

The Wounded Facilitator:

The gift of counter-transference when facilitating transformative learning in groups

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Keywords

Art, metaphor, transference, counter-transference, transformative learning, facilitation, autoethnography, group dynamics, the Nigredo

What is the aim of the article?

Here, I aim to explore my own experiences of counter-transference in groups by referring to some specific case examples. I argue that counter-transference, based on my own subjective experience, can play a transformative role when facilitating groups. Furthermore, I aim to demonstrate that working with the arts and metaphor can reveal the counter-transference/ transference dynamic in the group. I share my own specific experience of working with metaphor and art-making to understand my counter-transference responses and to reveal group dynamics.

Why my interest in counter-transference?

I have facilitated groups for over 25 years, yet I still get stirred up, riled, discomforted, scared, defensive and anxious in groups. During my career, I have aspired to be consistently strong, courageous, competent and thoroughly expert in handling the swirl of group dynamics – the calm sea captain in a gale. However, I have let go of this aspiration because I am so affected by groups. I am like litmus paper to atmospheres, tensions and my emotions. I am both fired up by and burnt by group work. It is impossible for me to be unaffected. Instead of the calm sea captain, I am strapped to the mast and terrified when the going gets tough.

It wasn't until I trained as an Arts Psychotherapist over 10 years ago that I found a language to explain this storm of reactions: the language of transference and countertransference.

More fundamentally, my training in psychotherapy has validated my emotional responses and given me the tools to use my counter-transference as a guide for leading transformation in groups.

Counter-transference and transformative learning.

A transformative learning experience involves a deep and lasting change. Mezirow (1978), the grandfather of Transformative Learning Theory, argued that this kind of fundamental change involves a re-structuring of a person's world view: a paradigm shift. These paradigm shifts can be an intensely emotional process as we let go of one way of viewing the world in order to see the world anew. Transformation can evoke feelings of loss, disorientation and resistance.

I hope to dispel the belief that to feel negative, difficult and strong responses when facilitating groups is a sign of weakness, incompetence or immaturity. In my experience, transformative learning is often characterised by strong and intense emotions and a heightening of transference and counter-transference dynamics. As facilitators, we may feel compelled to meet this storm of intense emotion with an air of invulnerability, well defended in our role as Expert. Over the last year I have directly experimented with challenging this need to be invulnerable and the Expert, in my role as Course Director and Lead Facilitator on the Advanced Diploma in Facilitating Creative Collaboration for [Artgym Academy](#). Instead of being the Expert Facilitator, I have been exploring what it like to be the 'Wounded Facilitator'.

Who is the Wounded Facilitator?

My concept of the Wounded Facilitator is inspired the Jungian archetype of the Wounded Healer. C.G. Jung (1951) referred to the archetype of the analyst as the 'wounded healer' arguing that only a wounded physician can heal effectively. According to Jung, (ibid) the 'wounded healer', through undergoing a process of deep introspection and examination of his or her wounds, is able withstand, contain and transform the suffering of another.

To be a wounded facilitator is to drop the fantasy of invulnerability, and to actively embrace counter-transference responses as the 'Via Regia' (Freud,1913) to transformative learning in groups.

What is counter-transference?

Counter-transference, according to Jungian analyst Sedgewick (1994: 108) is our 'capacity to be wounded'. Sedgewick (1994: 105-6) argues for the necessity of neurotic counter-transference and that any kind of counter-transference is neither good or bad, and that most of these responses fall somewhere along a spectrum between neurotic and useful. Our endeavour, as facilitators, is to transform the neurotic into the useful. Counter-transference is useful when it is personal: attuning to our full range of emotions and embodied reactions – the good, the bad and the ugly.

Ringer (2002: 142), in his exploration of the application psychodynamic theory to group work and experiential learning describes counter-transference as:

The core means by which the leader reads the unconscious processes in the group. The key is to acknowledge that the leader is the integral part of the unconscious processes in the group and that the leader experiences feelings and intuitive responses that derive directly from the group unconscious.

(Ringer, 2002: 142)

In this article, I take a Jungian perspective when making sense of my own experiences of counter-transference. Jung argued (1946: 177) that the analyst needed to be 'psychologically infected' by the patient. In other words, to have a strong counter-transference response is the expected and acceptable condition of Jungian analysis.

