Healing the Mind—What is the Process?

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How on earth do I heal someone else’s mind? It is obvious I think when I put it that way that it is not something that I can do. I cannot do this to you and you cannot do it to me. The word do immediately strikes the wrong chord. Some years ago I was in a distressed state. My mind was in turbulence. It was not, I might say, a unique occasion but the circumstances that led to it were overwhelming to me, more overwhelming than usual. Large waves I was used to but not a tidal wave. I could see no solution. I was at a dead end. Fortuitously a friend asked me to accompany him to a cottage that sat on the saddle of a hill and on each side of which were beautiful views. It was not in Australia and English was not my friend’s first language. Apart from myself there came my friend’s brother and two old associates of his. I stayed for five days at this cottage and the routine of the day was like this. We all rose in the morning at about seven and we were served with a cup of tea each, then we went for a walk that lasted about half an hour and then we returned to breakfast. When this was over my friend, his brother and two associates sat down at a table and played cards. I had with me a history of the country and a couple of other books and, armed with them, I went into the garden and sat and read until lunchtime. It was reflective reading. I was in no hurry and I quite often stopped and allowed thoughts to stray across my mind. After lunch I had a rest and in the late afternoon my friend, his brother and the other two and myself went for a drive through a countryside that was new to me. In the evening we had dinner. One of the party had brought a bottle of whisky and he gave to each one of us a night-cap and after a few relaxed exchanges of conversation we all went to bed. That was the routine and each of the five days was similar.

The drive from the city to this cottage took about three hours and I sat at the back with my friend and we talked. Each of the five days I talked a little when on the morning walk and also during the evening drive. The conversation with my friend was relaxed but personal. It must have been on about the third day when I was sitting in the garden reading that a very definite image came into my mind and I understood that having the image indicated that rather than being ruled by a storm that was raging outside of me it was now represented within me. In the National Gallery in London there is a painting of a ship in a storm by Turner. When I last stood in front of that painting and looked at it, the experience of a storm at sea had been beautifully captured but neither was my body being subjected to pelting rain nor were there winds and waves sweeping over me; the storm was on the canvas depicted through colour and perspective and it was enclosed within that frame and although all the elements of the storm were there to see yet its force and fury had all been tamed into the visual form before me. My eyes told me that
I was beholding a storm but the rest of my bodily senses were at rest. So also when sitting in that
garden I had a Turner-like picture in my mind instead of being blown this way and that. I was no
longer possessed by madness but had become its landlord, not ruled by fate but master of it. I
knew that a very important transformation had taken place. In that professional language that
robs meaning from our experience it would be stated that I had been relieved of anxiety. Now
how had this occurred? First, in this paper, I would like to reflect upon the mysterious nature of
such a transformation and then in my second paper to consider what are the outer circumstances
that favour such a happening. So in this paper the focus will be upon what occurs within the
mind when anguish is tamed and brought into the safe haven of understanding. The next paper
will focus on the outer environment that can favour such a momentous inner happening. It is
unfortunate that the limitations of time and space make it impossible to explain a phenomenon
without making such distinctions and categories whereas in fact the two are one. Picasso tried,
and I think with some success, to unify two different perspectives into one painting. He achieved
this to perfection in his painting done in 1937 entitled Woman in an Armchair. Unfortunately I
do not have Picasso's inspired genius and therefore have to make two separate paintings.

I want to give you a few instances where people had an inner representation, which were a
transformation of what occurred. A woman was fed up with her boyfriend who would not
commit himself to her. She was on her way to see him in the train; she was going to have it out
with him once and for all and then a surprising image confronted her. It was of her as a whining,
demanding child. She said to herself, 'I'll just attend to this demanding child when I meet up with
Matthew' and this is what she did. She did not confront Matthew but just looked after this
demanding child within her. At the end of the evening Matthew asked her spontaneously if she
would like to go with him when he went on his next business trip to Japan. He had never done
that before. However I do not want in this paper to focus on the consequences of such
transformations but upon the process of it. So that is one example.

