

Beginning psychotherapy – heading into the forest

Beginning the journey

Starting psychotherapy can be a daunting prospect for anyone. An analogy that is often made is that of starting a journey. What is daunting is that this is a journey into the unknown, akin to the journey into the forest that is so often embarked on in fairy tales. This journey into the unknown must be taken for psychotherapy to take place. And yet, psychotherapy currently exists against the backdrop of a society that demands certainty. With dazzling technology at our fingertips, we demand to know what an experience is like before we have experienced it in order to then agree to experience it. This demand can blunt the excitement of the new, and, indeed, the wonder of the lived experience, but it is what many of us have come to expect.

Support and challenge

Throughout the ages, readers of fairy tales have had the support of the familiar and repetitive structure of the stories to help them journey with the characters into the unknown. On the therapeutic journey, we need to take a step towards what is unknown. However, at times, we also need to lean back and be supported by what is known and stable. The combination of these two aspects allows the therapy to be safe and yet not restrictive, alive and yet not too overwhelming. In gestalt therapy, this is viewed as a combination of support and challenge.

Support and challenge can be thought of as the two wings of a bird. These wings need to be in a perfect balance, otherwise the bird will not fly. And so it is when a parent is with a child learning to walk. The parent cannot learn the walking for the child. Even if they hold the child to keep them steady, at some point, they will have to let go. Without this letting go, the child will never walk on their own. The parent needs to bear witness to the child falling down again and again, offering their presence and a kindly yet watchful eye to prevent their child from walking into a road or over a cliff.

So for the purposes of this blog, support could be the known and challenge could be the unknown. And to complicate matters further, there is the fact that for some people experiencing support from another is both unknown and extremely challenging.



Known and unknown – entering the forest

In my view, people come to therapy because there has been either a holding too tight or a neglect of the watchful eye during some point in their development. These instances can be many and varied in example, but often form the underlying structure of the difficult symptom experienced. What is *known* is the difficult symptom. What is *unknown* is what might emerge in the therapeutic space. It is also what is out of the person's awareness or as the psychoanalysts refer to it, what is unconscious. This could be thought of as the primordial fears located in the forest of the fairy tale. We may be invested in keeping certain experiences, memories or feelings unknown. We may desire to keep these things in the forest. But these things must be faced and experienced, understood and processed if the symptom is to diminish; perhaps not entirely disappear, but diminish all the same.

In conclusion

So what can support entering into the forest? In the world of fairy tales, the happy ending functions as a support for the hero/heroine. In the world of therapy, it is the presence of another person alongside as well as the consistency of the therapeutic process. And, of course, a leap of faith.

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