

# Some Unsystematic Reflections on the Relevance of Heidegger's Philosophy to The Practice of Psychotherapy

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I'm sitting here with copies of all of Bob's lectures from the past two years and simply allowing myself to feel - to know in my body first - my response to the class. I notice different levels - one is a response as a human being engaged in the difficult and thrilling task of making sense out of human existence in general and the 'thrown possibility' of my life in particular. Another is as a psychotherapist engaged in a process of mutual inquiry into the 'thrown possibility' of my clients lives. A feeling of standing alongside with them, sometimes in wonder, sometimes with horror, and hopefully also with a growing sense of intelligence and wisdom. A third is as a poet and an artist who must take these ideas and mix them with all the other influences that have fed my aesthetic, spiritual and creative life. As I write this I am aware of these three positions dialoguing, questioning each other, sometimes jostling with each other for a central voice and sometimes rising up together in a chorus of agreement and resonance.

Let me start with the idea of the hermeneutic circle, or more poetically, in T.S. Eliot's words, how I have arrived at the very same place and known it for the first time.

Four years ago, I wrote a chapter for a book called "Therapeutic Presence, Bridging Expression and Form". In the chapter I identified several principals which were central to my practice of therapy at the time. These principals were Presence, Process, Authenticity, The Self as a Process, The Reactive Mind, The Functional Unity of the Body, Mind and Spirit, and Developmental Order. In rereading what I wrote then, it is astonishing to me how much of Heidegger's philosophy I already knew.

Briefly, (relative to what I wrote in the book chapter) I would like to look at each of these principals and reflect on them from the perspective of what I have gained from this course. To be sure, each of these reflections will be incomplete, and somewhat rough hewn. So please bear with the 'work in progress' nature of this piece.

Presence. Presence is the primary mode by which Dasein appears in therapy. Presence happens through the quality of my eye contact, through the energetic field of potential space which the therapeutic encounter creates, through voice tone, in nonverbal gestures and postures, and especially in the silences which create different kinds of thresholds for new possibilities. The force of Presence, when used skillfully, precipitates a 'break' in my client's present at hand, already figured out, measured and familiar, experience of him/herself and the world. It forces us both, or even a whole group, into a field in which we must surrender our reified metaphysics and shut down the chatter of the already known, constructed realities in the mind. In the light of Presence we discover ourselves in the 'openness' with a sense of vitality and vigor. In this 'break' we are defeated and reborn simultaneously. We must let go of our old roles and stand 'resolutely' in the Opening, in the Nothingness, the Pregnant Void. (At least for a moment or two until we 'Fall'.) In the magnetism of Presence something/nothing is unleashed, unfurled and revealed and something else (the inauthentic, the present at hand and the already known) is restrained and concealed simultaneously. In the power of Presence we hold all the paradoxes of our particular lives and approach the bigger questions of existence with humility and care. Presence occurs in the crack between what we have been thrown into and the

possibility that is opened by our response to the facts of our lives. Presence is the silence in the theater of our bodies after all of the players have gone and our atmosphere and cellular vibration is heavy laden with the encounters and moments that have been shared. Presence is that moment when the words and the music match and something is communicated which can never be measured except in the tingling that we feel in our spines. Presence occurs in that moment of Being when we know in the marrow of our bones that we are made out of Care.

Process. All of life is a process. Psychotherapy is a process. If we can get past the cliché of these words, we arrive at something profound.

To me it all comes down to attention, and how we organize our field of attention with our intention. At each moment in attending to our process we are faced with a choice. To paraphrase a teacher of mine, all of these choices really come down to just one choice: Are we going to pay attention to our authentic experience or are we going to pay attention to our defense against that experience? If we choose our defense we go back to what we already know, to our explanations, interpretations and old roles. If we are really on top of our game we can explore our impulse to defend rather than simply acting out the defense. In my opinion, when a defense comes up, it is the job of good therapy to help someone stay in the exploration of the impulse to defend rather than simply living in the defense. Respecting and understanding each impulse towards acting out a defense is important because neither we nor the people we work with can always bear the ruthless honesty of authenticity at all times. It is also important to be able to retreat to what we already know, to consolidate our learnings and muster our resources before we can make the journey again (and again, and again) to the edge of the unknown, to catch the wave just as it crests into our awareness. (It never ceases to amaze me, when I really pay attention, that there is always another wave.) Ultimately, personally, professionally and artistically I think that this is the only game in town. Because I can't always do this, (none of us can), my process and the therapy that I do also has to include the reality that I will defend against authenticity and that both my clients and myself will catch ourselves acting out in subtle and not so subtle ways. In other words that we will 'Fall.' As I fall in therapy and in life, can I attend to that also? The paradox here is that if I truly attend to the Fall I end up back in the Mystery, in the Awe, and involved in a context which is always bigger than I thought. Back in the Clearing. In the Ahhh. in the Empty/Full again.