Some of you may have read a recent book of mine called *A Pattern of Madness* and if you have
then you will recall that at one point I took the image of Helen Keller to represent a
transformation which lies at the heart of civilization, that represents the change from barbarism
to civilization. Many of you will know the story of that remarkable woman. As a child she was
both deaf and blind. She was not born such but contracted a disease when she was eighteen
months old and this sealed her off from the world outside. She was in a dark prison devoid of
light and devoid of music. Then, in an act of inspired devotion, her parents hired the services of
that remarkable woman, Ann Sullivan, whom Helen forever after called her Teacher. Helen was
aged eight at the time. When Helen picked up an object her Teacher, with touching patience,
would spell the letters of the word designating the object into her left hand but with no success
until one sunny day she took her charge out into the garden and put Helen's right hand under a
spring of running water in the pump house and spelt the letters W-A-T-E-R into her left hand. At
that moment an extraordinary thing happened. Helen knew in an instant that those letters
represented the liquid that was trickling through the fingers of her right hand. A world of light
and sound was opened to her. How did she know that those finger markings on her left hand
represented that cool liquid flowing across her right hand? She knew it with absolute certainty.
One has to posit, I think, that there is something in the personality that surges to represent, to
paint a picture of, the sensations which bombard us both from within and from outside. The
philosopher, John Searle, has written a whole book on this subject and says at one point in it:

> The capacity to attach a sense, a symbolic function, to an object that does not have that
sense intrinsically is the precondition not only of language but of all institutional reality.
The preinstitutional capacity to symbolize is the condition of possibility of the creation of
Institutions are component parts of that more complex reality which we call civilization. The crucial words here are: the preinstitutional capacity to symbolize. In other words there is a capacity in the personality to represent, to make a painting of the turbulent or even peaceful happenings that are occurring both outside us and also inside us. Helen Keller would not have had that Eureka moment had there not been in her an emotional movement where a part of her personality was able, like a mirror, to reflect, contain and possess the sensations in her personality. A benign split occurs where one part of the personality transforms sensations into inner paintings. The sensations that surge inside of us change their form, they become a scene upon a canvas within our soul. What is happening here is an amazing transformation: out of the chaotic impulses surging within us we create a series of pictures which we dare to call our mind.

I just want to draw your attention here to this basic conflict within the personality. It is between the force thrusting to represent and the raw savage impulses that discharge out of us into the human environment around us. These are two forces pushing in opposite directions—one is thrusting to gather the discharges into a containing frame and the other resisting it. I mention this in an aside because Freud’s model of conflict was of opposing instincts at war with one another. Some may believe that this model of Freud has been superseded by more modern psychoanalysts and psychotherapists but I believe that this is not so. Kohut, for instance, definitely based his schema upon such a model; so also did Winnicott, Melanie Klein and Michael Balint. Wilfred Bion, I believe, did not but my sense of it from listening to many clinical discussions is that the old clash of instincts model is the one which reigns supreme.

So I have entitled this piece Healing the Mind but in fact it would be more accurate to call it Creating the Mind. When someone approaches the psychotherapist he is clamouring, under a thousand different guises, that he does not have a mind that is capable of managing the crises that are afflicting him. These might be crises that have occurred in the past whose radiating waves still bombard the personality or emotional upheavals that the personality is not able to encompass in the present. The patient is clamouring: Please help me create a mind that can cope with these disasters that are overwhelming me. The creation of a mind occurs bit by bit. We are not born with ready-made minds; we are born with the innate capacity to create a mind. If you keep to my metaphor of an artist painting a picture then it occurs bit by bit. First he puts in the sky, then the earth, the trees, then a lake, then some clouds in the sky and then some men and women dancing a morris dance in the foreground. As each new element of the painting is put in so other elements have to be modified until finally all the different elements come together to form a unity that the person beholding the scene can apprehend as a unity.

So there is something thrusting towards representation in the personality. This thrust is against a primitive force that favours discharge. When I am in the grip of this other force I am battered by the storm; the rain is slashing against my face, the waves are pouring over me; I come stumbling into hospital and am declared to be mentally ill. The soft quiet presence of the artist is striving slowly to gather these wild passions onto or into a canvas called the mind. If the artist succeeds in his venture then the turbulence of soul both inside and out are changed into a new form. Instead of a storm we have a painting of a storm. Unfortunately when we are describing the emotions all analogies break down. This analogy works quite well in the sense that the painting depicts the storm and holds within its frame the rain and the waves but it conveys the idea of a passive entity which is entirely wrong. Yet it is possible to think of the painting as generating emotions in the person who is looking at it. In other words it is active. I was once with a friend...
who, as she looked at a painting by Cezanne, burst into tears—'It's so beautiful,' she sobbed. So the situation is like this: the raw impulses which are throwing the personality this way and that way become converted into a picture; an image is formed inside but this is an active force. It has a power. I want now to look at the nature of this power but before doing so I must correct what may have given you a false impression.

