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A FATE WORSE THAN DEATH: THE FEAR OF CHANGING

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The fear of changing is familiar in psychotherapy as an expression of the "resistance." But the resistance is also the ways in which the patient brings about the difficulties which are central to the very problems which bring one to therapy. In this paper it is proposed that much is gained by recognizing that "resistance" is only one way of regarding the life structures which also make possible the patient's way of being in the world and which are intrinsic to the patient's self-concept. Thus resistance arises when important life structures are imperiled. The way the therapist perceives the nature of the life structures and the attitude the therapist takes toward the patient's efforts to preserve those structures are essential considerations.

The fear of change is familiar in psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic literature as the "resistance." Freud was not the first to point out what every therapist discovers: The patient who comes seeking desperately for help soon bends every effort to defeat help being given.

When therapists begin their careers, they are apt to see this resistance as directed against them personally and against their efforts. As they mature in their craft, they come to recognize how much more significant than that is the pervasive (apparent) obstinacy. It turns out to be the way the patient more generally acts in life at large. Indeed, therapists soon realize that this resistance constitutes the very patterns which disrupt patients' lives and are the core of the problems or neuroses which bring them to therapy. (Freud insisted that there was no psychoanalysis which is not the analysis of the resistance.) Still this is not yet the end of the chain of significance. It is the further importance of the resistance that is the point of this article.

In brief, resistance is not solely that which blocks the patient's full living; it is also what makes possible the ways in which the patient does have life. Admitted this is not the traditional view of the resistance; but it is hoped that there is value in examining the possibility. The ways in which persons come to structure who and what they are and what is the nature of the world in which they live are at once the ways which make it possible for them to live their lives and the ways which limit experience and keep them in self-defeating patterns.

Structuring Our Lives

By offering a parable, it is possible to convey more graphically what is proposed here:

The man wakes to find himself swimming in the sea. As far as he can see in any direction there is nothing but the uneasy plain of waves and troughs, of moving water; no landmark, no distant shore to guide his efforts. He treads water, then swims for a time in one direction, but he cannot be certain he is not circling. He begins to tire; no relief seems likely.

Now he discerns a more solid shape some distance away on the waves. Renewed by the sight, he swims to it and soon grasps a plank that has been carried on the water. Gratefully he throws an arm over the plank and eases his pain-filled muscles. He half-rides, half-swims and looks about for more flotsam. And he finds more. A hatch cover floats a short distance away trailing a length of rope. Soon it is tied to the plank. So it goes. Slowly, with great struggles at times, with fortuitous ease at others, the man collects and puts together what he finds until eventually he can climb onto his crude raft and rest.

Now a squall is on the horizon, and the water grows choppy. He must hang onto the raft to survive and to try to hold it

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together. When the storm hits, the man loses parts; hard-won supports are swept away. For a brief, terrifying moment, he almost loses it all back to the endlessly grasping water.

When the squall is past, he finds some, but not all, of the lost pieces. After a bit the sun comes out, and new gifts arrive from the sea. Now the man builds a more stable vessel. The next squall takes a smaller toll, and he grows more confident in his emerging boat.

In time other castaways float by on their rafts, and the man merges his construction with theirs. The vessel becomes larger and more dependable. At times great storms play havoc with it, but mostly it is possible to preserve the central portion and to rebuild adequately.

As days turn into years, the man and his children lose their memories of how the rafts came to be. The big raft on which they live they name "the world," and they are certain that their life is the way life is really meant to be.

The allegory need not be prolonged. It is evident that its purpose is to remind us that the structures within which we live our lives are, at root, our constructions. They have been assembled from whatever sources were at hand. They sustain us with varied effectiveness, and they remain vulnerable to stresses which may come from any quarter. (Indeed, today they seem subject to forces which threaten to quite destroy them and us.) So characterizing them, by no means are they trivial or without significance. Quite to the contrary, this constructing, this structuring of ourselves and our lives, is one of the astonishing and unique expressions of human capacity. Humans create an overworld of meaning which is superimposed on the world of direct experience in which other animals apparently dwell. From this meaning world, we transform the immediate world—for good or for ill.

