

Transformation: Facing the Anxiety of Being

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I have been thinking about what it means for a client to experience transformation in psychotherapy. Some people hit rock bottom and begin their life of recovery from that day onward, like the alcoholic who finally admits defeat and engages in a life of “living the steps.” This seemingly overnight transformation is much like the late Dr. James Loder’s concept of the transforming moment. Dr. Loder continually asked the questions, “What is a lifetime?” and “why do we live it?” allowing his existential pursuit of meaning to inform his concept of transformation for an individual. According to Loder, transforming moments can be shaping to our world and understanding of God. He suggested transforming moments can be called transformational because of what we do with the moments and how we respond to them in the years to follow. But this “overnight” transformation is not the experience of the majority of us.

Some people experience an internal ongoing gnawing that says, *something is not right, something has got to change*. This tends to lead to the beginning of the pursuit of change, change that comes in the form of switching jobs, a move, re-examining of relationships, greater dependence on God or maybe even engaging in the work of therapy.¹ This process of transformation is a slow process, riddled with the anxiety of not knowing; a process that is characterized by an unfolding, a discovery of things as they come. One feels as if they are walking blindly into newness, that they *hope*, and eventually trust, is there. All the while they learn to tolerate the anxiety that accompanies the not knowing. This is the experience of the greater population where transformation

¹ Sadly enough, it is not the greater majority of people who choose therapy as a way to embark on ways to experience change in their lives.

seems to come in smaller dosages, with the sum of its parts adding up to make the whole, allowing a person to look back with hindsight and say, *I have changed*.

It is this latter experience of transformation that feels more familiar to the process of psychotherapy. Engaging in the work of psychotherapy week in and week out with clients, slowly and artfully, is the work of providing a safe space for client's to come and unload their self; all in hopes of changing things for the better, from how things are to a new way of being. It is the purpose of this paper to address how transformation happens in the context of psychotherapy. I will propose that facing our anxiety at the origins of self allows us to step beyond ourselves to encounter the Divine Other, and thus, experience transformation. This kind of transformation is based on Ann Ulanov's concept the anxiety of being, where with the help of the other, we come to face our anxiety of being and invite transformation by welcoming Love.²

In her book, *Religion and the Spiritual in Carl Jung*, Ann Ulanov writes a chapter entitled, "The Anxiety of Being." She gleans from reputable theologian and scholar Paul Tillich, devoted his life to systemic theology, but was also receptive and engaging of depth psychology. According to Ulanov, Tillich "received and welcomed anything that promised to enlarge his-- and others' courage to be" (Ulanov, 164). He wanted people to participate in a life laced with meaning, where one is able to come to an understanding that one's particular human experience is infiltrated with transcendent movement. Tillich illustrated

² I use a capital "L" in order to highlight the particular connotation of love I am explicating. This is an unconditional love that many individuals have not known in their lives, and that I believe is Divine like in nature.

Martin Buber's *I-Thou* relationship, always seeing "the specific person there before him and addressed his remarks to the other person's deepest self" (165).

Anxiety of Being is an extension of Paul Tillich's thought that Ulanov defines as, "the anxiety so many of us feel about the being that is there before us, within us, around us, the being that is available to us with its abundance of possibilities, its many complex facets, there to be lived, and, even more anxiety-producing, for us to live and to realize" (Ulanov, 165). Ulanov parallels Tillich's notion that persons encounter three kinds of attacks when facing the anxiety that poses a threat to every person's life. These three kinds of attacks stem from the existential questions of "what it means to be, of how particular persons come into being, and from what sources of being healing can come?"³ Ulanov's notion of the anxiety of being is contextualized at the origins of life, at the place, in a Christian worldview, where Creator shapes and begets creation.

I am suggesting that transformation is embedded at this point of origin of the self, where one can look back at how one comes into being and understand what it means to be. Ulanov says that depth psychologists now center on how a person comes to be, "the mysterious early beginnings of the human self," in order to understand human pathology.⁴ Ulanov argues that depth psychologists parallel "age-old religious quests to relate to the power and presence of being at the source" (Ulanov, 170). Knowing and coming to know one's Creator, as life-giver and love-giver, is much of the work of theology. Getting to the original place

³ Tillich's three attacks are of fate and death, of meaninglessness and emptiness, and of guilt and condemnation.

