

Therapists and Social Responsibility

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In Mauritian Abroad the March issue writing under the title of Lost Direction I talked about a Mauritian friend of mine whom I have not seen for over 25 years. We had greeted each other. His first words to me were: “ I’ve lost my way.” I met him at the funeral of my friend Maurice Lim. Many Mauritian friends and others have come from far away places to pay their last respects to Maurice. Immediately I thought my friend coming from a long way had lost his bearing on the road and was late in arriving at the cremation ground. I asked him what exactly he meant. He said: “I’ve lost my way in life” in a low, depressing tone. I listened to his stories of pain, loss and family separation. I asked him to keep in touch; we exchanged telephone numbers. So far he has not got in touch; when I called him on several occasions there was always a dead sound.

Many of the clients I see are like my friend. I still feel I have a social responsibility towards that friend. This is the aspect I would like to explore somewhat generally here. In fact, Simon du Plock (1997) wrote about this very concern when he said: “therapists are used to working with people who feel they have lost their way and lack a sense of direction or purpose. It is at these times of existential crises that clients can work most creatively to establish their reason for living. In a society breaking away from the past, therapists have the opportunity to work together with clients toward a new set of ethical standards and goals”.

Here was an opportunity for him to link up and open up to seek help, knowing my background. He failed to take it up; there was some form of conflict. In the words of du Plock (op.cit): “therapy is the necessary and obvious adjunct of the age. While we enjoy a love-hate relationship with it, it fulfils an important function- that of providing meaning.” I could not resolve his personal feelings of lost but I could support him; there was not going to be a quick-fix solution, whether his phone was off or on: work has to be done on his part. With him as with any other clients I was prepared, in the words of Brian Thorne (1997) “to commit[myself] to a deeper level of experiencing”(p.204). As a therapist, if I was suffering from burnout I would not be able to listen and make connections with my friend or anyone else for that matter. Burnout affect connection and relationship therapists have with clients. Trust is likely to be disrupted; and respect for their dignity will be violated.

Making connections for our clients is part of our work, and working with making connections can be part of what we have to offer in social

responsibility. There is profound truth in the Sioux Indian saying: “With all beings and all things we shall be as relatives.”

Counsellors and therapists are human beings involved with the issues of humanity; we can express feelings and opinions. As the PSSR editorial(psychotherapists and counsellors for social responsibility) noted: “As people we all need the space to be passionate; as therapists, we definitely need a place where we can express our feelings without fear of judgement, and in the full and joyful awareness that people may not agree, and may even provoke a response.” If people like my friend is not coping very well under the burden of family responsibility and are falling apart, then as therapists we have a moral responsibility to pay sufficient attention to their moral values, accountability, family and community responsibilities. If we continue to overemphasize individual self-fulfilments to the detriment of these other important responsibilities we are actually doing more harm than good. Because of his stories of pain, loss and family separation my friend should not be made to feel he is a failure; that has been his experience and consequently he kept himself to himself and became depressed. Counsellors should consciously influence clients to change their behaviour by pointing out their achievements in other areas. Therapy can be a powerful healing force when clients face moral dilemmas around issues such as divorce, commitment to children, and honesty.

They are beginning to move in other areas as well. For example, therapists are exploring the broader spectrum of social and political issues on the citizens. From the Redpepper archive one can see the direction therapists are taking:

“ What is being put forward is a whole new take on what we understand a citizen to be. There is a sort of politician within everyone. The struggle is to develop her or his political self-awareness, to move from preoccupation with personal growth issues to a sense of social responsibility, to develop the freedom to engage creatively and effectively in politics without losing a sense of self-respect, to understand how our political attitudes and commitments have been affected psychologically by family, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic and socio-economic factors.”

Again, I quote: “Therapists have a chance to present a balanced view of human nature that, while not denying greed and competitiveness, also speaks with some authority about benevolence, altruism and our desire to make something happen on the basis of our need for connectedness with others...and one of the values of psychotherapy, derived from the struggles that are experienced in therapy itself,

is that it is possible to gather together the strength to push through the despair barrier and struggle on.” The despair barrier does not only affect clients but the mental health therapists too are affected.

Burnout is “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity”(Maslach,1986, p.61). In the name of social responsibility to themselves and to their clients self-care is advocated. Self-care consists of integrating one’s mental, emotional, physical and spiritual well-being according to Porter,1995). It is one of the primary methods of preventing and treating therapists burnout, noted Tracy Wityk of Calgary University in a paper titled “Burnout and Ethics of self-care for Therapists”.

Self-care of the counsellors is mostly an issue of responsible caring, one of the main ethical principles in the Canadian Code of Ethics and Conduct. Therapists must evaluate how their own experiences, attitudes, culture, beliefs and stresses influence their interactions with others, and integrate this awareness into all efforts to benefit and not harm others. Self-awareness of how a therapist’s own pressures, issues, and stress influence clients helps to improve the care of those clients. They must also seek appropriate help and/or discontinue scientific or professional activity for an appropriate period of time, if a physical or psychological condition reduces their ability to benefit and not harm others. One takes time for oneself only if conditions are negatively influencing one’s professional performance.

Therapists should be aware of this proneness to burnout and learn about how to engage in self-care to prevent its negative consequences. The need to learn the importance of balancing their personal and professional lives. Actually they need to follow their own advice and engage in the same beneficial self-care activities that they suggest to their clients in order to maintain their personal and professional well-being. As Norcross(2000) advised, they should recognise the hazards of psychological practice and engage in self-care to deal effectively with such hazards; because, as Porter(op.cit) observed: “Martyrdom begets poor care of clients, not sainthood.” Poor self-care can result in isolation, poor judgment, self-deception; self-care can protect clients from ethical violations resulting from therapist burnout. The self is an instrument of therapy that needs to be cared for. Many professional groups have developed programmes for impaired professionals, but this is not yet the case in the field of psychology (Nathan,1986). However, the appreciating the rewards of being a therapist/psychologist is one healthy method of self-care. According to Norcross (op.cit) the psychology profession brings joy, meaning, growth, excitement and vitality to both the therapist and the client. Developing and using a strong support network is one component of self-care that is likely to help prevent and

treat burnout. All counsellors/therapists/psychologists have a special personal and professional responsibility vis-à-vis their clients and public at large in health promotion.

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