



Supervision as Mentoring

Peter H. Coster, M.A.

Those of us who practice psychotherapy are at home in the world of paradox and contradiction. As therapists we immerse ourselves in the life of the soul with its many conflicts: those interior forces which pull and push us in multiple directions at once and mark the terrain we traverse daily with our clients. Accompanying others on their journey toward healing and integration as they search for personal meaning is what we do in the art of "soul making." You can call this process individuation; I prefer to call it creativity. Winnicott describes the creative act in psychotherapy as the "spontaneous gesture" and was audacious enough to call the experience of genuine and authentic connection between client and therapist an act of play. It is an image that I have come to love in the work that I do. If one of our aims in our work as therapists is the recovery of spontaneous play, an expression of the child's earliest experience of her creative genius, then what

is it we do as supervisors in our work with our supervisees? What vision guides the way in which we approach this important relationship?

In this article, I offer a few remarks about supervision as primarily a mentoring relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee. What distinguishes mentoring from other approaches has to do more with perspective, emphasis and attention. If being a "mid-wife for the soul" is descriptive of what we do as psychotherapists assisting in the birth of the client's potential and true self, then a supervisor's role is one of being a mid-wife for the supervisee by teaching, coaching, modeling and encouraging the supervisee as she labors to birth the "therapist" within.

The supervisor, according to Jungian analyst Lionel Corbett, helps facilitate the realization of the supervisee's potential, her

uniqueness and personal choice, the living out of her dream to become a helping professional in a manner that reflects her gifts, temperament and spiritual values.¹ Once the supervisee finds his/her own voice and trusts his/her own instincts and inner authority, he/she can begin to question, challenge and push "the boundaries" of the profession. Once he/she is able to stand on his/her own two feet and embrace the responsibility that comes with rightful ownership of the profession, then the supervisor ceases to be a transitional figure.

Within the mentorship model, the supervisee is seen as a junior colleague, a professional in the making. This collegial attitude helps evoke a reality that transcends the transference dynamics that are colored by parental projections and subjection to authority figures that will at times enter into this relationship. This transcendent reality, a co-creation between supervisor and supervisee is a creative space that opens to the transpersonal field and the Mentor Archetype. While containing elements of parental guidance and peer relationship, the mentor archetype embodies an authority best described as sapiential; a word that simply means wisdom.²

Supervision advances along a developmental path in a fashion similar to psychotherapy. The beginning therapist has needs that are different from a more advanced intern. The supervisor's role in this respect changes with the growth and development of the supervisee's skills, knowledge, sensitivity and maturity. The heart of supervision within a mentorship model is the increased attention to the supervisee's feelings, reactions, thoughts and fantasies that emerge within the supervisee as a result of his or her relationship to the client and the entire clinical matrix. In supervision, the selective attention given to the material which presents itself during any session is determined by many factors. We listen for the way in which the client's story impacts and affects our supervisee, as we, ourselves, allow this material to have an impact on us. To help

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the supervisee become aware of his/her countertransference and how to use his/her countertransference as an integral aspect of the healing relationship is, in my view, the very heart of supervision. What dynamics may be at work maintaining the status quo with a particular client? What may be hindering the establishment of empathy and is contributing to an impasse in the therapeutic relationship? What is preventing the work from going deeper? Exploring these questions together in supervision is a collaborative endeavor between the supervisor and supervisee. The focus of attention in this model is on the learning that takes place when the supervisee discovers for himself/herself how his/her reactions, responses and "gut" instincts coalesce to bring forth his/her own "spontaneous gesture" in a creative fashion that fits experientially with the theoretical paradigm that governs the way he/she thinks psychotherapeutically. While there is a place for teaching, for advice for admonition and confrontation in supervision, the supervisee grows most when he/she receives from the mentoring relationship the knowledge necessary (read

wisdom) to advance. This experiential knowledge aligns with the supervisee's own deep creative self coming forward through his/her voice and his/her being.

As a supervisor, my task is to hold the tension between content and process in a way that facilitates the supervisee's learning through inquiry and internal exploration. In doing this work, I am fueled by curiosity. I want to know how my supervisee arrived at a particular conclusion. Why did he/she make this intervention and why now? What was the rationale behind making this intervention? What alternatives might have been entertained but were rejected? What was the feeling he/she was having at the time and how did he/she interpret that feeling? This type of open and empathic questioning that is specific and focused deepens one's process and evokes at time levels of vulnerability in the supervisee that requires a trusting and non-judgmental relationship with the supervisor. While supervision is not psychotherapy, good supervision is always, or should be therapeutic, in my view. I find it helpful to welcome and allow the supervisee's vulnera-

bility in supervisory sessions without it turning into psychotherapy. Being able to be with oneself in a compassionate non-judgmental way facilitates becoming more present with ourselves and with those we are trying to help. Supervision as mentoring is about teaching the supervisee how to be more present.

There are techniques, if we can call them that, which I have found helpful in my work as a supervisor. Let me briefly describe one that I have found particularly useful with less experienced therapists. I call it "thinking and speaking outside the frame." Oftentimes, beginning therapists have very good instincts, but are reluctant to trust them, let alone speak about them. They are having feelings (countertransference reactions) which they believe are forbidden, non-therapeutic or not helpful because of a certain type of training they have received, or simply misunderstanding the nature of the therapeutic relationship. Their own family of origin often plays a part. I try to get them to expand, to break free of whatever is restricting them from being more spon-

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aneous and real. I invite them to role play with me and to stop trying to be a "therapist" for a moment by inviting them to speak their mind as fully and completely as possible. Their uncensored responses may be strong, confrontational or angry. It may include feelings of hurt, disappointment or sadness. Whatever the response, it is usually refreshingly honest and authentic. The work we do together is to address the self judgments which may accompany the expression of such feelings. Once their feelings can be acknowledged and there is the suspension of judgment, there is more clarity and objectivity. I then ask them to reflect on how these feelings may contain important information about their client. In what way does their countertransference contain important diagnostic clues which will help in their assessment of the client's psychological makeup, traumatic history, and transference relationship with them as a therapist? Working in this way we identify and work with the "projective identification" in order to deepen the empathic connection and facilitate the therapeutic process.

Once the supervisee becomes more empathic with the wounded part of himself/herself through objective understanding, he/she sees and understands his/her client's woundedness and defenses in a new way, which deepens the empathic alliance and facilitates the therapeutic process.

There are many aspects and dimensions to the mentoring relationship that cannot be covered in such a brief article. Let me conclude, if I may, on a personal note. My love for doing supervision runs deep, perhaps deeper than my passion and interest in psychotherapy. As a psychotherapist, the work involves uncovering and working through the many layers of the false self that have been developed as a result of early environmental failures and trauma. The work is highly rewarding. As a supervisor, the focus shifts to the way in which the emerging true self of the therapist finds his/her creativity and the presence of being in the world and sharing that self with others through healing relationship. The work is at times joyful. ☉



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REFERENCES

¹Lionel Corbett, "Supervision and the Mentor Archetype," in *Jungian Perspectives on Clinical Supervision*. Edited by Paul Kugler, Daimon, Switzerland, 1995, (pp.62-63).
²ibid. pp. 61-62.

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