

The Clinical Erich Fromm

Rainer Funk (Ed). (2009). Rodopi.

I found this such a hard review to write. Not because the book was boring or complicated but because it was so good that I wanted to quote every word. I found that I had written over 2,000 words and I'd barely started. So I had to think again and be more selective. You will gather from this that I really enjoyed this book and found it insightful and dynamic.

This book is a picture of how Fromm worked, a reflection of him as a therapist and a man and a memorial to someone who was life enhancing and who touched many people's lives. The editor, Rainer Funk, sets up the book firstly with two chapters by Fromm himself, then inputs from various people who have worked with Fromm as colleagues, supervisees, friends, etc. This gives a deep and profound view of the man and his work and the input he has had in the therapeutic world. *'At the heart of Fromm's work is a unique interdisciplinary outlook that bridges, sociology, philosophy, economics, psychology and psychoanalysis.'* (p vii)

On the front cover of the book is a photograph of Fromm working. It seems to me that this photo is in this place because it needs to be looked at and reflected on. It shows a man of intellect, surrounded by books and in the act of writing. I think it is worth spending some time looking at the face and experiencing it without foreknowledge. Maybe the essence of the man can be seen in this portrait.

Fromm describes himself as a Freudian. He is also adventurous, daring and experimental – he worked face to face with clients at a time when patients lay on a couch with the analyst out of sight behind them. He introduced new ideas into then accepted therapy. He talks of the unconscious and then reflects that he prefers to think of things being out of awareness.

There is a strong emphasis on boundaries in Fromm's work. I found this of interest because I have recently come to live in New Zealand and have found a different way of experiencing these issues. I was trained in counselling from a European perspective and have lately had cause to rethink my experience. For instance, one to one therapy means exactly that in Fromm's world. Here in NZ, however, the perspective is different. NZ is a western country and also a Pacific country – Pakeha (white people) and Maori and Island people are equal and different and The Treaty of Waitangi has a profound influence. This has an effect on how therapy is conducted as there is a recognition that a purely Eurocentric form of therapy is not good enough. Therefore in one to one therapy, for instance, the client may bring his friends or relations to the sessions. This has caused me no end of heartache – how can I hold my boundaries, etc, etc – it goes against all that I have been taught. I was recently at a seminar conducted by Matthew Selekman from America and he said that he uses anything that

will help him and the client talk – including inviting friends and relations of the client into sessions – people that the client has asked to be present. I mention this because, although Fromm lived in America and Mexico there is a decided Eurocentric slant to his way of perceiving therapy – this despite a deep interest in Eastern thought and philosophy and maybe there is a need to go beyond the influence of Dr Fromm and his generation. I have also had occasion to reflect in the past that maybe 1-1 therapy is another way of avoiding something – masturbation rather than a connection with the people in one's life. This is said very tentatively – it is purely reflection from experience – but maybe something to think about.

Fromm believes that people are born with definite personalities, which may be limited by life and it is part of the analyst's job to know what the client was meant to be – to help him find the disassociated part of himself. Wellbeing may mean *'the restoration of his specific personality'* (p 30). His concern for everyone he worked with shines through this book. All the contributors remark on his deep humanity and concern for other people.

Fromm, like Hans Cohn, says that kindness has no place in therapy but his kindness is very evident and is mentioned several times by contributors. He thinks: *'If a person has nothing human within him, if there is no impulse of goodness, of kindness, of love, of health then I would indeed say he has ceased to be a human being'* (p22). I think there is a place for reflection here – does this statement hold water? I would imagine that anyone who comes into therapy has one or more of these qualities – or what has spurred them into thoughts of change? – but the human population as a whole – does reflecting on the behaviour of the world population cause you to agree with Fromm? And if a human being ceases to be human then what is s/he?

I do believe that with regard to the basic facts of life, we have to live in the paradox and we have to think in the paradox, if we want to understand life

(p 11).

..... two contradictory statements, and the capacity or the willingness to live with these contradictions, and not to think that because they are contradictions, they cannot be true, or cannot be real.

Oh yes, this is profound. The anxiety that may be induced in client or therapist when this paradox is recognized and there is no declaration of right or wrong but a living with it and seeing where it might lead – *'the thingness of thinging coming towards me'* (Stenstad 2006).