As Jung puts it:

Often the doctor is in much the same position as the alchemist who no longer knew whether he was melting the mysterious amalgam in the crucible or whether he was the salamander glowing in the fire. Psychological induction inevitably causes two parties to get involved in the transformation of the third and themselves be transformed in the process.

(Jung, 1946: 199)

Here, I share some examples of my experience as a Wounded Facilitator in a group and reflect on my counter-transference: when I have been "stirred up" in the crucible or pot of transformation. I would like to make specific reference to my experience of using metaphor and art-making to illustrate how I 'stirred up the pot' in the group and in turn got 'stirred up'. The two specific examples I refer to, 'the warm blanket' and 'the dark sun', are drawn from times when I facilitated a group participating in The Advanced Diploma in Facilitating Creative Collaboration.

Case Example 1: The Warm Blanket

This one-year programme is intended for advanced practitioners with an emphasis on leading transformative learning and profound change in groups through applying creative-based methodologies.

The programme has five modules which include a series of face-to-face learning events. The first case example occurred in Module 1 during a three-day workshop. There were nine participants in the group and we were very much in the 'forming' stage (Tuckman, 1965). The group was in their first group process.

Notes from my journal – counter-transference responses

I feel a lulling feeling, like I am sitting in front of the fire. I feel comfortable, almost too cosy as if I am off guard. One of the participants likens the atmosphere to being like a warm blanket. I wonder silently – am I the warm blanket? I begin to feel strangely invisible as the group talk about the need to be less 'nice' with each other. It is like I am wearing an invisibility cloak, not seen and eavesdropping on a conversation.

I wonder aloud to the group, 'am I the warm blanket?' this provokes a lively discussion about the need for the group to 'whip off the blanket of niceness'. I am attempting to bring into the group awareness of possible transference, but I feel like I am the one being wrapped in the warm blanket! I feel 'stifled' but I am not sure why.

Reflections on my counter-transference after the event.

Who do I represent for the group? I feel like I am in the role of Mother and this image stirs up all kinds of emotions in me. I worry that maybe I am the smothering mother who is 'stifling' the group by being over-protective but I also feel like I am, in some way, being over protected in turn.

Barber (2012: 110) in his exploration of transference and counter-transference when facilitating change in groups asks the question "what sort of symbolic parent are you as a group facilitator?" I imagine myself as the

Mother who is like a 'warm blanket': the warm, protective, nurturing mother. But, what might they fear if I 'whip off the blanket?'

Boyd (1991) who has pioneered the examination of personal transformation in small groups through a Jungian lens, argues that the early stages of a group's consciousness can be experienced as the archetype of the Great Mother.

Such polarities as caring and abandoning, feeding and devouring, nurturing and denying are manifest in the group as it struggles to find its way.

(Boyd, 1991: 36)

In my experience, counter-transference responses are never straight forward, as they often pick up the polarities in a group. As I embody the metaphor of the warm blanket I feel the pull of polarities: to nurture and to deny comfort, to protect and to expose, to voice and to be silenced.

The more I sit with the image of warm blanket, the more I agree with Barber's (2012: 119) argument that there are "distinct differences between male and female related transference". He argues that maternal transference elicits far deeper, primitive material compared to the potentially unquestioning obedience of paternal transference. Our relationship with our mother is about survival and dependency. Maternal transference can stir up the pot in a more regressive way, provoking strong feelings of love and hate. For this reason, this metaphor of the warm blanket feels far from 'cosy'.

"Don't wake up the dog": a dialogue with the image of warm blanket

Working explicitly with metaphor, as a group facilitator, I would argue, is the 'royal road to the unconscious' (Freud, 1913). This case example, illustrates how I used metaphor as a facilitative intervention to heighten and reveal unconscious group dynamics via the use of my own counter-transference responses. As I embodied the metaphor of the warm blanket, I experienced a range of feelings from warmth and comfort to feeling stifled to another more disturbing feeling which I felt, at the time, unable to name.

Some images or feelings continue to haunt me long after the completion of a group learning experience. The image of the 'warm blanket' and the feeling it evoked, niggled me. I have learnt that these hauntings signal a need for some deep introspection and examining of wounds. So, many months later, I decided it was time to engage with the image of the 'warm blanket' which resulted in a naming of those disturbing feelings: the fear of shame and exposure.

This buried insight and affect emerged through engaging in a Jungian method of Active Imagination (Jung 2016). This a deliberate and conscious engagement with the images and metaphors that emerge from our imagination and unconscious. I set up a dialogue with the image of the 'warm blanket' with surprising results.