You might be wondering why it is that there is this other force, struggling against this push within the personality to create a representation? There is one aspect to my description above which may create a misunderstanding. When I talk about being blown hither and thither by storms or a tidal wave it may convey the idea that I am in writhing pain. In one way this is true but in another it is not. There is pain, there is exasperation but there is a struggle against the pain. At the moment when a representative image is created the pain is embraced. The previous state is a fight against the pain and, in fact, while this turbulent state is going on my mind is partially anaesthetized against pain. The resistance to the formation of a representation is a resistance against a piece of knowledge which is extremely painful. So, now that this has been noted, we may continue to look further into the nature of this creative power.

First, it has the power to digest experiences which, if left as they are, overwhelm the personality. These experiences are very varied in their nature. I lose through death someone dear to me. It is a shock to the system. I have been attached to her and now she is gone. When I begin to feel sad then I have started to create a picture of the loss and this generates the feeling of sadness just as the Cezanne painting generated, through its beauty, an intense pain in my friend. When I begin to feel the loss of the person who was dear to me then I have begun to paint a picture of that loss inside of me. Before that, I am in such a state of shock that I am unable to paint that picture inside of me. We all know how when someone we love dies suddenly we say we cannot believe that they have gone. Our picture is that the person is still here with us. We expect to see her tomorrow. I go to pick up the telephone to speak to her and remember that she is with us no more. We all know too of friends who, having suffered a severe bereavement, become ill or start drinking too much or, in some cases, despair and die themselves. In all these cases the person is being battered by the storm and they have not been able to paint a picture of the loss. The person drinks, gets ill or dies rather than feel sad. If I feel sad then it is because I have begun to paint a picture of the loss inside of me.

I have started with loss but it is not the most elemental experience. There is another experience: when I lack some capacity. I am unable to love, I cannot think properly, I am unable to create representations inside of me, I don’t register things that bombard me from the outside or from the inside. Again I cannot draw a picture of myself with this absent capacity. Imagine I have a deformed hand. I cannot draw a picture of myself with the deformed hand so instead I prance around being bossy to those around me and throwing my weight about in the most objectionable way or, alternatively, I might go around dejected. Now I have used here the example of a bodily deformity but the emotional or cognitive deformity is even more likely to make me stride around in an arrogant manner or to become depressed with the state of my life and the world. I am talking here of the instances when I have been unable to create a picture of what I lack. Just as when I begin to feel sad after having lost a dear friend so also the moment I begin to feel shame and am able to name it to myself then I have begun to paint a picture inside of my crippled state. Yes, shame is one of the most basic states—closer to the heart even than loss of another because it registers something that is basic to me.

So, sadness and shame arise out of an inner painting of loss of another and of absence. In both these cases the feelings register states that refer to events that are, that I am confronted with,
that I am not responsible for, but now we turn to guilt which results from what I do or have done. I have committed a crime. I may have done something which has contributed to my friend’s death or failed to do something which has contributed to a lack in me. Then we have not sadness or shame but guilt but, as with the other two states, I may not have drawn a picture of what I have done. In the case of the loss I don’t feel sad but instead become physically ill, or instead of shame become arrogant and instead of feeling guilty I get angry and blame those around me for all that is happening. So here we have a crime but again I have not been able to draw a picture of it inside of myself but instead blame, shout and scream at others. The moment when I start to draw a picture of the crime I have committed or the duty I have failed to fulfil, then at that moment of executing the painting inside of myself then precisely at that moment I begin to feel guilt.

So, in the way I am trying to describe it, in the moment when I start to execute the painting of my loss, my handicap, my crime I begin to take possession of myself. I fashion something inside of myself that takes the rest of my personality into its bosom like a good earth mother. There is something therefore in the personality that thrusts to create. I am tempted to say that the personality falls into two parts: the events themselves and then the painting of those events but it is not quite like that because at the moment in which the painting is executed then the events exist in a new form. The events in the form of wind, rain and waves or loss, handicap and crime are now in the form of a painting. The raw elements have been incorporated within the painting. What was outside the mind has now become part of the mind. I am now in possession of myself. I am sane, I am mentally healthy. This is one aspect of it but there is another, which is what this generates both in myself and others.

