

# Steiner and Winnicott in Dialogue: The Threshold Experience in Emptiness and Potential Space

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## Summary

Behind clients' anxiety and depression is often a desire to reconnect to their most profound longings and wishes in life. Part I will describe how therapeutic encounters that awaken such longings can arise, assisted by what Rudolf Steiner terms the past and future streams of time. Therapy is shown to help clients connect with impulses coming to meet us from the future that possess healing qualities and forces of creative freedom. Part II then illustrates how clients can reconnect to life's deepest longings by re-experiencing 'emptiness' and 'potential space' à la Donald Winnicott. A dialogue between these Winnicottian notions and Steiner's descriptions of the crossing of the threshold between the physical and spiritual worlds is thus enabled. The psychotherapeutic process can be seen as an earthly reflection of the anthroposophical path of schooling, with clients seeking to reconnect to their true selves.

'And if someone felt that his life had been an utter failure, and that he himself was only one among millions of wholly unimportant people who could be replaced as easily as broken windowpanes, he would go and pour out his heart to Momo. And, even as he spoke, he would come to realize by some mysterious means that he was absolutely wrong: that there was only one person like himself in the whole world, and that, consequently, he mattered to the world in his own particular way. Such was Momo's talent for listening.'

'I recognised us.'

Excerpts from *Momo*, Ende (2009)

Beneath the surface of many clients' symptoms of anxiety and depression lies a deep and desperate need on their part to reconnect to their most profound longings and desires that have been lost in the chaos of the past. It is the aim of the first part of this article to show how these deep longings and desires can be awakened in therapy through a fostering of meaningful and authentic encounters between therapist and client. I will outline how such encounters can arise with the help of what Rudolf Steiner calls the past and future streams of time, and highlight the importance in the therapeutic process of connecting to impulses coming to meet us from the future – impulses imbued with healing qualities and forces of creative freedom. In reconnecting to these future impulses, I will attempt in the second part of this article to

illustrate how the client can reconnect to his deepest longing and wishes in life by learning to re-experience what Donald Winnicott describes as the experiences of 'emptiness' and 'potential space'. I will introduce the therapeutic goal of learning to rest, and explain its importance in helping the client endure this state of emptiness and experience self-realisation in a potential space. Finally, I will seek to deepen our understanding of these processes by describing the experience of crossing the threshold as it is understood in Anthroposophy. In so doing, I aim to contribute to the dialogue between Winnicott's ideas on emptiness and a potential space, and Rudolf Steiner's descriptions of the crossing of the threshold between the physical and spiritual worlds. It is hoped that such an endeavour can clarify how the

psychotherapeutic process can be understood as an earthly reflection of the anthroposophical path of schooling, and demonstrate the role of Anthroposophy in deepening our understanding of psychotherapeutic processes that involve clients seeking to reconnect to their true selves.

Calendars and clocks exist to measure time, but that signifies little because we all know that an hour can seem as eternity or pass in a flash, according to how we spend it.

*Momo*, Ende (2009)

### **I Becoming Present Between Past and Future**

The task of psychological therapy, as well as that of the anthroposophical path of schooling, is to reconnect to our true essence, or 'True I'. When we are connected to this True I, we are fully present and aware of who we are and what we are meant to do in life. We are connected to the world around us and the world is connected to us. In this opening section, we will examine to what degree this 'I-Being' comes to expression in our life and to what degree it remains hidden. Furthermore, I will expand on our understanding of this I-Being by relating it to the expression of the artist concealed in each of us and its relation to the quality of time.

### **Impressing versus expressing**

If we begin our search for this I-Being at the beginning of life, we see that in the first months, a baby is helpless in the face of the sensory impressions that flow uninhibited from the surroundings over and into its soul. Thus, the role predominantly of the mother at this time is one of creating a safe, warm and protective environment for the baby. The overwhelming 'brightness' of the world causes the baby to return as often as possible to the world of sleep where it can reunite with its 'old home', a place of warmth and calm. Over time, with the help of the mother, the baby learns to wake up to the impressions of the outside world that flow towards it, and even to begin to respond to these impressions in a somewhat independent manner. One of the first signs of this independence is

around the age of two or three when the so-called rebellious tantrums make their first appearance. The child says 'no' to everything, a first expression of the child exercising a new-found independence that over time will come more and more under its control (Köhler, 1998).

Henning Köhler (1998), a German pedagogue, brings attention to the two experiences that have been described above. He describes the experience of sensory impressions that 'impress' themselves upon us in contrast to the 'expressive' experience of meeting these sense impressions of the surrounding world with our own moments of self-expression. The 'expressing' individual is the inquirer, the active thinker and questioner, the individual who seeks actively to transform the impressions he receives from the world. In contrast, the individual who is more passive in response to the impressions of the world may let the opinions of others become his own without asking himself what is right or wrong for himself. This is the individual sitting in front of a television or computer screen, simply allowing the impressions of the screen to flow over him. It is the individual not able to wonder at the beautiful view in the fields or the mountains. In this last case, it is important to realise that the act of meeting the world with wonder stems from an inward activity on the part of the individual to allow the beauty of the surroundings to touch him.