A Clinical Example

To illustrate clinically how threats to our self-and-world structures may bring about excessive fear of change, a case example will be described. The account will be presented at some length in order to convey the mood and quality of the despairing experience which is so much a part of the fear of change.

Todd knew he was driving in a dangerous way, but he didn't care. He turned onto the freeway and merged into the stream of traffic without looking; so somebody had to jam on his brakes and that somebody leaned on his horn to express his anger. A spark of irritation ran a short distance and died in Todd. "He's right. Damn fool way to drive," the old, relentless voice said. But Todd wasn't paying attention to it either.

For almost an hour he went with the flow of traffic until the freeway became a surface street, and he had to give more thought to cross-traffic, signals, and pedestrians. He didn't want to do that. He thought of stopping, but he wanted to keep going. If he stopped, the thoughts would catch up. Abruptly, only half checking the rear-view mirror, he made a U-turn in the middle of a block and started back for the freeway. On it he could drive monotonously and without distraction from . . . from what? He didn't know. From having to think, he guessed. Think about what?

He sped up to beat a red light, saw he wasn't going to make it—traffic starting up too soon on the left. Reflexes acted, and he swung a right turn, narrowly missing a pedestrian, and then charged up a street going somewhere else.

Gradually, irritably, he found his way back to the freeway. Once on it, going back the way he'd come, he settled into a vague passivity, keeping the car moving at about 50 mph in the second lane, paying no attention to the annoyance of drivers coming up behind him and having to go around him. When one flipped him the finger, he noticed it but didn't really react until the guy was a half-mile ahead. Then Todd laughed shortly, bitterly. "And the same to you, Mac," he muttered under his breath.

That seemed to break his mood, and he found he was impatient with the freeway and with driving. He worked over to the right, more alert now, found an exit, and took a surface street at random. It must be late, he realized; his lights were on—when he'd put them on, he had no idea—and the stores were mostly closed. His watch said 8:44 and with that he was hungry. A rather seedy drive-in was just ahead, so he pulled in and ordered a cheeseburger and a beer. Eating, he realized his mood was changing. For a bit he tried to keep his stuporous detachment, but the process was now irreversible, and he knew he was coming out of it.

Todd paid the carhop and drove out on the street before he realized he had no idea where he was. "Davis St. 1800"; the corner sign told him nothing. He thought of getting out a city map, but it seemed too much effort; so he drove along Davis Street until it crossed a major artery whose name he recognized; although he wasn't sure which way to go on it. Taking a chance, he made a left turn and twelve minutes later he was home.

Telling me about it the next day, Todd said, "I'm not sure why, but I think I just kind of flipped out. I know I wasn't really there. Shouldn't drive when I'm like that. Though I don't know whether I've ever been like that before. Anyway, I was shut down on all systems—or at least, most all. Some way I kept enough going not to kill anybody, or. . . ."

J: "Or . . . ?" softly.

T: "Or myself," flatly.

J: "Mm-hmmm."

T: "It was kind of like being dead, or partly dead."

J: "Like being dead."

T: "Yeah, but not really either. I think at one point on the freeway I had the thought of just shutting my eyes and letting the car go without looking, but it was just a thought. I mean, I don't think I would really do that."

J: "Not really."

T: "But driving the way I was. . . . That was sort of. . . . Well, I remember kind of thinking, 'It's up to fate.' It was like being partly asleep or dozing, but still being sort of awake."

So what is going on with Todd? Todd is 53 years old, has an advanced degree in electronic engineering, is married, has two children, ages 18 and 23. He is section chief in a middle-sized but quite successful research and development

company. Why is he playing a kind of Russian roulette on the freeway?

In simplest terms, Todd is fighting off the awareness that he is changing. He believes that if he lets that awareness really take hold, he, Todd, will cease to be. In his own experience, Todd is fighting for his life; yet he considers killing himself. What a paradox! Still that is just what Todd is doing, and it is what many of us do—although, to be sure, not as overtly and explicitly as is Todd. Here is how he talks about it three weeks after that dazed freeway trip:

T: Jim, I'll level with you. I don't like what's been happening here lately, and I don't think it's helping me. In fact, I think I may be getting worse. You are doing everything you can, I know, but maybe I'm just not the kind who can do this stuff. I mean, maybe some people just aren't put together solidly enough to deal with all the junk that gets turned up by this process.

