

Psychotherapy Invites the Dream, Locates the Pain, Imagines the Good Outcome and Holds the Hope that if I Can Change, So Can the World

Jonathan Fay

Nga mihi nui ki a koutou. Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

Introduction

I'll begin with a poem about a dream that is also a dream re-told in poetic form. The poem's called 'Somewhere a child is crying.'

For God's sake don't ask me where it hurts.
If I knew that I wouldn't be here.
There's a splinter in my mind that
makes me wake in the night.
Somewhere a child is crying.

I dreamt Paris was burning.
Fire lit up the night sky and there were
barricades across the boulevards.
I knew this revolution was overdue,
knew it had to come but it
sickened me just the same.
How could blood and bandages
be expected to improve anyone's health?
Now I'm traveling on foot,
alone in a strange city,
searching for a lost child,
and there's this urgency.
Everything is infected with urgency.

Don't ask me to hold your hand gently,
when it's obvious so much is wrong.
They've torn down the house I was born in,
and all of my family are gone.

You ask how I feel? I feel nothing.
There's a hole where my heart used to be.
But when I hear her cry, I remember my heart.
I want to comfort that child and stay by her side.
Oh, I could be so loyal, if only I knew how to find her.
If only she wasn't so lost to me.

Jonathan Fay September 2006

Who speaks in this poem? Is this a client who has just arrived for their first psychotherapy appointment? If so, they are probably going to be a handful. They are in a lot of pain and not very receptive to empathy. Or is this a dream about the human species in crisis? The suffering of the modern man, disconnected and alienated from himself and from his kin. Is the little girl real or is she a metaphor? Does she have a family? Does her community value her? Or is she the inner child of the protagonist, an anima figure, a disowned and denied part of the self? Or does she represent the small and the weak in nature and in society, all the fragile and precious connections that sustain our existence. How does this story turn out? Does the client get better? Can humanity survive itself? Psychotherapy moves among all these possibilities. Psychotherapy invites the dream, locates the pain, imagines the good outcome, and holds the hope that if I can change, so can the world. Invitation, exploration, imagination and hope – I will try to speak briefly to each.

1. Psychotherapy invites the dream, liberates the fantasy, resonates with the feelings, extends the metaphor, deciphers the symbol, deconstructs the defense, appreciates the anxiety, validates the needs, links the meanings, co-authors the new narrative and anticipates the emergence of a more complex and diverse sense of self.

The timeless appeal of dreams is a landscape of the self in which the ego no longer dominates. The ego is the singular 'I', the part of myself that I own, the executive function most closely associated with being awake and alert. The ego establishes a dominant culture within the self, a wakeful, watchful consciousness that is realistic, protective and safety-conscious. Developing our capacity for adaptive coping is a significant developmental achievement. Where clients demonstrate weak ego functioning and diffuse boundaries we generally try to help them strengthen their identity within their reference group and consolidate their capacities to differentiate themselves from others and from the surround. But we should also recognise that our imaginative capacities are curtailed in the drive to survive. In sleep, we relinquish our need for vigilance and self-ownership. The ego all but disappears and the true diversity of self is revealed. Dreams are the night shift, the workings of our creative imagination in which there are multiple centres of consciousness, sub-personalities, varieties and parts of self. Within a single dream, there may be several different experiences of 'I' or no 'I' as such. Dreams lead us back to the original, indigenous territory of the self. What we are is always more than we can know. Dreams have potential to broaden and deepen our self-awareness, bringing to consciousness many aspects or elements of self not included by the ego. To realize the dream's potential to extend and enlarge our self-understanding, however, we need the help of our

