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A Credo to Psychotherapists, or Time—The Unstretchable Dimension

Born in Berlin, raised in Tel Aviv, Dr. Bar-Levav studied in New York and Detroit, earning degrees in economics, political science, and medicine. A seeker, he dropped out of high school to work on a kibbutz, became a Socialist, apprenticed in journalism, joined the underground "Haganah", lectured, taught, and eventually resumed his studies. He regards himself not

only as a healer but also as one fighting to expand the domain of individual freedom by diminishing the insidious dictatorship of feelings.

More time in good health is what I wish for most. Time to live. Time to practice and to write. Time to enjoy the fruits of the many years in which I prepared myself to be a man, a *mensch*, a competent professional, a human being who is essentially at peace. I want time to be with myself and with the children I helped raise into sensible adulthood.

I am both sadder and happier now than I used to be in my youth. I see more clearly the many imperfections in people, in things, and in the world, but am also more tolerant of imperfections. I am less angry and less needy, and much more thankful for my many blessings. In general, I am content. Not interested in "making" money nor in having more children, I am also not so hungry for fame or for recognition, and I do not even yearn very much for romantic adventures or for trips abroad. What I am and what I have is enough, and good enough.

But new ideas still excite me. I want, need, and pray for time to read many more of the books I have not read, time to write a few; time to listen to much more music, and to enjoy the company of friends, the passing of seasons, and the marvels of nature. I love walking in the mountains, listening to their silence and to the sparkling sounds of streams that suddenly appear out of nowhere. The beauty of sunrises and sunsets still grips me, and the miracles of existence still fill me with awe: an unbelievably complex body that can even repair itself, a heart that normally beats 3 to 4 billion times before it stops, a heavy Boeing 747 that raises itself and all its contents to fly like a bird. And I never cease to be deeply touched by the courage of my patients as they face the monstrous ghosts from their past, determined to battle them till they are finally banished. Life is a blessing that I never take for granted.

Time is indeed what psychotherapy is all about. I have just seen a very anxious 44-year-old man whose busy mouth is always a foot ahead of his

Voices:

the art and science of psychotherapy

VOLUME 25 NUMBER 3 FALL 1989
REPRINT



THE HIGH ART OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

brain. Although very intelligent, gifted, and sensitive, he is lost in the paths of life and barely earns a living. Driving a cab, he exists at the margin, economically and socially. He tried several times to finish college, but was always derailed, as befits the indulged child of both his mother and father. They loved him, but neither had ever demanded or expected much of him. Tearfully, he suddenly remembers that as a 4-year-old he admired a close friend of his uncle, a young man with a free spirit who would swoop him up and take him onto his horse, galloping into the wind. This man seemed to have had no cares and also no fears, and he would tell the boy stories of strong men and women who dared to go on impossible missions, as if danger meant nothing to them. Such stories retained a fresh vividness within my patient throughout his life, and he fed his spirit upon them, paying little heed to reality. He, too, wanted to be a hero. He dreamed of accomplishing admirable tasks, but never did. Instead, he buried himself in books, and continued to dream without ever daring to do much. And now, suddenly, he was a middle-aged man realizing that time has passed, and that it is passing very quickly. The panic that was produced by this realization propelled him to seek me out. But even now he realizes only barely that options which are still open to a man of 44 will soon close and become unavailable. To him, time never had a great deal of meaning; it only begins to mean something now, but in many ways now is already too late.

It soon becomes obvious as I review the life histories of my patients that time is often the best yardstick to measure the damage that emotionally troubled people inflict upon themselves. They commonly dream instead of do. Errors that involve money or relationships cause material losses, pain, suffering, humiliation—all temporary in nature and perhaps reversible. We are often able to repair the damage and to make up our losses. Not so with the loss of time. It is fixed and eternal. It cannot be undone. Each of us is given but one, single, solitary stretch of time, and we do with it whatever we do, never having a second chance to correct or to redo anything. Time is the dimension that underscores the unforgivingness of reality, the finality of action, the fixed potential for joy or for pain that is contained in every passing moment.

