

**Constructivism in Psychotherapy****50 minutes conversation with Robert Neimeyer****Students final questions: elaboration of loss, Buddhism, being a psychotherapist, compassion, everyday losses ...**

A.H.: I don't know if anyone wants to put any question. Do you want to give any recommendation to beginning psychotherapists?

R.N.: Well, I would be interested to know what you are interested in and if you have questions, comments, concerns, criticisms for me.

T. I.: would like to... If you could speak a little bit about the constructive elaboration of a loss. What are the main features of a constructive elaboration of a loss.

R.N.: Alright, and what is your name?

T.: Teresa.

R.N.: Well Teresa, I think that to constructively elaborate a loss for me means finding some frame of... that makes it intelligible, that allows us to hold it and understand it in our heads and in our hearts, that weaves it into the story of our lives, so it becomes a meaningful chapter in a life that lead up to the relationship with that specific other, that honors the place of that person in our lives and in our ongoing life, that allows us to begin to transform rather than to simply discard the bond that we have with that person. To make it something that we can draw inspiration from now and in the future, at levels that may be more psychological, conversational, ritual. All of these would be entailed in constructively elaborating the story of our lives that's woven together with the story of the life of our loved one. And I would see that as an appropriate response to grief.

B.: Well, I have a question too, one or two. I'm not sure how to put it but since you mentioned Buddhism – I'm interested in Buddhism and did two meditations courses for ten days and listened to Eckart Tolle for example – and I see a few things I would like to see you talk about. One is identity, narrative, attachments to it, past and future as a major source of suffering as they see it, and our practice where we kind of try to help people to create and transform the narratives. And I'd like to know what you think about it and how could we use it or not in theory of practice.

R.N.: That's a beautiful question and what is your name again?

B.: Bruno.

R.N.: Bruno. I am of two minds about that. In my Buddhist mind or no mind, right?, I would surely agree with the notion that it is our attachment to particular narratives of identity - not only our own but the identity we confer on others or on a given relationship - and the assumption that will somehow will be stable, or essentialized within the self or the other, these are ultimately Maya, they're illusion, and they will

be tested and ultimately invalidated as we develop through time and as we ourselves experience gradual or abrupt losses. And so, in this way, I think there is wisdom in maintaining a sense of self in a way that is larger than a particular ego and that can be a great resource to us, as we encounter the many unwelcome transitions and changes that life will present us. That's one side. The other side is "I really like people, I really love individuals!", I love stories and cultures and I think it would be in some ways strangely inhuman to relinquish our storying of our lives. You know... I'm glad that Bruno has a story or Teresa has a story or Aníbal has a story that is different than Bob's story and I love the opportunity that therapy permits me to deeply enter those stories, respectfully holding their contours, the unique world of meaning that they call forth. So I don't want to in some ways say "Well that's simply illusion, lets sweep that away and just have the clarity and purity of consciousness that comes from mindfully witnessing", I want people to unmindfully speak and act and love and be passionate and fear and grabble with this human condition. So part of me is just very western and part of me is just very eastern, and I love the tension between them, each giving, I think, something to a kind of broader dialectic that shapes my work, at least, in ways that seem interesting and helpful to most of my clients.

B.: Thank you.

R.N.: But it's a work in progress, check back with me 10 years from now.

B.: Well, I think I may have another one. Pros and cons of being a psychotherapist, when it comes to your personal well being from your personal perspective.

R.N.: Oh, the contributions is absolutely enormous and for me irreplaceably precious. Being a therapist contributes immensely to my sense of balance, focus on what is important. I think that to any extend that I have achieved a sense of wisdom or perspective on my life, I owed utterly to my clients. I think it has deeply enriched my life in a thousand ways and I can't think of a single negative entailment. I think it is a remarkable profession and it allows me to focus on that which is most essential in my life and in the life of others, and to do that on a daily basis in one meaningful deeply engaged conversation after another. And I just can't imagine what would be better. I mean, I would love to be an architect, I would love to be an artist, I would love to be a real poet instead of amateur one. But if I had to choose, I would choose to be a psychotherapist above any of them. In part because you can do all of the others within the context of psychotherapy, looking at the architecture of people's frameworks of meaning and using language poetically to tease forth new possibilities. So, in some ways, it's a big container for a rich life.

B.: Ok. Maybe one last question, if you don't mind, a personal one. We know that you publish a lot, that you work a lot, and maybe there's some time left, and I would like to know what do you like to do most with that time, apart from writing poetry and maybe surfing.

