

# NOT KNOWING IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

BY

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*Note about authorship: John Firman and I thought together for over 21 years, and therefore these ideas belong to both of us. It is impossible to say that they are mine alone. They exist as memories of conversations we had and still have, as well as notes in a computer. I do take responsibility for the expression of them now, and sadly wish I had John's gift for writing. Over the years, our students have told us how touched they were by his words.*

In 1987, if I had visited a therapist because of the emotional distress I was experiencing in a relationship, I might have been told to “let go,” to realize and accept that the person I loved was simply not available. In my years of being a psychotherapist and a psychology instructor, too often I have heard individuals speak of having had such an experience in therapy; that is, of being told by therapists, either directly or in a subtle manner, what a possible outcome of their situations might be and, therefore, what actions they should take.

Counter to this, I didn’t let go; instead, I prayed and asked for guidance. The message I received was “Stay present and love him.” It was hard to do, and I often returned to prayer, asking, “Are you sure?” And I would hear once again, “Stay present and love him.” The odds of having my love returned in the way that I wished seemed small. And yet, with prayer and trust in a mysterious knowing that has guided my life, I followed this message. Thank goodness that I did. I stayed present and loved him, and three years later I married him.

I sometimes tell this story to my students, using it as an example of one of the most essential principles in being a psychotherapist: the realization that we are not omniscient and that we have no idea what the life path of a person will be, and that therefore we must be able to tolerate and accept not knowing.

In *The Mindful Therapist*, Daniel Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA, speaks of encountering the unknown in the psychotherapeutic situation:

Resonance [attunement] immerses us in the unknown and brings us face to face with uncertainty. These existential realities may be uncomfortable for those clinicians who strive to know and to be certain and to be able to control. (Siegel 2010, 56)

Professor of psychology Adelbert H. Jenkins, in his article “The Empathic Context in Psychotherapy with People of Color,” writes of “the capacity to suspend *a priori* judgments about the ‘truth’ and live with the uncertainties and doubts of psychic life as they present themselves” (Jenkins 1997, 331). He goes on to say, “empathizing activity is enhanced by the therapist’s temporarily giving up the ‘knowledge’ of what is ‘right’ that anchors him or her in the world” (331).

In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Carl Jung wrote:

He [man or woman] must sense that he lives in a world which in some respects is mysterious; that things happen and can be experienced which remain inexplicable; that not everything which happens can be anticipated. The unexpected and the incredible belong in this world. Only then is life whole. For me the world has from the beginning been infinite and ungraspable. (Jung 1961, 356)

And Shunryu Suzuki in *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* stated it simply:

If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few. (Suzuki 1970, 21)

Listening to the issues and situations with which clients struggle can be challenging for therapists. They can be overwhelmed by the amount of content that is presented, and those who are newly trained or who are not grounded in a specific therapeutic modality are especially challenged. On the other hand, therapists who are solid in their therapeutic approach are surer and believe they know how to address the client's presenting issue, and they may even believe that they know the direction a client should take or a choice the client should make. Whether experienced or not, or whether grounded in a specific modality or not, a therapist can quickly close the door to a client's possibilities, operating within a closed system rather than an open one.

In therapy, what does an open system imply? How does one understand this, no matter what one's theoretical approach is? Is there a model that can support both the therapist and the client as they remain open and tolerate not knowing?

To operate in an open system in therapy means that the therapist acknowledges that he doesn't have the answers to the client's struggles, and that though he may have a glimmer of how an issue will be resolved for the client, he accepts that he doesn't know for certain and that he doesn't hold the truth for this person's life. He lets go of assumptions and his need to know, and supports the client in the exploration of the psychological territory of the client's issue. The therapist does not rush to closure, using either his theoretical beliefs or his own life experience to bring resolution to the client's dilemma. He recognizes his role as one of helping the client explore the various elements of the client's struggle, not one of constructing a solution. A therapist's job is similar to what has been reported about Michelangelo and his attitude toward his work. It is said that he believed that the figure he sculpted already existed in the marble. He was not the creator of the figure; his job was to only reveal the powerful figures that were already present in the stone.

In his statement that an open system is a "system in exchange of matter with its environment, presenting import and export, building-up and breaking-down of its material components," Ludwig Bertalanffy (1988, 4), the creator of general systems theory, gives us a clue for a model that can support both the therapist and the client as they tolerate not knowing and remain open to possibilities. For our purpose here, what is significant about this quote is that it describes the creative process. Understanding this process can support a psychotherapist in the decision to not rush to closure, but to remain open in the face of the unknown.

In the creative process, one begins with a certain amount of knowledge, a stable position but one that is no longer satisfying or one in which there is a sense of unexpressed, yet desired, potential. The discovery and actualization of this potential is the journey of the creative process and those who have studied it describe it as comprised of various phases. Psychosynthesis theorist James Vargiu (1977) presented five stages of this process: preparation, frustration, incubation, illumination, and elaboration. These are similar to those described by Graham Wallas who is regarded as

a pioneer in the study of creative thinking: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification (Wallas, 1926).

In his discussion of creativity, Vargiu presents a model that can be helpful for us when thinking about what takes place in therapy. To explain the creative process, he uses the analogy of an electromagnetic field. After filing a piece of metal, if one scatters the iron shavings on a sheet of paper and then takes a magnet and slowly draws it toward and under the paper, the iron shavings will begin to move, gradually attaching to the other bits of metal, and ultimately clumping together and forming a pattern that is in response to the electromagnetic field of the magnet.

This is similar to what occurs in therapy. A client begins with an issue or a situation that is no longer functional or one in which he perceives unexpressed potential. The client may recognize that a behavior or way of being no longer works in his life, may or may not have an idea of how he wants to be, and even if he has an idea, often doesn't know how to reach it.

