

Opening Heart and Self to the Other: An Experiential Story From the Therapy Room

Abstract

When entering into a therapeutic relationship, the therapist is opening their¹ self to an Other, the client. Allowing their heart to open and be raw to the feelings entering the room. This opening allows for the therapist to fall in love with their client through vulnerability and a giving of the self. This falling in love is ultimately asymmetrical and leaves each person inevitably changed. This unique love, that takes the form of commitment, intimacy, and deep care, creates vulnerability in the therapist that leaves them open to heartbreak and pain, as well as, strength. This love that a therapist shows for their client is sacred and filled with deep resonant care for the Other, it comes free from expectations or the need for reciprocation. I will demonstrate this love and openness through a personal story from the therapy room. Using Rollo May and Emanuel Levinas as my guides, I opened myself to authentic and genuine engagement and allow clients to break my heart.

Introduction

Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction. - Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

What is love but acceptance of the other, whatever he is. - Anaïs Nin

Love has nothing to do with what you are expecting to get — only with what you are expecting to give — which is everything. - Katharine Hepburn

The following paper will explore the concept of love as it is experienced by the therapist for the client. I will start with a discussion of love and how it presents sharing examples from my clinical experience. I will share the deep, meaningful love and the heartbreak that comes along with being a therapist. The quotes that I have just read speak to aspects of this love: without expectation of reciprocation, with acceptance of the other as given, and in a relationship that is both mutual and asymmetrical.

¹ Their is being used as an all encompassing pronoun regardless of gender.

Mutuality in the therapeutic relationship encompasses that the work and relationship is created in the room together as Saint-Exupery describes, it is the looking outward, together, in the same direction. Asymmetry is born from one person baring their struggles and their personhood with much greater depth than the other. The therapeutic relationship bears this asymmetry, the client brings vulnerability and need, the therapist brings vulnerability and contains need. With a client, we will call J, she used the analogy of feeling lost in a maze and wanted me to hand her the map. I explained that we are both in the maze, together, that I have the tools, flashlight/GPS as she called it, and she has the advantage of knowing the terrain. Together, with our shared resources we will move through the maze. We were mutually vulnerable and working together with an asymmetry in how we moved. I had the safety of light and a map like device. She was feeling her way along the walls when we weren't together. The relationship with this client created a deep sense of responsibility in me. I experienced a sense of love for her. As relationships grow, the love that is felt may be mutual, asymmetrical, or both and will move through iterations as does the relationship.

Rollo May gives us four kinds of love: "sex, or what we call lust, libido. The second is eros, the drive to procreate or create. A third is phillia, or friendship...the fourth is agape...the love that is devoted to the welfare of the other, the prototype of which is the love of God for man. Every human experience of authentic love is a blending of these four (May, 1969, p. 38)."

Levinas speaks of love in two ways, one is satiable desire otherwise known as need, the other is a-satiable desire or agape. The love a therapist has for the client is a-satiable. It is not deriving from a lack or a void to be filled. A-satiable desire does not proceed from destitution, it is received through ultimate passivity, not from the subject, and it lives for the Other not from the Other. He describes desire as, "the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies." (Levinas, 1969, p. 50)

The love that I am describing here, that for client, is a love that goes beyond romantic, familial, or friend. It is agape, It is a deep care and thoughtfulness that transforms both the therapist and the client. It is a love that is entered into without expectation. It is not performance based it is authentic, genuine love. In the examples to follow, agape is the love that is brought forth, however,

writers and therapists over the years often share stories of agape that include elements of sex, eros, and philia. The therapeutic relationship is capable of holding elements of all four types of love. These elements color how love presents within relationships with different clients.

