APA presentations--Coming to Life: Experiences of Zest, Awe, & Art in Therapy

Dear Louise,

Thank you for the reminder about posting the upcoming APA Symposium. The symposium sponsored by Division 32 (Humanistic) is titled "Coming to life: Experiences of Zest, Awe, and Art in Psychotherapy" and is Chaired by Will Waddlington with presentations by him, myself, Erik Craig and Evgenia Georganda. The symposium is scheduled for Thursday Aug. 8 from 1-2:50 pm McCormick Place, Room W470A. Here are the abstracts:

**Coming to Life: Experiences of Zest, Awe, and Art in Psychotherapy**

“Coming to Life” is a phrase from van Deurzen who distinguished between the pursuit of happiness in everyday living, and “the ability, in therapy, to fully come to life in awareness of our freedom and in awareness of our possibilities.” (2012). The psychotherapy relationship, because of its time-limited nature, often reminds clients and therapists of the brevity of life itself, and therefore of the value of a life lived rather than endured. Aliveness, as described in this symposium, goes deep; it has to do with the way therapists and clients discover they can be together: present to one another, creating something new experientially. Aliveness takes place in the context of a real relationship, one of the evidence-based common factors that make psychotherapy effective. This symposium explores a phenomenon at the core of therapy--something rarely studied or described, that is nevertheless familiar to experienced psychotherapists. Aliveness is not achieved in therapy by way of method, but rather manifests spontaneously in moments of depth and authenticity. Along with attempting to describe this elusive process, the presenters in this symposium offer brief therapeutic vignettes that demonstrate moments of aliveness in therapy.

A discussant (Erik Craig) who brings a broad philosophical and psychotherapeutic perspective responds to these presentations, the abstracts of which follow:

(1) Living Passionately: Oistros and the Love of Life (Evgenia Georganda)

What does it mean to live life fully? Is it possible to live life in such a manner so that we could face up to Nietzsche’s eternal return challenge with no fear and remorse for things not done? Is existential guilt an unavoidable ontological condition? Could it be that we are so satisfied with our choices that we feel content with the life we have lived? Oistros is a state of being which helps us live life to the fullest since it implies that we are living creatively and passionately. When we are “stung” by Oistros, Socrates’ gadfly, we are in full awareness of the importance and urgency of living the now; of spending every day as best as we can. Oistros, from the root of which we have named estrogens, the female hormones for productivity, is the creative life force that propels us into a more authentic and satisfying life style.

We are fully engaged with whatever we decide is of importance to our life and we live as if we are in love. It is the same peak experience of being in love with another but it is life that we are in love with instead of a person. Both Eros and Thanatos awaken us to this condition of being in which we seize every moment as if it is the last one. Being able to give this kind of primacy to living life, living the moment, being there in full engagement with the other is vital for the process of psychotherapy as well. We often refer to the importance of ‘presence’ for the psychotherapeutic relationship. Being present with Oistros for this meeting with the other can enhance the therapeutic process. Oftentimes it is the therapist’s Oistros, the therapist’s love of life that will carry the client through the difficult despairing moments of his/her life. The re-awakening of hope and of possibilities, the re-kindling of desire for life are part of the healing necessary for the promotion of the well-being and the vitality of the client.

(2) Experiences of Awe in Depth-Existential Therapy (Kirk Schneider)

The sense of awe can be a natural and powerful outcome of depth-existential psychotherapy. By
“depth-existential psychotherapy” I mean any therapy that entails 1) intensive, here-now exploration, and 2) a focus on what deeply matters. By “awe” I mean the thrill and anxiety, humility and wonder or sense of adventure toward living. Elsewhere (e.g., in Awakening to Awe) I have described how depth-existential therapy provides a staging ground for the cultivation of the sense of awe. This staging ground comprises a general and a specific aspect. The general aspect is a product of the therapy itself in which there is a gradual shift from abject terror and paralysis to incremental risk and openness. This dialectic of unsettlement and intrigue, terror and wonder then becomes a pivot point for the general capacity to both access and express a maximal range of thoughts, feelings, and sensations in the ongoing experience of life, not merely particular situations. The specific aspect of the depth-existential staging ground for awe entails particular facets of the general experience. These facets (which I have called “lenses” in a different context) can be understood in terms of the experience of life’s transience and therefore moment-to-moment preciousness; wonder and therefore capacity for discovery and surprise; vastness and therefore meaning beyond oneself or one’s circumstances; intricacy and therefore subtlety, detail; sentiment and therefore emotionality, poignancy; and solitude and therefore capacity to be alone, contemplative. Each of these aspects, it should be further underscored, is an outgrowth of therapeutic presence or the capacity to both hold and illuminate that which is palpably significant between therapist and client and within the client. In this talk, I will discuss the above and show how each of the aforementioned experiences of awe have manifested in my work as a therapist.

(3) Psychotherapy as an Art of Living (Will Waddlington)

Once Freud’s closest associate, Otto Rank eventually developed something new—a process of psychotherapy that went beyond psychoanalysis. Rank’s “constructive psychotherapy” was more interactive, interpersonal, and collaborative. In the context of a real relationship in the “here and now,” Rank believed, therapists and clients are able to collaboratively create new experiences.

Freudian analysts focused on old patterns of behavior repeated in the transference; constructive psychotherapists attended to the client’s new ways of being in the present relationship. Many of Rank’s prescient ideas have become mainstream. Humanistic, existential, and newer psychoanalytic practitioners owe him a debt. Rank’s approach was philosophically informed. From Socrates he took the idea that psychotherapy, like dialogue, was a form of midwifery, helping the client give birth to a new self.

In Dilthey he found the notion of Erlebnis, or “aliveness” Rank absorbed Nietzsche, who talked of “giving style to one’s character,” suggesting there is an aesthetic decision about how one will be in the world. In this presentation I consider three processes that create the context in which “coming to life” can be experienced in psychotherapy. First is present-centeredness, the therapist’s and client’s mindful awareness of the life in which they are engaged in this moment. Next is a focus on what is new: the past may be prologue, but clients can catch themselves at times in unexpectedly novel interactions, learning by experience that they are not bound to mechanically repeating patterns from the past. Finally, in a safe intimate relationship, clients and therapists can improvise together.

Self-creation is not assuming a role or taking on a persona, but rather consciously becoming the person one aspires to be. A brief vignette illustrates that for one client, opening to aliveness differs from living life fully; one is perceived as an invitation, the other as a demand.

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