In this regard, we can appreciate the wisdom in the English language: excessive im-pressions without ex-pressions lead to de-pression! An individual dominated by the impressing activity, who is shaped by the world around him 'impressing' itself into him from outside without any conscious or active participation, i.e. 'ex-pression' on his part, can easily be overcome by excess passivity, or 'de-pression'. An individual suffering from clinical depression is an extreme example of someone so weighed down and overwhelmed by the impressions of the world around him that he cannot connect to this sensory world with his own expressive soul forces. These expressive forces have

surrendered themselves to the heaviness of the material world and to the weight of the physical body. Thus, the difficulty of many clinically depressed clients even to move, let alone get out of bed.

We are always living within these two experiences, sometimes more passively allowing the impressions of the world to flow over and into us (seen most strongly in the infant) and sometimes more actively meeting these sensory world impressions with our own inner self-expressions (which can lead to excessive narcissism). In adolescence we can see these impressing and expressing tendencies both working extremely strongly. On the one hand, the adolescent experiences intensely the impressions of the world; and on the other hand, he also experiences an intense need to express himself in this world (Köhler, 1998).

Today more than ever, there is a feeling that we are being overwhelmed by sensory impressions. This experience often leaves us with a sense that we are unable to initiate processes that will counter this world of impressions. Our soul forces of thinking, feeling and willing are experienced as solely reactive. In a lecture from 1912 when talking about the chaotic social life, Rudolf Steiner noted that the state of inner nervousness or restlessness experienced by humanity would only increase in the future. In the same lecture, Steiner notes that there are many damaging elements in the chaos of modern social life that increase our inner restlessness and that are spread like an epidemic from person to person (Steiner, 2008). In this regard we can ask to what degree do I act autonomously in the face of the overwhelming amount of sensory impressions that threaten to ‘swallow me up’? To what degree can I find the balance in my soul between the impressing and expressing tendencies? To what degree am I present and thus free to move within these movements?

## Two streams of time

In a lecture series entitled ‘Psychosophy’ from 1910, Rudolf Steiner describes the experience of the ‘present’. He introduces the idea of a stream of time running from the past to the future and a stream of time emanating from the future into the past. He notes that the experience of the present takes place where these two streams meet (Steiner, 1999). How are we to understand this idea?

### Stream of time from the past

We can begin by realising that the stream of time emanating from the past is the normal stream of time. In this stream of time, we are subject to the principle of cause and effect – ‘the causal nexus’ – meaning that an event experienced at a certain age is related to and influences an experience that occurs later in life. Time flows forward from the past to the future, later events seeming dependent on earlier ones (Schad, 2013). This is the stream of time ruled by determinism and similar to classic Freudian thinking. We could say that this stream of time is ruled by beliefs such as ‘All my troubles stem for a mother who was depressed’.

We can see this stream of time as related to the aforementioned impressing experience of the sensory world shaping me. In this experience, I am the result of all that the world has made of me without me taking an active part in meeting these impressions. In this stream of time, I live in repetition. For example, in this stream of time I never think new thoughts. A person I am prejudiced towards will always be seen by me in a negative light if I think the same thoughts about him every time I see him. Furthermore, when I think of something in the future, I am still thinking in the normal stream of time, from the past to the future. My thoughts about the future originate from my experiences in the past. In this sense, my normal thinking stems from my past (Steiner, 2016).

### Stream of time from the future

Facing this stream of time is the stream of time emanating from the future into the past. In contrast to the causal nexus, here we have the final nexus. I have an intention or plan I envisage in the future, and I work back from that plan or objective to the means in the present that will help me achieve this final goal. Thus, in this stream of time we begin from the future and work our way back to the present (Schad, 2013). The expressing tendency mentioned above is related strongly to this stream of time. In this stream of time from the future, I can connect to completely new and original thoughts or ideas that I have not thought of before. As opposed to the deterministic principle, in this stream of time, intentionality comes to the fore.

We can compare these two principles by looking at the initial reasons given by clients when first coming for therapy. There are the 'external' reasons that may be what the client tells the therapist upon first meeting him, and these may be symptoms such as anxiety or depression that stem from events earlier in the client's life (deterministic thinking). On the other hand, as noted by Wilfred R. Bion, the real reasons for coming to therapy often relate more to an underlying intentionality living in the soul that is not initially expressed in terms of the reasons for seeking out therapy. This intentionality connects to ideas and feelings that relate to the client's deepest intentions for this life that are calling him from the future (Symington, 1996).

### The artist as meeting point of present

In this stream of intentionality from the future, I start to awaken to my true longings and deepest desires that are often hidden in the day-to-day normal time from the past to future. The process of being inspired by my deepest intentions can be seen with artists who often intuit ideas that are just below the surface or just beyond the realms of daily consciousness. These ideas, full of potential, are given material expression by the artist. Henning Köhler notes that within each

of us is concealed an artistic being (Köhler, 1998). Similarly, we can also mention Joseph Beuys, a German artist who famously stated that every individual is an artist (*Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler*).

How can we connect these ideas to Steiner's statement that the present is experienced where the past and future streams of time meet? Schad (2013) notes that the 'present' experience arises in the rhythmic interweaving and overlapping between the past stream of time and future stream of time (see Figure 1, below), between the stream of cause and effect and the stream of intentionality and future goals, between the rhythms of impressing and expressing.