I imagined the warm blanket and what I saw, in my mind's eye, was an old dog blanket in brown and white check. It didn't look warm and cosy at all, but very lived-in, as it was used for a dog to lie on. Here is a snippet, from my journal, of this imaginal dialogue.

Louise: *who are you?*

Dog Blanket: *I am a blanket for a sleeping dog to lie on.*

Louise: *where are you?*

Dog Blanket: *by the fire and don't wake up the dog!*

Active Imagination is an exercise in being open to whatever emerges, no matter how strange, foolish or trite. It was as if my conscious mind was battling to block something emerging from my unconscious. 'Don't wake up the dog' felt like a warning to stop going any deeper: to let sleeping dogs lie and not stir up trouble for my conscious mind. As I persisted and stayed with the image, a memory, long forgotten, emerged. I remembered, as a young girl, accidentally tipping hot chocolate over myself in a hotel. My mother, without thinking, 'whipped off' my dress and ran to the hotel room to get me a clean dress. I sat in the restaurant in my vest and knickers, feeling mortified!

As I connected with this memory I experienced a flash of insight. I recalled, again, the group's need to 'whip off the blanket'. The action of whipping off a protective covering felt so exposing. On reflection, it felt more like a threat with a potential to shame. At the time, I was focussing on the image of the blanket rather than on the action of suddenly pulling off the blanket. This Active Imagination exercise revealed a potential paradox that was possibly in the group: a tension between the fear of being smothered, and over-protected, alongside a fear of being shamed; a desire to be hidden and invisible for fear of being exposed.

Whilst, in the group, we talked about a desire for honesty, openness, and sharing of our authentic feelings. In doing so, I would suggest, there were fears around being vulnerable, exposed and shamed. This is not surprising, as this was a group that was in the forming stage of group development. On the surface, this was a group grappling with being too 'nice', but maybe underneath the surface there were fears of being exposed.

The wound of shame

This deep dive into the metaphor also touches upon my own wounds, my fear of being shamed in a group. I agree with Ringer's (2002: 89-90) argument that shame is more of an issue in groups than in one-to-one situations. There is something potentially shameful about revealing hidden aspects of ourselves in a group. It is not surprising that the role of Expert can be a protective 'blanket' for facilitators: to bring our vulnerability into a group opens up the risk of feeling shamed and exposed.

When I have let go of the Expert mantle, I have experienced moments of deep connection with a group: a mutual meeting of our authentic selves that Buber (1958) referred to as an "I-Thou" moment. I have also felt naked, childlike and exposed. This desire for authentic connection mixed with the fear of shame, is a potent mixture that stirs up the group and the facilitator. For this reason, as Ringer, goes on to suggest (op cit) it is vital to attend to the emotional and psychological safety of the group. I would add to this and propose that the facilitator also attends to her/his own emotional and psychological safety when working at depth in groups.

Exploring my counter-transference responses, I have discovered, is one way to build emotional and psychological robustness without resorting to hiding behind the mantle of Expert.

In this case example, I have been 'stirred' up by a group dynamic that continues to percolate one year on. I have illustrated how I used a metaphoric intervention as a way to bring into awareness the unconscious

dynamics in the group. I have also explored how this metaphor continues to stir the pot, bring insight and uncover buried affect.

Case Example 2: The Dark Sun

The next example, takes a different angle. This time, with the same group, I am the one who stirs things up. This is Module 2 and the second three-day workshop. We are making a group painting. Participants are using paint and there is a lot of energy and laughter. I am invited to contribute. In the painting, there are two yellow suns. I take a brush and paint over the yellow sun on the right of the page, it's transformed into a black sun.

The Dark Sun: counter-transference responses

I am feeling childlike and regressed. The atmosphere feels primitive: on the edge of chaos. I feel ungrounded as if we will all fly up into the air. As I blacken the second sun, it is like coming back down to the earth – I feel grounded again. Black settles me as I listen to the laughter and noise surrounding me.

Once the painting is finished there is a discussion about The Black Sun. One of the participant's feels disturbed by the image. Once again, I feel like I am being talked about but not seen. I say to the group "it was me, I painted the Black Sun". I sound as if I am making a challenge and a declaration of 'I AM the Black Sun'!



