

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER WORK ON SELF

I once heard about somebody who asked Karen Horney what to do about his neurosis and received the answer that reading her books attentively was already doing something.

Also Freud, at the beginning of his therapeutic adventure, believed in the value of sharing with his clients his view of the mind in general and his emerging therapeutic theory. And, of course, psychoanalytic insight originated in an important way from Freud's self-analytic experience, and the value of self-analysis was shared by those in his circle—along with a realistic understanding of its limitations. With the passing of time, however, self-analysis was not only neglected but definitively inhibited by the opinion of practicing psychoanalysts in general.

One exception to the growing opposition of professionals to the effort on the patients' part to analyze themselves was Homey, who wrote her classic on the subject when she was still one of the senior training analysts at the New York Institute of Psychoanalysis. I personally view the widespread injunction of therapists to their patients not to attempt to clarify themselves as an expression of implicit authoritarianism, insecurity, and implicit alliance with a monopoly of experts, and I believe we cannot afford it at a time when our collective predicament depends much on individual human transformation and when we cannot afford not arousing

the potential and motivation of individuals to work on themselves to the extent that they can.

While it is true that intellectualization can compete with the therapeutic process inside the individual mind or in a therapeutic relation, I suspect that self-analysis was mostly forgotten as an implicit result of psychotherapeutic authoritarianism in the profession, particularly in the course of the pre-humanistic years. Thus it constitutes also an expression of the monopolistic attitude of psychoanalysis as an institution—which through each individual analyst is saying to the analysands, not only "don't go anywhere else for help," but also "don't try to heal yourself. I'll do it for you."

I take the position here that self-study can be not only a complement to psychotherapy in a professional, individual, or group setting, but can also go a long way with the support of the information in this volume.

Not only have ancient and hallowed traditions enjoined us to know ourselves but, we may say, the self-therapizing impulse (and more generally speaking the impulse to optimize one's consciousness) is a natural, healthy, and wise response to life difficulties. I am well aware of the enormous value of personal relationship in the healing of relationship problems and of the necessity of some persons to undergo, not only a period of therapeutic relationship, but also a period of therapeutic regression in the context of such relationship, before healing can take place—but I want to underscore that even in an interpersonal situation we may say that it is the individual who ultimately does the work. We may say that assisted psychotherapy is a specialized and particularly helpful situation in which to conduct self-study, yet what we discover about ourselves and how we envision what we discover is ultimately up to us. In view of this, I have espoused throughout many years of my life what I call an ethos of working on oneself and even a broadcasted view that in our critical and turbulent time, psychotherapy should be viewed as extra-help to a population of people ideally educated to keep their houses clean, so to speak, rather than a substitute for it.

It is now several years since I have been giving groups of people not only information such as is contained in this book but also tools to work with each other, supervised along the way,

and I know that this process has been extremely significant in the lives of many who had already had many previous experiences with psychotherapy. Yet, in that situation I present ideas such as those in this book in the context of a mere introduction to working on oneself, and the reader may, in view of that, understand to what extent I regard the present book as no more than an introduction to self-study.

Yet, as Karen Horney did in regard to her own work, I have envisaged the process of reading it as already a form of working. In particular I have imagined that the reader, as he or she has moved from one to another hall of portraits deriving from literature, psychology, or my own cumulative experience and its elaboration, would have felt as if she had been walking in a hall of mirrors reflecting back to her different aspects of her personality. For those who still, after reading, ask themselves, "What can I do now with this?" and are not part of an experiential teaching situation or community as I have described, I have written this chapter.

First of all I would like to endorse that aspect of "working on oneself" which is the acknowledgment of the truth about oneself and one's life in spite of the discomfort or pain that this may involve—in other words, intimate confession.

Just as, in Christian language, it is said that the acknowledgment of sin can be the gateway for contrition, purification, and eventual salvation, we may say in more contemporary terms that anyone who fully acknowledges psychological enslavement to neurotic needs will feel a desire for liberation animated by the intuition of a spiritual freedom. In other words, he will intimately aspire or pray to be free from the passionate realm, so as to breathe loftier air.