A woman came to me once many years ago, wanting help. She was an atypical patient for my practice: 66 years old, relatively unsophisticated, with only a little more than an elementary school education. She never learned to drive a car. She was "mistakenly" referred to me by a well-meaning physician who did not understand whom not to refer for long-term, intensive psychotherapy. Leaving her lower-middle-class house to come to my office, she took the bus and told her husband that she was going to see a doctor. But she didn't tell him for what. Their relationship had always been strained, and much distance separated them emotionally. They had no children, very few friends, little money, and even less hope.

I saw the woman a couple of times at a markedly reduced fee, and offered

her kind, but time-limited first-aid. But she refused to stop seeing me. She begged to stay, telling me in her innocent but sincere way that our two sessions had been extremely helpful to her, opening new vistas that she had never known to exist. She had never been aware of the richness of her inner life and obtained tremendous relief from the little unblocking of her hidden hurt and anger that resulted from our encounters. She could not imagine herself going back to her previous existence. She had to better her life. For the first time in years she had begun to read a book, and for the first time ever she visited a museum.

I had to search my conscience. What was I doing by opening gates to a new life for someone approaching the end of the road? She was very persuasive and insistent, and I wasn't sure what was right. I asked older colleagues, but they evaded my queries. There was no easy answer.

So I agreed to see her a few more times. She now observed other patients coming into my office for group sessions or leaving from them, and listened intently to their passing remarks. They were so very much alive, she noted. She too wanted to be placed in a group. She told me eagerly in an effort to persuade and to reassure me that she had saved money all her life and could pay me. This was not the point, I tried to explain. But she would not accept any of my explanations. "Just because I am old I'm supposed to die?" she challenged me without bitterness. "I should give up forever my todays just because I have had no yesterdays? How can you deprive me of life with meaning?" Even now I am not sure whether I was right, but after much hesitation and soul searching I finally offered her a place in a group. Although unschooled, she spoke beautifully and made so much sense. I could not refuse her.

She always arrived promptly, twice every week for almost 2 years. She bloomed. She was innately very intelligent, very thoughtful, and very sensitive—only the sensitive ones suffer so much—and she took to the company of human beings like a fish takes to water. She changed her wardrobe some, read a lot, and developed an eager interest in everything that was happening around her. Increasingly, she became more loving toward herself and genuinely helpful to others. But she was 68 years old by now, and one day, while walking near her house, she fell and broke her hip.

I visited her in the hospital, members of her group sent flowers and cards and they came to see her when it became clear that her hospitalization would be long, and that she would never walk again freely. Taking a bus was out of the question.

We kept in touch by phone and she always made a point of thanking me for the 2 good years that she had found unexpectedly. Soon after her husband died she moved into a nursing home; at least her physical needs would be taken care of properly. But emotionally she was starved and there was nothing to look forward to. If only she had come to therapy much earlier. But "lost time is never found again," said Benjamin Franklin, and

her life, like all tragedies, was not changeable either. Later I learned that she eventually committed suicide.

And yet, people often "kill" time without realizing that they are destroying the most precious of all their gifts. Why do they do that? Because in the grip of irrational fear life is experienced as a curse, a seemingly endless horror, and we cannot wait then for time to pass quickly enough. "The push away from fear or dread supersedes everything."

The powerful and persistent wish to be cared for by others also causes people to waste large segments of life. Such people typically wait for things to happen, as if they were not adults but fetuses still attached to a mother, or helpless newborns. This wish to be cared for is so insidious and so strong that many people let life pass them by. Hope springs eternal, and this is how it kills and maims those caught in its web. They yearn and they fully expect that somehow solutions and solace will come their way spontaneously and without effort.

The mere passage of time indeed solves all problems, but rarely the way we wish them to be resolved. One of the main tasks of the psychotherapist is waking patients from their delusional and self-destructive slumber. But those in the midst of it usually refuse to be awakened. Young children and immature adults do not normally realize that time is limited. They act as if its supply were endless, and therefore of little consequence. We must repeatedly condense the experience of time for our adult patients, so that its value is appreciated.

In a sense, what we must do is similar to what must be done to impress upon smokers the trouble that they bring upon themselves. Any one cigarette probably causes little damage, yet life really consists of nothing but many series of small incidents. If a smoker were to boil the tobacco of a single pack of cigarettes in a glassful of water and drink it, he or she would at least become very, very sick. The sudden ingestion of such a poison might even kill a person. But people assume delusionally that in smaller doses the effect is different.