J: Maybe you shouldn't be trying to do what therapy asks of you, is that is?

T: Well, yes, sort of. I mean, I don't like to think of it that way, but still. . . .

J: Todd, I think you're very frightened by what you're seeing about yourself and that you're looking for some way to dodge out of it.

T: Yeah, I knew you'd say that. But I don't think you know what this is like, what my thoughts are doing. I mean sometimes it seems real . . . well, . . . (he pauses again; I keep quiet) . . . well, kind of crazy-like, you know?

J: Better tell me; so we'll be sure.

T: Well, sometimes I find myself thinking about my work, you know, about how it is now and how it's going to be next month and next year and the year after that and so on. And . . . and then I get sort of. . . . Or maybe I'll think about Madge and the kids and. . . . You know, they mean a lot to me, mean everything to me, and. . . . Oh, I don't know. It's like I said, I don't think this stuff is right for me, and I maybe ought to take a little vacation from. . . .

J: Todd, you start to tell me about where your thoughts take you when you're at the job and what it will be like for you in coming days and years, and you stop without finishing what you're telling me. Then you start to tell me about thinking about your family, and again you abort. Now you want to abort therapy. I can feel that you're running very scared right now, Todd, but I know damn well that pulling out in the middle isn't going to work, won't solve anything.

T: That's easy for you to say!

J: Yes, it is. It's much easier for me to say than for you to do or for anyone to do who's in the spot you're in. It's a damn hard place.

T: You mean you've seen other people where I am now?

J: Would that make it different?

T: Well, no, I suppose not. But yes, in a way. It would say that there's some hope, that I'm not the only nut on the block.

J: You're not.

T: Oh, jeez, Jim, this is just no picnic. I'm glad because I guess you know where I am, and maybe you think it's okay, and. . . .

J: You want very much to have somebody know where you are, and you want to read that knowing as meaning it will all come out all right, eh?

T: You know it!

J: Todd, I have a general notion of what's going on with you, but I need to be straight with you: Each person's journey into this place is unique, and it's up to you what you will make of it. I'm with you, but I can't promise more than that. I can't promise happy endings or even solid guardrails on the curves.

T: That's not very reassuring.

J: I know.

T: When I think of Madge and Bob and Jan, I've got two different feelings at the same time. Well, not really at the same time. First one will come, and then as I look at that, the other begins to show up until it takes the place of the first one. (He pauses, seems to be gathering his resolution.) Like I think of how much they mean to me and how much I want them to have the best of everything, and . . . and things like that, and then. . . . Well, it's happening right now as I tell you about it. I'm losing touch with the feeling, and there's. . . . There's another thought coming up. But this is silly, and. . . .

J: Todd, don't stop yourself now. You've worked hard to get here; now hang in with yourself.

T: Oh, shit on all this 'hard work.' I don't know what's the matter with me. I feel like I need a good kick in the ass and someone saying. . . .

J: Getting angry and bitching at yourself will do about the same thing as taking another freeway ride.

T: Yeah, well. . . . (The anger fades as rapidly as it came. His face goes flat and expressionless.) Well, I think about my family, and then I think about being middle-aged, and then I wonder if I really do love them as much as I say I do. Am I just doing what I'm supposed to do by saying they're so important? Who are they? Sometimes when I think of them I can't remember who they are or what they're doing in my life. I mean, I know who they are all right, but I can't really feel any connection to them. I just feel kind of blah about them. Or I feel sort of . . . (a pause) sort of. . . . Well, you know, I'd like find a chick and take off with her and go to Las Vegas and fuck the hell out of her and live it up generally—like I never have—and. . . . But I know I won't do any of that anyway; so what's the use of all this?

Todd is acting out his fear of changing. Ironically, he entered therapy in order to change. In one way of looking at him, it could be said that he is falling ill emotionally or mentally. But in another way, it would be more accurate to say that he is falling sane. He is in danger of awakening. That prospect is fearful for anyone who begins to confront it truly. Todd is coming to that precipice more rapidly than do most.