Together with endorsing this wish for transformation and this turning from the world to the divine, I want to emphasize at the same time that the teaching strategy involved in this work is not only one of self-observational focus, but includes the development of a neutrality vis-a-vis the study of the "machine," a neutrality in which the desire for change is not

"acted out" in a precipitated and self-manipulative attempt to "perfect oneself."¹

Though behavior modification will be the focus of another stage in the inner work, this next stage of actively seeking the development of interpersonal virtue could hardly be tackled without the background of thorough self-awareness. Centuries of institutionalized do-goodism in all the higher civilizations clearly demonstrates that without self-understanding, self-intentional virtue can only be accomplished at the expense of repression and the impoverishment of consciousness.

When one practices the pursuit of self-knowledge in an attitude of prayerful aspiration and objective recognition of one's aberration, and yet at the same time seeks to make space in one's mind for such present imperfections as are unavoidable as a consequence of the imprints of past experience and the inevitable duration of the self-realization process, one comes to discover that self-understanding is sufficient to itself. Indeed, the truth about ourselves can free us, for once we have truly understood something about ourselves, it will change without "our" attempt to change it. True insight into what we do and how we do it transforms our obsolete responses into idiocies which are likely to fall by the wayside or lose power over our essential intentions.

Whatever is valid in regard to awareness of our aberrations in general applies, of course, most pointedly to awareness of our chief feature and ruling passion, which involves the perception of the gestalt of one's many traits and their dynamic connection to these central foci.

In writing the nine preceding chapters I have implicitly assumed that the reader, coursing through them, will identify more with some characters than with others, and that for some of them self-recognition in the light of one particular set of traits and dynamics may come both spontaneously and effectively. Indeed, believing that the spelling-out of that character throughout the book can serve as a self-diagnostic instrument and also believing that knowledge of one's chief feature can

¹The subtlety of this orientation, and other key issues, in work-on-self is spelled out in detail by E.J. Gold in his collection of essays, *The Human Biological Machine as a Transformational Apparatus* (Nevada City, CA: Gateways Books, 1985).

make an individual free from its tyranny (as center of the psyche) make me feel very pleased.

For those who have not come to such self-recognition through reading the book alone, self-study oriented to an insight into their "chief feature" will remain as the next most important aspect in the task of coming to know themselves better.² Sometimes self-recognition is being resisted as a consequence of not having yet achieved the ripeness to see oneself objectively; in such cases insight will have to await this ripening, and the pursuit of self-recognition is likely to constitute a stimulus for acknowledging psychological realities as they are.

I advise those of my readers who have come to a realization of what the dominant passion is (and the corresponding fixation) to begin a course of additional self-study through the writing of an autobiography that takes into account such insights. This autobiography should include early memories—particularly the memories of painful situations and experiences in early family life; and it should become clear how, throughout the story of childhood, character was formed; particularly, how it was formed as a way of coping vis-a-vis painful circumstances.

To those undertaking this exploration, I recommend that they seek to immerse themselves in their memories as they write, and to make sure that their narration does not lapse into abstractions, but that it reflects the sounds, the sights, the recollected actions, attitudes, and feelings of the past. Don't hurry, but welcome the opportunity to be in touch with your memories for whatever time it takes.

When immersing yourself in your experience of the past, seek to cultivate the attitude of an impartial observer. Write as one who merely reports on the facts, inner experiences, thoughts, decisions, actions, or reactions of the past. After the story of childhood, observe both your growth and your ego-growth during adolescence, a time when the pain of childhood becomes conscious of itself, a time when the yearning for what was missing in childhood gives shape to the earliest dreams and life

²To assist in the process I am providing some guidelines to differential diagnosis in an appendix.

projects. After this, as you continue with your life story, you may observe the living-out of these early dreams or ideals.

