

The Core Self & Shame

*Notes take from a lecture by
Paul Williams*

The Core Self holds the unique integrity of the subject, which we as therapists must be aware of, and can never interfere with.

Working with the Core Self

The work takes place within the therapist, not in the client. It is a kind of conscious echo-location, a sensing of the inherent vulnerability of its existence, a transference. There is a great deal of sensitivity needed to attend to the Core Self.

The Core Self is utterly defenseless:

- It can be invaded, but it cannot be destroyed.
- It incorporates the invader, and can get mutilated, but still exists.

The wholeness of the Core Self can rarely be directly accessible – only through traumatic violations, or life and death circumstances.

When the core self suffers from exposure, the potential for catastrophe needs to be recognized.

- There is a fundamental conflict inside - the need for the personality to be connected with, and need for the core self to be left alone.*

We can have no direct access to our core self, we only recognize it once it has been impinged upon.

A core self can give up, when circumstances are too difficult to bear. Then the spark or light in a person goes out, their sense of integrity is lost.

The ineffability of the core self, being attuned to it, sensing a spark of aliveness not always visible, and often not so – but it tends to flicker into existence.

- The core self can wait and wait, until the time is just right, to briefly protrude, to peek out.*
- The core self is eternal, abiding, not interested in growth or development, but in Being itself.*

- *The core self has recognition, it is primitive. It may contain the energy itself that permits the self to move itself toward psychic nutrients.*

The Process of Enlivening

To allow the core self to exist, to come into being – a dynamic tension is needed, just enough to slightly penetrate or impinge, but only just what is needed.

When working with the core self, we cannot take any of our clients to places we ourselves have not been. But our clients may go there anyway, without us.

Bion says, *“Being awake is over-rated.”*

Paul tells all of his supervisees: *“Please stop trying to help your clients.”*

Paul elaborates this further. *“We can’t take any of our clients to places we haven’t been ourselves. But they will go there anyway without us.”*

Typical of traumatization that occurs in our infancy – the core self was not left alone, and the personality was.

We have to trust enough to let the hate of what transpired in our early childhoods to be communicated.

The experience of being treated as a ‘bad object’ in our early life is very painful.

In order to communicate the depth of authenticity and truth of the core self, and the impingement that it experienced, it often requires the therapist to become the bad object.

“Now you have done this to me.” In this way, the bad object is a very good and useful object.

“The truth, the reality being experienced, is the thing that heals”, said Bion. No matter how awful, terrible or horrible the reality is.

This points to just how hard this work can be for us, as the therapist.

There seems to be an absolute ignorance of the core self these days.

The respect for and tolerance of difference requires a self that is intact with integrity.

The “Door Ajar” – the Core Self’s existence is the pre-condition for life-seeking, object-seeking pursuits, and the desire to be known.

What protects the core self is the defenses that happen in good enough relationships.

The erotic passions born out of hopelessness is the life force in the death instinct. The commitment to be a failure is active.

What is terrible is when the erotic of the transference is allowed to drain away into the sand; then, the talking just takes over. We must be attuned enough so the erotic part can at last be expressed.

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Moving from isolation and alienation to solitude in the midst of the other.

### **The Interior World of Shame**

One feels as if they are beyond salvation. They have the experience of the painful intensity of an unbearable and colossal failure, the lowest and worst an object of disgust or revulsion.

There exists an affinity with death. One feels like they are left tinkering with a very few trappings of life to hang on to. As if one is 'dying of shame'.

It is like gangrene, there is a sense of decaying of one's own essence. One feels as if they are dying from shame, and are already dead as well.

The orientation to the world is one of feeling like an outcast, without a location or a name.

How is it possible for an infant to fail?

At the very moment of maximum effort by the self, the environmental failure produces overwhelming shame.

How can the torrent of shame feel be so profound? What makes it so effective in its devastation?

- It produces a sense of condemnation that feels so absolute.*
- In our minds, others are no longer able to love us.*
- The complete sense of ruination has occurred, the public sense of exposure and failure produces a humiliation that stays with us.*
- It is the feeling of the withdrawal of all love, we are cast into hell.*
- Due to feelings of revulsion, all connections to life are cut off.*

Shame leads to a feeling that one has suffered a total loss; thus, the accompanying guilt must also be fitting.

If sufficient shame ruins us, then sufficient guilt kills us.

The guilt that accompanies shame leads to futile attempts at reconciliation and repair.

A conviction of guilt can feel so real that all other feelings pale in comparison.

### *Two Healing Paths for Shame*

Both paths require tremendous courage and risk. We must invert again our inverted world.

Shame is maintained by keeping our sense of flawed-ness or failure secret, even to ourselves.

- 1) *We must expose it, we must make it public.* This is a very good idea, but it is also the very thing it is designed to prevent at all costs.

We are now the ones who keep ourselves locked in our shame. No one else does this to us.

- 2) *We must admit our culpability to the whole world.* By doing so, we place ourselves at the mercy of the world. (My error with scheduling Cathy Vogt at PSEN)

Those of us with crippling shame will need an ally, someone to walk with us.

*Guilt is maintained by self-hate.* We punish ourselves by murdering ourselves, when we what we really want is to change our shape, change our ways, but can't stand being helped by another, we can't tolerate the risks changing requires of us.

Remember how childhood wounding occurs – whenever there is serious conflict in the home, children inevitably blame themselves.

*The real difficulty with shame is its secrecy.* Internally, we are always being subjected to and defend against the impending sense of exposure to public humiliation and condemnation.

We are ever protecting ourselves from:

1. *Humiliation*
2. *The Loss of the love of the world – feelings of total rejection and condemnation.*

The principle condemned one was the infant.

*By age four, kids know everything.*

*By age one, kids can be self-condemning.*

Mental illness can take place within the first year of life. Catastrophe can occur in the interior world of the child in the earliest stages of development.

Unconsciously, there is a tremendous amount of complexity in the mind of an infant.

What comes through the gaze of the mother, from her own unconscious, goes into the unconscious of the child.

As well, the potential for misrepresentation is enormous.

In the healing process, the therapist must be willing to be subjected to the murder from the client – be the bad object – and demonstrate to the client a survival of this. (my client S.W.)

The therapist must let go of the need to defend against the desire of the client to murder the bad object.

To become authentic, to be experienced as real, the therapist has to be slaughtered in a way, to feel this happening, participate in the experience, and come through it intact and whole, without injury and without retaliatory attack.

- *The terror of exposure always initially elicits the projection of impending annihilation.*

It has the feeling of risk that one is about to give up everything, stepping completely into the unknown, into a nothingness – it starts with that threshold to be experienced.

Shame is the worst personal affective experience one can have.

### **Pathological Organization**

A generalizing organizing state of mind that functions to take over an infant and care for it, in a perverse way, in the absence of any actual caregiving.

It is fueled by aggression. This pathological mind sucks out the positive, life-seeking aggression out of a person, on behalf of this ego-state.

If you are a young child, and your ego function is being assaulted – with severe disturbance – it develops its own autonomous function to cope, one that cannot directly be spoken to or intervened upon.

It is like a spy network, a deep state, designed to protect the ego from annihilation in a perverse way, of psychotic proportions – this is more common than we realize.

Bion broke new ground with his understanding of an attacking force in the mind, that the ego cannot control.

The pathological mind permeates into all aspects of one's life, to the point of delusions, and works like a director, designing the scripts and running the show.