Transient & Enduring Counter-Transference: 
A Life Journey as Woman and Psychodynamic Psychotherapist

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Through the recurring mind-body-spirit metamorphoses in my own intersubjective development from girl to young woman, woman to middle-aged woman with an eye toward elder and crone, I have discovered both transient and enduring countertransference experiences seemingly resulting from the parallel and interactive process of transformation that exists in both personal and professional development. Personal development includes aging, marital status, children, neuro-bio-chemistry, spirituality, relationships and personal and professional life experiences. Development over time as psychodynamic psychotherapist includes these latter areas as they affect professional identity, conceptualization of both self and patient, health and unhealth, wellness and dis-ease, ultimately transference and counter-transference within and including the various professional roles engaged, i.e. student, licensed therapist, supervisor, consultant, manager, author, speaker. Within these states of development, both short-lived and enduring counter-transference is discovered within the frame of a life journey.

A life journey includes transformations that are continual over the lifespan. These transformations are cyclical in nature and are understood as physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and relational. They are energetic, intersubjective, intra-psychic, neuro-bio-chemical, metaphysical, and alchemical. Stability persists as a fractal throughout each incarnation of the self which is forged through each developmental phase even while other aspects of one’s essence emerge briefly, transform over time and are no more. The intersubjective nature of relational experience changes the very brain and physical, energy body of each individual involved in that intersubjective exchange. The individual is evolving as new brain pathways develop in the context of intersubjective and intrasubjective exchanges. The body and its organ and meridian systems are changing with each interpersonal and intrapersonal encounter. The person of the therapist is experiencing this change, yielding new dynamics and experiences of her own transference and counter-transference processes.

Over time, these neurobiological, mind-body-spirit transformations result in the forging of new and renewed manifestations of self within the one life journey. Fractaling forward, each new or renewed person in her role as psychotherapist has counter-transference experiences that are familiar and “known” to that therapist throughout her life. This is the enduring aspect of counter-transference which can be experienced as “permanence.” Each new or renewed person in her role as therapist also develops counter-transference experiences that are new, unfamiliar and unknown to that therapist over time. He or she equally experiences the loss of previously present counter-transference states.

Case examples from my life:

Young Woman // Young Psychodynamic Psychotherapist

As a young therapist, aged 24 years, just beginning my career, I found myself working with children, very young children through early adolescence. I was very good, a natural. My counter-transference with the children I engaged in psychotherapy allowed me to utilize
play therapy easily and powerfully. Children healed. I was enlivened, empowered, confident and often true in the work. I was however notably less confident, less intuitively and naturally sure and clear in my work with couples and men. I often experienced confusion and a sense of disorientation in my counter-transference with this demographic. This paralleled my single, active, yet non-committal personal dating life.

**Woman to Middle Aged Woman // Established Psychotherapist**

Over time, I matured to become a woman in my 30s. I had many experiences during my tenure in graduate school in which to capture some of my own personally missed yet significant adolescent developmental experiences (I had grown up Southern Baptist and adhered to those conservative rules and strictures willingly throughout my teens). I engaged in deep healing and developmentally fulfilling psychodynamic and group psychotherapy. I evolved, matured, changed. I also began to experience boredom, decreased interest, creativity, and natural desire and connection with younger child clients. I began to unconsciously list in my professional ship toward work with older adolescents, young, middle and older adult women and yes, couples. As I entered middle adulthood with a new therapist who was male, I healed even further and even more deeply in areas previously not experienced with as much awareness or subtle intuitive knowing. I fell in love and married a man and his children; together we created a deeply fulfilling, loving and actively engaged family in our home. I also thoroughly enjoyed and played with my friend’s small children in my personal life. I found my natural abilities with children and adolescents had a home in my personal life, even as my psychotherapy practice no longer held space for them.

**Middle Aged Woman// Established Psychotherapist, Consultant, Speaker/Author**

As I have matured from early 40s to late 40s, I have observed a similar loss of interest with adolescent patients that I experienced with younger children a decade or more before. I increasingly discovered more negative countertransference reactions with adolescents than in the past and now naturally and unconsciously when not paying attention, align with their parents, regardless of presenting dysfunction! My practice is now filled with women of all ages, couples, and more men; I no longer market myself as an adolescent psychotherapist. I am currently intuitively, naturally and thoroughly enjoying and quite effective with couples, and for the first time, the men in my practice. I also find great fulfillment in speaking, writing, and consulting in addition to providing psychotherapy.

My transference and counter-transference as a young psychotherapist emerged in my 20s, changed in my 30s and has been in a state of metamorphosis again now in my late 40s. An enduring pattern exists in my ability to sense and intuit within the context of the intersubjective dance with my patients what they are feeling, thinking, and how they are organizing their affective, cognitive, and physiological experiences. My intersubjective conjunctions and disjunctions have both shifted and at times remained similar to those of my early years in practice. Interactions that previously stirred reactions in me, now yield calm steadiness. New areas previously maneuvered easily can yield doubt and require new exploration on my part.

