

Mastering Mindfulness

MOLLY LAYTON. Family Therapy Networker. Nov/Dec 1995. Vol. 19, Iss. 6;

I'M SITTING WITH THE Pattersons, an old-married couple, kids mostly grown, and she's hammering away at him. It's a first session, and I can't tell whether her startling bursts of anger are old hoary business or new. She's resurrecting incidents from 15 years ago, his affair, his drinking then, something he said here, something he did there, as if these had never before been aired between the two of them. He's not especially defensive, saying, "I know, I know," then proceeds to get lost in philosophical circumlocutions. In turn, she apologizes for her rage, but soon starts up again.

I ask, "You folks do this a lot?" They both say, "No," and she angrily says that she's kept silent for a long time. But he rolls his eyes at this, and they both describe how they've been battling for years, so I'm confused. Trying to figure out who knew what when, I ask them, Why is this all coming to a head now?" but they look as puzzled by the question as I am by the freshness of her anger.

However, I am not bothered much by my own confusion, not especially anxious, although I am keeping a wary eye on the rising intensity between the two of them. The poet Keats called this space "negative capability," a capacity to hang in ambiguity without any "irritable reaching after fact." So in sitting with these painful feeling her glowering resentment, his hangdog spirit I am finally moved to ask a more fundamental question: "Are you two questioning your love of each other?" There's enough silence to mark a roomy, echoing space, and I go on, "I mean, do you question whether you are loved, or do you question whether you feel your own love for the other?" They are genuinely relieved by the directness of this question. So am I. For the rest of the session we talk about pure love and ambivalent love and mature love and weary love and other mysteries of loving, until the husband, remembering his father's wretched in-r ability to love his wife or his children, jolts me by suddenly gulping great tears. It seems his father had died barely two months before, but until this moment, the couple had not connected the father's death with their own mysterious crisis.

I offer this vignette not in the spirit of "how to do" therapy but rather in the spirit of "how to be." When I was a novice therapist, I often found it too excruciating to sit with other people's pain. In my anxiety, I talked a lot, jumped in early with directives, thought I understood things that I was nowhere near imagining. Caught by the distress and confusion in my clients' lives, I wished, ached, longed for the day when I had so much experience and savvy that I would know, always, what to say or do that would relieve their burden. I imagined that I would not be sitting there, caught in my own doubts and confusions, trying on this theory or that, held in imaginary conversation with a supervisor, but rather would know. Now it is years later, and I know a lot, my experiences are rich and meaningful, my theories tested and honed and revised. But slowly I have come to realize that what I am getting paid to do is

tolerate just these crosscurrents and tricky undertows of theory and experience and emotion.

The longer I practice, the more I am struck with the importance of this capacity of tolerant, hovering attentiveness that therapy demands an attentiveness that looks, Janus-faced, both outwardly at the client and inwardly toward the therapist's own processes. The demand for this attentiveness cuts across all sorts of ideas of what therapy is, what therapists do. In fact, it's a spirit I can recognize now in a range of human activities. In honor of its place for several thousand years in Buddhist and other meditative practices, we should call it mindfulness. Mindfulness is the capacity for here-and-now presence. Like a lot of really simple things, it's hard to do. It's easy to slip clean away in a therapy session, especially if feelings are deadening or overstimulating, if problems are tediously knotty. One moment you're there, the next moment you're stuck up in some quiet room in the attic, lost in thought. Typically, I might find myself, chin in hand, brow knit, puzzling over a client's dilemma: What's the matter? How do we fix things? I begin to notice that in my attempts to peg the problem, I have become disconnected from the person in front of me. The truth is, the direct experience of another human being can be terrifying; in exercises when two people gaze meditatively for more than a few moments on each other, face to face, I have seen people burst into tears from the intensity that is generated.

What we typically do in order to stand so long in the presence of each other is think and judge. We can always count on our minds to produce plenty of internal chatter to keep us distracted. We can especially count on our minds to crank out an unending stream of carping analysis. How much easier to hunt for something wrong. Perhaps, lost in his or her discontent, the client begins to appear whiny or boring or irritating to me, endlessly repeating complaints, ungratefully ignoring my wise remarks. Perhaps I start to feel I am a bad therapist; I should be wiser, more skillful, more dedicated, more empathic.

Growing alienation, distractibility anxiety about how it's going these may be reactions to the client's problem but more likely are indications that, in some way I am not really tuning in. To tune in to the client, I have to let go of my own demand to fix or understand them. I might have to abandon my hard-won sense of knowing, my prized experience, and instead sit there, open, expectant, empty. Mindfulness has a certain spaciousness to it, a quality of emptiness, as if allowing air and light into the growing tension and clamor of a therapy session and into the chatter of my mind.