Authenticity. This word can also so easily become an existential cliché. But again the experience and phenomenological exploration of authenticity is profound.

To arrive at authenticity we must separate out all the voices of 'Them' from the whisperings of Dasein. We must engage in an alchemical process in which we distill the essence of our experience into its most refined form. We must have the courage to resolutely let go of our fantasies, our stubbornly repetitive roles and pervasive transferences. Every good therapy, indeed every good relationship, must be about the quest for authenticity and be lived as an authentic encounter or it becomes lifeless and uninteresting. Every good therapy is at its core a struggle with the inauthentic, an inquiry into how we have lost our ability to hear the Call of Dasein.

In each therapeutic encounter I ask myself what is my authentic response to this person and this moment of our interaction. What is being called out from me in this moment and how do I organize that response towards the goals of the therapy? How does my authentic response inform the 'appeal' which I am formulating as a therapeutic theme? How do I live in the space between us with authenticity? How much room is there here for Reality? For the force of Presence and the trumpet call to Awakening? Maybe my client is more Awake and honest than I am at that moment. Can I respond to that without taking it personally!? When the space loses its charge, when the current of authenticity begins to flicker, what is being defended against, inside of me, inside of the relationship, inside of my client? How are 'they' intruding

and deadening the connection, killing the voice of authenticity in the room? Living authentically in life and in therapy requires courage, resoluteness, a care that is ruthlessly honest and attuned to the core of who we are, not our protective shells.

Which brings us to the Self as Process. As Heidegger says, Dasein is Nothing, it is an Opening, a potential space, a Happening that is constantly getting mulched back into the ground of 'all that is'. So in attending to Dasein, to this core quality of our being, to this 'self', we are really attending to the 'Opening', to the Dance, not the dancer. The dancer will always be changed by the Dance. In fact, ultimately without the Dance the dancer doesn't exist. We are always in a context, in a Dance, and the largest part of our suffering arises when we forget that and insist that we are primary and the Dance is secondary. Our job is to attune to the Dance, to respond, to let go of our fear and selfish desire to control the music. To remember that we are thrown possibility not simply one pole or the other. To truly respond to the music is to live in reality and to stand resolutely in our Being Towards Death. The very moment we can truly respond, let go, move to the music, the dancer dies and the Dance is born. It is this art that I am trying to teach in therapy. For in the end there is only the Dance. There is only the Dance. My prayer in life and in therapy is to remember that. To fully enter, to become the Dance, to forget myself so that I can be re-membered into that context which is bigger than me. To allow this small I that clings to life out of fear to die again and again and again.

Although to be truly rigorous and Buddhist about it, one has to ask who is this I that is asking to remember anyway?

The Reactive Mind is essentially the I that resists the Dance. The I that gets scared when the music Calls him or her to the floor. The I that holds on stubbornly to any one point in the circle including authenticity and resisting the inevitability of the Fall. The I that tries so hard to be found that he or she is utterly and hopelessly lost. The reactive mind is so filled with chatter that it can't possibly hear the Call. The reactive mind decides that it already knows the next beat and so misses the music altogether. The reactive mind is dancing all alone in a corner believing that it is at a carnival sharing drink and reveling with Kings and Queens. The reactive mind resists coming into its own authority and taking over responsibility for thrownness by feeling outraged and victimized by a sadistic God. It is resisting coming to terms with the reality that the most intimate act we can ever do is to bear eachother's aloneness together. The reactive mind has lost its context and is living in its fantasies, old roles and in tight rigid muscles. It takes all of my therapeutic artistry to get someone to look at their reactive mind in the mirror and to dissolve its structure at deep and more and more fundamental levels. It has taken all of my mentors' therapeutic artistry to help me to look at my reactive mind and to dissolve the chains of fear that bind me! All of us, our clients, ourselves, our mentors and spiritual teachers are constantly involved in this dissolving process. I've never met anyone who was exempt!

The Functional Unity of our Body, Mind and Spirit. Our body/mind/spirit is the instrument through which we attend to the Dance. In the organic process of our body/mind/spirit we are the Opening of authenticity constantly occurring, we are a 'Happening', we are the circle, the being born, the living . the dying, the Care. If we train ourselves in the discipline of listening with this instrument, all of Heideggers philosophy exists in the wisdom of our blood in the pulsation of our hearts and the silence of our breath.