imagination. Imagination allows us to re-work the dream, consciously registering its signs and symbols, resonating to its images and themes in order to recognise the intentions of the dreamer, surface the latent meanings, and reveal the hidden self. Psychotherapy is, among other things, a shared reverie. Reverie is the closest we come to dreaming while awake. In reverie, we relax and give our imagination free rein. We can allow ourselves to daydream, associate freely, enter the realms of fantasy, picture what never was and what might be. Psychotherapy creates a safe space in which survival requirements are suspended enough to allow minority consciousness to emerge. In the invitational space of psychotherapy, we learn to attend to the marginal experience, the edges of things, their emotional tones, atmospheres and felt intuitive sense. As in a dream, fleeting sensations and perceptions pre-figure what is to come. Fragmentary images take shape, gather and merge, coalesce and constellate. Earlier editions of the self find their voice. Lost attachments are found, forbidden longings acknowledged, traumatic, split-off fragments integrated. Disowned and denied needs are re-claimed. Old memories return, old disappointments are revisited and resolved, old loves are renewed or given up at last. Psychotherapy invites the dream in order to widen our horizons. This process does not merely strengthen the ego. It also deconstructs egotism and egoism in the interests of reconstructing a larger self, a self that is less defended, a person that is less conflicted: more flexible, resilient, tolerant, and at peace with themselves and the world. The politics of the inner world are not dissimilar to those of the outer world. We need a cooperative plurality of selves, all the ages we've ever been, relating to each other and playing in concert, like an orchestra. The ego should function as a conductor, not a dictator. Good governance is not imperial rule.

2. Psychotherapy locates the pain, approaches what was previously avoided, and witnesses, acknowledges, understands, interprets and stands in solidarity with suffering.

More than anything else, psychic pain is the thing that divides us and separates us from the rest of our fellow human beings. Pain isolates us and puts us in a world of our own. In states of acute pain, we crave release. In states of chronic pain, we come to believe that release is impossible. Psychic pain disrupts time, making it difficult to be in the moment or stay present. In psychic pain we are pulled back into the past. We feel we are living a repeating cycle, a recurring nightmare. Psychic pain attacks the imagination. It closes down our inner world, impoverishes our feelings and our fantasies, detaches us from ourselves, and makes us feel we are not really living but merely going through the motions.

Psychotherapy offers relief from psychic pain through a strategy that is counterintuitive, contrary to our natural inclination to avoid whatever is painful. Psychotherapy teaches us to approach instead of avoid, to move towards our injury and embrace it in order to alleviate some of its anguish. All psychotherapy begins with empathy. Empathy is experience near. It understands rather than explaining. When we move from explaining to understanding, we move to an epistemology of the heart, an understanding that personifies the world, a thoughtful mode of feeling. We begin to recognise our self in others and the otherness within our own self.

Psychic pain is not senseless. We can learn from our suffering. Again, the politics of the inner world are not dissimilar from those of the outer world. Lack of respect, recognition or acknowledgement adds insult to injury. What

helps psychic injury to heal is the willingness to empathically attune to it, make the effort to understand it, and stand in solidarity with it, Recognising and acknowledging our own suffering and the suffering of others, we can appreciate the strength, the courage and the resilience of the weak, the sick, the hurt and the vulnerable.

Effective treatment for psychic pain is quite specific. Conflict and ambivalence benefit from vigorous interpretation because giving voice to all sides of a conflict helps to facilitate its resolution. Working through loss and grief, by contrast, involves a process of mourning in which what we love is simultaneously retained, integrated and let go. Neglect and deficit need rehabilitation rather than interpretation. Abuse and trauma must be witnessed and acknowledged before the work of healing can begin.

3. Psychotherapy imagines the good outcome, helps us begin from where we really are, accepts our existential predicament, retrieves us from destructive investments and develops our vision of a life well lived. Psychotherapy is a modern wisdom tradition that believes human beings can live with care and skill in congruence with life-enhancing values, achieve personal satisfaction and happiness and leave the world a better place than we find it.

In very broad terms, the good outcome in psychotherapy can be conceptualised in terms of human development realized and human potential fulfilled. The alleviation of painful symptoms frees our energies for other tasks. This tends to facilitate flexibility and adaptive coping and increase our chances of success in meeting developmental challenges and achieving life

goals. Personal progress and regress can be measured in reference to developmental milestones as well as by the quality of our relationships, who we love and who we are loved by. But what might be considered a good outcome in psychotherapy must also be contextualized in terms of our age, gender, social position, ethnicity and culture, both where we are located in our own life and where we are located in the world.

Psychotherapy helps us begin from where we really are. Most patterns of dysfunction are embedded and familiar, however uncomfortable they may be. By encouraging us to accept ourselves as we are and to understand ourselves in the context of our history, psychotherapy develops and deepens our awareness and prepares us for the challenge of change.

