

# SELF EXAMINATION IN PSYCHOANALYSIS & PSYCHOTHERAPY COUNTERTRANSFERENCE & SUBJECTIVITY IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

Bill Cornell

*Notes by Michael Mervosh  
For the  
MGM Supervision & Study Group  
2020*

## Introduction

*Understanding the Context & Implications of the Psychotherapy Process.*

*Psychotherapy requires an interest in learning about ourselves.*

Psychotherapy requires deeply personal working relationships that seek to develop one's capacities for self-scrutiny and emotional maturation. We look for and enter the troubles of mind and body.

Areas of trouble can be seen as areas of greatest potential for growth. They are impasses to be resolved, often in areas of our lives many of us would least like to look at. We venture into these areas with curiosity, respect, a sense of exploration – as lying in wait will be areas of trouble in need of thoughtful attention and interest.

In psychotherapy, an understanding is established that the therapist will eventually be invited into the most troubled and vulnerable areas of the client's life. Psychotherapy is a process that requires the willingness for risk and uncertainty – for the client and therapist both.

It is within these areas of trouble and difficulty that some of our most important learnings about ourselves will take place.

A psychotherapist seeks to provide a unique space and relationship within which we can finally explore aspects of our lives that we have often overlooked or avoided – *trouble in mind*.

Welcoming these troubled places within one's self is no easy task, but it can be deeply intimate and rewarding.

The conversations that take place in psychotherapy are unique. They authorize a person to speak to areas of life that have often been put on hold, and held in silence. These silences have often been necessary to protect ourselves as we face life's difficulties – and the subsequent disappointment, shame, and sense of failure that life too often brings.

This protection comes at a cost to our individuality and vitality. The vitality of the self is often muted and suffocated over the course of a lifetime; it requires *self-scrutiny, the interest of others, and acts of courage*.

- *The restoration of the vitality of the self is at the heart of psychotherapy.*

A long-term, in-depth psychotherapy provides the vital base of a working relationship that is challenging, unpredictable, honest, and lively.

At some point in psychotherapy, a client has to choose between the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of living life more fully, or receding into the more familiar and deadening security of life-long habits and defenses.

Psychotherapy is a process that requires facing, and bearing, what those who have gone before us had found unbearable and unspeakable.

The benefits and outcome of a successful psychotherapy is not simply that of symptom relief but much more of a process of psychic growth, and developing the capacity to remain engaged in life in the face of all of life's vicissitudes, uncertainties, loves, and losses.



## Chapter 1 – What Am I Getting Myself Into?

A satisfying life is a skilled life. It is a product of a lot of learning fostered by the interest and support of those who care for us.

We need to learn many essential skills in order to navigate our lives, such as:

- *Forming and keeping social and loving bonds.*
- *How to separate and individuate from others, while staying connected.*
- *How to have forward-moving & life-giving aggression.*
- *Understanding what is required for healthy conflict resolution.*
- *Having worthwhile work and creativity in play.*
- *Having ways to think on behalf of one's self, while also considering others.*
- *Tolerating frustrations, disappointments and failures in life.*
- *Learning how to make new meaning of what happens.*
- *Having a healthy sense of sexuality and intimacy.*

People do not come to psychotherapy because of a happy or contented state of mind.

Most of us have significant gaps, or gaping holes, in our abilities to grapple with all that life brings our way. These gaps in our emotional and psychological competencies can undermine our sense of what is possible for us life.

Most of us try to rely on our familiar skills to cover or compensate for the blank or damaged spaces in us. But it is these gaps in our abilities to live life at its fullest that bring most people into psychotherapy.

Many people entering therapy are plagued by a perception of their character flaws, a sense of badness or emptiness, confusion and fear, a sense of failure or loss, shame, or unlovableness.

How would you take up the question, should a client ask you directly, *“What am I getting myself into here? How does psychotherapy actually work?”* Many clients enter therapy with this question on their mind, but do not feel free to ask it.

How *does* psychotherapy work? The nature of long-term therapy is a mystery to many people. It is not a normal and familiar way of relating to someone else.

Psychotherapy begins as a meeting of two strangers, each with initial impressions and fantasies about the other. It holds the promise of a living example of what is possible between two people, of opening up new possibilities for a client’s life for things that have not yet occurred.

Therefore, psychotherapy will inevitably be both a difficult and exciting endeavor. It is work, and like all work, it can be difficult and frustrating, as well as enriching and rewarding.

In the process of psychotherapy, beliefs and ways of being that one may have taken for granted about one’s self, about other people, and about one’s present and past life, will be opened to questioning.

- *The relationship between the therapist and the client, in the here and now, is one of the most important relationships to be examined as a means of personal understanding and change.*



## **Stories and Scripts**

We have an innate need for psychological structure, for creating and maintaining familiar and predictable ways of making sense of ourselves internally and of life around us. This fosters a tendency to create accounts of our lives, *stories*, which can provide psychological stability and meaning. But these stories can also limit how we see life’s possibilities for ourselves and others.