When one feels that identity and the known world are in danger of being swept away, it is truly terrifying. The price of preserving the familiar meaning world and one's place in it may be literal and physical death, but that price has been paid repeatedly by men and women throughout human history.

The Nature of Life Structures

The following paragraphs will describe one way of conceiving the nature and function of the life structures which constitute the lived world. These are not architectural plans but sketches for the rafts on which we live our lives. That qualification derives, not from modesty, but from the cold recognition that how we interpret the amazing and embracing fact of being is inevitably a product of who and where we are at the moment of interpretation. Here are constellations—which exist in the eyes of beholders and not in the sky—and which may be useful ways of pointing.

The flotsam which, in the raft allegory, served as the building materials may be likened to what Rollo May calls our "destiny" (1981). He so identifies the particular epoch, culture, family, and other conditioning and forming influences of our birth and lifespan. These provide materials from which we create the structures with which we meet the ontological circumstances of being human. It is to these circumstances that attention is now directed.

It is convenient arbitrarily to identify five "givens" of being (Bugental, 1981) which each person must take into account in some way and whether knowingly or not:

1. We are embodied. Our lives are expressed in physical bodies.
2. We are finite. We are limited in what we can do, what we can know, in how long we will live, and in all dimensions.
3. We are capable of acting or of not acting. We are not passive observers but are, rather, active agents in the creation of the actual from the potential (Bugental & Bugental, Note 1).
4. We have choice. Unlike the tropism- and instinct-governed species, we have the capacity to select from repertoires of possible responses.
5. We are each separate from but related to all other humans. Never are we wholly individual, never wholly in union with others.

These five conditions of being—embodiedness, finitude, actionableness, choicefulness, and separate-but-relatedness—are the parameters of our being human. It is useful to take note of these five, but it is essential to recognize that they are really five aspects of a unity. Thus, for example, finitude conditions each of the other four: Our lives are expressed in or through bodies that will live but a time. We can act or not act but only within certain limits. While we have choice, there is much that we cannot choose. Love may bring us close, but oneness eludes us; hate may divide us, but we can never, if we are truly aware, deny kinship with our enemy. In the same way, each of the five parameters interweaves with each of the others.

In some fashion each person interprets the meaning of these givens of being. These interpretations, of course, are rarely conscious and explicit; they are implicit, lived-out patterns. For example, we have no alternative but to be embodied if we are to be physically alive (although Todd is beginning to question whether he will continue to accept that equation). Some center their attention on this dimension, as in hatha yoga; some ignore it, as does the stereotypic, successful, young businessman who drives himself to a heart attack before he is 50; and some attack the body, as do the ascetics who practice mortification of the flesh.

The existential parameters set the stage upon which we play out the dramas of our lives. They do more than that: They are the roots of the life motivations which animate our actions. This comes about because each of these givens confronts us with a life issue with which we must continually deal in some fashion. Each similarly necessitates that we form certain perceptual structures (Kelly, 1955) in order to maintain and live out our lives.

The Existential Confrontations

In a crude way, the confrontations which arise from these conditions are the equivalent of the waves which both support and threaten the riders on the rafts. From them emerge the possibilities of constructing our lives. As we construe the fact of being able to act (or not to act), for example, we deal with the issue of being responsible for what we do or do not do, and we have the opportunity to discover our own powers, what they are and what their limits are—in short, we experience our potency.

Now, what is the point of all of this? The point is that these needs are truly existential, are as vital to life as are safety from the water, as are food, drink, and reasonable protection from excesses of heat and cold. Unless we have some degree of spiritedness, of identity, of potency, of meaningfulness, and of relatedness in our lives we grow weak as persons, and we become mad or sicken or die.

Our clients come to us because the life structures which they have created—the timbers, lashings,

rudders, and sails of their rafts—are not sustaining them, are not sufficiently satisfying their existential needs. The structures of their lives are the ways they perceive themselves and their worlds, are the patterns they have developed for seeking satisfactions and avoiding harms, are the expectations they evolve for how their lives should be.