Our existential predicament forces us to build on uncertain foundations and stand on shaky ground. We know our early experience in our bones; we just can't remember exactly how life began. We come to consciousness mid-process, already a work in progress. Our life is well underway by the time we first notice it and already we can apprehend its end. If we are fortunate enough to survive our youth, we can look forward to old age, sickness, infirmity and death. We are compelled to accept this challenge, shoulder this burden, take up the task of being responsible and free, co-create our own reality, choose our own destiny. The adult version of 'happily ever after' cannot offer us a resolution free of conflict or compromise. Beyond tragedy, melancholy, and heroic struggle, however, lies the affirmation of life and its joyful possibilities.

Happiness and the good life bear strikingly little resemblance to conventional fantasies of success. Self-interest makes a poor substitute for self-care. The ubiquitous preoccupations of our age – wealth, power, fame, prestige, glamour and luxury – are symbolic achievements that fail to deliver the quality of life they promise. Happiness is not a commodity or lifestyle, it cannot be bought or sold. We can't compete for happiness, win it, grab it, go for it, or achieve it through force of will. Happiness is emotional satisfaction, the by-product of a life lived with care and skill in accordance with life-enhancing values. We can develop healthy attachments, learn to belong, make contact, connect, engage, relate, include ourselves, and join the dance. We can be vital and free, autonomous and self-determining, play, create, develop our spontaneity, humour, sense of fun, capacity to enjoy the moment. We can be constructive and productive, re-make, re-shape and influence our world. We can take the inward journey, learn to know and appreciate ourselves, find satisfaction in making meaning. We can find love, intimacy, ecstasy, and contentment in a shared existence. We can care for each other, faithfully, with loyalty and devotion, develop commitment and fidelity, mutuality and reciprocity; grow our abilities as guardians, protectors, and providers. We can develop spirituality and wisdom, enhance and extend our capacity for gratitude and celebration, integration and wholeness. At full maturity human beings glimpse the possibility of partnership with the entire cosmos. The whole of creation is and can become our playground, worksite, cathedral and marriage bed.

4. Psychotherapy holds the hope that if I can change, so can the world. The art and science of psychotherapy links the microculture of the self, the miniculture of the family, the culture of local community and the macroculture of global society, encouraging healthy attachment, reflective self-awareness and passionate participation in each of these domains.

Psychotherapy is a science, an art, and a vocation. Psychotherapy is the applied science of the personal world, the art of making and sustaining therapeutic relationships, and the vocation of caring for the psyche or soul. Psychotherapists bring to clarity the personal life, the inner life, the life that is most private and precious to each of us. We value the small, the specific, the tiny gesture, the intimate nuance. We value human needs and feelings above power and efficiency. We seek contact and relationship. We strive to listen to all the voices. We seek a unity in which diversity is protected and preserved. We nurture the tender shoot, attend to children and the vulnerable, child parts of the self. We believe in the importance of the past, pay close attention to origins, and study how living things unfold, develop and grow. Psychotherapists attempt to practice on a daily basis, in a very humble way, the principles of non-violence, consensus, dialogue, reciprocity and respect for difference. All of these working principles can be applied to progressively larger levels of social organization, from the individual psyche to the psyche of the world. Individual micro culture, family mini culture, local community culture and global macro culture: these are four levels and four interdependent domains in which to understand the reciprocal influences that produce a unified field that includes both private and public life. The private inner world is projected and played out on the stage of

public life. Parents replay the dynamics of their childhood histories each time they come together and create families of their own. But equally, family life is the heart of personal life, without which we would be barely individual, homeless and bereft. A healthy community is needed to contain and hold the lives of its constituent families, giving them shared identity, meaning and purpose. A healthy nation is needed to join and unify its communities while protecting their diversity and supporting their local self-determination. It is cooperation and not competition that makes a healthy family, community, nation, and world. Even our sovereign individuality depends upon our capacity to cooperate with ourselves. A cooperative self is open to change, open to becoming less egotistical, self-willed, restricted and constricted by its own dominant culture. A cooperative self can dream, and dreaming, can imagine there to be more than one right way to make meaning of a dream.