Make out of the writing of this autobiography a study in the origins and development of your particular character-centered on your particular ruling passion and fixation. When you finish analyzing your past, in terms of this basic structure, you will be in a better position to observe your "machine" in ordinary life and in the here and now.

After the study of your past life, you will be prepared to undertake an ongoing self-analysis from the point of view of these ideas—i.e., an ongoing self-administered Protoanalysis: the processing of daily experience in the light of the psychological understanding discussed in this book. This will involve the discipline of self-observation and also a discipline of retrospection—a chewing-up of recent experience in the light of "work ideas."

Since a relevant work idea, in connection with this discipline, is the recognition of the particular usefulness of attending to "negative emotions," and, since these are painful states caused by the frustration of the passions, it may be said that an inevitable aspect of this work is what Gurdjieff used to call "conscious suffering"—a willingness to stay with such experiences as need to be observed and investigated.

The ideal material to process in one's writing is that of painful and unsatisfactory moments in the day: moments of frustration, guilt, fear, hurt, pride, solitude, and so on. In particular, examine episodes that may be felt as "wrongly lived": times when one feels that one's behavior or words were not what they could have been, and one looks for an alternative, wishing to "re-write" the episode in one's life. It is to these that one should begin to apply the book's information, seeking for the operation of the passion—one's ruling passion, in particular—and seeking also to identify the traits or attitudes, linking this behavior to one's generalized way of being.

In addition to the ongoing writing-up of painful interpersonal episodes and their analysis, one should seek to include more and more the experience of existential pain: i.e., the pain of feeling (perhaps increasingly) one's mechanicalness, the conditioned nature of one's personality, one's lack of ultimate reality and, especially, the lack of a sense of truly being.

We might say that the ordinary condition of the mind is half full and half empty in regard to the sense of being. We are only half conscious of our unconsciousness, only half aware of our disconnection with what should be the core of a human being's experience. Or rather, we might say that we have obscured an old, too painful sense of existential vacuum with a false sense of being that is supported in the various illusions peculiar to each character.

Awareness of endarkenment is the deepest aspect of conscious suffering—yet burning in this pain, for anyone who plunges into it, is the source of the most precious fuel for the work of transformation. I would recommend to those who have thus applied themselves to self-observation and journal writing for 3 or 4 months to re-read what I have written under the heading of "Existential Psycho-dynamics," (in the chapters corresponding to their ego types) and that, drawing on their observations, they write a statement of both corroboration and amplification.

Work of self-observation such as I have been recommending is not only an occasion for the development of an observing self, which is an intrinsic aspect of progress along the path of self-knowledge; growth of the capacity to be a witness of oneself, in turn, is a factor that supports the harvesting of psychological insight.

Of the various disciplines used to develop a self-aware, non-robotic, and centered stance, I particularly recommend, as a beginning, the task of ongoing belly-centered awareness as described by Karlfried von Durckheim in his book *Hara*.³ Essentially, the practice consists in maintaining throughout daily life a sense of presence at a point about four fingers under the navel, coupled with abdominal relaxation, relaxation of the shoulders, alignment of the body axis to gravity, and breathing awareness.

An additional recommendation to those who share an interest in continuing to use this book beyond its reading, is to further develop their ability to experience the moment without

³Von Durckheim, Karlfried Graf, *Hara: The Vital Center of Man* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1962).

conceptualization or judgment, which may be done through the practice of *vipassana* meditation.

The combination of self-study and meditation has been one of the constant features of my work, and the natural consequence of a schooling in both Buddhism and the "Fourth Way." After nearly 20 years of experimentation, I have come to the conviction that the most suitable background for self-study proper is that of *vipassana*, with particular emphasis on the mindfulness of sensations and emotions, while the practice of *samatha*, with its emphasis on tranquillity, is the most appropriate for the second stage of the work—where the focus is on behavior and development of the virtues.