A return to Todd will illustrate these points: Todd learned in his early years that he was brighter than most of his schoolmates, that learning came easily, and that recognition and rewards followed promptly. He learned to expect that he could continually advance in any competitive situation. Although he probably would never have said it aloud even to himself, he anticipated attaining the very top ranks in his profession and the very fullest satisfactions in his personal life. However, over the past five years, the realization has been seeping into Todd's awareness that he is probably at or near the high point of his career, that others are able to go farther, that his marriage and family are not so exceptional, and that he, Todd, while certainly competent and a good friend and family member, is not the special person he had secretly thought himself to be. In short, Todd is on the verge of discovering that the person he has believed himself to be does not—and never did—exist. This is, in a nearly literal way, a kind of death.

The Need/Value Structures of Being

The existential issues with which our being confronts us require some response. Each of us needs a degree of spiritedness, of energy, of drive or motivation, and that need is rooted in our bodily being and is evoked as we confront the ever-changing world of experience. Perhaps if life would hold still, we would not need to be impelled into action, but it is all too evident that life will not hold still.

We live in a contingent universe in which we are impacted by events beyond our anticipating or control. Our best efforts may attain success or prove futile; our deepest fears may never be realized or be repeatedly confirmed. We are so clearly finite in the midst of infinity. How we deal with that fact constitutes much of our inner sense of identity. "I am a Christian; I am an atheist; I am a hard worker; I am an engineer; I am scientific in my outlook; I put a lot of trust in the natural goodness of people." Each of those statements tells us about a person's self-view and something of how that person prepares to meet the circumstances of life.

The sense of potency is vital to our sanity. The person who feels totally impotent is the one who goes on a sniper shooting spree or tries to kill a public figure. We insist on having some power in our lives, and when we do not have it, we will do anything necessary to get it. To be able to act or not to act is to have responsibility for our actions and to have responsibility is to discover our potency, our powers.

Choice is the miracle of our evolved consciousness; it also inflicts the endless burden of having to say "no" to possibilities, of having to kill possible selves. Only thus can we truly have our own lives. Out of our choices we create meaning, and our meanings guide our choices. Meaninglessness is more fearful than the emptiness of space. We need and seek meaning, even when it is clearly absent. It is sometimes Saturday in the blue talisman of the seventh grand parade yesterday. What happened? The thought sequence was probably; "What was that? What did that sentence say? Oh, it's just nonsense to prove a point about meaning." Of course, that's exactly so, but notice how rapidly our consciousness scrambles to restore meaning when for an instant it seems lost.

Finally, we need a network of relations with others. Human beings are as much social organisms as physical. Solitary confinement is one of the most dreaded punishments, and extended, unsought solitude can lead to madness or death. Even those who choose to be alone soon populate their isolation with fantasied others—real persons to whom they write, imagined persons who torment or support them, divine persons whom they serve. We are each eternally separate from others but equally irredeemably tied to those others.

Implications for Psychotherapy

The most important implication of what is being advanced is also the most difficult to convey. This is so because in a way it is something that is already familiar; thus it is so apparent we may easily overlook its profound significance. The point is this: Perceptions of the psychotherapy client's "resistance" as being opposition to therapy or as being neurotic or as being something which must be overcome, analyzed away, or circumvented—such perceptions themselves are contratherapeutic. These ways of seeing what is undoubtedly one of the most central and universal phenomena of psychotherapy repeatedly confound the therapeutic work, undermine the therapeutic alliance, and prolong the therapeutic course.

To many psychotherapists this will not be a surprising statement. Many have suspected that the old way of conceiving our task has somehow been faulty. Yet many years of immersion in our work of psychotherapy—as a patient, as a therapist, as a teacher and supervisor—convince me that implicitly we still tend to cast the therapist as the opponent of a negative force in the patient.

Our lives, our well-being require that we maintain a measure of continuity in our way of living in the world and that we develop a repertoire of skills for responding to our existential needs. We cannot do so, we cannot remain sane, if we do not modulate our accessibility to the countless injunctions, seductions, inducements, invitations, and teachings of family and friends, of radio and television, of newspapers, magazines, and books, of pulpit and classroom, and of every other facet of our lives. Therapists must find ways of supporting this capacity to maintain continuity and must abandon efforts to undermine it.

