The Larger Self

By

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We all know about those luminous moments of clarity and balance, in our own lives and in those of our clients, which come briefly now and again. However we get there, we suddenly encounter a feeling of inner plenitude and open heartedness to the world that wasn't there the moment before. The incessant nasty chatter inside our heads ceases, we have a sense of calm spaciousness, as if our minds and hearts and souls had expanded and brightened. Sometimes, these evanescent experiences come in a bright glow of peaceful certainty that everything in the universe is truly okay, and that includes us – you and me individually – in all our poor struggling, imperfect humanity. At other times, we may experience a wave of joyful connection with others that washes away irritation, distrust, and boredom. We feel that, for once, we truly are ourselves, our real selves, free of the inner cacophony that usually assaults us.

For much of my life, the closest I'd come to actually experiencing this kind of blissful oneness was on the basketball court. Over the years I'd become addicted to basketball because of the fleeting moments when I entered into a state in which my inner critics disappeared and my body seemed to know just what to do. I had total confidence in my abilities and experienced a sense of joy and awe at being spontaneously in the moment.

When I became a family therapist, I longed to experience something similar in sessions with my clients. Instead my work seemed hard, frustrating, and draining. I believed that it was up to me to restructure families – to use the force of my personality to pry apart enmeshed relationships and open up blocked communication patterns. I thought I needed to change clients by pure force of intellect and will. I had to come up with reframes for their symptoms, solutions to their problems, and new perspectives on their dilemmas. And then I had to find a way to motivate them to do the homework I gave them, and to not feel totally frustrated when they didn't. All this responsibility for creating change, and doing it quickly, not only precluded any peak experiences in my work, it was burning me out.

Then in the early 1980's, I began noticing that several clients with eating disorders described extensive internal conversations with what they called different parts of themselves when I asked about what happened inside them to make them binge and purge. I was intrigued. I had one client, Diane, ask the pessimistic voice she was describing why it always told her she was hopeless. The voice responded that it said she was hopeless so that she wouldn't take any risks and get hurt; it was trying to protect her. This seemed

like a promising interaction. If this pessimist really had benign intent, then Diane might be able to negotiate a different role for it. But Diane wasn't interested in negotiating. She was angry at this voice and kept telling it to just leave her alone. I asked her why she was so rude to the pessimist and she went on a long diatribe, describing how that voice had made every step she took in life a major hurdle.

It then occurred to me that I wasn't talking to Diane, but to another part of her that constantly fought with the pessimist. In an earlier conversation, Diane had told me about an ongoing war inside her between one voice that pushed her to achieve and the pessimist who told her it was hopeless. Could it be that the pushing part had jumped in while she was talking to the pessimist?

I asked Diane to focus on the voice that was so angry at the pessimist and ask it to stop interfering in her negotiations with the pessimist. To my amazement, it agreed to "step back," and Diane immediately shifted out of the anger she'd felt so strongly seconds before. When I asked Diane how she felt toward the pessimist now, it seemed like a different person answered. In a calm, caring voice, she said she was grateful to it for trying to protect her, and felt sorry that it had to work so hard. Her face and posture had also changed, reflecting the soft compassion in her voice. From that point on, negotiations with the inner pessimist were easy.

I tried this "step back" procedure with several other clients. Sometimes we had to ask two or three voices to not interfere before the client shifted into a state similar to Diane's, but we got there nonetheless. When they were in that calm, compassionate state, I'd ask these clients what voice or part was present. They each gave a variation of the following reply: "that's not a part like those other voices are. That's more of who I really am. That's my Self.

I've devoted the ensuing two decades refining methods for helping clients to release this state and to get in this state myself, for I've found that the most important variable in how quickly clients can access their Selves is the degree to which I'm Self-led. When I can be deeply present to my clients from the core of my being, free from anxiety about how I'm doing, or who's in control of the therapy, or whether the client is following the correct therapeutic agenda, clients respond as if the resonance of my Self were a tuning fork that awakens their own. It's this deep, true, and faithful presence of the therapist – without portfolio or baggage – that every client yearns to connect with.

