

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TOUCH AND THE THERAPEUTIC PROCESS?

There are many individuals who need to be touched rather than simply talked with to make genuine progress in a therapeutic process. While they know something is wrong in themselves and their interpersonal relations, and will quickly enough seek someone to talk to, they are at a loss to explain why verbal examination of their dilemma does not seem to penetrate to the core of the problem which, they vaguely intuit, lies just beyond reach.

The nucleus of the problem is that the individual enters adulthood unaware of primary needs. The majority of adults in our culture did not in early childhood have the opportunity in interaction with parents to spontaneously awaken and nurture those feeling needs which later form the basis of satisfying adult behavior.

Why, then, do basic needs not emerge and get satisfied in adulthood? The child unconsciously assumes the parental attitude that it is impossible to satisfy basic feeling needs. The parent has either intruded upon the child, or, by example, left this impression. Thus, beginning early in life and continuing into adulthood, there is a collision near the surface of the body between the surfacing feeling needs, and the half-conscious attitude of hopeless negation descending from the ever more isolated thinking function. Here a verbal therapy, in the absence of nurturing touch, tends to reinforce rather than undermine a head-oriented survival mode of being.

How, then, can the therapist create an ambience in which the primary needs eventually emerge? The therapist verbally and empathically affirms the wisdom of the client's early childhood self-protective withdrawal to the head and within. The therapist transmits from the very beginning in his being, his movement, in his or her unconditional positive regard for the client, a sense that at least there, in the consulting room, is safety for full expression, both verbal and bodily. He transmits the provocative assumption that the wisdom of living fully in the body is sufficient to prosper in the world. All of which provide a continuity of support for the client to tentatively and momentarily descend from the head into the rage, the grief, and full panoply of feelings that have surrounded the lack of satisfaction of primary needs from the beginning.

How does the therapist help awaken in the client awareness of primary needs? Generally, he touches before he talks. He or she touches the client where, at this early stage, the organism can take a little nurture: the overworked head, the hands that reach, the feet and legs that support. And he takes his time. When he touches on his own initiative or at the suggestion of the client, he maintains a firm, prolonged, clear contact not so much to affect the muscle complexes (which do need quietening), as to enrich the fluidity of the blood at the center. He senses and affirms with his hands the unconscious waves of movement of the living interior of the client. And then he steps back clearly, and watches, no intention in mind, perhaps after a few minutes asking the client of what he or she is aware.

Whether the client emits an involuntary belly gurgle, a cough, a whimper, or experiences imagery from his or her uncompleted past, or expresses imagery of archetypal proportion which reflect autonomous vegetative activity deep within, the therapist knows from experience that the withdrawn center is awakening. As the client begins to observe these phenomena (initially at the prompting of the therapist), exploring them in movement or in deep quiet, she or he begins to recapture an internal bodily sense. The capacity to sustain that sense even as here and now

difficulties are confronted, and as the memories and feelings of early childhood trauma are expressed, affords an ever clearer focus on the original feeling needs.

These primary unsatisfied needs emerge primarily in the order that the self needs to establish a bodily foundation, depending upon the nature of the original woundedness of the individual. From deep within the abdomen emerges the need and capacity for positive self-regard, the need to feel that oneself is sufficient. From the upper back and rear of the head emerges a feeling toned need to objectively comprehend the world, both internal and external (rather than conquer it). From the chest region there slowly develops the need and capacity to love and be loved. And from the lower back and pelvis there slowly emerges an embodied will or drive to pursue and satisfy the other three needs. Only as daily life is observed from within rather than from above, through the thousand signals the wise body makes available to an awakened consciousness, can one begin to melt rigid, isolated modes of being, and discover a deeper embodied truth about oneself.

Richard Wolf Nathan maintains a private practice in the United States, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany in Bodypsychotherapy, and conducts ongoing training workshops in both America and Europe.