

## A MOMENT OF RELATIONAL DEPTH

MICK COOPER

Supplementary material for *Existential Therapies: Contributions to a pluralistic practice* (Sage, 2014), Chapter 2.

Counsellor Anne Deacon (Brown, Deacon, Kerr, & Ralph, 2013) gives a very powerful example of one moment of relational depth with a client, Grace, who had experienced extensive abuse and neglect in her youth. Grace was describing a beating she had experienced as a child and, as she did so, Anne's eyes filled with tears. Grace stopped mid-sentence and said to Anne 'those tears should be mine, shouldn't they?' Anne nodded. Anne goes on to write:

Grace continued to look at me and then I saw her eyes begin to fill with tears as well. (This was the first time in 18 months that she had shown emotion.) She continued to look at me as if she needed to be connected to my tears to allow hers to flow. Time seemed to stand still, quietness had seemed to descend on the room, there was nothing happening, yet there was so much happening. Grace continued to look at me and the enormity of her pain was tangible. Then her tears came, slowly at first, as she blinked hard as if to force them out of her eyes. Then she was sobbing, her body shaking with the force. She looked at me now with panic in her eyes as she experienced for the first time what it felt like to cry for herself. I leaned closer, her tears were now falling onto her arms and clothes and the noises she made came from deep within her very soul.

Anne asked Grace if she wanted her to sit next to her and, with Grace's assent, Anne moved slowly across the settee, sat down half-facing her, and made her hand available to Grace. Anne continues:

I made no movement and gradually she touched my finger with hers. All the while her sobbing continued. Suddenly I was aware she was carefully and gently starting to hold my finger. When I felt her finger touching mine, I was careful not to make much movement as I was aware of the courage it was taking for her to touch me. The way she was touching me was so tentative and uncertain that instinctively I didn't respond straightaway, but waited until she was holding my finger more securely. Then, very slowly, I held her back and we sat like that for what seemed an eternity. The contrast between her fragile touch and her racking sobs seemed a chasm apart. I didn't feel any sense of a need to comfort her in any way, I felt a deep empathy for her and in that moment I was willing to just sit alongside her in that dreadfully painful and terrifying place she now found herself in.

Eventually, states Anne, Grace's crying subsided, and she gently and slowly released Anne's finger. They returned to their original positions facing each other. 'She looked into my eyes again,' writes Anne, 'and in that moment we knew that something wondrous had just taken place.'

Anne's encounter with Grace exemplifies what it means to relate at depth with another: to dialogue at the level of the 'wordless depths.' And, as such, Anne's way of engaging with Grace also exemplifies what it means to be towards another in an I-Thou way: a sitting alongside the other (literally), a deep confirmation of their being, and a willingness to be fully open to them and to take the risk of sharing one's genuine response (in this case, tears).

### **References**

Brown, C., Deacon, A., Kerr, J., & Ralph, K. (2013). Meeting at relational depth in therapy: The lived encounter. In R. Knox, D. Murphy, S. Wiggins & M. Cooper (Eds.), *Relational depth: New perspectives and developments* (pp. 13-20). London: Sage.