I mentioned my friend who burst into tears at the pain she experienced at the sheer beauty of the Cézanne painting. The painting, in other words, has an effect. This new image within has an effect upon myself and then also upon others. The effects upon myself are: trust, tranquillity, confidence, conviction, courage, honesty and generosity. When I am able to fashion a painting inside of myself the very fact that this is something that I have achieved and I can experience having done so, this enables me to trust myself more than I did before. It is easy to see the connection between that and confidence, conviction and courage—the three cs—confidence is a synonym for trust in myself, conviction is a trust in the object of my attention and courage is the capacity that arises out of trust to put inner representation into action. I act upon that which I trust. Peace or tranquillity arises out of a state of knowledge that things are as they should be. I am not being blown around by the storm but it is within the bosom of my own heart. This state throws out fear which enables me to be honest; I can say what I think because I am not worried by disapproval. Disapproval can only break me up if I have not encircled my inner tempests within a well framed womb. In other words disapproval only has an effect on those untamed elements in me that I have not embraced. You can think of my personality as an agglomeration of bits. When I embrace them, then instead of being in bits they become skilfully moulded into a unified pattern. The butter, the sugar, the lemon and the flour become welded together into a unity, put into the oven, and out comes a lemon cake. Once that cake is out I cannot reduce the elements back into lemon, sugar, flour and butter. It is only in the disunified state that disapproval can break me up and render me helpless.

It is clear then that this inner representation is what I aim to build inside myself. Yet this is not quite the right way to talk. It suggests that I can consciously control the image, yet this is not true. The painting, the image, arises spontaneously out of myself. Quite how it occurs is mysterious. This is the reason why I gave the example of Helen Keller at the beginning: there is a sudden leap where she knows that the markings W-A-T-E-R being drawn into her left hand were a
representation of the liquid flowing through her right hand. There is a spontaneous moment of
certainty that she cannot explain. The process that occurs within has similarities to what, for the
sake of shorthand, I will call the Helen Keller phenomenon. The difference is that the image, the
representation, is generated within. This has to mean that there is something within the
personality that is thrusting in this direction: something pushing to represent. What do I have to
do then? I believe that something beckons within my personality to go with, to agree to this
process. I can resist it, turn aside from it or I can go with it. No one can make me go in the
direction of fashioning a representation. No one could have made Helen Keller see that the
letters in her left hand represented the liquid in her right hand. It is an inner spontaneous act. So
what we have here is a thrust within the personality that tends in the direction of a
representation and then there is the spontaneous act that ratifies it. Like a legal document that is
drawn up but only becomes an authoritative fact at the moment when a signature is affixed to it.

You may be wondering what this has to do with psychotherapy? It is of crucial importance that
we understand the workings of the mind. I have often said on public platforms in one place or
another that the psychotherapy movement is in a state of crisis. One reason for this is that a lot
of therapy is based upon what is a psychological muddle; that our map of the mind and the way
it works is shockingly inaccurate. Of one thing I am certain: that, in order to work, the process
of psychotherapy needs to be psychologically accurate or as accurate as we are humanly able to
make it. So what I have tried to outline here is a picture of the inner movements within the
personality. I started by telling you of my five day sojourn at my friend’s cottage and how, during
that time, some images came to me, images that were transformations of outer bombardments
and I knew instantly that something benign had occurred. A healing was occurring within me. In
the next paper I will try to examine what were the outer factors which I believe favoured this
development.

I will end by summarising what I have said. The best image I know for this process is that of
Perseus sent to slay the Gorgon Medusa. If he looks her in the face he will be turned into stone.
However if he can capture the image of her in the mirror of his shield then he can slay her. He
can dissolve her power if he is able to take the image of her into his mind, otherwise is he is
petrified, turned into stone, frozen with anxiety or becomes catatonic. There is a temptation to
look her in the face. It looks easier to cut her head off that way. It is more difficult to do it
through looking at the image in the mirror of his shield. The short way, the easy way, the way
that looks the easiest is the path of disaster. The other is harder but in this mode the power of
events have become transformed into an inner strength, in the other the power remains outside
and the individual is a helpless victim. So there is a thrust in the personality to do it by
representation, to capture the Gorgon’s face in the mirror of his shield, the other is the
temptation to go by a sensuous path. Both these are at war within the personality. Then there is
an inner act which either confirms the person in madness and the mental illness is worsened or
an act that liberates and makes a representation in which lies the core of mental health. That is a
simple summary.

References

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