If the first century of psychotherapy was governed by a particle theory of the self in which each person has a unique, individual space-time address, this second century of psychotherapy will be governed by a wave theory of the self in which we are understood as the sum of our relationships; social, cultural, ecological and spiritual subject relations. This shift is relative rather than absolute, a reversal of figure and ground, but profound nonetheless. Whereas relationships have always made up the background of individual consciousness, now we can think about relationships as the very fabric of the self, the threads from which the individual is woven. Previously, our therapeutic focus had been the development of an independent, autonomous ego. Now interdependence takes centre stage. The breadth as well as the depth of the self is found in the relational matrix in which the micro culture

of the self is formed and deformed, nurtured and ruptured. The analysis of the ego is complemented and completed by the analysis of the 'wego.' Our absolute dependence upon the natural and social environment, and our mutual regulation of each other's physiology and psychology, are some of the recent insights of Western science that re-connect us to traditional, holistic, indigenous worldviews. But to understand the indigenous worldview, we must transpose our psychotherapeutic thinking from the micro cultural level of the individual self to the macro cultural level of the Earth community and the cosmos beyond. Our most important 'client' is now the world, our planet, Mother Earth and all her creatures.

In a seminal book called *The Universe Story* (1992) authors Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry assert that there is a coherent story of the universe in its historical sequence in measureable time was never realised prior to the 20th century. Only recently, indeed, only in our lifetime has the central revelation of 500 years of scientific truth seeking been made manifest. The gospel of science reveals that the universe is not only a vast, ever repeating seasonal and celestial cycle but is also evolving in an identifiable sequence of irreversible transformations. The universe is a dynamic, evolving, self-organizing system that is constantly becoming more complex and diverse while at the same time becoming more harmonious, integrated and sentient, conscious and self-aware. The universe is not a mechanism that began with a big bang but a living organism, a living being whose birth was a primal flaring forth 13 billion years ago. From the very beginning of time, a constant quantity of stardust has been undergoing qualitative transformation. Our bodies and our soul are one, and they are composed of this same original stardust. In other words, what is called God in a religious context is

called, in a scientific context, Nature. The natural world is the primary revelation of the divine. Science attempts to maintain objectivity, or critical distance, from what it studies. But its subject matter, the universe itself, is not a collection of objects but a communion of subjects. This recognition, this epiphany, is supported by extensive empirical evidence in every single field of scientific inquiry. The closing of the gap between secular intellect and spiritual awareness is the healing of a split that is extremely consequential for the fate and future of humanity. According to Swimme and Berry, this new awareness comes not a moment too soon. Human technology is now threatening to shut down the life systems of planet Earth. Our health, along with the health of all the other component members of the Earth community, is dependent upon the health of the planet. The wellbeing of the Earth is primary and human wellbeing is derivative of this. The myth of progress is not false, but this myth has been diminished and distorted to justify the wanton plundering of the Earth's resources with devastating effects. During the past century humans have taken over the guidance systems of planet Earth without understanding the integral dynamics of planetary affairs. Mechanistic thinking has obscured the biological truths of the living world. The world has been considered merely a "resource" for human consumption; the inner spontaneities that guide the destinies of the natural world have been considered irrelevant. Instead of measuring progress by the health and wellbeing of the earth community, we have measured progress by the extent of human control over the nonhuman world and the supposed benefits of this control. But the earth is a living organism that cannot survive in dismembered pieces. The primary concern of all health professionals must now extend to the health of the planet itself from which our physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual health will be derived.

As the urgency of the need for healing at this global level becomes more and more apparent to us, we will need to find ways to recognise and develop our ‘wego.’ The ‘wego’ is a group identity founded on an ethos of consensus and decentralized, local, cooperative self-determination. Consensus is hard work, sometimes too hard. But there is only one world and we all share it. The unity of humanity can and must be lived rather than merely represented. If we do not perish first, our species will grow up. If only in the nick of time, we will learn how to strive and manage the resulting strife without violence and without constantly submitting to relationships based on power imbalance, exploitation and threat. Dreaming and imagining our essential unity with the whole of creation will help us to hold this hope and work towards this outcome. Psychotherapy begins in the consulting room, but like a stone dropped into a pool of water, it moves outward in ever widening concentric circles. The values that guide clinical work belong in a social context. By developing a public practice to complement its private practice, psychotherapy demonstrates pragmatic possibilities of genuine engagement with the real world. These action steps are available to us at every level of culture: self, family, community, and planet. Our vision and our values are grounded in our clinical practice, but on this foundation we might begin to claim another, larger vision, and in this aspiration we will not be alone.

No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou, tena ra tatou katoa.