We can observe how an individual fully immersed in an artistic process is working in the present moment. How is this so? The present is always in movement and in the process of becoming and of being, in contrast to the past that has come to a standstill (Steiner, 2016) and to the future that has yet to manifest. In the artistic process, I connect to my inspirations from the future and work artistically in the formed material world that is already past. In this sense, as an individual absorbed in an artistic process, I stand in the rhythmic interweaving of the past and future streams of time, and am fully present. Anyone who has been truly 'present' in an artistic process can testify to this. The more present I can be, the more I can actively shape my surroundings so that these surroundings will also be raised to higher expressions of artistic beauty through me.

### Childlike forces connecting past and future

By looking over his life, the client connects to his past, right back to childhood, to a state in which he was truly still asleep to the world, to a time when his future potentialities and deepest longings were most fully present, before they were overwhelmed and forgotten in the past that had not yet taken place (Köhler, 1998). Children, more than all other beings, live in the stream of time emanating from the future. The adult experience of consuming, obtaining,

grabbing, and finding security has not yet managed to cover and overwhelm the child's future. Children are therefore most sensitive to the stream of time emanating from the past consuming those around them. As stated so beautifully in the novel *Momo*:

people never seemed to notice that, by saving time, they were losing something else. No one cared to admit that life was becoming ever poorer, bleaker and more monotonous. The ones who felt this most keenly were the children, because no one had time for them any more. But time is life itself, and life resides in the human heart. And the more people saved, the less they had.

When a baby arrives in the world it is all future. It is a being immersed completely in searching, exploring and seeking. The baby wants to touch and put in its mouth everything it sees. A baby is a being who is all curiosity (Köhler, 2014). How much do we as adults still feel these future forces of curiosity and interest? To what degree do we bring our searching and curiosity gestures, so alive in the baby, to our encounter with the other? To what extent do we meet the other with the forces of the past, and to what extent do we meet the other with the forces of the future, with openness, active listening, empathy and natural spontaneity?

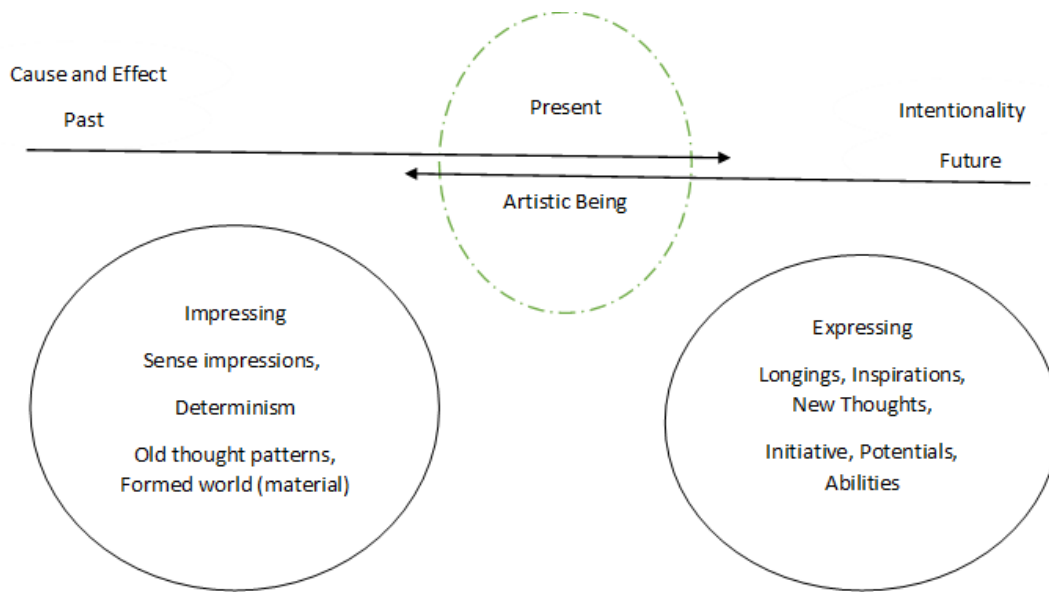
These forces of the future, so present at birth, are also concealed in us adults. We can also call these future forces 'child-like forces' – not to be confused with *childish* forces (Köhler, 2014). No matter what our role is in life, be it therapist, teacher, parent, friend etc., we should foster these child-like forces in the meeting with our fellow human beings. With children especially, in such a manner we avoid burying the future impulses of the child in our own adult world of the past and thus we do our part in helping children connect to their deepest longings and desires emanating from the future. Instead of

our dominant impressions fostering an experience of cause and effect, 'unfreedom' and depression, we foster expression and intentionality. This will allow the children of today to face the challenges of the future from a place of true presence, and in such a manner it will allow them to shape the world of tomorrow artistically and creatively.

### **Penetrating the past and reshaping it anew**

How can we connect these 'time' experiences to what happens in therapy? Many of the clients we meet are ensconced in the past stream of time, 'im-pressed' by their environment, subjected to the world of passive reactivity, and subjected to the principle of cause and effect. They often feel that their current existence is simply the result of what has happened to them in the past. The inner child-like forces have long been forgotten. Herein lies the importance of helping the client to observe the course of his life once more, now in a more active manner, and in the process to penetrate his biography with loving sympathy.