The nigredo: Image from my Journal

Reflections on my counter-transference after the event

The image of the Black Sun haunts me. There is something paradoxically disturbing and steadying about the image. I feel uncomfortable with my action of overlaying the sun with blackness and wonder if I am acting out; what is the challenge I am making to the group?

The more I stay with the image and the blackness, the sadder I feel. I feel the weight of grief. Over the last five years, three close members of my family have died. The Black Sun, I believe, was my unconscious communication to the group asking the question, 'can I bring my grief into this group?' and 'do I have the right as the facilitator?' In my journal, I wrote:

How can I lead and facilitate when my heart carries the hard stone of grief? So many dead people deaden me. I can't always be light and warm. Under the warm blanket is the rock face of loss - raw, peeled, stripped and ravaged.

Amplifying the image of the Black Sun.

In order to make this counter-transference response 'useful', I propose another Jungian Method of Archetypal Amplification. Romanyshyn (2010: 6) refers to the images that emerge from the unconscious as 'psychological companions' who 'haunt our presence and inform our ways of being'. Archetypal Amplification is a way to understand the message that my psychological companion, The Black Sun, was seeking to convey.

Archetypal Amplification draws parallels between personal material and more universal and ubiquitous sources such as myths, fairy tales, ancient religions and esoteric traditions like alchemy (Jung, 1947). To amplify the Black Sun is to seek out its universal quality.

Alchemy and the Nigredo

Alchemy was a metaphor used by Jung to describe the journey of individuation: to become whole and integrated. The Black Sun or Sol Niger, is one of the most important phases in alchemy, the nigredo. The nigredo, according to Jung, is an encounter that produces suffering as "the soul finds itself in the throes of melancholy locked in a struggle with the shadow" (in Marlan, 2005: 10).

The archetype of the alchemical Black Sun, according to Jungian analyst Marlan (2005: 22), refers to the nourishment that can be found in being wounded, it is 'when psychological blood flows' dissolving hardened defences.

I have discovered a nourishment in my wounds and a treasure that can be found in dark places. The Black Sun is a dark light that illuminates what is hidden and feared within myself. My psychological companion offers me the gift of wisdom that comes from suffering. To be a Wounded Facilitator, is to find strength in vulnerability. I recognise that for my work to be transformative, I need to walk in the darkness, as well as in the light.

The phase of the nigredo in group work acknowledges the darkness, the despair and the grief that can accompany personal transformation. To be transformed is to give up the old and let go of what no longer serves us. To dissolve our hardened defences is difficult and exposing, but ultimately it is the stuff of what makes our work as facilitators life changing for others.

I truly believe that if we are to facilitate personal transformation in groups, we need to acknowledge the full breadth of what makes us human. My grief, as well as my joy, has a place in my work. The Black Sun offers permission to be fully human rather than perfect.

Conclusion

Romanyshyn (2010) argues for an imaginal approach to education, and for educators to develop a 'metaphoric sensibility'. This imaginal approach to transformative education acknowledges the primacy of unconscious

dynamics and processes in facilitating change. To develop a 'metaphoric sensibility' is "the first step if one is to make a place for the unconscious" (Romanyshyn, 2005, 9) in transformative learning. This metaphoric sensibility places the 'image' at the heart of transformation and serves the whole person: mind, body and soul. To acknowledge the reality of the unconscious in the work we do, as facilitators, requires our ability to work with counter-transference.

I have applied a metaphoric sensibility to my work as a facilitator through attuning to all of my counter-transference responses, useful and neurotic, and viewing these responses through the lens of metaphor, the imagination and archetypes. The case examples illustrate how I work with art and metaphor in three distinctive ways:

1. To explore my own counter-transference responses as a way to understand what is bubbling away under the surface of a group.
2. As a facilitative intervention to uncover and raise awareness of unconscious group dynamics.
3. As a personal exploration of my own 'wounds' in service of my practice.

Jung argued for the 'self-education' of the analyst as a prerequisite for working with the unconscious. He believed that a deep exploration of our unconscious as a practitioner was a 'touchstone for outer objectivity' (in Romanyshyn, 2010: 9). Writing this article has involved sharing my wounded self and my messy counter-transference responses. At times, I have felt the vulnerability of my younger self mortified and exposed in her vest and knickers! I do this in service of proposing that to transform others, we need to be transformed and this can only happen when we, as facilitators, jump into the alchemical pot and get stirred up.

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