

Self-Love: Finding Light in the Dark

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Abstract:

This paper was presented as a keynote speech at the Third International Conference of the International Integrative Psychotherapy Association in Rome on April 19, 2009. The speech is the author's view of what is behind a client's desire for self-love and the importance of facilitating the emergence of positive experiences of the self, drawing from ideas in positive psychology and EMDR. Helping new positive neural networks arise in clients is as important as the dissolving and working through of defenses arising from childhood wounds, hence finding light in the dark.

How many times have you heard a client say "I need to learn to love myself"? I don't know how you respond but my internal reaction, which I do not show, is one of groaning. This brings associations of new age philosophy and affirmations that one reads in self-help books--making something extremely complex sound easy. If only it was as easy as reading a book. And the very few times I've had a client say "I love myself", it was done in a way that sounded narcissistic and my reaction was one of disbelief. However I think the client who says he wants to love himself is saying something really important. What I believe he is saying is "I want to be released from my inner hell, my inner critic, my inner blackness; I want to stop hating myself". For these clients, it feels like there is really nothing but darkness and helping them find the positive is an extremely difficult and long process. The guiding metaphor I have used for myself is: helping them to find some light in the darkness. This metaphor for therapy originally came to me when I joined Amnesty International in the eighties. I was deeply moved by the Chinese proverb from which the Amnesty symbol of a candle is derived: it is better to light one candle than curse the darkness. What is your internal response as you reflect on that? From the first time I heard it, repeating the words to myself leads to an upwelling of feeling that is difficult to put into words but is probably a combination of hope, gratitude, empowerment and a deep knowing.

Literature abounds with this metaphor, as well as all religions. I did a search on Google and came up with hundreds, if not thousands of quotes about light as a metaphor. Let me quote one of my favorites from the Rubaiyat of Rumi:

Into my heart's night
Along a narrow way
I groped; and lo! the light
An infinite land of day.

I was at a Buddhist meditation retreat recently and the leader gave a talk on the Buddha's encouragement to "Make of yourself a light". The Bible alone probably has thousands of lines about light as a metaphor, starting with the first: And God said: Let there be light: and there was light. Let me give you some examples of experiences or images from clients that I refer to as finding light in the dark. They could also be called the building blocks of self-love. These metaphors can come to clients in dreams, through the therapeutic process, through meditative or spiritual practice and sometimes through daily life. Some examples: being naked in a fountain and be cleansed by the water; being on a giant rock at the seaside, alone and safe; driving up a hill towards a light on the horizon and then being in the light and totally enveloped by it; a feeling of warmth in the body that spreads and energizes. I find that often these positive experiences are in fact body experiences which do not have any image attached. Let yourself reflect for a moment on your own associations with light.

Releasing people from their inner critic, their script, the prison of their defenses is what we try to do with our interventions using Integrative Psychotherapy. What I have come to appreciate over the years, especially through my experience of using EMDR, is that building the positive, finding the light, can and should proceed apace with our working through defenses and fixated child ego states. This is another way of saying that new positive neural networks in the brain can be built and strengthened as the negative and script bound ones are dissolved. Daniel Siegel (2007) uses a definition of memory that I find highly relevant: memory is the probability of a neural network firing. That is why script is so tenacious; the neural networks that encode script-reinforcing memories are most likely to fire especially under stress. My 89 year old mother's reaction to me forgetting to phone her one night when I had said I would was one of feeling unloved and uncared for, a replay of her childhood experience, a replay of her script neural networks. Our task as therapist, in addition to decommissioning the negative neural networks, is to foster the conditions under which the positive ones can blossom and grow. One of the ways of doing that is helping clients find the positive qualities in themselves; building and reinforcing these positive neural networks so they become memory in Siegal's sense, neural networks that have a high probability of firing.

Having introduced the idea of positive neural networks, it becomes necessary at this point to say something about "positive thinking" and positive psychology. This is not going to be a lecture about these but I would like to place them in

context. Thinking positively generally has a bad connotation amongst psychotherapists; it is simplistic and even old-fashioned. How can one take seriously the idea of Emile Coue, who was the originator of positive thinking, to repeat daily “Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and better”? Positive affirmations are a variation on this theme. They probably benign in most cases, helpful in a few and probably harmful if they activate feelings of shame and failure when they don’t make a difference. Making an effort to see oneself, others or life experiences in a positive way is a useful practice. I would not discourage anyone from doing it. However I believe these kinds of affirmations are generally not effective because they are not attuned to the person’s process or their body. They are like feeding sweet desserts to a starving person. Attuned self-affirmations that arise out of our internal process and are felt in the body are the ones that make a difference and the ones that are worth remembering and repeating.