When we attend to the rhythm of our body/mind/spirit we also have to grapple with reality of Time and the heartless progression of Time towards death. Paradoxically, it is also in the sensuality of this unitive experience that we can touch experiences of Timelessness and Presence and of the Clearing. It is in the the lived reality of our body/mind/spirit that we take the journey, that we travel between the world of the authentic and the inauthentic, the Pregnant Void and the Already Known.

The history of each particular journey is written in the structure and cellular memory

of the body/mind/spirit. Each thought, each intention towards Awakening, each habitual way of falling asleep, is written there. In therapy I work with the structure of someone's body/mind/spirit very directly and use it as a tool to Call them back into their relationship with Authenticity and the Dance. As I touch someone or simply call their attention to their inner experience I am looking for that opening into potential space. I am listening for how Dasein is both revealed and concealed in the story that their body/mind/spirit is telling me. I am listening to their breath, to the sound of their voice, to the pulsation of the different fluids and to the harmony or disharmony of their internal organs. I am listening for where the river has become stuck, to where the membranes and fascia have become glued together and limit the full expression of Being, to where character structure lives in chronic patterns of tension and/or flaccidity. When I have truly attended to the functional unity of my clients and my body/mind/spirit during a session my experience is of living on the razors edge of thrown possibility. Each session is a spiral that moves forward into the unknown and yet also around in a circle. When I am really attuned, there is a sense of a complete gesture occurring. The relational space between me and my therapeutic dance partner reaches a state of dynamic balance between emptiness and form. There is nothing left over, and yet everything is open, moving and unfinished at the same time.

Developmental order. This is an area that Heidegger is not particularly interested in. After all he was a philosopher and not a psychologist. However in terms of the practice of existential psychotherapy, I think this area is crucial. Bob has come closest to addressing the issue of developmental order from an existential perspective in his piece on 'the appeal.' Each of us, even the most healthy, is frozen, arrested, somewhere in our dialogue with the unknown. Each psychological structure has embedded within it a philosophical error as well as an emotional trauma. The existential appeal in a therapeutic context is a passionate reaching out to connect a frozen, stagnant, or perhaps overflowing and uncontained part of the psyche back into wholeness and into the context of life. It is the deep current of authenticity in me calling out to the deep current inside of my client in the context the particular phase of development that they are working through. Each phase of development or issue requires a different appeal. Each appeal is a call to live the thrown possibility of a particular life as it is, not how one wishes it would be. Each appeal must also be lived in the context of an authentic encounter that has a certain ruthless compassion and dedication to truth.

I would like to close with a poem that I shared last year in class. This poem seems particularly apt as we "cross the boundary" out of this class and take the ideas which we have learned here into our lives and our work. It also completes another circle as it was the first piece of my creativity that I shared with the class.

## **We Are Crossing a Boundary Now**

We are crossing a boundary now  
Leave behind your familiar maps and time honored interpretations,  
Pack them neatly, and check them at the door.  
They will be kept safe for you until you return,  
(though you may not want them anymore).

We are crossing a boundary now,  
The constructs of the past and the future are slowly fading away  
Surrender your war stories, your tragedies, romances,

and catastrophizing into the flame of the present.  
Dear friends who have responded to the invitation  
The ceremony has begun  
The inner bride and groom are at the altar,  
Let us not keep the guests waiting.

We are crossing a boundary now  
We have reached the edge of the unknown  
The mystery from which all creativity bubbles forth  
like an effervescent spring of possibilities  
Make sure you have brought your curiosity along!

We are crossing a boundary now  
We have entered the threshold where the  
Everywhere and Always meets the Here and the Now  
We ask that the energies of self and essence guide us on our journey,  
That we have the courage to not hold back on our explorations.  
We seek the wisdom to see through illusions,  
to dissolve the fears that we have told ourselves that we must hold onto  
year after year after year after year after year,  
The discrimination to know the difference between  
the paper tigers and the real ones.  
How many of those tigers have long ago  
snuck back into the primordial ooze??  
Leaving us quaking superstitiously,  
our bodies still believing they were there??  
They're not even alive anymore!  
Their bones have long ago turned to dust!

Open your eyes!  
Dare to become present!  
Embrace yourself! All of you!  
Nothing that is real is forbidden!

We are crossing a boundary now  
Into the sacred circle  
Into the cauldron of each other  
The fire is hot - Pay attention!

Listen to the instrument of your body  
The life force is flowing through it  
Find resonance with each other - Join on that!  
Trust the current - it knows where to go.  
The adventure is calling, the journey has begun,  
let's go !

P.S. I am very sorry to miss this last class. I promise you I will listen to the tape  
(please speak loudly!) I have very much enjoyed my contact with all of you and wish  
you well. Until our paths cross again - All the best,  
Michael