A psychotherapist is ever-developing new inter-subjective counter-transference experiences over her life journey. The myriad aspects of a life journey include intimate, personal and professional relationships, attachment fulfillment and injury, health, wellness, and illness, hormonal changes, aging, births and deaths, celebration and grieving, the
effects of finances, environment, goals set and achieved or not, sustaining and changing interests and activities. As each experience effectually changes our individual brain, body, and spirit development, each of these areas and experiences result from and affect personal and professional transformation.

As an individual female, my biological and hormonal metamorphoses have changed my experience of self. Pre-pubescence to menses to full menstrual cycling. With the development over time of hormones run amok, yielding a need for hysterectomy and its resulting menopause and accompanying memory lapses, bouts of irritability, fuzzy thinking and drug-addict-like hunts for estrogen! Yet with all of this middle life volatility, comes a beautiful gift, often experienced spiritually as “wisdom.” I know and trust myself in a way that is both familiar and yet much more grounded and trusting of life and process now than at age 40, 30, or 20, with surprising doses of the beautifully lessened self-scrutiny reminiscent of ages 10, 6, or even 3 years!

Consider the Labyrinth as journey metaphor. It is a maze that holds a path for the walker of the maze; it incorporates both experience and the metaphor of a journey for the one walking it step by step. With its twists and turns, if followed at a micro level, the maze walker finds herself at various moments at locations not previously conceptualized or imagined and at points near center or near periphery not always expected, even while repeating similarly designed paths. A labyrinth is a form of fractal, with repeating twists and turns that eventually create a whole form or repetitive projectory from a macro view.

Consider the fractal. An enduring pattern or shape and movement that repeats forward over time, ever changing, transient yet enduring. Transience and permanence. “A fractal is a geometric pattern that is repeated at ever smaller scales to produce irregular shapes and surfaces that cannot be represented by classical geometry. Fractals are used especially in computer modeling of irregular patterns and structures in nature” (http://www.thefreedictionary.com/fractal). Loosely applied, you are a fractal of your former self, your transference and counter-transference experiences are fractals of your former psychodynamic psychotherapist self. You are not the same you of your infancy, childhood, young adulthood or later. You are not the same psychotherapist of your graduate school or early or middle career self as you are today. You will not be the same you in your crone years as you are in this moment. In fact you are not the same you in this moment as you were in the last moment or the next to come. We are in our very existence transient, yet as fractals of ourselves, we do know and experience a permanence of pattern, of transference of familiarity of self.

Where is the permanence in all of this transience?

Ken Silvestro stated in his presentation at IFPE November 1 2013, “Transience is a reality and permanence is an illusion.” A participant in his presentation posed the question, “Is transience the only permanence?” Paul Cooper in his IFPE 2013 presentation stated that “We are living and dying and living and dying repeatedly in an instant. We are just not aware”

I invite you to participate in an exercise of your own transience and permanence. Lay out pictures of yourselves chronologically from infancy to date. Look and observe the
awesome changes and striking samenesses! This can be a powerful imagery exercise in considering you as fractal of you!

Neurobiologically, psychologically, spiritually, metaphysically, and relationally, we are ever changing. Much of that change is affected in the context of intersubjective relationships – regardless of context of personal or professional, with family, friends, employees, supervisors, colleagues and patients.

My life journey as woman and psychodynamic psychotherapist has been full of adventure and change, even chaos, along with familiarity and stability. As I stand at a point called middle adult and look toward elder and crone, I feel my heart dance with expectation and excitement knowing that what I know now will evolve and become. Those patients with whom I am energized in my psychotherapy practice and professional life will evolve and most assuredly change. Those areas of blindness in the therapy process will become clear and new areas will confuse me. And as the turns in a steady labyrinth walk can surprise, I shall be both surprised and yet not surprised as wisdom increasingly accompanies me in my journey. For I am deepening in my knowledge that yes, transience is permanence. There are aspects of me, my psychotherapy practice, my transference and counter-transference that endure. There are even more aspects that change. Change is not to be feared, but expected, grieved and/or celebrated…and lived as the essence of who I am, as I journey on as woman and psychodynamic psychotherapist.

BIO:

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Dr. Elisabeth Crim, Licensed Psychologist, Certified Relax/Renew Yoga Trainer, Speaker, Writer, Founder/Director of Moonstone Center. Ph.D., M.A. Psychology, M.A. Theology, M.A. Counseling. Providing treatment for over 25 years, she is an energizing, engaging speaker, writer, offering psychotherapy, consultation, education from an Inter-Subjective Psychodynamic (Stolorow) & Holistic Mind-Body-Spirit approach. She is the editor of the monthly e-newsletter+video, The Healer’s Life! www.MoonstoneCenter.com.

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