given to one part of me gradually soaked through to the rest, and though no-one and nothing external can fill the emptiness of absence, recovery of self does depend on care and attention from outside of a quality and duration sufficient to encourage and maintain return.

A big part of celebrating is to acknowledge and appreciate both his part and mine in our work together, which in turn is central to how I am in relation to my clients.

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