

## **COUNTERTRANSFERENCE AND TRAUMA ASTSS CONFERENCE AUGUST 1996**

WHERE CONSCIOUS memories and words are unavailable to trauma victims, such as those who suffered early sexual abuse, therapy relationship between them and their therapists is the vehicle for both communication of the dissociated fragments of their traumas, and their healing.

Countertransference in trauma therapy involves the equal but different participation of therapists in the healing relationship. It involves recognition in oneself of the evocation of roles pertinent to the abuse. This needs to be brought into the awareness of both therapists and patients, acknowledged and put into context of past and present. If this is not done, the role may be reenacted and the abuse repeated.

What I am struggling with is the technique of doing this and the theory behind the technique. The following is a case around which to illustrate this struggle.

Jenny was a 45 year old businesswoman who had been adopted out in childhood.

I had announced the previous week that in two weeks' time I would take three weeks holiday.

After seeming to have some trouble understanding the exact dates, she replied in a businesslike fashion that this would actually suit her, as she had so much on her plate, and she expanded on this.

We were in the week prior to the holidays. Jenny told me how she had totally lost her temper with Bob, her *de facto*. He had said that he would return from the football at a certain time, then he rang to delay it, and then he came home later again. "I was furious with him. I told him that he was just using my cooking and the comforts of my house like a hotel, and this being so he may as well piss off."

Jenny then considered what it would be like without him. She remembered how she felt while she waited for him. She had felt forlorn, alone, and had great trouble keeping in check panic attacks. Such panic attacks had been a constant background in her life and they related to abandonment feelings as a child. She diverted her conversation to talking about her busy business schedule.

I could have said, "You are defending against the panic of me abandoning you again by saying that you do not need me anyway, and by sending me away in rage." I could have also expressed surreptitiously some annoyance at her continual use of her defenses by interpreting them.

However, I looked at her genuinely struggling , so instead I said, “It may be interesting at this time to review what happened here today thus far.” She seemed interested in this task and she did review the signposts in the session. However, in considering the signposts she very quickly became immersed in the contents and started repeating her story as before. I pointed out that she quickly reached a point where it was difficult to think about what had happened. How did she appear to herself at the particular point which I pointed out where she switched from being able to see herself to where she was in her story without thought?

She deliberately and thoughtfully retraced having come in this day, trying to remember how long it was till my holiday, becoming confused, and telling me about her rage with Bob.

“What happened at the point where your thinking gave out?”

She carefully considered me, and said, “I knew there was something wrong with my unmitigated rage with Bob. I knew it even as I was angry with him, and he knew it too. Actually, it quickly blew over and I knew my abandonment feelings were unreasonable. He is really a good person and he loves me.”

“And our relationship?”

“When you told me about your holiday, I thought “That’s reasonable. But then I thought “No, it’s not. Why didn’t he tell me?! Holidays don’t just come up in two weeks. He must have known about this probably for months!”

“So?”

“Well maybe you were protecting me from too many breaks at once, you knowing about my abandonment panics, so you dished them out to me in smaller doses. But..” and she was crying in much distress.

“But what?”

“I just feel manipulated, used, people just use me for what comforts I give them, but I myself am worthless, not worth considering.” She cried bitterly.

“And what’s that like?”

“It’s like a terrible pain in the chest, but worst of all is that you can’t do anything about it, and you would be better off dead.”

“What do you think about that?”

“I know I am sensitive. I know at work I was given a desk once out of the main office and I became paranoid about why they are setting me aside. The funny thing is that often if you just ask a simple question, it turns out to be quite different.

“What simple question might you ask me?”

She hesitated. “Well, why didn’t you tell me about this holiday earlier?”

“Well, you were right, I did want to protect you from too much abandonment panics.”

“You were wrong.”

“Why?”

“You gave me no choice. I know it would have been hard, but it is better to know all the bad news so you can adjust. You did not give me credit that I could. You were too..”

“Patronizing? Not giving you credit?”

“Yes! Patronizing!” Then she smiled, “Well, perhaps I need protection. I do fall into panics a lot and maybe I could not have tolerated a month ago as much as I can now.”

“Still, I should have given you a choice. I could have told you and you could have panicked or blocked out the information as you wished.”

She smiled graciously. “Yes. When you first told me about the break, my mind went blank, and I know I could not absorb the correct dates, and I know that that was my abandonment panic. Maybe I could have worked on that, but then my interpretation as being worthless because you did not bother telling me about the conference earlier, that not being worthwhile overwhelmed me. That touched off my sense of not being worthwhile from my childhood; meaning I might as well die... So I took it out on poor Bob, and got myself busy. But today I see that I am not worthless, and that I am not abandoned. Bob loves me and you do in your own way. Perhaps you were wrong, but your intentions were good toward me. Now I can think clearly about that whole session.”

“You can think clearly about the panic of being abandoned, and not wanting to live if you are worthless?”

“Yes. They both belong to the past. The present is different. You will come back from your holidays.”

In actual fact, trauma therapists and psychoanalytic psychotherapists might deal similarly with the transference feelings of abandonment and worthlessness. The difference may be in theory, though theory can affect practice.

One may simply interpret the feelings of abandonment and worthlessness, and the defences against them in the here and now, in the transference situation. One may even acknowledge one’s

countertransference, the patronizing rejecting attitude which played into her transference.

However, in trauma therapy the exact feeling in all its intensity is defined and traced back to the past traumatic situations in which the feelings were evoked. The situation and the feeling are named clearly. Then in a highly emotional state in which consciousness is altered, the duality of the bad past and the benign present are brought into simultaneous view and teased apart. This is then assimilated into a trauma narrative which no longer needs to be reenacted in the transference.

I want to emphasise that in therapy transference and countertransference are essential tools to elucidate past trauma. The two must be married, not belong to two different disciplines as they tend to do at the present.