One of the reasons that we often as therapists don’t react well to clients trying to think positively is because it is used as a defense. The reaction of one of my clients when I went on holidays this past year is a good example. He tried to be positive and upbeat: you need a holiday, it will be good for me to see how I’ll do on my own and see what I’ve learned. This was from a client who was undergoing surgery for colon cancer while I was away. He denied there was a downside for him of my going away at that time, which of course was not true. With the light there is also darkness. Focusing on the light is only truly therapeutic when the darkness has been acknowledged. That is another way in which we are integrative psychotherapists: helping clients integrate the light and the dark.

Thinking positively can also be an introject from caregivers. Often well-meaning people, including many parents, encourage children to think positively as a way to encourage, give hope or help them to move out of negative thinking. It can also be a caregiver’s defense against their own helplessness. Some examples: Maybe it’s for the best; why don’t you try thinking of something else; you can find someone better than him. The child or person receiving the advice is likely to experience feeling not understood. The advice may be realistic but unless it is done in an attuned way, is it more likely to be experienced as a rupture. Unless our darkness or pain has been acknowledged we are generally not open to the positive or light. We cannot force others to access their positive neural networks. The real positives or light come from within and it is our task as therapists to facilitate that, as much as it is our task to help them work through defenses and script beliefs.

This is where the positive psychology movement has something to teach integrative psychotherapists. This branch of psychology, founded by Dr. Martin Seligman, came to prominence when he was the President of the American Psychological Association in 1996. It focuses on positive emotions, strengths-based character and healthy institutions; in other words, what makes for happy people. There have been many interesting studies done in positive psychology that are of interest to integrative psychotherapists. Let me give you some findings

from an article published by Seligman in the July/August 2005 issue of the *American Psychologist*. He and his researchers were trying to determine if interventions based on positive psychology could increase a person's sense of happiness. Through a random-assigned, placebo-controlled experimental design based on Internet responders they found some surprising results. Two of their six interventions which lasted for a period of one week, led to significant improvement in reported happiness even after six months. These two interventions were as follows. The first was called Three Good Things in Life and participants were asked to write down three things that went well each day, every night for one week. In addition they were asked to provide a causal explanation for each good thing. That was it. For example: I cleaned the bathroom for my partner; I did it to give her a break. The second intervention was called Using Signature Strengths in a New Way. In this intervention, participants took an inventory of character strengths by means of an Internet tool which gave them their top five strengths. Their task was to use one of these top strengths in a new and different way every day for a week.

That these results would lead to higher reported happiness that lasted six months is surprising. And all this was done over the Internet. The researchers speculated that if these interventions had been done in the context of a therapeutic relationship the results would have been even better. It is not surprising that such activities would make a person feel better but most of us would not predict them to have such a long lasting effect on happiness. There is an important role for the inclusion of focusing on the positive in integrative psychotherapy and we may be doing our clients a disservice by underestimating or minimizing its importance. I have a hope that at our next conference someone will step forward and do a presentation on positive psychology.

It is truly inspiring for us to be witness to the healing nature that people have inside them facilitated by us providing an attuned presence. A loving and caring therapeutic relationship helps foster the conditions for self-love. As clients are able to let in our light, they allow their inner light to grow. The American novelist, Edith Wharton, wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century: There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.

One of the ways I am continually inspired by my client's discovery of the light inside is when I use EMDR. Exploring and acknowledging the darkness inevitably leads to the light. Let me talk about a client whose course of EMDR is typical. My client, a very competent professional woman in her late 50's, had a number of years of therapy with other therapists, starting when her children were young. Her current therapist referred her to me for EMDR regarding childhood issues that could best be described as cumulative trauma. The father was highly controlling, both of his wife and my client. The memory that captured the essence of her trauma was the morning breakfast scene, where the father would appear, and be either friendly and inappropriately sexual with the client's mother, or icy cold with no conversation other than critical comments. My client adapted by trying to be as invisible as possible, doing nothing to bring attention or criticism to herself. Her adult life had been spent struggling with a harsh internal parent, that

left her anxious and in many cases unable to assert herself; she also could literally not find any positive qualities about herself.