In this process, the client can begin to shed new light on his past and thus experience his past, present and future differently. In this manner, the individual can start to 'break' through and overcome the domain of cause and effect that has left him or her unfree in the present – the client comes to slowly realise that he or she may have been affected by an event in the past, but that event does not have to completely shape or define whom they are today. The client connects to his deeper intentions and future goals, and can begin to reshape his determined past in a new light. The stream of time from the future begins to inwardly penetrate and transform the stream of time from the past (Köhler, 1998). To use the artistic analogy, the artist transforms the clay into a new form.



**Figure 1:** The streams of time and the experience of the present

What [the people] could endure least of all, however, was silence, for when silence fell they became terrified by the realization of what was happening to their lives. And so, whenever silence threatened to descend, they made a noise. It wasn't a happy sound, of course, like the hubbub in a children's playground, but an angry, ill-tempered din that grew louder and louder every day.

*Momo*

## II The Thresholds of Emptiness and Potential Space in Therapy

We will now examine more deeply the therapeutic process as it relates to the challenge of being truly present and connecting to our artistic being. This challenge is often highlighted by clients who are so weighed down by their past that they cannot see a future, let alone experience the present moment in which the artistic experience described above can take place.

### Approaching sleep consciousness

Rudolf Steiner presents a path of initiation whose aim is to help us become more present by

connecting to our 'True I' that lives in a consciousness of deep sleep (Steiner, 1984). The more we can experience this sleep consciousness, the more we can connect to our True I, where our creative forces and deepest longings reside. Sleep consciousness as meant here should not be understood in the normal sense – i.e. going to sleep and losing consciousness. To best understand what is meant, we can compare it to the experience of sailing on a boat, with the everyday chatter and noise in our head similar to the choppy restless waves throwing us from one side of the boat to the other and not allowing us to rest and observe our surroundings. In contrast, sleep consciousness is similar to the waves calming down and becoming serene and tranquil, allowing us to be still, present and more conscious as we observe our surroundings.

How can we consciously approach this sleep consciousness? Perhaps we can answer this question if we first observe a typical phenomenon in our daily life that is experienced in the stream of time emanating from the past. Today, many people come to therapy suffering from all kinds of anxiety. Often, these anxieties

are accompanied by symptoms such as racing automatic thoughts that are constant and relentless. These thoughts come and go without the individual having any control over them. Clients often describe this experience as if thoughts are being constantly fired from an automatic machine-gun. In his book *To Have or to Be?*, Erich Fromm introduced the concept of 'non-productive activity' to describe a type of 'relentless busy-ness' driven by 'external factors and incessant deadlines or by internal compulsions'. This relentless doing continues at all costs, driven by the need to avoid the nothingness that will rise from the 'shadows' if this non-productive activity ceases (Fromm, 2013). This is a type of impressing from within. Thoughts that I do not consciously initiate compulsively impress themselves upon me.

In contrast to this awake 'busy-ness', what are the forces that are imbued with sleep? Among others, these are the forces of empathy, active listening and natural spontaneity (Köhler, 2014). These are experiences that foster the feeling of 'presence' and are able to calm down or 'put to sleep' our own personal and alert busy-ness. With regards to fostering presence, just think of the nature of spontaneity that, in any given moment, I react without my past being present. Otherwise, it is not spontaneous. In order to calm down my own busy-ness, a true gesture of empathy obligates me to quieten down my daily thoughts and feelings (busy-ness in head) – in other words, to 'put to sleep' my daily awakened way of being, and to learn to 'sleep' into the other. As mentioned above, being surrounded by calm or 'sleepy' waters allows one to observe and intuit the other more deeply and lovingly than if one is experiencing choppy and stormy waves.

A classic example of this is presented by the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion who describes the interaction of mother and baby. The mother senses the needs of the baby without the baby needing to express its needs verbally. Bion discusses the importance of the therapist being able to have a similar experience with the client in which the therapist can turn off the thoughts in his head and meet the client

without 'memory or desire' (Bion). In other words, the therapist meets the client without preformed ideas or thoughts that stem from his normal everyday consciousness. Entering this condition of reverie, as Bion calls it, we learn to enter an awakened state of day-dreaming similar to the experience of the mother with her infant (Bion, 1967). In order to achieve this, we must activate increased will forces. Just think how hard it is to 'put to sleep' our every-day ego's thoughts, feelings and intentions, and to listen to the other as empathically as possible.

In this way, we can understand Steiner's idea that the 'True I' lives in a state of deep sleep. Through connecting to my own heart forces of calmness or sleep (empathy etc.), I meet the client without my past (theories, ideas, explanations) forcing or impressing itself on him. I can then begin to help the client to awaken to his future potentials and dreams (stream from future) buried beneath the everyday 'busy-ness' (stream from past). In this process, I help the client to lift the weight and burden of the past from his shoulders.