A number of books on *vipassana* are in print and may serve both as a stimulus and a basis of wider understanding of the topic, yet I'll finish this set of suggested prescriptions with the following *vipassana* instructions that may be put in practice from this very day on:

- Sit, either on a chair or, preferably, in the half-lotus posture or on a meditation bench.
- Close your eyes and relax. Relax your shoulders, in particular be sure you relax your tongue—more connected to internal dialogues than is usually realized. Let your body hang from your spine and sink, if possible, into your belly. Relax your hands and feet, too.
- Attend to your breath, now.
- Allow your internal animal to do the breathing, if possible, or your lower brain—rather than telling yourself to breathe in and to breathe out in a military fashion.
- Now, add the awareness of the rising and falling of your upper abdomen to the awareness needed to drop muscle tensions and to be in touch with your breathing. Seek actually to sense the abdominal wall at the epigastrium (i.e., the triangle region under

the tip of the sternum and between the descending lower ribs) as it rises and falls within each breathing cycle. Be in touch with your "solar-plexus" as your abdominal wall rises and falls with each breathing cycle.

While the above may be sufficient practice for several meditation sessions, it is only a back-bone of the *vipassana* practice proper. Once you have attempted it and developed some proficiency at it, regard your breathing as a reminder to ask yourself, with every in-breath the question, "What do I experience now?" In this manner, the meditation exercise becomes one of an ongoing awareness of mental events without forgetfulness of the breath or of the abdominal focus.

The question "What do I experience now?" need not be put in words, of course. The very act of breathing can be taken as the equivalent of a wordless question, or a wordless reminder to be in touch with whatever is happening in the body, feelings, and subtler aspects of the mind.

While the above corresponds to contemporary attempts in psychotherapy to be in touch with the "here and now," the distinctive characteristic of *vipassana* practice is a *particular attitude* toward ongoing experience:- a centered attitude, comparable to that which we have discussed in connection with the awareness of daily life; a neutral attitude of making space for whatever is there, an attitude of panoramic availability of attention. More deeply, yet, it is an attitude of not grasping for anything and not rejecting anything--an attitude of openness and non-attached equanimity.

Perhaps the most important thing I can say to anybody who has followed me thus far by putting into effect my suggestions is to go beyond self-study, self-awareness, and self-insight proper, to an increasing measure of confession in regard to the understanding thus far gained of the personality. This may have come about spontaneously—for what we learn about ourselves tends to come into our communication, yet there is something that may be cultivated to the extent that we understand that not only is truth compatible with a successful life but also shared truthfulness (in certain chosen relationships) can be a path by itself; and conversely the inability or

unwillingness to be genuine, at least in such chosen relationships, contributes to the perpetuation of our self-imprisonment in the world at large.

An alternative to a resolution to increase transparency in regard to self-insight in the life of one's individual friendships and family relations may be an association with like-minded people interested in going further through these ideas. To such a group my main recommendation would be to share, not only in general terms, but to quote specific pages of journal writing with freedom to censor and an acknowledgment of what censorship was introduced. Sharing alone, I can anticipate from past experiences of groups, will be a significant stimulus to the ongoing work, from the moment of the group formation on. Another piece of advice is to use the time of being together as an occasion to practice meditation together and also a psychotherapeutic exercise in couples best carried out with changing partners throughout successive sessions. This is an exercise consisting in the alternation between what I call a "free monologue" (more exactly, a free monologue in meditative context) and a retrospective commentary on the same in terms of interpersonal roles, character traits, and manifestations of resistance. While the former exercise is conducted in couples, it is useful to carry out the retrospective discussion in groups of 4 or 6 (where two speak at a time, in the presence of the others). I quote the following description of the free monologue from a joint meeting with E. J. Gold under the auspices of the Melia Foundation, in Berkeley, California:⁴

"I'd like you to close your eyes, and make yourself comfortable and relaxed, but with a straight spine. Make like a column, letting gravity pass through it. Let your body be relaxed, and let your mind be as it wants to be. Feel your body; feel your breath. In a couple of minutes I'll ask you to open your eyes in such a way that that doesn't change anything of your internal state."

