

Spiritual Direction, Creativity and Core Process Psychotherapy: Three Forms, One Presence

I so resonate with Julia Cameron, the beloved writer of many books on creativity, when she says she doesn't make a distinction between creativity and spirituality. Some religious and spiritual people can seem a bit life-less. It is as if there is a fear of really living freely. Creative endeavours can help break through this and help us live the freedom and aliveness we are made for.

Creativity and play is perhaps an attitude as much as it is an activity. But it can include a sort of fooling around, perhaps letting a simple chant or song well up from within you. Or doodling with crayons. Or trying – in five minutes so you don't get nervous – to write a few lines that you may call a poem. We can learn to spot the activities that help us know our alive-ness. Mostly we are helped in this by sharing such activities with others. Like many good things, it can be harder to do alone.

I have been surprised and delighted to notice a profound congruence between spiritual direction – I have been benefitting from this form for about three years now as a spiritual director – and Core Process Psychotherapy in which I trained in England. The latter is sometimes referred to as a psycho-spiritual practice. Its form is as follows: one sits with the other person without an agenda of 'fixing' or even healing. One has an appreciation that the work is supported by a wider healing presence in which both parties rest. Having followed contemplative paths in Christianity and Buddhism for quite a while now – I guess going on 30 years – this is the only form of psychotherapy I could practice – one that rests in contemplation. It is such a blessing for people to receive this from another. A setting where you won't be analysed or pressured to 'get better'

In Core Process we are trained in four qualities known in Sanskrit as the *Brahmaviharas* or divine abidings. These are *metta*/loving kindness, *karuna*/compassion, *upekha*/equanimity and *mudita*/sympathetic joy. To include joy unashamedly in the work of psychotherapy is quite novel for many. Clients look surprised when it becomes clear that I am interested in their joy.

In fact for some – well all of us really – who have experienced trauma, noticing and cultivating joy can be hugely difficult. It is as if the traumatic memories want to claim us and they somehow pull us in, not allowing room for much else. In Core Process one helps the client to gently be with difficulties as they arise – current or historical (and current difficulties may relate to historical ones) – but also and equally to learn how to rest in goodness. People may resist this. I may resist this. (I am not different from my clients.) I've noticed too that when our lives change positively this in itself can be challenging for people.

I have been so delighted with my experience of receiving spiritual direction. I have at times felt rejected by the church. When asked why I left the formal ministry I say that God got too big. South Africa is conservative in many ways including regarding religion, and the rural area in which I lived and ministered was even more conservative than the cities.

Sitting with my spiritual director Lindsay month after month I feel fully accepted. She is part of the Benedictine community and broadly but firmly part of the established church. This acceptance is balm for me. But also important for me is her experience of the body. We had met at a movement event that she facilitated and she is a practitioner of yoga and other movement forms and a dance teacher. Lindsay is able to receive my body with its sensations and expression in the time we share together. We may start the session standing. As needed, we move furniture and create space for movement – which is often very simple, perhaps just different postures or walking the space of the room, once creating a form which resembled the beginning of a spiral pattern. And I let her know, as we sit together, what sensations arise in my body as I notice these.

Awareness of the body is something that was new to me until I trained in Core Process Psychotherapy. Now I regard it as one of the most wonderful aids to wise living that I know. To live from the body provides a huge resource and offers information that cannot easily be arrived at in any other way. It is not cognitive nor is it linear but is full of a wisdom of its own.

Here's a piece I wrote about the body.

wondering¹

What

if I lived

at the speed

of my body?

I love atheism, secularism, (parts of) Christianity, Buddhism. And some of Islam that I've been exposed to.

And what compass do I choose by which to live?

I want to inhabit my body. To live in time, in tune with my form. This often means slowing down. Pausing maybe, stopping. Sensing into even just the body's pulse. Being at rest in my flesh and blood.

Is this not praise and thanks?

I am lucky in spiritual direction. I joke that I can talk about anything to my spiritual director, including things like facial hair. I'm sort of joking, but not much. We don't

¹ *Pleasure-in-relating* p 83.

have to talk about God at all. And I'm aware that in this, as in other things, having the right 'match' of person is everything.

Part of writing this article is to appreciate the common ground or common approach between spiritual direction and Core Process Psychotherapy. The aspects I have pointed to are the following:

- The confidence that arises through resting in loving Presence – that the work does not depend on oneself.
- The enquiry into joy – resonating and sharing in the joy of another.
- An appreciation of the richness of the experience of the body and including this with respect and reverence in the work.

These three areas are so essential to both of these forms – and I would say essential to all healing work and the arts.

As I move towards concluding, I wonder again about the relationship between creativity and God. For me, my creativity – be it a song or a piece of writing – has a need to be shared (mind you it wasn't always like that). It is this that seems to bring it to completion. Where and how it is shared feels important and requires discernment.

Contemporary Christian contemplatives such as Thomas Keating and Laurence Freeman speak of the relationship between self-knowledge and the knowledge of God – of knowing the self as being the first step to knowing God. If self-knowledge is a prerequisite to knowing God, how do we assist people – and ourselves – with this? Could this be where creativity comes in? Maybe creative expression is the practice of truth and freedom and leads to self-knowing – and this then allows for a more authentic relationship with God. If I think of myself, relationships of authenticity are so important. How would it be if we had relationships that we can rest in as we rest in God? How do we learn to know God also in and through our bodies? These are lovely questions to consider.

Might we return to the time when the mystics were considered the doctors of the soul? Might we find a way for us all that doesn't necessarily mean you have to go to a psychotherapist although that can be a wonderful resource? How can the road to self-knowledge become a more acknowledged and supported part of the spiritual journey?

Winding back to a consideration of psychotherapy (a clumsy word), Gerald May, the Christian writer and psychiatrist, speaks of many people leaving the established healing professions as there was no way they could integrate their spirituality within the existing models.² I know this is changing. Certainly in the practice of Core Process Psychotherapy there is no division. Spirituality is viewed as an ongoing enquiry with psychotherapy itself being seen as a spiritual journey. The phrase is used: awakening into contact. For some of us who are 'naturals' with God, to awaken into contact with other people can be the profound journey of a lifetime.

² *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit* p 201.

No doubt we are all God's creative project in process. And more and more the division between disciplines – and between faiths – will soften, with one tenderly informing the other. May we be part of that.

References

May, Gerald G. *Care of Mind/Care of Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction*. New York, HarperCollins, 1992.

Groves, Susan. *Pleasure-in-relating*. Athlone, Cape Town, Hands-On Books, an imprint of Modjaji Press, 2013. It can be ordered online through African Books Collective or through the author at www.susangroves.com.

Forthcoming publications by Susan Groves are *Cherishing the Wound* and *Presence in Relationship – Offering Core Process Psychotherapy*.