ARTICLE · 2009

# Stronger in the Broken Places — Martha Stark

By Martha Stark

By Martha Stark. An exploration of the paradox captured in Hemingway's phrase 'the world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places' — developing a clinical theory of how therapeutic transformation occurs precisely through the engagement with, rather than the avoidance of, the places of wounding and failure.

KEY THEMES

— Strength through brokenness: the therapeutic paradox
— The therapist's use of failure and limitation
— Rupture and repair as the engine of change
— Optimally frustrating vs gratifying stances
— The broken places as sites of potential growth

## The Paradox of the Broken Places

Hemingway's observation — that the world breaks everyone, and that many are afterward stronger at the broken places — provides the epigraph and organising metaphor for this exploration of therapeutic transformation. The paradox is this: it is not in spite of the wound but through it that genuine strength develops.

This is a clinical truth which many therapeutic traditions have discovered independently: the humanistic tradition in the concept of the 'wounded healer'; the psychoanalytic tradition in the understanding of working through; the Buddhist tradition in the teaching that suffering is the ground of compassion. What Stark brings to this understanding is a specifically psychoanalytic articulation of the clinical mechanisms through which the broken places become sites of strength.

The broken places are not, in this account, places of simple healing — of wounds that close over cleanly and leave no trace. They are places of a different kind of integrity: of strength that knows its own vulnerability, of capacity that has been forged through encounter with limitation.

## The Therapist's Broken Places

One of the most important aspects of Stark's account is its application to the therapist as well as the client. The therapist's own broken places — the areas of limitation, error, and personal wounding that inevitably shape their practice — are not simply handicaps to be managed but potential sources of therapeutic depth.

The therapist who has genuinely worked with their own brokenness — who has experienced limitation, failure, and wounding and has found ways to be present to these experiences without being destroyed by them — brings to the therapeutic relationship a quality of understanding that cannot be achieved through training alone. This is the clinical application of the wounded healer archetype: not romantic idealisation of the therapist's suffering, but recognition that genuine human vulnerability, honestly inhabited, is itself therapeutically potent.

This applies specifically to the moments of therapeutic failure — the misattunements, the errors of timing or interpretation, the times when the therapist fails to be what the client needs. Stark argues that it is precisely in these moments, and in how the therapist responds to them, that the most important therapeutic work can occur.

## Rupture and Repair

The concept of rupture and repair — developed in the relational psychoanalytic tradition — provides the clinical mechanism through which the paradox of the broken places becomes operational in therapy. Each rupture in the therapeutic relationship — each moment when the working alliance fails, when the therapist's limitations are exposed, when the client feels failed or betrayed — is a potential site of the deeper healing that comes from working through rather than avoiding difficulty.

The key is not the rupture itself — which is inevitable — but the repair: the way the therapist responds to the failure, the quality of acknowledgement and presence they can offer in the aftermath. A therapist who responds to their failures with defensive self-justification, or with excessive guilt and apology, or with withdrawal from the relational field, cannot offer the client the experience of genuine repair.

A therapist who can remain present to their failure, acknowledge it without being destroyed by it, and maintain their genuine care for the client through the difficulty of the acknowledgement — this is what creates the conditions for the deeper repair that is genuinely transformative. The broken places, repaired with genuine presence, become the most reliably held parts of the therapeutic relationship.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

— Stark, M. (1999) Modes of Therapeutic Action. Northvale NJ: Aronson

— Stark, M. (2009) Stronger in the broken places. Unpublished

— Winnicott, D.W. (1969) The use of an object. International Journal of Psychoanalysis 50

— Benjamin, J. (1990) An outline of intersubjectivity. Psychoanalytic Psychology 7

— Ferenczi, S. (1932) The Clinical Diary. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

Published at soth.co.uk · © 2009 Martha Stark · All rights reserved