‘Healer’ as Identity and Therapeutic Aggression

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What is Therapeutic Aggression? How can knowing about Therapeutic Aggression help us in our Shamanic Reiki practice?

I first heard the term ‘Therapeutic Aggression’ when I was a graduate student in the early eighties at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Co. My master’s degree program was entitled “Tibetan Buddhist and Western Psychology”. It was long ago renamed: “Contemplative Psychotherapy”.

My work at Naropa intended a contemplative approach to psychotherapy, which did not exclusively focus on the client, but also recognized the awareness and engagement of the therapist as part of the overall environment for healing.

This is my understanding of Therapeutic Aggression, from the above context:

Actions or statements made by the therapist that serve to ease her or his own anxiety or discomfort in response to a client’s behavior or sharing in a session.

The therapist may be aware of responding to ease his or her own anxiety or may be completely unaware of this. The conscious or unconscious goal is to push to client to some form of change. Either in the immediate moment – such as to move the session beyond an awkward moment instead of allowing a space of uncertainty for the client to experience, or long term, such as to direct the work toward goals, which the therapist sees as productive.

Therapeutic Aggression may be blatant or more subtle and interpersonal.

Blatant examples of Therapeutic Aggression that I see in our modern therapeutic context include substituting authentic care and compassion rooted in an awareness of the inseparability of spiritual, social and environmental factors that contribute to imbalance - with a focus on drugs and strategic techniques aimed solely at reducing symptoms.

The more subtle or interpersonal aspects of Therapeutic Aggression are the edges of exploration for our Shamanic Reiki Work. They involve the ego identity of the healer. One of our most important tools is our self-awareness. The easiest way to understand whether we’re doing this or not, and to bring awareness to our own process, is to contemplate some examples of Therapeutic Aggression.

Example One

Your client is awkward and stammering in attempting to express how she or he is feeling. The person is taking a long time to finish, and there is a lot of awkward space in how he or she is expressing, so you help them describe their feelings:

*“So, you feel inadequate when you’re at work. You don’t feel that you’re being recognized for what you offer.”* (This is different than paraphrasing what they ‘ve shared with you, after they’ve done so.)

Upon deepening your awareness, you may recognize:

Your own discomfort in sensing and sitting with the awkwardness and space

Your attempt to protect your client from feeling inadequate, which has been activated in the space

Your desire for your client to be or feel other than what is occurring in the moment; you want them to move beyond it or drop it to feel ‘adequate and good’.

Example Two

Your client shares vulnerability about issues with their only child. You cut off their feelings and sharing, and project your ‘intuitive’ inisights onto them:

“*You and your daughter will at some point experience a separation. It will be hard for you, but you’ll both need that time.”*

Upon deepening your awareness, you may recognize:

Your own family issues and losses and reactions have been triggered

You have stopped listening from the heart and have jumped into your head

You are acting as if you know this person’s future, yet this is your own defense mechanism; you’ve placed their experience in a box that makes you feel superior, ‘psychic’ or in control

Example Three

Your client shares about a feeling. You listen and allow space. Then you have an ‘insight’ and say:

*“That relates back to your father issues and the abandonment you feel.”*

Upon deepening your awareness, you may recognize:

You have stopped listening from the heart and have jumped into your head

You have usurped an opportunity to convey compassion and allow space for your client to explore feelings – instead placing her or his experience in a box that makes you feel more comfortable, ‘smart’ and/or separate from what is expressed.