INTERVIEW · 2010

Therapy Today Questionnaire

Michael Soth

Responses to a questionnaire from Therapy Today magazine, in which Michael Soth reflects on his approach to practice, his influences, what he has learned from his clients, and what he considers most important in the therapeutic endeavour.

KEY THEMES

— Personal reflections on practice and development
— Key influences in the development of an integral-relational approach
— What has been learned from clients
— The most important things in therapy
— Hopes for the future of the profession

On Approach and Development

My approach has been shaped by an unusually wide range of influences — from the Chiron tradition of holistic body psychotherapy to Kleinian object relations, from process-oriented psychology to relational psychoanalysis. What I have been trying to do for the last 30 years is not to choose between these traditions but to hold them in productive tension — to use the conflicts between them as clinically illuminating rather than trying to resolve them into a neat synthesis.

The central thread running through all of this is what I have come to call the 'relational turn' — the recognition that the therapist's own subjectivity, woundedness, and embodied aliveness is not a distortion of the therapeutic process but its primary vehicle. This shift changes everything: from what we pay attention to, to how we understand what is happening in charged moments, to what we bring to supervision, to how we think about self-care and sustainability.

What I have found, over many years of practice and supervision, is that the most healing experiences in therapy are rarely the ones which conform most closely to any theoretical model. They are the ones in which something genuine happens — something unplanned, sometimes uncomfortable, often surprising — which moves the therapeutic system in a direction neither party could have anticipated.

What I Have Learned from Clients

Clients have taught me, repeatedly and sometimes painfully, that they are always more aware of what is happening in the relationship than they can say. The client's unconscious tracks the therapist's state with extraordinary precision — noticing the slight tightening of the chest, the shift in breathing, the fractional change in vocal quality which signals that something has been touched in the therapist that they have not acknowledged.

I have learned to trust this awareness — to take seriously the client's 'irrational' responses to the therapeutic space as information, not pathology. The client who feels criticised when the therapist has been carefully non-judgmental is not simply projecting; they are reading something real in the therapist's bodymind state which the therapist's conscious mind has not yet registered.

Most importantly, I have learned from clients that they can survive — and often benefit from — the therapist being genuinely confused, moved, uncertain. What they cannot survive without damage is the therapist's pretence of certainty and equanimity when the reality is otherwise.

Hopes for the Profession

My hope for the profession is that it will find the courage to take seriously its own impossibility — to acknowledge openly that the therapeutic endeavour is genuinely paradoxical, that there are no techniques which can guarantee safety or transformation, and that what matters most is not mastery but honesty.

The field has been gradually moving in this direction for decades — from the certainties of classical psychoanalysis through the humanistic revolution to the relational and embodied approaches of recent years. But there is still a powerful pull towards premature certainty — towards models and protocols which promise to make the impossible possible.

My hope is for a profession which can hold its own uncertainty with grace: which can acknowledge the wound in the profession as well as the client, which can use that acknowledgement to deepen rather than undermine the therapeutic work, and which can ultimately offer what I believe is most fundamentally therapeutic — the experience of genuine, imperfect, human contact.

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