So, sitting with the Pattersons, getting temporarily nowhere, I am able to give up for a while my need to get the details down pat. Calming my own mind down, I sit back to observe the flow of energy between the two of them. I notice that while she is making accusations, he doesn't make countercharges; she fires a rock at him, but

he won't fire one back. At first, I find myself appreciative of his restraint, even perhaps a little too appreciative, being for the moment spared an all-out battle between them. But soon I notice how he is almost welcoming her accusations, as if he deserves the punishment. Is he feeling guilty and is he feeling helpless in that guilt, as well? But rather than getting caught up just then in ideas about guilt, I keep the space open, just listening to their tone with each other. I notice at last that whenever she softens her voice, when she lets up on the punishment, he does not look all that interested or relieved, but rather makes another round of vague and tangential remarks. I find myself feeling disappointed in him, then I start to wonder what would make a person unable to respond to someone's warmth. Actually, "wonder" is too cognitive a description imagine a kind of gentle curiosity, tolerant, expectant, not rushing to judgment. Open.

Even though the two rarely look each other in the eye, I notice moments when each listens well to the other, cocking a head in attention, nodding to follow a statement. I feel a steady flow of their attachment, as if all this really matters. But watching him ignore another conciliatory gesture from his wife, I get to wondering whether he thinks he deserves any love, even when it is being handed to him. Is he really so un-movable? I feel weary for him. And then, resonating with his weariness, I start to feel how incredibly hard it is to keep loving someone. My own heart opens up in warm recognition: what a terrible and human and real problem that is, to expect ourselves always to feel unambivalent love. I've been trying to understand what to do with that myself. That question about love "Are you two questioning your love for each other?" took shape when I observed his eyes dart away, before he started on one of his vague speeches, as if he were looking into his heart and coming up empty-handed. That's the short answer to how the question about love popped up. But the long answer is that it is a question that vitally engages me, that evokes my own sense of mystery. How does married love last? Must we inevitably arrive at the wreck?

THE CAPACITY FOR MINDFULNESS, for sitting with others, is truly an exercise in slowing down and opening the heart. Being in the ebb and flow of a therapy session requires attention to nuances and shadings of another human being, nuances impossible to capture in texts and training manuals. That's why mindfulness is so important to cultivate, because as a human being, even as a very good, highly trained therapist, you can't really know another human the way you can know that an egg hard-boils in seven minutes. What is necessary to understand another human being must come from, resonate with, be filtered through, our own humanity as well. Wrestling with my own limits prepares me to sit with other people's struggles with loss and ambiguity. That's the kind of knowing a therapist needs: the generous knowing of a person truly present both to one's own experience and the experience of others.

Yet, how lightly this knowing must be held and easily given up if the breeze should shift. It's one thing to recognize one's own experience un-thoughtfully in another's dilemma, and it's another thing to project that experience onto the therapy session, running one's own movie clip. If the Pattersons had not both sat up at the question of love's

limits, had not held their breaths, had not turned toward each other, the question would perhaps not even have registered, would have disappeared, would have sunk below the flow of our discussion.

And our clinical theories must be held lightly, too. Theories drive hard, carry enormous power; they are designed like Mack trucks. So a helpful principle for me is that there are "no ideas but in things," as the poet William Carlos Williams put it. The proof of a good theory is not in its own logic, but only as it's meaning emerges, almost to surprise me, before my very eyes. It's one thing, certainly worthy, to read about projective identification, and a totally other thing to watch in amazement as an icy woman accuses her partner of not loving her well enough. And another thing to know what to do with such fancy knowledge.

So the expertise of a therapist with a client has a contradictory quality to it: the therapist must know and not know. At any moment, our smarty-pants theories, can get in the way of our being with a person. A certain tolerance for "not knowing" can be a gateway to new learning, to ever-deepening connection with the experience of another human being.

In general, the attitude of mindfulness holds the therapist right up against his or her growing edge. I recently spoke to John Welwood, a writer and psychotherapist steeped in the discipline of meditation, and he said that the capacity for mindfulness, for a here-and-now presence, comes in at a different angle from knowledge and memory. "Mindfulness makes a vertical cut into experience," he said. "It brings in newness, a new edge to whatever level we're on. But knowledge is horizontal. It's like when I drive a car well, all my knowledge of how to shift, how to use the brakes, can function smoothly in the background. The knowledge is there, but if I always have to keep track, it becomes distracting from being in the present moment."

