

The Candle

By Peter Jay Stein, MD

“...Where is the way where light dwelleth?...”

Book of Job

Like a candle's soft glow, psychoanalytical psychotherapy illuminates a patient's obscure path towards self-understanding, obstructed by the patient's false goal of needing to be someone that he is not. This flickering candle of wisdom shines most brilliantly in the writings of Karen Horney, MD, who described the neurotic patient “...at war with himself...driven to actualize his idealized self...his life...dedicated to a search for glory...” (Karen Horney, The Therapeutic Process, Essays & lectures, B. Paris, ed., 1999, p. 249). The patients' self esteem “...rests on the shaky ground of...grandiose illusions about their own uniqueness and...collapses like a card house at a light touch...” (ibid., p.65).

The psychotherapist and the suffering patient together orchestrate intimate and complex compositions of verbal and non-verbal communications, sonatas of emotional attunement and dissonance. The therapist struggles with his own internal distractions in an effort to discover the patient's unique forms of self-expressiveness, to let the patient know that he is understood and accepted as a struggling human being, and to promote the patient's awareness of his special inner conflicts, their self-defeating consequences, and the need for deep, emotional change. Unable to completely suspend judgement and abandon preconceived notions and theories, the psychotherapist allows himself to be swept up with the patient into the patient's inner world.

(The Candle, cont.)

Without totally losing himself, the psychotherapist resonates with the patient's feelings, helping to make intelligible a tangled thicket of contradictory emotions and inner conflicts. As a benign and trustworthy guide, the therapist encounters the patient's inner battle between his fantasized selves - selves that were self-created through the patient's imagination to help elevate him above his infantile feelings of isolation and helplessness; contradictory selves that now divide the patient in a painful war between self-aggrandizement and self-effacement; selves that now tear him apart and divorce him from his authentic being.

Cautiously descending from his defensive perch of seemingly indispensable tyrannical shoulds, rigid inner dictates, false pride, lofty pretenses, and neurotic claims, the patient may gradually recognize and relinquish the inflated, fictional versions of himself. In surrendering his compulsive need for blind admiration, he may begin to appreciate his real strengths and limitations, without feeling hopelessly defeated, panic-stricken, and consumed with pitiless self-hate. The interested and accepting psychotherapist maintains faith in the patient's intrinsic capacity for constructive emotional growth, even when the patient has lost faith in himself to do so.

(The Candle, cont.)

In the process of such growth, the psychotherapist, beyond promoting the relief of the more superficial target symptoms of depression and anxiety, acts as a midwife towards the patient's greater emotional aliveness and mastery, restored inner unity, real self-confidence and self-respect, and friendlier relations with himself and others, all of which are prerequisites for genuine personal fulfillment.

At bottom, the ultimate treasures of maturity and enlightenment reside in the patient's capacity to internally connect with the core of his genuine being, to decipher the hidden messages revealed to him from the cavernous depths of his own heart.

Anathema to the empirical guidelines of evidence-based psychiatry embraced by DSM IV, eschewed by managed care, and challenged by one's own counter-transferential attitudes in response to the patient's wish for a magical cure, the psychiatrist's empathic merger into the patient's primal and eccentric universe faces formidable adversity...but one must keep the candle burning.