### **Fear of the future that is past**

In his article 'Fear of breakdown' (1974), Winnicott relates to this burden of the past by describing how we often fear something in the future, without realising that the terrible thing we fear has actually already occurred in our past. An example of this is when children experience trauma at an age at which they are still unable to conceptualise or digest experiences with adult thinking and perceiving. Thus, a traumatic event may have occurred, but the child did not experience it in the sense that she did not digest or remember it consciously. There are some clients who come to therapy chained by their past. They are paralysed with fear of the future, without comprehending that the terrible thing they fear has already occurred. In therapy, it is possible to help the client wake up to this fact, thereby helping them to connect to their true self in the present (Winnicott, 1974).

I will now introduce two ideas as expounded by Winnicott in relation to the fear of a future event that has already happened. These are: (1) emptiness, and (2) potential space. I will then present the main thesis of this article, which is an attempt to show how these ideas relate to the crossing of the threshold experience as understood in Anthroposophy and to integrate them with the themes discussed above – that of the artistic being concealed in each of us, the two streams of time, and the balance between past and future.

### Emptiness

To illustrate more clearly the experience of fear of something that has already occurred, Winnicott introduces the idea of ‘emptiness’. I will quote Winnicott at length, as this concept is central to this article.

Winnicott notes that children live with an emptiness, and that if all goes according to plan, it will be filled up with a ‘profitable’ experience. However, often this emptiness is not filled up with what children expect it to be filled up with. Instead of ‘profitable’ experiences filling up the emptiness, there may instead be neglect, lack of attention or simply a mother too self-involved to connect lovingly to her baby. In this case, Winnicott notes that it is necessary

to think not of trauma but of nothing happening when something might profitably have happened. At the time, the client did not know what might have happened and so could not experience anything except to note that something might have been. (Winnicott, 1974, p. 106)

In such cases, clients come to therapy with an unconscious need for the emptiness to be experienced (Winnicott, 1974).

Winnicott goes on to state that emptiness is a prerequisite for

eagerness to gather in. Primary emptiness simply means: before starting to fill up. A considerable maturity is needed for this state to be meaningful. Emptiness occurring in

treatment is a state that the client is trying to experience, a past state that cannot be remembered except by being experienced for the first time now. (Winnicott, 1974, p. 106)

A state of emptiness is a prerequisite for experiences of meaning, for the facilitation of a certain eagerness that can permit something to enter and be experienced as meaningful (Hazell, 2003). Winnicott goes on to note that ‘in practice, the client fears the awfulness of emptiness, and in defence will organise a controlled emptiness... by not learning or else will ruthlessly fill (it) up by a greediness which is compulsive and which feels mad’ (Winnicott, 1974, p. 106–7).

Winnicott concludes that

when the client can reach to emptiness itself and tolerate this state because of dependence on the auxiliary ego of the analyst, then taking in can start up as a pleasurable function... the basis of all learning is emptiness. But if emptiness was not experienced as such at the beginning, then it turns up as a state that is feared yet compulsively sought after. (Winnicott, 1974, p. 107)

### Potential spaces

Many of us today are subjected and consigned to this deterministic past of constant and compulsive ‘filling up of the emptiness’. It is one of the main ideas of this article that when experiencing the emptiness in our lives, we are faced with a choice. We can continue the past pattern of compulsiveness ‘that feels mad’ (or is felt as a relentless busy-ness, as Fromm called it); or we can learn to refrain from filling up this emptiness compulsively. *Allowing this emptiness to be once more experienced is a prerequisite for the experiencing of a ‘potential space’ in therapy* (Winnicott, 2004).

What is this potential space? Winnicott says that this space is where the ‘cultural experience’ is located, between the individual and the environment (1967). He notes that ‘cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play’ (Winnicott, 1967, p. 135).



The degree to which an individual can ‘use’ this space depends on his life experiences, especially in the early years. Winnicott (1971) further notes that playing and cultural experience ‘link the past, present, and future... they demand and get our full concentrated attention, deliberate but without too much of the deliberations of trying’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 147). This is a place of ‘relaxed self-realisation’, and he notes ‘how the special feature of the place of play and cultural experience is that *it depends for its existence on living experiences*, not on inherited tendencies (Winnicott, 1971, p. 146, italics in original).

### **The birth of spaces of potential between mother and infant**

These living experiences take place initially between the mother and infant. The more the mother can refrain from imposing her analytical or interpretive explanations on the child and can instead learn to ‘get to know her baby’ in an ‘inexact way’, allowing herself to be immersed in the ‘shapelessness’ of the baby’s life, the more this space of potential can be fostered (Ogden, 1989). The more the mother manages to be present without her own often selfish needs impinging on the baby, the more the forces of play and creativity are fostered between mother and infant (Winnicott, 1960). These spaces are neither the mother’s experience nor the infant’s experience alone, but an experience borne out of the interaction between infant and mother. Winnicott describes these spaces of potential as being simultaneously subjective and objective, as being created and discovered at the same time. These are spaces between reality and phantasy that can be experienced throughout life (Winnicott, 1971).

A potential space can happen only in relation to a feeling of confidence on the part of the baby, this being a feeling of dependability on the mother figure and environmental elements (Winnicott, 1967). Winnicott notes that during the separation process of the baby from the mother, in a healthy dynamic the question of

separation and the fears accompanied by it do not arise because the baby is all creative play in this potential space (Winnicott, 1971). Thus, a separation takes place, but on the other hand separation is avoided through the experience in the potential space.