The capacity to "not know" yields an important difference between therapy and traditional medical treatment, with which therapy is too often and unfairly compared. Treatment in psychotherapy is different from this relationship between a knower (the doctor) and what is to be known (the condition of the patient). The condition is something there to be discovered, described and treated: pills counted out, hot compresses laid on, parts of the body cleaned, drained, swabbed or sutured, injected, cut away, splinted, bandaged. The body is there, pulsing, juicy, fleshy, responding, something to be acted upon, to be known. Whereas in psychotherapy (and nowadays in some more holistic medical treatments), clients are not there to be acted upon, they are not conditions to treat.

In contrast to traditional medical practice, the energy in psychotherapy is fundamentally a co-creation between at least two people, and the therapist's own awareness is just as likely to want examining on the table as the client's. Such tolerance for self-awareness mindfulness again is a discipline cultivated by many schools of therapy. Training as a family therapist, I thought it was a True Secret of the Universe Revealed at Last when my teachers would show me how my particular reactions to a family my frustrations, my wish to rush in here, my blindness there mirrored the intricacies of the family's own system. I remember once

heading pell-mell out of my office to stop an adolescent from running into the woods next to the building, and having, in a split second, a more enlightened, second thought: "Damn! This kid doesn't want me running after him. It should be the dad!" How elegant, how sympathetic, how handy are our visceral reactions! And what a wonderful source of jokes on ourselves!

When I studied object-relations therapies, my teachers supported a kind of stamina, a capacity to observe and to contain without jumping into gear! the complex emotions that are stimulated both in the therapist and in the client by close interpersonal relationships. Sitting with a young woman one day, talking together of how mothers let their daughters down, I told a story of a time my own daughter had to challenge me. And my client's voice rose in anger as she addressed me, "Why does the daughter have to come to the mother? Why doesn't the mother see what is going on and go to the daughter?" We sat there stunned for a moment at the sudden intimacy: she, a daughter speaking forcefully to her own mother; me, a mother hearing again her own daughter's dilemma. I said at last, with my own dawning insight, "Well, it's a gift; the daughter is giving the mother a gift."

The verb "to contain" reflects the therapist's experience as a vase or crucible safely holding unstable, swirling emotions threatening to spill over. These "dangerous substances" might even be the therapist's own rising fears, angers, frustrations, memories.

The therapist's capacity for dynamic containment is strikingly similar to the Buddhist meditation of *tonglen*, where the mediator imagines breathing in cloudy, toxic air and breathing out clear. When the young woman and I enacted, for a moment, the roles of a mother and daughter with each other, we were both entering a poisonous, contaminated space, a place that we inhabited together for a moment and through our efforts made lighter, airier, a place where we could both breathe.

Fortunately for therapists, the capacity for containment can be developed, but like jogging or rowing, only after miles of split sides and aching muscles. There is, for me, an air of humility in such stamina, a willingness to pause, to sustain oneself modestly, expectantly, as clients begin to reveal

themselves, to teach me. I say something, the client bristles, I remind myself for the thousandth time: "You really haven't understood yet, just keep listening." It's an old feeling now, sometimes comfortable, sometimes not, to hang in patient mystery until . . . until, what? What is the shift that I await? I rarely know in advance, and never know the particular story that eventually shapes itself up. What I await is a change in myself, an expansion, a melting, something hard that softens, a joining. Before the shift, I might feel that I don't have a leg to stand on with this client. After, I feel that we are in the same frame, as in a shared landscape.

In my experience, the virtue of mindfulness evokes the best of our traditions of psychotherapy, one human being fully alive to another. It is no coincidence that most schools of therapy not only have a conception of the therapist's authentic presence in their theories, but honor it existentially in their training methods, specifically in the oral tradition of learning by sitting at someone's knee. In supervision, the student therapist brings in not only notes and tapes, but also endless anxiety, excitement, discoveries and fears. Consequently, hope-fully, the kind of mindfulness that the therapist brings into the space with a client is a consciousness that has been shaped by long, trusting relationships with mentors, with one's own therapist and close colleagues. These are all tended by one's teachers and held with more honor than most have ever experienced before. For myself, I was grateful, sitting with the Pattersons, that I was anchored in my own long history sitting with such mentors and therapists. It is a space I have now entered many, many times, in many guises.

As our own supervisions and therapies have taught us, the most direct experience of another human being is not through our well-chosen ideas but through our own vibrating selves, pulling closer in attraction, withdrawing in fear, arriving at last in tenderness. This experience of mindful presence is the simplest thing in the world, and it looks like I might spend my lifetime practicing it, over and over. Maybe it's as close as I'll get to enlightenment.

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