



The Place of the Therapist

An interview with Soledad Valenzuela, M.A.

A therapeutic relationship has beauty – and danger. It demands sharing yourself with another human being in an intimate, vulnerable way.

How should therapists relate to clients? Should the therapist be a blank slate? Warm and fuzzy? Offer analysis ... or allow the client to do all the analysis? Different kinds of therapy offer different answers.

Soledad Valenzuela led a workshop in February and focused on a difficult concept that some modalities oversimplify: the place of the therapist. Soledad is a trainer with the Florida Society for Bioenergetic Analysis. She is a Licensed Master in Clinical Psychology, Certified FSBA Bioenergetic Psychotherapist and was a founder of the Bioenergetics

School in Chile. She has an active private practice and leads workshops all over the world.

During her recent workshop in Florida, students were struck by her incredible therapeutic presence. It was soft but containing, loving but strong, and certain yet curious. Soledad shared some insights in an interview after her workshop.

The Place of the Therapist

Most people who have been in therapy in any capacity have heard about transference and counter transference. Transference is what clients feel and project onto a therapist. Counter transference is what a therapist senses and projects onto a client.

These incredible tools allow us to learn about ourselves as therapists and clients. However, Soledad says that something else must first be evaluated before counter transference and transference.

“In the training program and in universities we learn about transference and counter transference, but for me there is previous work. It is where the therapist says, ‘Who am I in this place?’ It’s not about the client: it’s about me, my story, my biography, my expectations, and my fears. It is the work before transference and counter transference work.”

Exercise Spotlight



This Is Me

Taking time to connect with your presence is a very important. It can be a very emotional piece of work that should be done gently and by listening to your needs the entire time.

Instructions:

- 1) Find a hand mirror, bathroom or dresser mirror, anything that shows you your reflection.
- 2) Close your eyes and breathe deeply. Connect with your breath by taking about 10 deep breaths.
- 3) When you feel calm and centered, open your eyes. Look into your own eyes in the mirror
- 4) Allow your brain to wander at first. You might think: “Oh, my hair is a mess! Is that a wrinkle or pimple I see?!” When your mind quiets, engage yourself in nonjudgmental eye contact.
- 5) Ask yourself what this feels like. What do you feel when you look into these eyes? These eyes have been through everything with you. These eyes have seen things you have never shared with another human being. What does it feel like to connect with these eyes?
- 6) Hold the position, breathe and continue to explore. Do this for a few minutes.
- 7) Now explore by adding words. Use phrases such as: “I am here with you,” “I know you and I love you” or “This is me.”
- 8) Ask yourself what it feels like to say these things to yourself. Can you feel this relationship? Are you able to connect with yourself fully?
- 9) As always, be gentle; don’t push yourself too hard.

“I need to think not with my mind, but with my entire organism including my body. In this way it is always simple.”

Before a client comes into her office, Sol asks herself, "Who am I in this moment as I welcome this client?" She says that being attuned with yourself is the only way to prevent your issues from being part of the client's process.

"Your own tiredness, your own lack of balance, your own lack of happiness or aliveness, maybe your own superficial feelings can affect your perception," she says. "If you are very balanced, very present, very peaceful with yourself, then you can build a very natural relationship with the client."

Practice, Not Theory

Of course, staying attuned with yourself as a client or therapist is hard when you're running late, have stressful life events happening outside the therapeutic setting, or you just haven't eaten and are starving. Soledad has those days and times, too, but has learned how to reclaim her therapeutic presence on difficult days.

"For me in my office, the breathing process is the absolute core of everything," she says. "If I realize I am not breathing deeply, I know I am not attuned."

When that happens, Sol often asks the client if she can take a minute, and "sometimes the client takes a minute for themselves too." Some therapists might feel guilty or strange pausing in a session, but Sol says "It's okay, because if I can't breathe, I can't be present. When I am attuned and the client is in front of me and looks in my eyes, I realize something lets down."

A therapist's presence, Sol maintains, is a way to welcome

clients with all your body and all your spirit.

If, after breathing, you still find yourself dreading the session(s) as a therapist, Sol says you may be working too much. "I realize I am working too much from my mind, not from my body," she says. "When I work too much from my mind -- and not my body -- things become difficult, and I think too much."

Certain thoughts are warning signs. "I start thinking 'What can I do? What can I do?'" she says. "I will have the client sit down, stand up, hit the mattress. I realize this is all for me. I need to be calm and consider what is happening with me. I need to think not with my mind, but with my entire organism including my body. In this way it is always simple."

When we do too much, we lose our grounding and our focus on the patient, she says. "When a client is coming to my office and I start planning what to do, this is bad ... because I have a plan, not curiosity. We need to always be surprised. If I don't feel surprised, something is wrong."

Clients, too, can be distracted and miss feelings that may signal bigger issues. For example, those who feel resentful about coming to therapy may have something to work on. They should explore this with their therapist. It could be resistance in some form.

