



## Intimacy and psychotherapy: a bcpc student's view *Michelle Oakman*

When I started thinking about our presentation on intimacy I realized how therapy had helped me become so much closer to myself. I can enjoy my own company and keep my self safe. Best of all, even though I see my imperfections more clearly now I can still say – I like you!

The proportion of people living alone in Western Europe is greater than ever before. A large number will be online looking for a partner or out speed dating. The latter is competitive, based on a points system. Success is measured on profiles matching - a kind of pseudo intimacy - We both like playing golf and country walks so we must be compatible.

Buber spoke of the I – Thou moment being supported by confirmation and inclusion. This doesn't mean one cannot be alone to experience intimacy. Can feeling completely present in this moment be the ultimate intimacy with oneself?

I remember sitting in this room listening to Tree talking about Winnicott. His theory of a baby thriving in the state of 'going on being' resonated so strongly: the strength drawn from not suffering impingement to 'have a self into which to retreat for relaxation' (Winnicott), thus not needing to throw oneself into chaos from a fragmented inner world. I had made distraction into an art form, because I could not be with myself, so I worked on attracting more impingements and then longed for peace. The career of social work I chose gave me plenty of distraction, but I found myself in situations of incredible intimacy.

On a cold dark day we met in Sylvia's flat,  
she on the sofa, me by an open fire.  
We talked of her partner's suicide,  
but also of her future, grief yet hope.  
In a blessed moment we met and felt as one.

I discovered that it is contact with the substance of everyday life shared that creates intimacy. The losses and gains, and being there to acknowledge and meet those feelings can bring very different people together.

When my sister and I sat with my dad in the last hours of his life I experienced a sense of sharing something hugely important. Our need to keep him company and say our goodbyes brought us together. There was something so beautiful in holding our pain, a shared task of immense significance in our lives that would change us and our relationship forever.

About a year later one of my social work clients asked me to join her for a while during her labour. As I sat with her and a few family members, there was a celebratory atmosphere. However, I was struck by the familiarity of a shared purpose in anticipation of the momentous event, the coming and going of lives.

Is it that much of this natural cycle of life is sanitized now, we are somewhat removed from the process? Everyday events like birth and death more commonly take place away from home and family. Once in hospital a life is controlled by their routine and regulations, and friends and family can feel disempowered. Life is a messy business and there is an army of professionals employed to deal with the debris others don't wish to deal with or know how to.

Is that why alongside the growth of virtual reality games and online communications there is a huge growth in individuals seeking therapy in one form or another? Anything to help discover what is real, to face up to our own mess and find out who we are.

Many don't stay the course. Could it be that real contact with oneself is too unfamiliar, too uncomfortable, and exploring what is there with another – too intimate? The intimacy we crave seems often to be what frightens us most.

The decline of the extended family is cited by Stephen Johnson in his book 'Character Styles' as a possible reason for the growing number of psychopaths. His rationale is that as the developing child's needs fail to be met in the absence of any caring adult they start to shut-down all feeling. They can no more reach into themselves than reach out to others – they have lost all contact with themselves. In a less dramatic way perhaps many others may just lose contact with parts of themselves or feelings become foggy as we struggle to cope with an increasingly isolated existence as advancing technology is relied on more and more to caretake the vulnerable members of our families.

Therapy is a new way of relating to another, but also oneself. In being met, our needs attuned to perhaps for the first time, we can start to experience those flashes of intimacy – the I Thou moment that enables us to gradually let go of the adaptive behaviour we had to adopt in order to maintain a sense of closeness with those important in our lives.

In a paper called 'The Capacity to Be Alone', Winnicott wrote of the child playing. Her mother is present, a source of safety, but allowing her to just 'be' to discover herself in the world around her without the anxiety

of abandonment or another's need being imposed.

If feeling close to another has to be dependant on putting our own needs aside for them then we will experience closeness as a compromise of ourselves. We will have lost touch with our

organismic self – our inner voice that will tell us what we need and who we are.

By reflecting on our own process we start to understand and know ourselves and develop the capacity to be with another in a more real way.

## References

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