In the case of a less-than-satisfactory mother–infant dynamic, the potential space ‘has no significance’ because no reliability and confidence with the mother were fostered and thus there was no ‘relaxed self-realisation’ (1971). In this case, the infant resorts to protecting itself, leading to compulsive doing and a disconnect from authentic experiences that, instead of fostering a True Self, lead to the experience of a False Self (Winnicott, 1960).

### **Emptiness on the path of initiation and mirrored in therapy**

To summarise, we have seen that emptiness facilitates the experience of meaning and eagerness to receive. This emptiness must be tolerated in order for a potential space to be experienced. This potential space comes into being through the interaction between mother and infant, and cannot be inherited. In this potential space, the infant is so engrossed in creative play that it does not take note of the gradual separation taking place from its mother, and is thus protected from the anxiety of such a separation. In the potential space, the true self can start to appear (Hazell, 2003).

Where is this emptiness and potential space in Anthroposophy? In a lecture from 1921, Rudolf Steiner notes that as we cross into the spiritual world on the path of initiation, we must first pass through an

absolutely empty and dark space, and we are not able actually to enter the spiritual world without traversing this empty darkness. But it (the ego) has to pass through the absolutely dark void, for only out of this dark void is the spiritual born for the ego. (Steiner, 1991, accessed from unpublished manuscripts of English translations from the original German)

Steiner then goes on to state that ‘a pathological condition arises on the one side when man pours in his own being where there should be an emptiness in him. Then he carries the world of his visions and hallucinations into this empty being.’ (ibid., unpubl. ms)

In such a state, we are only ‘raying forth our own life into the emptiness’. This ‘pouring in his own being where there should be an emptiness’ can be compared to the ‘busy-ness’ of Fromm referred to earlier, the constant compulsive doing that fills up the emptiness.

Steiner then goes on to say that ‘if, however, we experience the emptiness, then into this emptiness there comes – just in the way the external world works through our senses – what I have already described as the actively weaving world of the angelic hierarchy’ (Steiner, 1991, unpubl. ms).

Steiner described how every night, when we go to sleep, we connect to a being who we could call our Angel or higher being. Perhaps this is the reason we are often stopped in our tracks, literally slowed down, experiencing such wonder when seeing a baby, so angelic-like as they are. Babies, sleeping as much as they do, spend most of their first months in this angelic world, and thus are still most strongly connected to their angels. In Anthroposophy, the higher being or Angel of each individual accompanies him and watches over his deepest longings and wishes for this life. As will be expanded upon below, in the therapeutic process as adults we can learn once more ‘to go to sleep’, to learn not to fear this emptiness by refraining from filling up the emptiness, or as Steiner notes, we can allow the ‘actively weaving world of the angelic hierarchy’ to enter this emptiness. In terms of therapy the client begins to connect to his deepest longings and intentions coming to meet him from the future.

### **Winnicott in dialogue with Steiner**

Just as Steiner talks about the emptiness between the physical and spiritual worlds and the importance of not filling up this emptiness

with our own self, so Winnicott describes the ability to be in ‘relaxed self-realisation’ as opposed to the ‘persecutory’ compulsion to fill up this emptiness that can ‘drive one mad’. Similar to Steiner highlighting the importance of refraining from filling up the emptiness so that a spiritual experience can enter this space, Winnicott talks about emptiness being a prerequisite for an experience of meaning (Hazell, 2003) and the beginning of pleasure and true learning. A spiritual experience in the anthroposophical sense, and an experience in a potential space, can both be seen as taking place in heightened presence. It is an experience that incorporates past, present and future (Winnicott, 1971). Ultimately, we see the parallel on the anthroposophical path between the crossing of the threshold to the spiritual world and its earthly reflection in therapy, in the meeting of the emptiness that can lead to experiences in potential space. Both in crossing the threshold and in the experience of potential space, we begin the journey back to our True I by reconnecting to the artist concealed within each one of us.

### **Fostering emptiness and potential space in therapy**

Creating a balanced breathing space between past and future

The dominance of the past stream of time in the client’s soul life precludes any possibility of a breathing (potential) space in the present. The overbearing dominance of cause and effect, of being chained to past events, of dwelling on the past or fearing the future, is not met with an adequate counterbalance from the stream of time from the future. It is as if the stream of time from the past is not met with any resistance that will allow a space to arise in between. It is like an individual with an overbearing personality who does not allow the other to talk, thus leaving no space or experience to arise in the mutual interplay between these two individuals. Fostering the client’s inner forces of initiative by helping them shed new light on their past allows a new-found balance between the past and future streams of time to come

about, leading to an enhanced experience of self-awareness and presence as mentioned above (Schad, 2013), this being a first step towards allowing them to face the emptiness with less fear.

#### Learning to rest

In combination with fostering this new balance between past and future, we can help the client bravely face the emptiness by allowing him to come to rest. 'To rest' in this context does not mean to go on holiday, but instead to help the client to refrain from 'filling up' the emptiness that he unconsciously fears with compulsive doing and busy-ness; or in other words, to help the client refrain from filling up the potential spaces with his past.

