

June 2, 2008

Researchers and theorists who contribute to the field of psychotherapy have been interested in the interactions that take place between mothers and their infants for quite some time. It's an interest that has, over recent years, moved from the fringe to the very centre of our field. Theories about the formation and dynamics of the individual psyche, and the many shapes its troubles can take, that were originally based on informed intuition are now being tested against the findings arising from very close and systematic observation of these interactions. The results have called into question many long-held beliefs and brought about big changes in some influential ideas. At the same time, this scientifically rigorous activity has actually taken many other psychotherapeutic principles to a whole new level of validation. For example, we've always known that babies who are engaged by their parents in lively conversation, even long before they know the literal meaning of words, tend to develop verbally and generally fare better than babies who are treated as if they are linguistically inert. What we now know, thanks to sophisticated imaging technology such as M.R.I.'s, is that the mother's responsive facial expressions and changing verbal intonations are actually essential to the development of vital neural circuitries that would otherwise remain dormant. In other words, a mother's loving smile actually stimulates brain development.

One concept that comes out of this research that is getting quite a lot of attention these days is the notion of **mentalization**. It refers to an individual's ability to think about his or her own thinking. To reflect on one's thought processes and submit them to examination and evaluation. It's a capacity we all develop with varying degrees of success. When it's extremely undeveloped in a person, he has a very limited ability for differentiating his thoughts from reality. This individual's thoughts about a given situation are for him the absolute reality of that situation; they're indistinguishable. As you might imagine, this makes for a very closed and rigid way of being in the world, and causes no end to problems in the interpersonal sphere. (Maybe you're sitting beside someone like that this evening- if so, please don't mention it to them until this talk is completed)

Mentalization, this ability to experience our thoughts as **just** thoughts, begins its preliminary formation when we are babies in our parent's arms. Its gradual and on-going development is the result of having our ever-changing inner states treated by others as meaningful events. The infant wants something, let's say, he wants to be picked up and held against his mother's big warm body. He expresses this desire with the limited vocabulary he has

available to him. He begins to get *fussy*. Mom notices this change in his state and she correctly intuits the meaning of his signal. As she picks him up she says, “you look a bit lonely, would you like some company?” Through this simple interaction, which will be repeated in many variations over countless times, he has the experience of being treated as a being with his own mind, a mind that is source of its own intentions and motivations.

These very basic early conversations and exchanges originate within an intimate and specialized atmosphere, where each mother and baby develops a unique spoken and unspoken vocabulary. It happens within what D.W. Winnicott called the zone of **primary unity**. It’s within this zone and through these exchanges that, to quote Winnicott, “the child finds himself in the mind of the other”. That is, the child learns who he is by having his subjective experiences being treated as meaningful and having them reflected back to him through the parent’s empathic responses. As the baby develops and the conversation becomes increasingly more sophisticated, he gradually learns that the mother’s actions are also shaped by intentions, that she too has an inner world of thoughts and feelings that are not necessarily the same as his. As he recognizes this he begins to distinguish inner from outer, his thoughts and feelings from other people’s and from what he will eventually understand as *objective reality*, which might radically differ from the immediate thoughts and feelings he’s having about it. This is mentalization, and when it’s adequately developed the experience of having a mind that differs from the minds that surround us is an interesting and pleasurable reality of life. When it fails to sufficiently develop, which is usually the result of chronic misattunement in that ever-expanding zone of primary unity, our own feelings and thoughts can become dreaded enemies. Our relationship to our own mind can become one of alienation. We might be constantly overwhelmed by unmanageable feelings or have been so successful at deadening them that we have no idea what we feel in our deepest self. We might feel out of our mind, but the underlying truth could be that our mind has never really been our own in the first place. That’s because when we repeatedly looked for it in the mind of the other what was reflected back had very little connection with or resemblance to the potential self within us. This is, of course, seldom the result of malicious intentions on the part of the parents, and usually arises from their own unresolved troubles and limited capacity for mentalization. Nevertheless, when things go badly in the child’s search for himself in the mind of the other, he might find himself searching for a psychotherapist twenty-five or thirty years later. His troubles might show up as the symptoms of depression or an anxiety disorder, or an inability to establish and sustain a loving relationship, or

maybe he feels lost and empty and directionless. He might be in the middle of a very successful career and have two kids and an adoring wife, but he's haunted by the feeling that he's living someone else's life. So he drinks too much and engages in risky behaviors.