This early stage of therapy corresponds to the preparation phase of the creative process (the gathering of iron shavings in Vargiu's analogy), and the client, assisted by the therapist, begins the exploration of the known pattern, the known way of being. What are the elements – feelings, behaviors, beliefs, and prior experiences – that make up the no longer desired or useful way of being? And what are the fantasies of what could be? In this exploration, what is brought to light is everything the client knows about the existing pattern, including how it may have been initially formed. We describe this stage as one of moving about in inner territory, gathering all the known elements (the iron shavings described above) and approaching unknown (unconscious) ones. We had a marvelous experience one day in London that illustrates this stage.

Threatened by the Nazis, Sigmund Freud left Vienna in 1938 and lived the last year of his life in London. His London home is open to the public, and in one of its rooms psychoanalytic students are invited to create exhibits. The day that John and I visited, we approached the closed door of this room, not knowing what to expect. Next to the door was a small table upon which was a basket that contained flashlights. A note instructed us to take a flashlight, to turn it on, and to enter the room. We followed these instructions and opened the door and walked into a pitch-black room.

We directed our flashlights around the room and where the light shone we saw objects on shelves and in cases. It was an inspired exhibit. We were looking into the unconscious, wandering into unknown territory, and with the light from our flashlights, began to identify some of the objects in the room. This is what happens in therapy as the client begins to explore the issue that prompted him to seek help. The flashlights are similar to the tools – empathic curiosity (curiosity in service of the client) and specific psychotherapeutic techniques applied empathically – that the therapist engages in assisting the client's exploration, and the beams of light are similar to the awareness of both the client and therapist as they gaze at that which has been illumined by the flashlights. The therapist and client together are walking about in the client's inner world, identifying the elements that are visible. Neither therapist nor client knows for sure what will be found. Here is the openness to be present to whatever reveals itself.

The elements that are recognized and gathered are similar to the iron shavings in the analogy Vargiu describes in his article.

The stages of the creative process can be seen in a condensed form in the case example of Cindy that can be found in our book, *A Psychotherapy of Love: Psychosynthesis in Practice* (Firman and Gila 2010, 49-52). Cindy, a premedical student, comes to therapy with the presenting issue of being “freaked out” by tests. As Cindy expresses her distress, many possibilities for how to address it rush through the therapist’s mind—among others, systematic desensitization, teaching her a meditative technique, exploring the childhood roots of her fear of failure, and focusing experientially on her feelings and physical experience. The therapist is able to resist the pull of his psychological training and his own life experiences and stay present to Cindy, an individual with her own unique path in life.

Successful at resisting all that immediately pops into his mind, he turns to Cindy and assists her in exploring the various elements of her “freaked-out” feelings, including what she knows about how she would wish to be in the test situation. He makes no assumptions. As this exploration proceeds, Cindy has an “aha” moment when she recognizes that she has used her anxiety to motivate her to study, and therefore she is not sure that she wants to be rid of it. This is an experience of illumination that she would not have reached if the therapist had rushed to apply a technique and not stayed present to her. In this case, the therapist had to be willing to remain in the open system of not knowing—not knowing the meaning of Cindy’s pattern of anxiety, not knowing what it would reveal, if anything, and not knowing whether Cindy would experience relief of her distress. As the session progresses, Cindy has a sense that there must be another way to take tests, and with further exploration guided by the therapist, Cindy finds a new way to be in the test situation and elaborates this in her discussion with the therapist.

Returning to the model of the creative process for a moment, what is actually happening in therapy, for example in the case of Cindy?

Cindy enters therapy with a problem, a pattern in her life (anxiety) that is causing her distress and senses that there is another way of being when taking a test. This sense of another way, of potential, is similar to the experience of the mathematician or molecular biologist who searches for the answer to an unsolved problem. Or to take an example from a television sitcom: Sheldon in the *Big Bang Theory* who attempts to find the solution to a physics problem and spends the entire evening at a white board on which he has written everything he knows about the problem. He manipulates the elements hoping to find the solution only to experience increasing frustration as each hour passes.

In all cases, be it in therapy or in the biology laboratory or in an episode of the *Big Bang Theory*, the known elements are reviewed, arranged, and rearranged, all in search of the new discovery. In the psychotherapeutic situation, the therapist facilitates the exploration of the elements, those that are known and those that were previously unknown (for example, Cindy not realizing she uses the anxiety for motivation). The therapist *follows*, not sets, the direction of the thread of the client’s unfolding consciousness. As Irv Yalom (2002) writes in *The Gift of Therapy*: “The flow of therapy should be spontaneous, forever following unanticipated riverbeds . . . .(34).

In the model of the iron shavings and magnet presented earlier, it may now be clear what the iron shavings are in psychotherapy; that is, they are the elements that relate to the client's no longer functional pattern or way of being. But what is the magnet to which the elements respond? What is it that creates an energetic field that, in a sense, reforms the client and shows him a new way of being? We would say that hopefully it is not the will or the wishes of the therapist.

In the psycho-spiritual approach of psychosynthesis, the magnet is Self, and the process described here is that of Self-realization. Self can be defined in many ways. In religious terms it can be said to be one's God. In spiritual terms, it may be called Spirit or Higher Power. And in secular terms it may be called one's Truth, one's deepest sense of meaning. Self-realization, therefore, is the following in one's life of God, or Spirit, or Truth. In Self-realization, we form patterns, that is, ways of being, in response to Self. As therapist, therefore, the task is to assist the client in exploration, however illumination is the domain of Self. If we insert ourselves at this point, providing solutions and resolutions, we are attempting to be the creator, and not recognize as Michelangelo did, that we are to reveal, not attempt to create, another human being.

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