The "Pull of Regression" and the "Push Against Progressing," like two super-giants, pull our reason apart and blind us to the squandering of time. We often just sit there, waiting for some mythical Mother to take care of us. So powerful and so common are these yearnings that politicians and lovers often cater to them to advance themselves, thus supporting our refusal to accept the bitter fact that such yearnings are really unfulfillable. The promise of everlasting and unconditional love, "till death doth us part," like chronic dependency on welfare checks or food stamps, are really camouflaged roadblocks on the way to personal freedom and independence. Mother comes in many disguises. But whatever the form of the disguise, it interferes with our real need to grow up and take charge of our lives. Only when we finally give up dreams that cannot be do we live with the knowledge that time matters.

The time allotted to each of us is fixed and inelastic, but how we use it and how we live in it either expands or contracts our experience of it. Subjectively, time disappears altogether and is lost when we numb ourselves with distractions into living unconsciously, out of our minds. Those who succeed in experiencing all its moments meaningfully and with awareness never have enough time; they know that it always flies away and disappears too rapidly. But, in a state of desolation and inner emptiness it drags on and on, seemingly without an end. Life is made up of time, and its quality is largely in our hands.

It took many years of painful trials and errors to gain maturity, some wisdom, and a modicum of inner-peace. But this hardly brought the blessings of leisure. The demands of others on my time are heavier now than ever. I'm more pressed than in the past. Now that I can often literally see a lovable child within the needy, scared, "sucky" or even obnoxious adult, when it takes no effort to genuinely empathize and be with a patient, I always have a waiting list. At times I have no choice but to refuse people in acute agony and in urgent need. I cannot stretch the available time even for them. I often tried to expand it somehow, but always in vain. The number of hours in any day is always constant and, unlike money, we can neither save time for future use, nor borrow it from others. We also can't buy it. Years ago I was squeezed financially, but in terms of time I am actually poor now. And with the recent publication of my book, (*Thinking in the Shadow of Feelings*, Simon and Schuster, 1988) the demands on my time are more persistent than ever. Like everyone else with limited resources I'm forced to budget again, but much more carefully than in the past.

But I do not complain. I listened once to an anti-Zionist reform rabbi who had just returned from a trip to Israel. He was transformed. He spoke openly of never having really understood before the continuing struggle of the Jews and their unceasing wish to return "home." But now he, too, wanted to join them. He could sense a unique opportunity to participate in the work of creation, he said. "A new land is being built, and a new people is being molded. Now we all can participate in creating something worthwhile out of nothing, a rare privilege normally reserved only to God." This is also our opportunity as psychotherapists. Eyes whose spark had been extinguished can be lit again by our efforts, new hope offered to those who have already given up and resigned themselves to hopelessness.

Such words may sound grandiose, but only to those who do not actually experience their daily efforts in such a manner. For me, the prose of life is often wonderfully poetic. I really sense myself often as one small particle in a much larger design. I, too, like Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones (Chapter 37), often have a chance to breathe life into half-dead people, and I truly rejoice when they finally hear the inner command, "Live."

Psychotherapists who do not enjoy their work this way may well have unfinished personal agendas interfering with their task, or they may follow a

theoretical model that causes even sincere efforts to meet with only limited success. This is bound to exhaust and to discourage anyone, and burnout is then inevitable. We seek time away from patients then as a reward for our difficult and painful way of earning a living. Chasing money, power, hobbies, sexual forays, new therapeutic fads, and other distractions then becomes essential for survival.

But curing lifelong depression is such a unique privilege that it tires me only physically. It requires, however, much more than offering interpretations, reconstructions, or insights. Depression—this cancer of the soul—does not yield its choking hold on a person easily. As explained more fully in my book, the physiology itself must be reversed till our autonomic reactions to irrational fear are basically altered.

Thomas Mann perhaps expressed best what should be an appropriate credo for psychotherapists: "Hold fast the time! Guard it, watch over it, every hour, every minute! Unregarded it slips away, like a lizard, smooth, slippery, faceless, a pixy wife. Hold every moment sacred. Give each clarity and meaning, each the weight of thine awareness, each its true and due fulfillment" (*The Beloved Returns*).

We succeed in our work when our patients also realize the absolute truth of these words.

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