

The Primacy of Human Presence

Gendlin, E.T. (1990) The small steps of the therapy process: how they come and how to help them come. In G. Lietaer, J. Rombauts, & R. Van Balen (Eds.) Client-centered and experiential psychotherapy in the nineties. P. 205-224 Leuven:Leuven University Press

“I want to start with the most important thing I have to say: the essence of working with another person is to be present as a living being. And this is lucky, because if we had to be smart, or good, or mature, or wise, then we would probably be in trouble. But, what matters is not that. What matters is to be a human being with another human being, to recognize the other person as another being in there. Even if it is a cat or a bird, if you are trying to help a wounded bird, the first thing you have to know is that there is somebody in there, and that you have to wait for that “person,” that being in there, to be in contact with you. That seems to me to be the most important thing.

So, when I sit down with someone, I take my troubles and feelings and I put them over here, on one side, close, because I might need them. I might want to go in there and see something. And I take all the things that I have learnt – client-centered therapy, reflection, focusing, Gestalt, Psycho-analytic concepts and everything else (I wish I had even more) – and I put them over here, on my other side, close. Then I am just here, with my eyes, and there is this other being. If they happen to look into my eyes, they will see that I am just a shaky being. I have to tolerate that. They may not look. But if they do, they will see that. They will see the slightly shy, slightly withdrawing, insecure existence that I am. I have learnt that that is OK. I do not need to be emotionally secure and firmly present. I just need to be present. There are no qualifications for the kind of person I must be. What is wanted for the big therapy process, the big development process is a person who will be present. And so I have gradually become convinced that even I can be that. Even though I have my doubts when I am by myself, in some objective sense I know I am a person who can be present.”