The Self in the Consulting Room

I'm meeting for the first time with an anorexic client, Margie, in a residential

treatment center where I'm a consultant. She's fought with her anorexia for 19 years, and has found that whenever she starts feeling better about herself, she stops eating. Before the session, I focus on my internal world – to center myself. I hear a familiar voice of fear saying that she's obviously very fragile and I shouldn't do anything to upset her. I tell that part of me that I'll be sensitive to her condition, and ask that it trust me and let my heart open again. I focus on my heart and sense the protective crust that had enveloped it as I approached the time of the session melt away. I can feel more sensation now in my chest and abdomen, with a vibrating energy running through my limbs. I feel calm and confident as Margie enters the office and sits down.

She looks like a cadaver and has a feeding tube in her nose. Her movements are controlled and rigid. She eyes me warily. At once, I feel great compassion for her and respect for the parts of her that don't trust me. And may not want to work with me. I'm not invested in a certain outcome for this session. I'd like to help her, but I'll be fine if she chooses not to let me in. I'm curious about what her anorexia has been up to all these years, yet I am certain that it has good reasons for doing this to her. I feel the energy in my body extending nonverbally through my heart toward her, and trust that at some level she can sense it. I'm confident that, if I can remain in this state, whatever is supposed to happen will – I don't have to make anything happen.

I introduce myself and tell her that I'm good at helping people with the parts of them that make them not eat. I ask Margie where she finds that voice of anorexia in her body and how she feels toward it. She closes her eyes and says it's in her stomach, and she's angry at it. She says that it tells her that it's going to kill her and that there's nothing she can do about it. I feel a jolt of fear clenching my gut and hear a familiar inner voice saying, "it's determined to kill her and is succeeding. What if you say something that makes it even more determined!" Again, I quickly reassure the fear with words like, "Trust me. Remember that if I stay present something good always happens." My abdomen immediately relaxes and the soft, flowing energy returns to my body.

In a calm, confident voice I tell Margie, "It makes sense that you're angry with the eating disorder part, because its avowed purpose is to screw up your life or even kill you. But right now, we just want to get to know it a little better, and it's hard to do that when you're so angry with it. We're not going to give it more power by doing that – just get to know more about why it wants to kill you. So see if the part of you that's so angry with it is willing to trust you and me for a few minutes. See if it's willing to relax to maybe watch as we try to get to know the eating disorder part." She says okay and when I ask how she feels toward the eating disorder now, she says she's tired of

battling with it. I have her ask that part to relax and step back too, and then another part that was very confused by the disorder. Remarkably for someone in her condition, each time she asks a part to step back, it does. Finally, in response to my question of "how do you feel toward the eating disorder now?" she says in a compassionate voice, "Like, I want to help it".

The moment in a session when a client suddenly has access to some degree of Self always gives me goose bumps. Up until then I'd had to repeatedly reassure my fear and my own inner pessimist, who, as each new part of Margie's took over, were sure I could never get access to the Self of someone who was so emaciated and symptomatic. At the point that her own compassionate Self emerged, all my parts could relax and step back because they knew from experience that the rest of the session would go smoothly.

How did I go from often dreading doing therapy, hoping clients would cancel, and feeling chronically depleted, to enjoying therapy as a spiritual practice filled with experiences of connection and awe-inspiring beauty? How did I come to be as refreshed after an intense therapy session as if I'd been meditating for an hour? How did doing therapy come to replace playing basketball as my greatest source of that flow feeling?

The short answer is that over the years, I've come to trust the healing power of what I'll call the Self in clients and in myself. When there's a critical mass of Self in a therapy office, healing just happens. When I'm able to embody a lot of Self, as was the case with Margie, clients can sense in my voice, eyes, movements, and overall presence that I care a great deal about them, know what I'm doing, won't be judging them, and love working with them. Consequently, their inner protectors relax, which releases more of their Self. They then begin to relate to themselves with far more curiosity, confidence, and compassion.
As clients embody more Self, their inner dialogues change spontaneously. They stop berating themselves and instead, get to know, rather than try to eliminate, the extreme inner voices or emotions that have plagued them. At those times they tell me, they feel "lighter," their minds feel somehow more "open" and "free." Even clients who've shown little insight into their problems are suddenly able to trace the trajectory of their own feelings and emotional histories with startling clarity and understanding.