⁴ Freud began with the Oedipal conflict between ages 4-6 years. Klein looked at the pre-oedipal years of a child, going back to year one. Winnicott looked at the first months of a newborn's life.

where one's sense of self came into being, and where one's true self, to use Winnicott's words, receives an opportunity for a second birth, is much of the work of psychotherapy. I would argue that transformation can happen in psychotherapy where these two disciplines meet. Where self meets other, when the patient comes to a convictional knowing⁵ that there is an *other*⁶ who is bigger and more able to contain the anxiety that comes with living. It is in this space that transformation can occur, however, this cannot occur until the anxieties that plague what it is to *be/become*, are faced.

Ulanov's three forms of the anxiety of being are: the terror of being, anxiety of meaning, and refusal to be. These three forms of anxiety of being are usually addressed at a regressed⁷ state of being during therapy, at a place where being and nonbeing encounter one another at a crossroads. This is the place of transformation in psychotherapy. It happens at a crossroads where the human meets the Divine, where the anxiety of being is ultimately met, tolerated, and held by Love. However, Ulanov's three forms of anxiety have to be met, tolerated and held before a knowing of the *other* is present and actually experienced.

Ulanov's terror of being is being frightened by what is there not by what is not there. She says this is what Otto Rank calls "life fear," the notion that one can differentiate from the group and become an individual self, yet still remain related to the group. And so this terror of being is having a self and yet remaining in

⁵ Loder's concept that speaks to a experiential knowing that is more Hebraic than Western.

⁶ I use other here in italics to highlight the way this connotes so much meaning. Concretely, it is the therapist in the room. But because of projection, that other can become so many things, i.e. mother, father, God. Furthermore, based on my argument for this paper, other can be representative of the Divine, in which all the client's anxieties are held and the client experiences Love by the other.

⁷ Philip Bromberg speaks of regression as "the raw state of mind" where the patient closely connects with "the development of insight which leads to change in self-representation" (Bromberg, 32). More generally, regression is the notion that speaks to a person's desire to regress back towards infancy.

relationship. This particular anxiety accompanies the experience of bringing something new into being. It also shows up in the aspects of our lives that go un-lived, that aspect of our lives that have been laid to death. We think we can live so many different lives, and then at some point in our development we realize we are limited, limited to one life and one life in particular. The answer to this form of anxiety in the terror of being is self-affirmation. This is where Love holds our small being in its own larger reality. As the therapist steps into role of *other*, the client is allowed to regress into that originating place of being, when he or she re-experiences a “coming into the world.” It is at this point the anxiety of the terror of being can be held by *other*, who is bigger and more able to contain all of the self; just as the infant self is held and contained by its’ mother who is bigger and more able to face the experiences that accompany being in the world.

Ulanov’s anxiety of meaning is about the meaning that is present, even when there is loss of meaning. “One of our most successful ways to avoid being is to hide among the pseudo issues of nonbeing” (Ulanov, 175). For example, asking what is the meaning of suffering? cleverly avoids the question of what am I to make of this suffering that currently plaques me? This anxiety is a wrestling with the meaning we have assimilated in our lives. Shifting the question of why did this happen to what has happened is a process of meeting the particular anxieties that have faced us in our individual lives. This is one of the tasks of psychotherapy. It is critical to focus on the concrete, here and now, experience of the client so that meaning can be attained out of his or her particular circumstances.

Ulanov's refusal to be is the refusal to receive our being in the fragments of experience that are offered to us. It is at this place that we tend to replace our sense of being with anxiety, so that we no longer know who we are and know only the anxiety that plagues us. "We are made anxious by our awareness that if we became all that we could be, the intensity of being would be too much for us. Life is more threatening than death" (Ulanov, 178). This encounter and embrace of life can only be met by love. The book of Song of Songs from the Old Testament tells us that only love is as strong as death. Our refusal to be can be countered with an invitation to Love, to contain and sustain us as we learn to tolerate the anxiety, as we experience the *other* tolerating our anxiety, however large or intolerable, that comes with living.

And so transformation in psychotherapy is an invitation to Love. It is when a client is willing to be loved so that all the anxieties of living can be contained and the self experiences full acceptance and embrace. However, the terror of being, the anxiety of meaning and the refusal to be are necessary parts of coming to this invitation to Love. As Ulanov illustrated, these are necessary experiences of being in the world. We must offer our clients self-acceptance, engagement in their particular questions of meaning grounded in their particular story, and ultimately offer love. We must guide our clients through their particular versions of these forms of anxiety so that they are ready to receive Love from a bigger *other*. It is much like a blind walking and placing oneself into the hands of the *other*, hoping, and eventually trusting that there is new life on the other side

of deadness they are experiencing. This is transformation, shaping to our world and critical to our understanding of God and self.

References

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