Fromm opens up the discussion of what we (as therapists) are there for. He makes the statement: *'To understand the patient better than he understands himself; to understand that experience which exists in him,*

which is there and yet has not come to his own awareness, is obscured from him, is separated from him' (p21). He also says: 'When you come to me, I will be completely open to you, and I shall respond with all the chords in myself which are touched by the chords in yourself' (p26) and: 'If you are naïve and blind ... you will be exactly as naïve and blind to your patients' (p28). Fromm talks about the patient's isolation and how, in the relationship with a therapist, '...the patient doesn't feel isolated anymore' (p 62). 'He is not a thing over there which I look at, but he confronts me fully and I confront him fully, and there is in fact no way of escape' (p62).

A significant part of this book is recollections of supervision with Dr Fromm. The supervisees attest to his being 'present' and to wanting them to focus on what they are struggling with – rather than presenting what they feel they are doing right with clients. This chimes with my thought on supervision. Supervision is about being open and honest about my struggles as a therapist – learning about me and my weaknesses and blindspots so that I can better be with my clients. For me, that's where the energy comes from – that change of perception – the engaging with possibility.

As I said at the beginning of this review, I loved this book. Somewhere Fromm must have been unpleasant and grumpy, etc, etc and this is hinted at in the text but overall he is someone I would very much like to have known and worked with.

There is a thorough list of references in the back of the book and thumbnail sketches of the contributors.

I will finish, as the book finishes, with a quotation from Feldstein:

Erich Fromm's writings were powerful, lucid, and deceptively simple. They have stirred a whole generation into reflection upon the meaning of love, authority, human wholeness. When he was at his best, his face, and his voice, shone through his words. For, in the end, Fromm's genius was in his actual presence, and in the surgings of that presence, through each who was affected, to another. Others will judge, in times to come, the ultimate stature of Fromm's written words, but no person who has ever encountered Erich Fromm, face-to-face, can doubt the ultimate stature of the man. His face, his voice, and his spirit-illuminated physical presence are inviolable. They will not perish.

(p170)

Kia ora

Reference

Stenstad, G. (2006). *Transformations: Thinking After Heidegger*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Nicola Slade

When Nietzsche Wept

Directed by Pinchas Perry (2007) based on the novel by Irvin Yalom
DVD - First Look Studios

Here are two, related, pieces of usually truthful but not always accurate everyday wisdom:

1. Psychotherapists are failed novelists.
2. If you have loved a particular book, you will be disappointed by its translation into a film.

What links these two statements together for me at this moment in time is Irvin Yalom. Or, more accurately, a conversation on writing novels that I had with him a couple of years ago. Yalom is an obvious exception to the first piece of 'everyday wisdom' noted above. As if you needed reminding, he is both a highly successful psychotherapist and novelist. He is also almost certainly the most well-known living existential therapist - even if he, himself, does not believe that a form of therapy called existential therapy is possible. And, perhaps, not even desirable.

It was during our conversation that he alerted me to the fact that his first novel, *When Nietzsche Wept*, had just been turned into a film. What did he think of it, I asked. The gist of his reply was: 'They did the best they could, given the limits of the budget and the actors.'

Ben Cross plays Josef Breuer, Kathryn Winnick plays Lou Salome, Michal Yannai plays Bertha (Anna O). And Jamie Elman plays the young Sigmund Freud. Uhm.

I was intrigued enough to purchase the DVD. I had read *When Nietzsche Wept* when it was published in the UK in 1990 and, though I can't say I'd 'loved' it, I'd thoroughly enjoyed it, not least because as a work of 'historical fiction' it played by the rules of the game by ensuring that dates and events coincided with what 'actual' history, or at least could have occurred within its boundaries. I also thought that the characters of Nietzsche, Lou Andreas-Salome and Josef Breuer were exceedingly well-developed and three-dimensional. Freud, I wasn't so sure about, but then his role in the drama was somewhat peripheral.

Like the novel, the film's basic plot is this: Lou Andreas-Salome, Nietzsche's platonic lover, is deeply concerned about his mental state. She meets with Josef Breuer in order to convince Breuer to take on Nietzsche as a patient. Breuer reluctantly agrees, but the 'talking cure' goes nowhere