So he calls a psychotherapist. What he hopes for is an expert who will take away the symptoms that have become too troublesome to ignore any longer. But if he's fortunate, he might find his way to a therapist like one of the five who are graduating this evening who have struggled long and hard to accept the realization that no one can actually meet his expectations. They've learned that we can't be taught how to take away someone's self-loathing or anxiety, or to give them a sense meaning or the ability to love deeply. As much as they would like to be able to do these things, they've come to accept that this really only happens on daytime T.V. They accept this reality, yet are quite willing to take on the job because of the fact that they've spent the better part of the last decade in a pursuit that is remarkably similar to that baby's search for himself in the mind of the other. They have all been tracking down their *therapist mind*, a process that we might understand as a kind continuation and elaboration of that original pursuit. Like most of us who are drawn to this work, in the beginning Janie, Leeanne, Judy, Nadia, and Julie all hoped that someone was going to teach them how to do it. We would all be greatly comforted by a really good and definitive manual. And psychotherapeutic theory is invaluable, but it doesn't teach anyone how to be a decent therapist anymore than a book on the history of aviation teaches a person how to fly a plane. So while these five graduands have been steeping themselves in a wealth of theory, they have also been repeatedly tossed back into their inner worlds with nothing to guide them but their own feelings and intuitions. This is how the search for our therapist mind reprises that original process. Just as we can never teach a child who she is, but only create an atmosphere that might help her discover it for herself, we can't teach someone what her therapist mind is, she must discover it by bringing to life. This can't be taught, but as with the original discoveries of self, it can't be done alone. It too requires repeated encounters with another to bring it about.

Each of the therapists graduating this evening does therapy in a way that has never quite been done before because they each have a unique therapist mind. The fact that each one of them is informed by this unique centre of therapeutic intelligence and sensibility is what makes it possible for every therapy they engage in to be a *one off* encounter with each client. Most importantly, this is also what makes it possible for a given therapeutic relationship to, as it were, emotionally reconstitute something like that *zone*

of primary unity. This is not to say that the therapist attempts to re-parent anyone, but rather that the kind of informed and focused attention she provides holds the client in an interpersonal atmosphere that can eventually re-activate a dormant process of self discovery and actualization that had been truncated, misdirected, or otherwise de-railed early on. But she can't do this if she enters the therapeutic relationship with a well-defined agenda. This is the recurring paradox these five graduands have been wrestling with since they began the clinical phase of their training, and one they will be continually tossed into for as long as they practice. They have to know what they're doing while not knowing where they're going. They need to have a sound and expansive grasp of theory to help them order and make some sense of the material their client's present. But if they allow theoretical formulations to supplant a direct and authentic human encounter, the tail begins to wag the dog and the *transitional space* that can act like the zone of primal unity is foreclosed. Just as we can't plan to be spontaneous, we can't provide a real atmosphere of discovery if we can't tolerate the unknown. When Nadia, Julie, Janie, Lianne, and Judy began this process, there was a lot they already knew. They were already very accomplished women with highly developed minds. In addition to being mothers, among them we have an actor's mind, a couple of teacher's minds, a concert violinist's mind and a lawyer's mind. But they were all willing to fully embrace the humbling experience of being students again. They were willing to brave the experience of not knowing, of being the beginners as opposed to the accomplished ones. But I'm quite sure that the degree of not knowing they would be required to sustain surprised even them. Especially when they began working with clients. They probably had no idea that doing psychotherapy can sometimes feel like being a lifeguard on a completely deserted beach. Or that it can sometimes feel like you're staring into the business end of a wood chipper. Or that it frequently feels like that dream in which you've just found out that the final math exam is this afternoon and for some unknown reason you haven't been to any classes all term. But then it can also feel like listening to Miles Davis play a ballad when perfect sound arises from a place of pure silence.

Its many challenges and rewards actually have their common source in the mystery of the unknown. This is why the work asks us to embrace the sensibility that the American musician and performance artist, Laurie Anderson expresses in the final lines of her song, *Life on a String*. She says:

Some people know exactly where they're going
The pilgrims to Mecca
The climbers to the mountaintop
But me I'm looking
For just a single moment
So I can slip through time

Leeanne, Judy, Janie, Nadia, and Julie, I hope you can, like Laurie Anderson, continue to be O.K. with not always knowing exactly where you're going. I know that you will continue to be open to how mysterious human beings actually are and because you'll do this your *therapist minds* will continue to expand. I also know that I speak for the whole C.T.P. faculty when I say how proud we are to call you our graduates.