"When I was like this as a client," Sol says, "my therapist would always say, 'Sol, is there something we are not talking about? What is it?' She would take the elephant and put it right on the table." This helped Sol

refocus and reengage in her own process.

The Humble Realization

Sometimes, we can be doing our best as therapists or as clients and something still isn't working. We have evaluated the issues we can name in the relationship but still ... something isn't right.

It can be very disheartening as a client or therapist to admit that the therapeutic relationship is not moving forward anymore. Sol says this can be a very important moment of growth for the therapist and client.

"For me, it's about being humble, about recognizing that there is something I don't know. There are some diagnoses and some pathologies I don't work with. Things that regularly make me lose my center I cannot do. I also respect my limits and never see more than seven people per day."

Final Words

Sol is very passionate about helping therapists and clients find the therapeutic style that works for them. She recommends reading books and even watching movies to better understand the therapeutic relationship.

"Read biographies -- Carl Jung, Freud or Winnicott," she says. "Read the biography and see how this human being built the presence they worked in. Carl Rogers' theory of how can you receive the client with acceptance is a beautiful piece of work."

Following the Body

By: Charles Martin, PhD

Thoughts dart into the forefront of my mind, and then back to the dark edges, the recesses -- like jittery ever-moving fish in a pond. Where to start? This was the beginning moment as I sat to write this article --

after I'd agreed to pen something on the topic of "using the body to follow the needs of the client during the session."

This, too, is the beginning moment -- standing with my client as we

discover where the work can begin. Thoughts dart to and fro. Where to start?

As I begin writing, I wonder... Whose body in therapy was I being asked to write about? Attending to

the client's body? Or attending to me – to my body? Ahh...So here is where we begin – with writing.

And with my client. We're in a training program, doing some small group work, so there are three observers to our session as well. Extra mental noise for my client and for me. To be observed can bring energy, fear, pride, shame – and more. I can feel myself pulling the circle of awareness in to gently take in just the client and our work together.

What is here, right now? What is happening? What is happening with my client? With me? With us? What is already moving – or being held? Because holding – too – is a movement. A movement against the initial urge to move.

Sensing. Feeling. Into myself, even as I increasingly let myself take in my client. Her standing, breathing, gaze.

I like her. I want to do well for her in this work. There's that old noise. Wanting to do well. And in the next moments letting the noise in my head give way to settling into the now of my own body. Some noise, and also the settling.

Now I am better able to sense and feel what is going on with my client, in her body-mind. Better able to take in that, right now, my client is watching me, and then looking away quickly.

Waiting. Breathing tensely.

My client told me she wanted to work on something about trusting her grown-up sexual energy. I appreciate her forthrightness and courage in going after something like this. Even as right now, as I become aware of my body gripping the ground with my toes, rising up, trying to not feel my anxiety. My own eyes trying to take the client in, but also more tense than usual. Not quite yet able to let my client fully in.

There is the urge to connect, but fear too. Whose urge is that? Whose concern? Wanting to explore, wanting help to come forward, but not trusting. Rising up in her body, swaying forward and back, trying to be a good client by wanting to work on this issue, but not altogether in herself. Not altogether trusting.

An image had come to me in the very beginning, something I'd seen somewhere in an article, but the idea had run back to the edge of the pond like a scared fish. Or had I pushed it away, because the suggestion was too intrusive? Because it was taking a chance on my part? Because I felt the care that was needed? Who needed to be careful?

My client? Me? Yes.

"Let's just be here for a little while, and feel our way into our legs. Feel the ground."

Who needed that? Both of us. My toes told me I needed it, and even as I felt my toes and let down, I was

now able to offer the suggestion to my client.

"You'd said you wanted to do something to work with your pelvis, with your sexual energy. I also want to make sure you feel safe. Maybe you could hold up a blanket between us, so you can be here and also be in charge as you do some things to explore moving your pelvis."

Relief. Shoulders settle. Her shoulders. Mine. We can explore this arena and she is in charge of what she shares and experiences.

The initial image was a good way to go, and feeling into our legs helped us both find the right pace. The right presence – for the time being.

Body-mind. Sensing. Feeling. Images. Thoughts. All part of us. All information. Impulses can emerge in all of them, because we are a body-mind. And they can emerge in my client's bodily self and my own bodily self.

Two bodies are in a shared space. There is something that can teach and lead us in every part. Sensing, feeling, images, thoughts, impulses.

The fish, the water in the pond, the boundaries of the pond, the earth supporting the water, the movement of the water. The client's body, my body, the shared space, the earth.

Rather than using the body, be moved by it. Be moved. Be it.

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Ana Murillo and Alberto Wang, MA

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May 19, 2018

Saturday Bioenergetic Growth Group
(FSBA Students & Graduates)
Paul Cohen, L.C.S.W.

August 3-5, 2018

All You Need is Love
Soledad Valenzuela, MA