What's particularly impressed me in those moments isn't only that my clients, once they've discovered the Self at the core of their being, show characteristics of insight, self-understanding and acceptance, stability and personal growth, but that even disturbed clients, who'd seem to be unlikely candidates for such shifts so often are able to experience the same qualities. The accepted wisdom in the field during my training was that clients with truly

terrible childhoods – relentless abuse and neglect – resulting in flagrant symptoms needed a therapist to construct functioning egos for them, virtually from scratch; they simply didn't have the psychological wherewithal to do the job themselves. But even those clients, once they experienced a sense of their own core, began to take over and acquire what looked like real ego strength on their own, without my having to shovel it into them. And yet, almost no Western psychological theories could explain where this newfound and quite amazing ability to contain and understand their inner turmoil had come from.

The more this happened, the more I felt confronted by what were in essence spiritual questions that simply couldn't be addressed in the terms of problem solving, symptom-focused, results-orientated, clinical technique. I began my own novice's exploration into the literature of spirituality and religion and discovered a mother lode of esoteric writings by sages, holy seekers, wise men and women, who emphasized meditative and contemplative techniques as a means of coming to know their Self. ("Esoteric" here means not exotic or far out, but derives from the Greek esotero, which means "further in.") Though they used different words, all the esoteric traditions within the major religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam – emphasized their same core belief: we are sparks of the eternal flame, manifestations of the absolute ground of being. It turns out that the divine within – what the Christians call the soul or Christ Consciousness, Buddhists call Buddha Nature, the Hindus Atman, the Taoists Tao, the Sufis the Beloved, the Quakers the Inner Light – often doesn't take years of meditative practice to access because it exists in all of us, just below the surface of our extreme parts. Once they agree to separate from us, we suddenly have access to who we really are.

I have also found, however, that the most important variable in how quickly clients can access their Self is the degree to which I am fully present and Self-led. It's this presence that constitutes the healing element in psychotherapy regardless of the method or philosophy of the practitioner.

Obstacles to Self-Leadership

Yet being Self-led with clients isn't easy. There are so many ideas we're taught about clients and about doing therapy that fuel our fears and keep us distant. The DSM-IV keeps our focus on our client's scariest and most pathological aspects. Our training encourages us to constantly monitor ourselves to avoid doing anything unprofessional, such as letting clients know how we feel about them or what our life is like. We stay on guard to ensure that clients don't violate our clinical boundaries or peek behind our professional masks.

In addition to the way we learn to view and relate to clients, we also bring lots of personal baggage into our offices that's easily triggered by their stories or behavior and is another source of disconnection. We have to deal with these in order to work from Self. For example, in the early years of my work with sexual-abuse survivors, I'd encourage them to embrace the terrified, young parts of them that were stuck in the time during the abuse. As my clients emotionally described the horrific scenes they were witnessing, I'd listen for a while, but then find myself distracted by daydreams or thoughts about what I needed to do that evening. Since they were so absorbed in their inner worlds, I assumed that it didn't matter much if I checked in and out during that work, despite the occasional complaint from one of them that I didn't seem to be totally present.

Only when a compelling personal crisis drove me into therapy and I spent a year and a half in my therapist's office, crying much of the time, did I finally get to know the sad, humiliated, and terrified young parts of me that I'd spent my life trying to keep buried. As I helped those vulnerable boys, the voices that protected them also quieted down. The arrogant intellectual, the angry rebel, the driven careerist, even the contemptuous and harping self critics telling me how inadequate I was, all of them found new roles.

