

## WHY VALIDATION IS NOT A “THERAPY”

By Naomi Feil

“AGE DOES NOT MAKE US CHILDREN, AS SOME SAY:

*IT FINDS US TRUE CHILDREN...*”

GOETHE

Webster’s dictionary defines therapy as... “the treatment of disease, stemming from the Greek, therapeia, to cure...” From 1951 to 1956, at Columbia University in New York, I studied therapists: Sigmund Freud, Karen Horney, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, Alfred Adler, Eric Erikson, Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow, and other humanistic psychologists.

Deeply embedded in these therapies is the concept that present behavior can only be understood in terms of the past. As a young student, I completely incorporated their beliefs: **the way a human being has lived: the way he has faced his biological, social and**

**psychological life struggles, plus the culture in which he now lives and has lived (Fromm), determine his present day behavior.** “The therapist’s attention, to be productive, must be complete and without reservation. Understanding the patient is the basis of all Technique. The therapist must become aware of his own unconscious; must hold non-judgmental positive regard for others; good listening skills; and most important, must use *empathy*, the key to healing. Carl Rogers, founder of client-centered therapy, described empathy as “central to the success of therapy.” When therapists view clients with “unconditional positive regard,” listening actively, *feeding back thoughts and feelings* with sensitivity and accuracy, healing happens. **“Cure depends upon the patient’s understanding of the mistakes in his life style. *Expressing emotions is not enough. Insight is crucial.*” (American Handbook of Psychiatry II).** The therapist responds to the feelings, not the facts. “The patient finds emotional release from feelings heretofore repressed, increasing

awareness...and increased ability to recognize his own feelings openly, and without fear. This is the beginning of and the basis for insight.”(Rogers) Insight is the click, the “Aha!” when the patient gains a new perception of the cause and effect of his behavior.

Insight is when emotion and cognition collide. *With insight comes cure.* “This reorientation and reorganization of the self,” (Rogers) permits the client to deal with the world outside, adjust, and solve his own problems. **The patient is motivated to change.** His suffering brought him to **seek therapy.**

Validation theory and method evolved through years of work with very old people diagnosed with a dementia. In 1963, I began working with 30 cognitively impaired residents, with no history of mental illness, aged 78-101, at The Montefiore Home for the Aged in Cleveland, Ohio. My goals were to “renew independent functioning, self-awareness, stimulate existing brain functions, enhance communication, increase social controls and feelings of well being.” (Feil) **For five years,** I tried to help these nursing

home residents become aware of the acting- out behaviors that isolated them; to achieve insight, to orient them to outside reality.

I used the skills I had incorporated in school. First, recognizing that each individual is unique and valuable, I established close relationships by accepting negative emotions, showing respect.

When Mr. Rose accused the administrator of The Home of castrating him, I listened, without judgment. I became aware of my own fear of authority figures. I tried to help Mr. Rose gain insight to change his behavior; to become aware that he frightened other residents. His diatribes decreased. But he was not cured. He continued to vent his anger. I tried to orient him to reality, to help him confront the administrator. Mr. Rose turned his back and walked away. I tried other psychological interventions to cure him, such as behavior modification: positive and negative reinforcement. When he swore, I walked away. When he smiled, I supported him. I tried diversion and re-direction. He withdrew inward and died. Mr. Rose, and hundreds like him, taught me.

Mr. Rose had been beaten by his father, and had never rebelled. He had stored, deep within him, a lifetime of fury. Now, in old age, with physical damage to his brain, when his controls had evaporated, his rage exploded. Carl Jung wrote: “The cat ignored, becomes a tiger.” Suppressed emotions give pain. Suppressed emotions that are expressed to *an empathic listener*, lessen. The client feels release and relief. (Rogers) I learned, too late, that Mr. Rose was using the administrator of The Home, the authority figure, as a symbol for his father, who had abused him. Now, at age 86, he had to vent his backpack of rage to find relief. **He wanted to heal himself as best he could.** He could not transfer his rage to me. His focus was always on the administrator. He needed me to feel his fury. I never felt what Mr. Rose felt. I lacked empathy.

He, and the many, many hundreds of very old people with whom I work, **do not want insight.** They need to express emotion without

**acknowledging the reason underlying the emotion.** They lack the motivation, the cognition, and the ability to understand their mistakes. *They do not want to change. They do not want to adjust to the world outside.* They have rooted. **They do not seek therapy.** They want to resolve having lived, without reflective self-awareness.

It took five years for me to learn that I had never achieved empathy. Elizabeth Grogg, aged 87, was my first teacher.

I can see her now as she tucks her battered black purse under her armpit, accusing her roommate: “take off my pink silk pants, you whore.!” To me, she shrills, flapping her incontinent pad in my face: “Get out of my way, Fay! I have to mail this envelope! The post office closes in five minutes!”

Carl Jung wrote:...”the psyche works at its own errors...Feeling shapes time...Thus do we pick up old relationships again where we left off...” Fay was a co-worker at the large electric company where Mrs. Grogg served for 52 years as a file-clerk bookkeeper.

Being an excellent worker is her reason for existence. Her purse symbolizes her filing cabinet. She hoards, filling it with kleenex, toilet paper, pencils, other people's glasses, fulfilling her need to be in control. Throughout the day, she works. The nursing home has become her "company."

One day, she yanked at my blouse, shrieking, "Fay, I can't find the post office. I'm lost."

Jessie Hecht's shrill voice pierced the day room: "Don't worry, honey. It's better when you're crazy. Then it doesn't matter what you lose."

I listened and heard Elizabeth Grogg's fear and trembling. Her voice was shrill, high pitched. I looked close into her eyes, mirroring her wild panic, her total despair. The despair of a lost child, abandoned forever, without hope. I felt empathy. Elizabeth Grogg and I became one, for a moment. Her fear vanished. She walked with me to her room. She never lost her way to the post office again.

Edith Stein, a German philosopher, writes that empathy is like “falling in love. When the moment of enrapture hits us, it catches us unaware... It is not so much a behavior as it is a happening.”

The Validation Worker can facilitate this “happening,” using Validation verbal and non-verbal techniques, but when it happens, it happens without cognition. Healing occurs when one human being connects with another. “A special alignment spontaneously takes place.” (Buber) Validation is healing. It is ongoing until the old human being dies. It is not a cure. It is therapeutic, not “Therapy.”