The Experience of Being
A Therapist

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The psychoanalytic tradition is based on Freud's (3) concept of making the unconscious conscious ("Where id was, there shall ego be"). But the techniques for how this is accomplished vary according to the theoretical emphasis of the therapist. While therapy has always tried to help a person face reality through verbal understanding, it may be equally helpful to work with the data of immediate, directly perceived experience.

In recent years, as I have experimented with techniques of sensory awareness and meditation designed to enhance awareness, I have discovered that a distinct sense of "presence" is just as important for the therapist as it is for the patient. The therapist himself must experience changes in his total being if he is to be free to communicate what he has learned to his patients. Such personal transformation goes beyond simply mastering techniques; a therapeutic therapist must radiate a sense of being, if he is to have an impact on his patients. If I, as the therapist, know only about myself on the verbal level, I will not be able to transcend the verbal level of insight with my patients. The therapist must be free to sound out his own unconscious on all levels of understanding, if he is to creatively address himself to the myriad levels of hidden
messages being communicated by the patient. The great value of sensory awareness and meditation for me was to liberate me from my conditioned response to focus on what I have to do. It helped me to extend my helping role from one that was limited and controlling to one that opened up new vistas of relatedness. I began to experience the realization that the more you give up trying to do, the more you are able to do, without consciously controlled effort, because you find yourself miraculously there, fully present in the now of experience.

Discussing self-reflection from a phenomenological point of view, Van Dusen (7) describes how his feelings about his face lead him to further his understanding of himself:

My face, a mask of concern, worry, as though I seriously bore in and try to penetrate things. I could act carefree, but I don't choose to. My usual set is boring, penetrating concern to do what is right, best, perfect. Be a nice guy. Do your duties. Be so good, no one can criticize. Sacrifice yourself first.

If I choose such a set, what reasons would I have? Well, in the first place, it seems defensive. Be so damn good no one can criticize. Yet they criticize me as being no fun, a worrywart, which is correct. It is a prideful position, prideful over those who are not neat, punctual, doing things right. When I look at my do-good style it must be a pain in the ass to others! No wonder I have headaches. I delegate poorly ("Others won't do as well as I"). And it sure is a pain to me.

What commends such a style? I'm hard put to find anything. It wears me down and is unpleasant to others. It does little to protect from criticism and in part awakens it. I guess its greatest value to me is that I can feel that, damn it, I tried. But this is somewhat like a plea to Nameless Fate, and Fate is not obliged to respond.

When I read the above account, it immediately struck a resonant chord within me. It was me and others like me he was describing, in the clarity of his vision of the uptight man of today. Being present as a therapist is a demanding but exciting challenge, to any therapist who is willing to engage in vital encounters with his patients. By and large, therapists are not that different from the people they are trying to help. As Perls (6) reminds us:

Modern man lives in a state of low-grade vitality. Though generally he does not suffer deeply, he also knows little of true creative living. Instead of it, he has become an anxious automaton . . . He seems to feel that the time for fun is childhood and youth, and he abdicates life itself when he reaches "maturity." He goes through a lot of motions, but the expression on his face indicates