Points for Therapists to Ponder

At this time I cannot offer a well-worked-out plan of therapeutic action designed to implement the foregoing recognitions. (As a personal aside I must confess that a new edition of my first book was published [1981], and in it there is a central place given to the more traditional view of the resistance.) What I will offer are three observations which therapists may consider as they enter into the engagements of their practices:

1. When patients resist change, they are demonstrating that a threat to being is experienced. Understanding it that way, we need to accept the appropriateness of this defense and to join the client in seeking to understand just what is being threatened. Although in most instances the terms will be more individual, the five existential needs described above offer useful directions for this exploration: spiritedness, identity, potency, meaning, and relatedness.
2. The stance that the therapist takes in displaying to the client how the latter wards off change is, itself, exceedingly important. If it is evident that the therapist is not invested in the patient's so strongly giving up what is felt to be needed, then the therapist is experienced more as an ally rather than as an opponent.
3. It is important for the therapist continually to demonstrate to the client the professional's genuine conviction that the client can protect what is threatened while yet relinquishing what is threatening or crippling the patient's life. This strong affirmation of the client's potency does much to support readiness to move toward change.

It is evident that the three suggestions are basically directed toward how therapists conceive their role in relation to the life structures and their persistence. This is a reflection of my conviction that, far beyond any techniques or stratagems, the healing power of psychotherapy derives from the attitudes, empathy, and faith in the growthfulness latent in the patient.

Conclusion

We humans fear change because it seems to us that it threatens the very structures which we feel are our lives. The wording of that statement is important: the structures which we take to be our lives, not just the structures which we think support our lives. Because we so see these structures, the possibility of their changing is the possibility of death. And there is truth is this apprehension.

To change is to kill, to die. To change is to relinquish one way of being which is to say one identity, one life that might have been. To relinquish is to kill one possible self. Because I choose to write this paper now, I cannot be at a professional meeting to which I was invited. From that difference, that choice, that relinquishment, unimaginable consequences may follow. Such is the stuff of drama, of comedy, and of tragedy. On the scale of a day's activities it is all familiar and not particularly threatening.

Yet to change my way of being alive, to change my concept of who and what I am, to change my view of how the world is—these changes more sweepingly and more frighteningly involve relinquishments, and relinquishments are deaths. Because I chose to become a psychologist, I did not become the journalist I had once dreamed of becoming, I did not meet the public figures, see the historic events, have the life that might have been mine along that road forever closed. That self, that Jim Bugental, was killed at age 26. That death is as final as any.

Relinquishing the self I have always thought I was is a kind of suicide, and if I am strongly invested in that identity—as most of us surely are—physical death may not be too high a price to pay to preserve (or to seem to preserve) who I was.

Todd had finished his therapeutic journey now; although he is still very much unfinished with changing—as is true of us all. Before he left therapy, Todd had to come to face the fact that at 54 he was nearing the peak of his professional life and that, while he held a responsible and rewarding position, he would never be the head of his own research firm, would probably never attain international recognition for his scientific contributions, and certainly would never be the parent to his children that he had always intended to be (for they were already young adults).

These are the "nevers" of middle life that all persons have to face in some way and to some degree. Todd had always treated as exceptions the events which might have forewarned him. In psychotherapy the tremendous backlog of unconfronted issues of this kind broke through and sent him into panic. He had to face that he was more limited than he had dreamed, that he was more isolated from his family than he had let himself recognize, and that he was continually changing even as he feared to acknowledge the inevitability of change.

The struggles of Todd's confrontation of his changefulness, his limitedness, and his loneliness are a drama beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, we must see ourselves in Todd, accept our own continual changefulness, and choose freely and repeatedly how we will construe our own being. George A. Kelly once commented, "The key to human destiny is the ability to reconstrue what cannot be denied" (personal communication, 1958).

And when we therapists come to consider changing our way of regarding our patients' fear of and resistance to change, we may find that we, too, are confronted with our own fear of change.

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