Agape, as the earlier examples explain, is a love that is given without reciprocation and often with little planning or force from the therapist. It is a genuine love that comes from the interaction and the relationship. Genuineness allows for a relationship to grow and deepen. The ability to be open, vulnerable, authentic, and experience the Other as genuine allows for feeling to enter the room and create a deeper meaning to the work. I have found within my own work that the times when I am questioning myself and I come from a disingenuous space are the times when the safety in the relationship falls away. I believe this is in part due to the lack of mutuality in these times. I am not seeing the person in front of me, only the story, symptom, legal repercussion, or fear in myself.

An example of this comes from my graduate internship I worked with a client who was going through multiple life transitions. She had come out as trans feminine to her wife and was in the process of separating. She was laid off from her job about a year prior and had decided to attempt going back to school. She was discovering her true self and we were progressing well in our work together. As we were entering our last two months of working together I entered my own round of life transitions, long-term relationship ending, graduating from graduate school and beginning a career, and becoming more open about my own fluid sexuality with my family.

There was a point in our work where she sent me an email that disclosed a lot of information about how she was feeling about our work together. Included in this email there was something that struck a chord in me. She told me that she looked forward to the day after our work was over when we could be friends. This was the first time I was told by a client that they saw a life beyond the therapy room with me in it. She mentioned my son, which sent me into a place of fear and discomfort. I was uncertain as to how to proceed and I discussed the email with my supervisor. The results wound up being disastrous. I was told to tell the client that this was not an option and to end my relationship. This didn't sit well with me and when I tried to discuss it in more detail I couldn't name what felt off about the

response. So I went into my next session, followed the script that my supervisor gave me and this client began crying. She told me that she never knew I could be so cold and harsh and that she was absolutely devastated by this response.

She was in touch with the clinical director and my direct supervisor who eventually discontinued her services at the clinic and told me to write it off and let it go. I still haven't. I still hold that client in my heart and hope for her wellbeing. I have spent many hours thinking about this person in the 18 months since this happened and I realize that I was not acting authentically. I was concerned because my house had been broken into the week prior. Nothing was taken but my books and school papers had been shuffled through. There was a dog leash left behind. This was less than a month after my partner moved out and 4 weeks from graduation. I was a mess. I felt shaken and unsafe in my home, my personhood, and my professional life. This email scared me. I was on high alert and instead of coming to the session with my vulnerability and explaining that this email really threw me. I reacted with all of the fear that was living inside of me. I stopped loving in that moment. I hurt this person. I have learned from it and I try to act from my intuition with greater depth and authenticity. I still make mistakes.

Care and thoughtfulness are the first ways that I find myself loving my clients. How much space do they take and do I give in my own psychic space? I pay attention to when I find myself thinking about a client and why? I have a client who is brand new to Seattle and going through a tough transition with very few social connections here. I found myself feeling worried for this person on the first deeply grey day of the fall. Upon exploring this worry, I found that I was caring for this person's mood as the weather turns and they are alone. I brought this to them and saw a wall of distrust melt. Clients pass through my mind at different points of the day. Some with clear connections to the work we are doing and others just in passing. Some with greater frequency and others almost never. I mark these moments, pay attention to what brought them to mind and sometimes share it. Other times I will share the thought but not the process.

Learning to listen and hold when a client passes through my mind and trusting my intuition for when to bring it to the work has been one of my greatest learning challenges. Through work with my supervisor, individual therapist, mindfulness and internal work I am

putting greater trust in my intuition and yet I find myself lost in the ambiguity of knowing. Therapists live in ambiguity. Our work is in trusting our intuition, we may have training in listening and studies to guide our approach but it is truly, our intuition that leads us to movement. A few weeks ago, I watched a dance performance that embodied this space of ambiguity and the fear, trust, and vulnerability required in the therapeutic relationship. In this performance, the dancer creates a moment with one audience member where she makes eye contact and says, "I am just me and you are just you. That's it. So I am just gonna be me and you, you are just gonna be you." She then crawls on to the audience members lap and whispers in their ear. I was the lucky member to hear her message that night. She said, "I am me and you are you. I don't really know what to do. Do you know what to do?" I answered simply by saying "no" she said "me either. I am just going to stay here." and held onto me tight for a minute until another dancer came and pulled her from my lap she fought against him and maintained eye contact as she sat in the middle of the stage, reached for me, and sat in her isolation. This is the ambiguity, the raw unknowing and fear that we walk together into the therapeutic relationship with. We only have our selves and our intuition to guide us through the world we live in. It can feel lonely knowing that no one can ever fully understand your pain and it can be rewarding when someone tries.

