Book Review


The Gift of Therapy is Irvin Yalom’s attempt to distill his forty-five years of psychiatric practice into a guidebook for therapists and their patients. The book, presented in short, succinct chapters, is full of tips presented as reminders, obstacles to avoid, and lessons learned from the author’s wealth of knowledge regarding the psychotherapeutic milieu. Yalom describes the text as a resource for beginning therapists and their patients; however, it seems more useful a guide for novice and possibly more seasoned psychotherapists.

The 85 ideas and techniques discussed in this book are organized loosely into sections. The first and largest (Chapters 1–40) section of the book explores the relationship between therapist and patient, here-and-now process issues, and therapist self-disclosure. While written from an interpersonal and existential theoretical framework, the lessons in this section focus on the importance of those “nonspecific” factors which catalyze the work of all therapists. Examples of chapter titles from this section include: “Be Supportive,” “Therapist and Patient as ‘Fellow Travellers,’” and “Use Your Own Feelings as Data.” Yalom is refreshingly unapologetic in the weight he places on the therapeutic relationship.

In the second section (Chapters 41–51), Yalom addresses existential themes in therapy, such as death anxiety, search for meaning in life, and the paradoxes of personal freedom. While today’s mental health care environment may not be supportive of existential exploration for its own sake, this section offers nuggets of wisdom that many therapists will find of use, especially those working with populations for whom end-of-life issues are less distal realities. The author’s sage treatment of freedom and patients’ responsibility for their behaviors has applicability to a variety of clinical contexts.

In the third section (Chapters 52–76) of The Gift of Therapy, Yalom discusses pragmatic issues germane to the day-to-day practice of therapy. With simple, yet effective reminders, such as the importance of taking a clinical history, inquiring
about interpersonal relationships, exploring previous therapy, and respecting sexual boundaries, this section reinforces lessons ingrained in most therapists. Also conveyed in this section is Yalom’s clear chagrin at the trend in the field toward empirically supported treatments.

The penultimate section (Chapters 77–83) relates the author’s advice on the use of dreams in psychotherapy. While Yalom does not advocate full interpretation of dreams, he does encourage therapists to solicit dream material from their patients and to use it judiciously in the therapy hour. It is somewhat puzzling that the author devotes as much space as he does on this topic. It seems that many patients present with rich enough material on their own or in the context of their relationship with the therapist that use of dreams seems questionable. Even if to explore its potential metaphorical value, dream work does not seem to be pragmatic in the context of today’s health care system. His disclaimers aside, Yalom seems to do his readers some disservice by focusing on these tips near the end of this guidebook.

The final section (Chapters 84–85) touches briefly on the occupational hazards and privileges of being a psychotherapist. Given that writing of *The Gift of Therapy* was prompted, in part, by Yalom’s desire to pass along what he has learned in his career as a psychotherapist, it is somewhat unfortunate that he did not elaborate further on these poignant reflections. The demands and satisfactions derived from this career are likely more complex than summarized here.

*The Gift of Therapy* is not written as treatment manual, nor is it a scholarly, pedagogical theoretical or research primer on psychotherapy. While scholarly citations are occasionally referenced, including many of Yalom’s own writings, the author does not support his claims with appeals to extant theory or research. Rather, Yalom conveys his messages and techniques with clear, deft narrative liberally supported by clinical examples and composites. While many of the case examples in *The Gift of Therapy* will be familiar to readers of Yalom’s earlier works, such as *Love’s Executioner*, his approach to the material remains absorbing and intriguing. As the book is a distillation of the author’s life experience as a psychiatrist, much of the material is autobiographical in language and in tone.

This book will prove useful for the beginning therapist, but will likely be beneficial for more experienced clinicians to review—regardless of theoretical orientation. This open letter presents a range of ideas pertinent to the therapeutic encounter. With focus on the here-and-now therapist-patient relationship, Yalom also advises therapists on use of existential themes and dream work. While some will disagree with some of Yalom’s techniques, he points out many times that he has not written a cookbook. Rather, he encourages young therapists to uncover the theoretical position and techniques that resonate within them. Unfortunately, Yalom’s treatment of the range of topics tackled in *The Gift of Therapy* seems too