R.N.: Well, I can answer that in terms of what I've been doing since I've been here in Lisboa. And that is I've been exploring – that's a very constructivist thing to do I think.

I've taken some long jogs through the city and I've also been walking for many hours and looking for different patterns of the cobble stones that I like to take photographs of, or unusual angles of photographs of Fernando Pessoa sitting there at the Brasileira, you know, and kind of taking his profile as he looks toward the statue of the other poet in the square. And so, in many ways I think I just engage life, I like photography, I like imagery, I love art – I'm heartbroken that the Contemporary Art Museum is closed today, so I won't be able to see that here in Lisboa. I love food, I like people very much, I enjoy dancing, I mean, is just a variety of things.

S.: It's a little question about a word that you've used and I have also heard Aníbal using it and fifteen years ago when I finished my training and I graduate in Psychology we didn't used to use the word compassion. You've talked about empathy and defining empathy as the capability to understand the person that is with us by the way he thinks not by the way I think. What do you really mean when you say we have to feel compassion?

R.N.: Well, in one sense, empathy without compassion could be psychopathic, right? In the sense that I could enter your way of thinking very subtly with the goal of manipulating you to my ends and I can do that as a psychotherapist as well as a used car salesman, right? So compassion adds to empathy caring for the other in his or her own terms, being moved by the other. If my clients are weeping in a session – tears coming down their face – if my eyes are not at least moist, then I feel something's wrong with this picture. I need to find a way of moving closer, to be more compassionated emotionally. And so, in most sessions where my clients are weeping I too am weeping and the only concern for me is if I cry longer or louder than my clients, then I know I need to backup a little bit to achieve optimal therapeutic distance. So, that's what I would mean by compassion - is be allowing ourselves to be touched in our hearts and souls by another and to move in the therapy as a function of that deep witnessing. And it is easy for me to call up this feeling, I feel it now as I speak with you about it. And if we were speaking about something intimate and painful concern to you I would feel it much more, right? So that's what I mean by compassion, it's just presence, it's just presence. Well, this is why you're a therapist Sara, it is because you have that capacity and I think that to be a therapist without that capacity is a tragedy, right? Now, there are times when we need to modulate it, right? When we need to be willing to... you know, our client may need us to be strong because they're so phobically concerned about injecting their bad feeling into another, and then I'll find a way of metaphorically wiping my eyes and listening dispassionately because they need me in that stance for this moment. But it's not my prefer or natural way of being. Nor is it yours.

C.: Hi, my name is Catarina and you mentioned on the beginning of the talk about the fact that we are always looking at loss, on everyday things and projects and places and people. And how do you look at your approach by this view, by this point of view. How do you integrate this work on our everyday, not only grieving therapy...

R.N.: Well... you say it's Helena?

C.: Catarina.

R.N.: Catarina. I guess what I would say about that Catarina, is that I think it's fairly natural attention to what is an issue for this person, what is being lost and registered with grief or *duelo*. What does the person fear could be a loss, and perhaps then held with anxiety, uncertainty. What does the person feel that he or she may be responsible for losing – and in this way held with a kind of guilt, right?, or self-blame. And what is the person fearing that life or another will take from them – and being registered with a kind of anger and reassertion of boundaries. So, in many ways, across a broad emotional spectrum I would look at the role of actual, pending or possible losses, I'm just kind of listening for those themes and for what people tell me. But I'm really not a morose kind of down guy, I mean, I easily laugh with clients, I celebrate their joyful achievements of intimacy and efficacy. I'm very pleased when I can essentially celebrate their preferred narrative that they're living out. And so, my therapies are not always relentlessly looking for what is not there, we often deeply appreciate what is, right? And also - coming back to Bruno's Buddhist perspective - to recognize the preciousness of those things that are there, in part because they are impermanent. You know, we now have this chance to have this kind of relationship with one another and you have this chance with others in your life, and it's not something to squander or neglect, because it will not be a permanent offering, right? It is precious, it is now. And so, I think ultimately the goal of all therapy - and certainly my therapy – is to help people live more intensely and to live in some ways in an accelerated way, to embrace change, to engage in less unconscious resistance against unwelcome transitions and to find the possibilities inherent in every moment, whatever that moment presents to us. So, that's a simple idea but it's one that makes sense to me.

A.H.: Wonderful, thank you so much, it was wonderful!

R.N.: Muito obrigado to all of you!