#### Learning to rest: silence in the room

Allowing short periods of silence to reside in therapy can be an exercise in rest. Both client and therapist learn to refrain from filling up the therapeutic space with words or content. I have experienced that often after a silence of 20 or 30 seconds, the client will say something new or surprising, often a thought that sheds new light on his situation. As a therapist I have also experienced that a silence has allowed me to also receive intuitions or inklings of an idea that are more constructive and penetrating regarding a client's situation than the normal thoughts that take up most of a therapy session. I have found that faith in the silence or emptiness is often rewarded with immeasurable gifts from the depths. By allowing the wordless future to reside in the room, I allow the past to feel lighter, thus fostering a new relation between past and future, and in so doing I am more present; and this presence allows new light to enter the therapy room.

#### Learning to rest: the experience of knowledge

The therapist himself must know how to come to rest. This relates to Bion's aforementioned idea of entering the therapy session 'without memory or desire', of leaving the unrestful daily thoughts and ideas at the door. In describing the

first analytic meeting with the client, Ogden describes how every analytic meeting should be a first meeting. He notes:

that the analyst must be able to allow himself to be genuinely caught off guard by the pervasiveness of the influence of the unconscious mind... to only retrospectively apply the familiar names to these freshly rediscovered phenomena. If the analyst allows himself to perpetually be the beginner that he is, it is sometimes possible to learn that which he thought he already knew. (Ogden, 1989, pp. 169–70)

Allowing oneself to experience something without initially grabbing hold of it or analysing it is the key to coming into a state of rest, and of subsequently fostering a potential space between therapist and client. To be able to experience a process that is coming into being in a fully present manner is to be able to rest truly. In this regard, Bion introduced the idea of Knowledge or 'K' that describes the difference between obtaining a piece of knowledge about yourself in therapy and the actual experience of getting to know yourself in therapy through the encounter with the therapist.

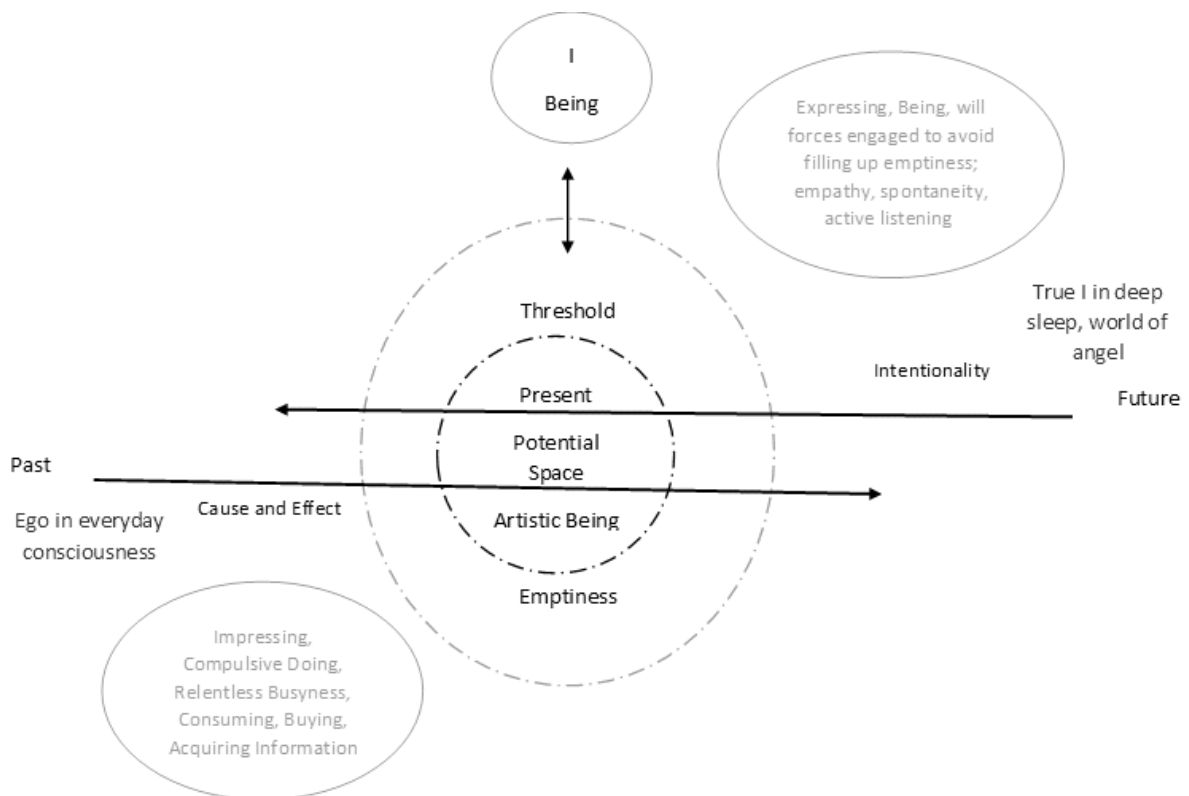
This second experience is what he means by Knowledge. It is an experience that lends itself less to expression in words, less to intellectualisation and analysis. The gathering of information about oneself is an activity that falls into the deterministic stream of time from the past to the future: it is an experience of filling up the room with thoughts, opinions and ultimately words, whereas the experience or process of getting to know myself in the encounter with the therapist falls more under the stream of time from the future in which I connect to my True I, an experience that struggles to bring itself to expression in mere words (Symington, 1996).