Showing the client love, caring, and genuineness can help them learn how to view their own self through a different lens as well as help them to take this love out into the other relationships in their lives. This love and connection assists the therapist to understand their own responses as well if they listen. Terlato discuss love in the therapy room as "Each one of us, in order to be able to love himself or herself, needs to have been loved at least a little. In the therapeutic relationship, the patients discovery that he or she has an emotional impact on the therapist helps the person to appreciate his or her chances for being loved and to see himself or herself not only as someone waiting to be seen but also as someone seeing his or her own self and the other" (Terlato, 2013). In order for the therapist to let the client know they are impacted, they must remain open to the emotions that arise in the moment. The therapist can come to a greater understanding of the growth that they are seeking as well. This is the therapist's work to do separate from the

client, however, through countertransference we can awake pieces of ourselves that have been dormant. In so many ways, client and therapist learn and heal from each other.

J was one of the first clients to come to me as I embarked in private practice work. She had come to see me based on her concerns about cycles in relationships. She has a history of becoming deeply submersed into the other person, begins to feel she has lost herself in this relationship, pulls away (either through yelling or more often just breaking up with the partner), and then coming back when she feels guilty or begins to miss the closeness she felt. The anger she experiences when she is in the pulling away portion of this cycle is what she found most concerning and wanted to look into. We both entered into this process as deeply vulnerable beings. I was eager to be present and do work that was not on a deadline proposed by an agency and she had never been to therapy before and wanting to make changes in her life.

J and I worked together for about 8 months. Our work started slow and the trust took a long time to build. I felt like there were obstacles at every turn. When we began our work together I was subletting office space and she asked if the few books in the room were mine. When I said no she questioned why I didn't have any books in the room and said she judges people by the books they read. When I moved into my own office space and had my professionally relevant texts on the shelf I remember feeling interested in what my assessment would be. I wanted her to approve. Of what, I am not sure. Of me as a professional, as someone she could trust and be open with, someone she wanted to be around, I suppose.

I often felt like I was straddling a fine emotional line in our sessions. She would start to bring forth an emotion and then grow quiet and insular, she didn't like sitting with emotions that were difficult and would often come into session very guarded. I remember sitting with her and feeling this sense of a small child who needed someone to hold her and tell her she is good. I wanted to be that someone. She talked of her emotions as "too messy" and didn't like bringing it into the room. I asked her to make a mess. She was very observant of the world around her and

often defaulted to her intellectual self as her representative self. I saw myself in this behavior.

There were clear moments of trust building, like when she brought in the brochure for the degree program she applied for. Showed me her artwork for the first time, and when we bonded over the importance of Cat Stevens music. In addition to these moments there were clear components of the therapeutic relationship that she did not like. She would tell me that she felt like she was “supposed to perform” for me and she did not like the ethical component of seeing each other out in the world and my not engaging. She really did not like that I couldn’t say hi to her and yet, she would avert her gaze every time we would find ourselves in the coffee shop across the street from my office together.

I found myself caring about her, worrying about her in between sessions. She was forced to grow up at such a fast pace that she was never able to play and enjoy the freedom of being a child. She felt deeply responsible all of the time. This was resonant in me. There was a lot of countertransference that came into the room. The height of this came when we began to live the cycle of her relationships. She came to me and discussed that a friend had confided in her about committing an illegal act. I paused internally with the question “what are my legal and ethical obligations here?” and decided to pursue the feelings and responses that she was holding. After our session, I checked in with my supervisor to verify that there were no legal components. It was bad timing as I was rushing home to take care of my child and she was busy with her own family obligations. We were both distracted and the story didn’t fully translate. I called J back and told her that we needed to report. I lost her trust. She was very upset by this and as the next 24 hours unfolded I researched and discovered that I, indeed, made the right call the first time and there were no legal or ethical responsibilities that I was overlooking.

