

Exploring Character as Defense and as Communication

MM Personal Notes From The Bill Cornell Workshop

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Workshop Notes

When we are working at the level of character, there is an ever-present sense of urgency to the presenting problem. (Verbally they tell us the story, and their body shows us the story.)

The client gives us glimpses, samples, tastes of the trouble, which is just out of reach.

There is always a kind of 'plea' that is communicated, yet their words might tend to say the opposite of what the plea is.

How to keep in mind the 'family body' of the client, while we are accompanying them with our body?

- *What has happened to this person that makes their way of being a 'solution to their problem', in order to make their lives more bearable?*

When we listen, and we wonder about this, and in this particular way – it opens the space differently between therapist and client.

- *"Inner life is typically less coherent than our conscious representations of it." – Bollas*

The conscious representations are rather impoverished, diminished.

Bollas encourages us to make a receptive environment for the '*unthought known*', that which is somehow known to the individual, but the individual cannot yet think about.

The process of maturation makes our conscious awareness of ourselves more receptive to the unconscious – undoing repression – otherwise, we tend to live as if our pasts didn't happen!

We are born with a unique personal 'idiom', a fundamental core essence within the self that ever seeks knowledge and expression – it is an unconscious force that drives us. It is constantly seeking experiences that can bring it forth.

Bollas states that trauma theories are always privileging the past.

- *We don't just repress our past, we also repress our futures.*

- *Our work is to create more receptivity to our own distinct future possibilities.*

Each of us as children need a different kind of parent, depending on the kind of kid we are.

Our sexuality and our idiom never quit, these forces are always at play, and always want more:
“This is a world I am to inhabit, and this world is to inhabit me!”



The contributions of character theory don't ignore that people suffer; it helps us to bear the tensions of what is possible, and what has always been (or seemed) impossible.

Character carries the vital sense of what is 'at stake' for the person in their lives.

Traditional character theory became too static, too predictive and prescriptive.

In our internal object world, there are important people, but also important activities – music, art, theories; we either outgrow our theories, or they become too familiar, and they rigidify, and they become confused with our lived reality.

Theory is an important way of thinking about things, which offer us advantages and disadvantages.

HOLDING CONTAINERS

Do the parents and grandparents provide the child with a real and receptive enough environment, one that gives the child a path to their own idioms? Do they allow for discovery, self-regulation, curiosity, play?

Dream work – involves the capacity for receptivity, for reverie, a space in which to imagine, wonder, being quiet – this is an attitude and a posture to hold.

- *Receptivity requires taking the time to inhabit a problem, instead of solving a problem.*

The therapist holds this attitude in mind:

“What is happening right now in the life of this person that is becoming too much, too threatening for them? How can I feel this for myself, and inhabit this trouble with them?”

- *We can use our mistakes and misunderstandings with our clients to clarify things.*

Dreaming with our clients – allows us to wander around our own range of inner experiences – our own memories, wishes, body sensations, impulses, longings, fantasies, etc, on behalf of our clients.

Sometimes the kind of reveries or mind wanderings we experience as therapists, while sitting with our client, will make no sense at all to us, but they might for the client.

This is the quality of receptive listening needed at this level of character work:

- *To be inhabited by what inhabits them, as best we can.*
- *To receive the ‘ghosts’ of the client’s ‘family body’ as communicated by the character of the client.*
- *Then, in time, we can begin to speak to what we learn and discovery from this way.*

For example, we can accompany and inhabit with a client their ‘unbearable loneliness’, that for which a kind of manic defense was created, to protect the client from a lived history that was born and bred in ‘absence’.

There is an importance of getting the client to see and feel the other’s efforts to understand, to accompany, to ‘inhabit with’.

Does the client value this? Are they threatened by this? Is this profoundly foreign and dystonic to them?

At a characterological level – a fundamental observing capacity is not there in the client.

- *It is the job of the therapist to provide this observing function on behalf of the client.*

We often cannot predict the impact of our observations, interpretations, reflections on the client. *How does it help them? How does it hinder them?*

It is our job to provide an environment in which the client is able to make use of us, where they can learn something about life, or about themselves.

When we are in a ‘teaching mode’ with our clients, we are at risk of imposing knowledge upon them. This can be ‘infantilizing’, depriving them of their own agency, their own discoveries.

THE NOTION OF IDIOM

- *Is a fundamental and developmental force within us, that sees to a richer and fuller expression of who we really are.*
- *It is unconscious, both the seed and soil, from which something comes alive in ourselves.*
- *Makes it possible to recognize ourselves more clearly.*
- *Allows us to feel like ourselves more fully.*

The environment becomes like the soil into which we are planted, that brings us alive, brings the idiom forth. (MM's experience with Karin Aarons facilitating a large group process at BBSH.)

We also can often encounter and discover the idiom in us when we've been ignored or deprived by the environment.

GHOSTS AND SPIRITS

When we make an unconscious change in who we are, at the level of character, it's transgressive to the transgenerational family system – it is taboo.

This has an effect on other generations that came before us, in a way that *feels* like a betrayal of them – though it is not an actual betrayal. When this happens, the character defense will over-ride the idiom. *“Who do you think you are!”*

The ghosts and spirits are the remnants of people who once lived with us, or lived as we now live. They inhabit us, they haunt us, they inspire us.

In the psychotherapy process, *they are in the room*, they are inhabitants of our client's way of being. We are to welcome them, wonder about them, listen to them.

“If I make this change, if I become this, I am violating my parent's, my grandparent's, unconscious wishes. I am doing what no one before me did. I have no right to do this.”

REVIEWING A CASE PRESENTATION

If we are overly definitive in our language, we foreclose other possibilities, we foreclose what else might emerge from our clients, or ourselves. It is best to have an attitude, a kind of posture that is more tentative, that keeps the working space open, that keeps the thinking active.

C.T. - Feeling into a strong, underlying feeling of 'being distracted'. This is happening below the surface of the content. We are always inquiring, asking ourselves, 'What is going on here?'

“Sometimes a client has never been attended to in such a direct, caring, engaged way, like we may be providing. Yet this is precisely the quality of attention that is required, even though it is not yet being taken up.”

This quality of attention is a real discipline and dedication. We offer what Freud called an 'evenly hovering attention', we stay with it until the client is able to make use of it.



*We can make our minds
So like still water
That beings gather about us
that they may see,
It may be,
Their own images,
And so live for a moment
With a clearer,
Perhaps even fiercer life
Because of our quiet.*

- Yeats