After that, I found that I can stay with my clients even when they're in intense pain, because I'm no longer afraid of my own. If I notice myself beginning to drift off, I can remind the distracter that I no longer need it to help me that way, and I'll immediately snap back. These days, my clients take more risks, entering the inner caves and abysses they used to circle around, because they sense that I'll be with them through the whole journey. And staying with them provides continued opportunities to visit and embrace again the vulnerability they stir in me, affording me a full appreciation of their courage, along with their terror and shame. Increasingly, I find tears of compassion and then joy flooding my eyes in the middle of sessions, and I'm less afraid to let clients see those tears and know how much I care.

Of course, none of this is as simple as I'm making it sound. It's an open secret, known to any halfway honest therapist, that our clients stir up in us as many unruly feelings, thoughts, prejudices, negative associations, and untoward impulses as we stir up in them. Not only are we as susceptible to the crosscurrents of contagious emotions typical of almost any human interaction as anybody else of our species, but we have certain vulnerabilities unique to our field. For one thing, we're supposed to be perfect – in session at least – mature, selfless, perceptive, calm, lucid, kind, hopeful, and wise no matter how nasty, hostile, self-centered, unreasonable, childish, despairing, and uncooperative our clients are.

I'm sitting with a client, who's complaining (as she frequently does) in a high-pitched, whiny voice about how hard her life is. I feel a sharp stab of annoyance. She's very rich, has numerous servants, and spends much of her time shopping and attending to her elaborate social life. Today, she's unhappy with the antique vase in her living room that she just spent $20,000 on. I, on the other hand, am a poor, hard-working therapist, who has to put in killer weeks to make sure my kids have their college tuition. Somewhere inside I know that she was neglected and ignored as a child, and that part of her is still that lonely little girl crying for someone to pay attention. But right now, I have the urge to scream at her to shut up and quit whining. How do I reclaim my inner balance when this mean, little voice of righteous indignation so powerfully insinuates itself into my consciousness?

On another day, I'm seeing a couple – both highly successful, perfectionist, ambitious. The man, particularly, comes across as very sure of himself, overbearing, argumentative. He's that way in his family, which is one reason the couple isn't getting along. I sense a part of him that can't stand being "one down" with anyone, me included, so the tone of the conversation tends to become rivalrous. I feel myself taking the bait, beginning to get caught in a slightly competitive footing with him as I counter his arguments with my own. What can I do right now to keep this from turning into a power struggle that will make us both losers?

A beautiful, young woman comes in for her first session. I find myself looking at her more than I would other clients, and a romantic, sexualized fantasy pops into my skull. Because I see a population that includes many survivors of sexual abuse, I've become sensitized to the damage to her trust in me this kind of energy can do. I know from experience that berating myself for these fugitive incursions doesn't much help – I end up expending more energy trying not to feel what I feel than paying attention to the client. So how do I stop objectifying her enough to reconnect?

With all the intense provocations to which we're subjected day in and day out, we need to find a way to keep ourselves firmly grounded and openhearted. Without being tossed about by our own reactive emotions. We have to be able to tap into something at the very core of our being that provides a deep keel for our sailboat in the storm, so we can ride the roiling waves without being submerged by them. We can't become centered in what I call the Self – the deep ground of our being – by trying to flatten, suppress, deny, or destroy the feelings we don't like in ourselves or others.

To experience the Self, there's no shortcut around our inner barbarians – those unwelcome parts of ourselves, such as hatred, rage, suicidal despair, fear, addictive need (for drugs, food, sex), racism and other prejudice, greed,

as well as the somewhat less heinous feelings of ennui, guilt, depression, anxiety, self-righteousness, and self-loathing. The lesson I've repeatedly learned over the years of practice is that we must learn to listen to and ultimately embrace these unwelcome parts. If we can do that, rather than trying to exile them, they transform. And, though it seems counterintuitive, there's great relief for therapists in the process of helping clients befriend rather than berate their inner tormentors. I've discovered, after painful trial and much error at my clients' expense, that treating their symptoms and difficulties like varieties of emotional garbage to be eliminated from their systems simply doesn't work well. Often, the more I've joined clients in trying to get rid of their destructive rage and suicidal impulses, the more powerful and resistant these feelings have grown – though they've sometimes gone underground to surface at another time, in another way.