In our next session, I apologized, we talked about what happened and she decided to continue our work. We had three more sessions. All of which held an element of her pulling or pushing me away and me asking her to keep working. I

pointed out that we were in this cycle that she came to me with and that THIS is the work. I cried more in this month about this client, in and out, of session than I have cried in the previous year. I felt as though I had really done injury to this person and I wanted a chance to work through the rupture. I was in the role of her partners and in my role from previous relationships. She came in one morning and simply stated, "I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to keep coming here." I honored her request. Told her that she has done some deep and beautiful work and that she had a wonderful future ahead of her with education and her life pursuits. She left and I decided to walk the 3.5 miles home that day.

Walking home from our last session, my heart felt heavy. My body was numb, my head full of "what ifs", and my chest, my being, my Heart hurt. I couldn't help but feel as though I had just gone through a break up. Not the kind where you are years in and everyone involved knows just how dysfunctional it has become, rather, the kind where you think there is good chemistry and have just begun to allow yourself to imagine a future with this person and they show up to tell you it's not working out for them. This is the kind of heartache I am talking about. The kind that leaves you feeling blindsided and sad for a few days and leads you to question, "what went wrong" and ultimately leaves you with the answer, "nothing. This is just the way it goes sometimes." I have stopped going to the coffee shop across the street, partly for her but mostly for me.

Individuals and couples work brings love and loss. When a couple breaks up in session or out, I go through the loss of relationship as well. Although experienced differently from the clients experience and situation, I find myself sitting in heartbreak as well. To witness a relationship end is painful. To bear witness to a relationship where two people have worked and confronted pieces of themselves and brought you into their circle of trust to show them grace and kindness in a hard time, this is heartbreaking. I discuss and do grief work with all of my couples. Regardless of the work to be undertaken, there will be a change of the relationship as they currently know it. As I encourage this grief work with clients I often forget to

prepare myself for the same thing. I find that I, similarly to the clients, have investment in the relationship and experience a loss when the relationship ends (either through break up or ending therapy) as well.

Most recently, I had a lesbian identifying couple who came to me with complaints in the relationship that had been present from the get-go. They were about one year in and the one partner was completely closeted and had deep-rooted fears of intimacy and internalized oppression. We worked together for a bout 6 months before the out partner decided she couldn't stay in the relationship. That she needed someone who was ready to share an open and unashamed love. There had been so much progress over the course of 6 months with this couple and I found myself deeply engaged in the work with them. I looked forward to our sessions and to seeing what movement and what sticking points they were bringing with them. They were both very committed to working together and individually to confront the fears arising. They had two different paces and this left them at an impasse. They were able to end with love, respect, and a level of kindness that brought me to tears. After our last session I found myself overwhelmed with sadness. I felt heavy and tired. I was lost, confused, sad, and scared that I had not helped them as they needed me to. I had moments of wanting to grasp at the work we had done. Try to bargain...yes, this is grief. I am grieving. Time to take the self-care I told them to do and do the same for me. Protein, water, exercise, sleep. I was lucky enough to wake the next day and know that life goes on and we are all ok. If only all heartbreak was so easy. These are small ruptures that hurt and create space in me that I can't always fall into. Sometimes I need to go to the next client or play a game with my son, have dinner with my partner or see a friend.

This work is lived work, experienced as it is made and altering the ways that the therapist and the client move through the world. It is living and ever evolving from the dynamics and the events that bring us to the room together and the events we are coming from. Thus, love as it is experienced is different with each individual

encountered. This leaves me feeling comforted and terrified. I will continue to grow, love, feel, grieve, and experience heartbreak with every person I meet.

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