#### Learning to rest: true play

Ultimately, a potential space arises between two or more individuals. As noted in describing Winnicott's emptiness, this emptiness can be experienced with the help of the 'auxiliary ego'

of the therapist (Winnicott, 1974). In this respect, similar to the mother who connects through her state of reverie to the infant, as a therapist I engage my own ‘future forces’, ‘sleep forces’ or ‘heart forces’, as we could call them, when meeting the client. I bring empathy, active listening and natural spontaneity to the fore. These soul forces emanating out of the stream of time from the future help the client calm down and put to sleep the compulsive ‘busy-ness’ that protected him in the past from the dreaded emptiness. As noted by Winnicott, the client, having overcome the prerequisite of not fearing this emptiness, begins to be eager to learn and to experience meaning. Therapy can now be a training ground for true play and ‘cultural experience’. For the first time, in the potential space, we ‘experience ourselves as alive and as the authors of our bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions’ (Ogden, 1989, p. 200).

As noted above, Winnicott describes how the infant does not even realise that the process of separation from the mother is taking place due to its immersion in creative living in the potential space. It is as if separation and reconnection are taking place simultaneously. In therapy, clients want to reconnect to themselves and to the world. This is prevented because of the fear of emptiness, because of the fear of the threshold. Through the fostering of creative and artistic experience in therapy, similar to the infant who does not realise that separation is taking place, clients can meet the emptiness without realising it – by learning to play in ‘relaxed self-realisation’. The artistic being awakens. The prerequisite for this process is a therapist who has developed the ability truly to play and experience relaxed self-realisation with himself and with the client.



**Figure 2:** The threshold experience arising out of the meeting of the two streams of time

Time is life itself, and life resides in the human heart.

*Momo*

### III Synthesis

#### A new beat of the heart

In therapy, the therapist, connecting to her own sleep forces emanating out of the stream of time from the future, helps the client put to sleep the relentless busy-ness that stems from the stream of time emanating from the past and that has chained the client to a repetitive and unfree life. This past can thus become 'lighter', and the first light of future possibilities starts to appear on the distant horizon. The new balance created between the past and future, between impressing and expressing, allows an experience of enhanced presence to be experienced by the client. This experience, expressed in the new rhythmical interweaving of past and future, takes place in the human heart, in the new balance between diastolic and systolic; inhaling and exhaling; expansion and contraction; impressing and expressing; cause and effect and intentionality (Schad, 2013).

#### Crossing the Threshold

More and more, I experience clients being thrown back into their past or catapulted into their future by a world distracted by itself and by their own selves. It is said that in our darkest moments, we can sometimes find the greatest light. In a similar manner, in these times of overwhelming noise and distraction, perhaps we can begin to find our deepest and most satisfying silence (emptiness) in the therapy room. In this silence resides our True I. This silence is a future force of creative power that lies buried beneath our distracted (past) world of 'relentless busy-ness' and distraction, and can be reached in the meeting between two individuals.

A true meeting of human beings involves uncertainty, risk, potential and the possibility of true play. Such a meeting is a threshold experience. Crossing thresholds often involves leaving behind something familiar, and going towards something unknown. In therapy, in safe and reliable space, the inherent uncertainty and unknown nature of this experience is permitted

to reside calmly and steadfastly between client and therapist. The client comes to embrace these thresholds that once upon a time caused him so much pain (and thus fear) because something did not take place that could have done. Similar to the experience of the angelic hierarchies entering the emptiness on the spiritual path of initiation, at the earthly therapeutic level the client can experience a reflection of this process when his deepest longings and intentions are (re)discovered in this emptiness through learning to rest.

As mentioned above, one of the main aims of the anthroposophical path of schooling (similar to many other spiritual paths) is to connect to one's True I by crossing the threshold between this world and the spiritual world. However, this ultimate goal must begin in the more modest but no less important steps of learning to first experience the thresholds of emptiness and potential spaces in our daily lives. The therapy room is one such place where such threshold experiences can be practised and experienced. In Anthroposophy, we often talk about the crossing of the threshold to the spiritual world as if this crossing is a 'walking' from one place to another. But this crossing of the threshold into the spiritual world is not a physical crossing, but a training in refraining from 'filling up' the emptiness and the allowing of something new to enter this emptiness. This anthroposophical 'crossing the threshold experience' into the spiritual world is reflected in the emptiness and the artistic and playful 'potential space experience' in therapy – a threshold event that can be encountered by the client when the therapist fosters within herself the qualities of openness to new experience, faith in the artistic being of the client, and courage and humility in the face of the client's future potentials seeking to manifest in the present.

Every therapist should remember that in the meeting with a client who presents with symptoms of anxiety, depression, pain and fear, rising from the silent depths of their souls is often a desperate whispering plea or request to experience these thresholds anew, to truly

experience a playful, restful, and artistic ‘self-realisation’ and to thus rediscover their future that was lost so many years ago in the overwhelming distractions of the past.

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