In contrast, these same destructive or shameful parts responded far more positively and became less troublesome, when I began treating them as if they had a life of their own, as if they were in effect, real personalities in themselves, with a point of view and a reason for acting as they did. Only when I could approach them in a spirit of humility and a friendly desire to understand them could I begin to understand why they were causing my clients so much trouble. I discovered that if I can help people approach their own worst, most hated feelings and desires with open minds and hearts, these retrograde emotions will be found not only to make sense and have a legitimate purpose in the person's psychological economy, but also, quite spontaneously, to become more benign.

I've seen this happen over and over again. As I help clients begin inner dialogues with the parts of themselves holding horrible, antisocial feelings and get to know why these internal selves express such fury or self-defeating violence, these parts calm down, grow softer, and even show that they also contain something of value. I've found, during this work, that there are no purely "bad" aspects of any person. Even the worst impulses and feelings – the urge to drink, the compulsion to cut oneself, the paranoid suspicions, the murderous fantasies – spring from parts of a person that themselves have a story to tell and the capacity to become something positive and helpful to the client's life. The point of therapy isn't to get rid of anything, but to help it transform.

As I discovered the nature of the extreme parts of my clients and increasingly was able to trust their healing Self, I became liberated. I no longer had to come up with the answers for people or wrestle with their impulses. It was like I'd been the engine of a powerboat straining to push therapy through dark storms and over big waves and then, suddenly, I could climb inside, put up a sail, and let a wise and gentle wind carry my clients and me to

destinations I couldn't have predicted. At first, it was hard to give up the sense of control over what would happen and what goals would be achieved in sessions. But now I love the adventure of it all. It's easy to go with the flow when you really trust the flow.

Once that boulder of responsibility was lifted off my shoulders, I found that I could breathe again. Being able to drop my guard, as well as my inner diagnoses, strategies, pushers, and motivators, I could enjoy being the person I am. Ironically, clients enjoy me more, and resist me less when I'm in this way, too – sensing my authenticity and lack of agenda. Clients come to love the Self-to-Self connection they feel when I'm really present.

But it's hard to maintain that kind of presence. In addition to the parts that your clients trigger, your outside life has a way of doing that, too. The painstaking work of developmental researcher John Gottman has shown that it's the capacity to repair the inevitable ruptures with those we love that constitutes successful intimacy and relationship. The same is true in our relationship with our clients. Therapy is virtually never a lovely, unbroken pas de deux between therapist and client. More often it's a series of minor fender benders and close calls, punctuated by the occasional bad wreck. Clinical work progresses via ruptures – misunderstandings, confusion, subtle conflicts, power plays, and disappointments within and between client and therapist – which are then repaired. And it's through this process of rupture and repair that therapeutic advances are made.

But therapists sometimes forget that it isn't only the client who misunderstands and reacts. Those of us who use this therapeutic approach have an axiom: whenever there's a problem in the therapy a part is interfering, but you don't know whose it is. Sometimes it's a wayward angry, scared, or deluded aspect of the client that's been triggered. But it's equally likely that a protector of the therapist has taken over without his or her awareness, and that the client is reacting to the breach in their connection.

The Healing Self in Action

How can we, with all the intense provocations to which we're subjected day in and day out, keep ourselves firmly grounded and openhearted? To do this, we have to be able to tap into something at the core of our being.

I meet Marina, a sexual-abuse survivor, at the door for her regular session, and I know instantly that she's really furious with me. "You were completely spaced out with me during the last session – not present at all,"she hurls at me, before going into a tirade about how cruel I was to lure her into a vulnerable emotional state and then abandon her. "You're one heartless

bastard!" she spits out in summation.

Being faced with an enraged woman, particularly one who's angry with me has always aroused a cacophony of alarm bells in my head and sent electric shocks through my body. At the moment, I nod sagely, trying to look calm and stalling for time, until I can breathe again and marshal a response. One inner voice instantly bursts forth with, "Well, abuse survivors always blame their therapists sooner or later. This is all just projection – you've finally become her perpetrator!" Another irate member of my internal family chimes in, "What an ingrate she is! You've cut your fee for her and see her at odd hours, and look how she treats you!" An inner hysteric begins shouting, "Oh, my God, she's a borderline who'll ruin your career! Danger! Danger!" Then my various inner critics weigh in with their take on the subject: "Well, she's probably right. You probably did zone out on her. Why can't you really be there for your clients? What kind of therapist are you, anyway? Maybe you should go into some other line of work."