In the story Suzanne’s life, she was cast as the ‘black sheep’ of the family, the misfit, the youngest daughter and sibling, the burden to her mother – who turned her care over to the siblings.

She carried a relentless sense of never being really wanted, or enjoyed, and it formed an unconscious foundation for the stories that came to define Suzanne's sense of place and meaning among others.

She gradually came to the conclusion the depending on anyone was bad news. She had many memories that reinforced this conclusion. In her mind, she did not leave home because she wanted to, but because she was unwanted – no one wanted her to stay.

The term *script*, rather than story, captures the sense that we often feel as though a story has been written for us within our families and our cultures, and then imposed on us.

Gradually, but repeatedly, our early life experiences foster story lines that take deep roots in our developing psyches. It comes to feel as though we are being taught fundamental and unquestionable lessons about who we are to become and what life is going to be like.

Some part of our personal stories can be exciting, unpredictable, and open-ended. But the '*script*' aspect of our life stories feel like the deep ruts in a well-worn road.

Are we the authors of our own story, or a character in someone else's story for us?

- *One of the important ways that psychotherapy works is that therapist and client work together to identify the enduring and compelling stories of one's life.*

At a certain point in the psychotherapy process, it is critical to recognize that our life-long, ready-made explanations from our '*scripted story*' does not match our current reality.

We must be able to see the power our compelling expectations have on other people, of the ways our well-worn psychological ruts will inevitably pull others into the ruts with us.

We then begin to at last stand apart from our assumptions and expectations, and see how they play themselves out in self-fulfilling prophecies.

Our life stories, drenched in histories of failure and disappointment, are at one and the same time achingly familiar in our minds, and compelling in their power and automatic functioning.

- *The unconscious enactment of one's life stories within the therapeutic environment is most commonly called 'transference'.*

Working with a client's transference reactions is one of the most important tasks of the psychotherapist, and is a crucial mechanism of how psychotherapy can work.

- *When transference is not examined and understood, it has the power to reduce any new relationship into the same old and predictable story.*

Therefore, the exploration of transference is an invaluable means of insight and pattern recognition, a crucial mechanism for moving beyond the well-worn ruts that can create pervasive suffering in our lives.

In work relationships, friendships, and in our most intimate connections, we will live out elements of our 'scripted' stories without ever being aware of them, feeling them instead resigned to predictable ways of relating, inevitable disappointments, with little that ever seems new or creative.

Psychotherapy allows us to engage in a mutual, respectful scrutiny of how and why we do, what we always tend to do. The therapist's job is to stand simultaneously inside and outside of this transference dynamic as it develops.

Psychotherapy provides a space within which to reflect together and experiment with new meaning and possible ways of relating, beyond the predictable, well-worn ways.



## **Insight**

- *The development of insight is a learned skill.*

Insight is another essential element in how psychotherapy works. Like most learning, it requires a teacher and a lot of practice. With practice, insight fosters a mind that becomes stronger and more flexible.

Deep and life-changing insight can be very difficult to accomplish without an active witness to our process, without the eyes, ears and mind of another – which is an important part of what the therapist supplies.

When a client begins to examine the well-worn tracks of their life-long stories, there can be a deep sense of failure, despair, depression, hopelessness, and shame. The therapist needs to sustain an attitude of curiosity and respect, which will help to make the experience of insight and self-examination more palatable.

Stories, when they are not 'script-bound', often express our wishes, desires, strengths, and creativity. The shared curiosity, respect and insight afforded in the therapy process can go a long way toward restoring the vitality of our life *stories*, and overcome the deadness of life *scripts*.

Unfortunately, there is often no room in our clients' life stories for the accompaniment and curiosity of another.

- *Insight is primarily a cognitive process. It is a necessary, but often not sufficient, condition for change.*

Gaining insight through reading, but being unable to actualize these insights, is not uncommon. Wishes for a life with less depression and anxiety, and more meaning and intimacy, will inevitably be accompanied by feelings of fear, insecurity, anger and shame, along with one's own personal hauntings of past failures in relationships and rejections by others. To actually make a meaningful change in one's life can seem insurmountable.

- *Moving beyond one's scripts will require our clients to discover that some of the people in their lives have a far greater range of life skills than their families of origin had.*

Clients will at some point have to enter into the necessary sense of risk and uncertainty, once they set aside the well-worn tracks of their life scripts. They have to become more tolerant of the unpredictable, and that others can be teachers of new ways of interacting and being.

In psychotherapy, the therapist can become steadfast about creating an interpersonal environment that differs from the client's life scripts, one that holds possibilities beyond what is most assumed or expected.

Another therapeutic task is helping our clients see the limits of their childhood environments as just that – limited. All of their family members would have suffered in their own ways from the limits of the family system, and in the cultural milieu as well.

To see the limited skills in one's family of origin, and how each of the members suffered in their own lives, provides our clients with a very different and compassionate perspective on their own past and present lives, and on the lives of the others.