In the first session of processing, the client was in the memory in an intense way and the feelings she connected with most were of wanting to run but being trapped, and secondly, sadness for her mother. In EMDR, one comes to trust that the client knows at some level where they need to go and while in a talking therapy session her focus on her mother might be seen as a defense, this was seen as part of what she needed to process to let go and integrate the memory. In this first session, she was not able to find any internal resources to imagine handling the breakfast scene in any other way; attempts to speak up, to address her father, felt hopeless. She began our second session by reporting that just after finishing the first session, she'd remembered how she'd been assertive with a professor when doing a graduate degree as an adult, basically telling him she didn't want to work with him. There was the first light, as I call it, in working with this memory. This had spontaneously come to her and she felt a sense of pride in the memory of having done this. In the second session, after processing the breakfast scene again for a while, she remembered her grandmother being next to her at the dinner table when she visited, rubbing her arm under the table, something that felt really comforting. Again more light in the darkness. She connected with loving her grandmother and from there could own "I am a loving person" connecting all this with a feeling in her body. This is the beginning of a neural network of a positive self-identity that will be expanded as she continues the processing. In the week between the second and third session, after a meeting with one of her business clients she was driving home and had the spontaneous thought "I'm competent"; she felt so excited having this thought she seriously considered calling me and leaving a message. In the third session while processing in EMDR she had the revelation "I don't have to live in fear" and felt a sense of amazement, mainly in her body, which was still with her as she left the office. I could go on but I believe I have illustrated my point: that positive self-regard is made up of these kinds of experiences and thoughts and that in addition to facing the darkness, our task as integrative psychotherapists is to facilitate the conditions in which these positive experience and thoughts can emerge.

I started thinking about this speech by reflecting on my own experiences where I felt I found light at significant times in my life and I'd like to share two of them with you. They could be considered self-love but I think of them as examples of finding light in the darkness, not by having someone point out the light to me, but with it arising inside by some spontaneous, somewhat mysterious process. In 1998 I was diagnosed with prostate cancer and had to undergo surgery. It was the most frightening time in my life. I did a lot of emotional and mental preparation for it, including sessions with a medical doctor who used hypnosis as a way to visually prepare. A short time before the surgery I had the spontaneous thought that as soon as the operation was over, my body would already be starting the healing process. This felt very reassuring. To my wonderment, the first thought I had when I awoke from the anesthetic in the

recovery room was “My body is already starting to heal” and I had a complete sense of calm. Not only was this thought calming, it was also true.

The second experience was a dream I had the night after my father died in 1994. My father had been ill for several months with cancer and I had known that he was going to die and I had been getting closure and saying good-bye in my own way. My last words to him were “I love you” when I left him at the hospital one evening, having no idea it would be the last time. In the dream, my father and I are walking down a quiet road on a warm summer evening. The sun is low in the sky and we come upon a pear tree right by the side of the road. I reach up to touch a pear, and it falls into my hand, a perfect pear. I am in awe of its perfection and how it came to me with no effort. To me, the dream was a body experience; I awoke with a transcendent sense of calm that I can still connect with today. The dream meant “I will be OK”, an experience of self-love. To have the dream at that time, was truly the light in the dark. Nothing anyone said to me at that time could have had anywhere nearly the same impact that my dream did. If it was your dream, what would it mean to you? The dream I’m sure has many interpretations as there are of you here today, and they are all right. The origins of that dream remain as mysterious as the day I had it.

These two experiences for me capture the essence of self-love or as I prefer, finding light in the dark. They arise from some place inside in a spontaneous way, not forced but arising of their own accord. When one considers how mysterious love for others is, how it arises spontaneously and cannot be forced, then how can self-love not be the same? Let me conclude by quoting Rumi’s poem again:

Into my heart’s night,
Along a narrow way, I groped;
And lo! the light,
An infinite land of day.

Over and over again as clients struggle with painful or traumatic memories, as they stop denying them, let themselves be fully aware of them and accept their feelings about them, the positive or light spontaneously appears. It is inevitable.

Exercise:

Think of a time when you found some light in the darkness. Let it come back to you as fully as possible. Don’t judge what comes to you; just accept it is coming for a reason. As you recall the experience, where do you notice it in your body now? What positive statement about yourself starting with “I” captures this experience? Repeat it to yourself and see if the truth of it deepens. See if there are any other positive statements that come to mind. How would your life be different if you held onto this memory and light every day?

Author:

John Hallett is a registered psychologist in Vancouver, Canada, with 34 years of experience in practicing and teaching psychotherapy. Earlier in his career, John worked in outpatient mental health clinics with families, children, and adults. It was during this time that he discovered Integrative Psychotherapy, eventually leading him to move into private practice where he has been for the past 20 years, providing both individual and group therapy as well as training in Integrative Psychotherapy. He uses EMDR and finds it a natural fit with IP. He was a founding member of the IIPA, the membership coordinator for 6 years and is currently a Board member.

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