(The pairs sat quietly for a few moments.)

"When it is time to open your eyes, look not at your partner's face, but at their belly. Just let the visual impressions

⁴Naranjo, C., in "Transformation and the Human Potential Movement," *Talk of the Month* journal, no. 85 (Nevada City, CA: Gateways Books, 1990).

come in: see without looking. Watch yourself without interfering, be aware without an agenda, and if you find yourself getting into thinking or body tension, you can close your eyes again and try once more from zero. Now, open your eyes and stay in zero.

"So with your eyes open, there you are, sitting in the presence of somebody else, and still you don't have to think. You don't have to do anything about being in the presence of somebody else. Allow yourself just to be, or, as the Taoist instructions for meditation put it, allow yourself to be like an idiot—which is a little more difficult in the presence of somebody.

"Now, very slowly start moving your gaze upwards to your partner's chest, continuing to sit with a silent mind and a relaxed body. Continue going up, very slowly, until you rest on your partner's throat. Feel if there is a different taste; a different quality to being there. Finally, your gaze arrives at your partner's mouth. While one of you continues to be attentive to the simple presence of their partner, the other will begin to speak. The words are given no significance by either party, they are merely sounds.

"The rules of the game will not be those of psychoanalysis, which is to say letting the mind go where it wants to go, nor those of the awareness continuum (i.e., expressing what your ongoing experience is). If you are a speaker, you are absolutely free. There is no rule about what you talk about. You just talk. The only rule is that you continue to observe yourself, that you are aware of yourself. And every now and then, as a recommendation, throw in some of your awareness of yourself into what you are saying."

For any group that has come thus far in implementing these suggestions, another step could be a measure of supervision, for which I find myself in a position of recommending a number of people that have trained at it under my direction during the last ten years or so.

This, in turn, could be a transition to the second stage of the work—which focuses on the cultivation of the higher feelings or virtues, and the selective inhibition of the most destructive conditioned responses—a subject that goes beyond the compass of the present volume.

Since after many years of teaching the material in this book to psychotherapists I consistently have seen how significantly it has affected their clinical practice, I cannot help feeling that the impact of this book—making these ideas available to a much wider professional audience—will make itself felt in the still wider community of those undergoing psychological treatment. This, naturally, contributes to my satisfaction in releasing this volume, and also causes me to want to say something specifically to those among my readers who are psychotherapists.

I want to address myself very briefly to a question that I have often been asked: "How should one apply these ideas in psychotherapy?" — only to say that it may not be the most fruitful question to ask. Though I have shared some observations which have arisen from my own practice as a gestaltist at the second International Gestalt Conference in Madrid (1987),⁵ and might write someday how I have implicitly used the same information working with therapeutic communities (where a considerable portion of the benefits derive from the friction between different personalities and from the occasions with which individuals are provided to see things through each other's eyes), now rather than attempting to produce any set of notions as how to apply the understandings in this book to psychotherapy, I want to say that I, personally, never endeavored to apply them intentionally, and that I also feel like recommending to others to let the ideas "work by themselves"—that is to say, to let them seep into their practice in an organic and spontaneous way.

It is my conviction that a sharp perception of character is one of the best supports of effective psychotherapeutic intervention, whatever its modality, and since I also believe that character constitutes the skeleton of neurosis, I am convinced that a character-focused therapy is necessarily more to the point than one concerned with symptoms and memories only. Consequently, with the trust that this knowledge will be illuminating, orienting, and inspiring in creative ways to those who are assisting others in their healing and growth, I think that

⁵Naranjo, C., "Gestalt and Protoanalysis" in *Gestalt Therapy: The Attitude and Practice of an Atheoretical Experientialism* (Nevada City, CA: Gateways Books, 1993).

it only remains for me to emphasize the distance that mediates between intellectual and experiential understanding, and to suggest that the best that any professional may do by way of applying these ideas will then be to verify them in himself or herself—for the rest will follow naturally.