Years ago, one of those parts would have taken over and I would have gone into heavy-duty defensive mode – minimizing her feelings, taking a condescending tone of clinical wisdom to subtly let her know that she must be mistaken. Or I might have apologized but not in a heartfelt way, which would just have fueled her rage. Or I might have become one of my inner critics and begun overzealous mea culpa, apologizing effusively, letting her know that what I did was unforgivable.

But now, I quickly quiet these inner parts, asking them to step back and just let me listen to what she's saying. Whereas before I'd feel spacey, out of control, as if various aspects of Dick Schwartz were being catapulted from one side of the room to the other, now I remain deeply and solidly in my body – literally, embodied. I suddenly feel myself spontaneously shifting out or that frozen place, relaxing, and opening myself up to her. And now I can sense the pain behind her words, so I don't have to meet the attack itself head on, or mollify it.

Instead, because I can see the little hurt child in there, I can talk to that child from my heart, convey my sincere regret for the pain she feels. "I can see something happened in the way I was with you last time that made you feel bad," I say. "I don't remember what happened, but I can see it felt very hurtful and I'm sorry. I know I do have a tendency to drift off occasionally, but I'll keep a closer eye on it and take it more seriously." She calms down immediately because she knows I'm not trying to correct her, placate her, change her mind, or get her to see things my way. The entire conversation shifts to another level, because she feels truly heard and seen. A repair is made and we have the opportunity to work with the parts that felt so angry

and hurt by me.

I'm usually able to quickly calm those protectors of mine not just because this technique of asking them to step back is so effective, but also because I've done other work to get my inner parts to respond to my requests. I've become less affected by the rage of others because I've spent time holding and healing some of the young, vulnerable, childlike parts of myself that used to become so terrorized by people's angry eruptions. Since I'm less easily hurt, my inner defenders and critics have less to protect. I've also had lots of practice demonstrating to those protective parts how much better things go when they let me – mySelf – lead.

In training programs, we've devised an exercise in which one person role plays a client who provokes the therapist until a part takes over. Then the therapist finds and works with the part and asks it to let his or her Self stay present even in the face of the provocation. The more my inner family members have witnessed the power of my Self-leadership, in practice sessions and in everyday life, the more they've become willing to step back and trust me to deal with situations that they used to automatically take over.

In this process, I've tried to let my most disturbing clients become my best teachers. They're my tormentors – by tormenting they mentor me because they trigger key wounds and defenses that I need to heal. Also, they present ample opportunities for me to see what happens when I don't take the bait and, instead, remain Self-led. In this age of highly technical therapies, manualized methodologies, pharmaceutical propaganda, and, of course, the managed-care-generated atmosphere of therapy-lite, it's hard to remember the healing potential of your openhearted presence. And yet, patiently being with clients from the deepest core of ourselves is the most important resource we have to offer. I've learned that if I fully trust the power of my Self, I can also trust the power of my client's Self. If I can show up with confidence, and compassion, and curiosity, my client, eventually, will show up, too, and we can spend much of our time together with a river of energy flowing between us. When that happens, we both heal.

Once you've attuned with your client, the session begins to flow, and there's an almost effortless quality to the work, as if something magical were unfolding almost by itself. I don't even think about what I'm going to say – the right words just come out, as if something were speaking through me. Afterward, I'm full of energy, as if I'd been meditating for an hour rather than doing hard, demanding, clinical work. In a sense, of course, I've been in a state of meditation – a state of deep mindfulness, full-bodied attention, centered awareness, and inner calm. And even after all these years, I still have the sense of being witness to something awe inspiring, as if the client

and I both were connected to something beyond us, much bigger than we are.