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What helps

I am delighted to have the opportunity to share some of my thoughts and understanding with you today. For my first 20 years as a psychologist, I worked with people primarily in a long term therapeutic way, the process took years rather than months. Then, about ten years ago, I started having conversations with Zeni Thumbadoo and Merle Allsopp about the most effective way to support mentors and child and youth care workers in the Isibindi program, given the amount of stress experienced in their work and this compounded by the fact that they so often encountered echoes of their own lives in their work. The care for carers program (C4C) was dreamed , and in 2007 I piloted it in 4 Isibindi sites. Since then C4C has been taken to well over 150 Isibindi sites around the country, by myself and colleague Linzi Fredman.

The C4C program.

The C4C program is a 6 session process. I visit the Isibindi site on 6 occasions over a 3- 4month period, once a fortnight when possible. The question of whether to visit less frequently or more intensively has long been debated. I prefer more frequent visits which keep the team and individuals more focused on the process. This frequency also helps me stay aware of each individual story, more or less, and this facilitates my relationship with the team and individuals. While I do feel that one of the functions of C4C is to provide emotional support and a context to off load and debrief, my primary intention is to develop the individuals sense of agency in relation to their own lives, so that once C4C is over, they will feel that they have the skills, and confidence, to engage more proactively with what life might bring them in the future.

The nature of C4C in the Isibindi program creates some interesting challenges for the psychologist. The C4C psychologist travels to her clients, the Isibindi child and youth care workers, and they, in turn, are obliged to attend sessions. The majority of child and youth care workers may not have asked to see a psychologist, nor would they necessarily even know that it may in fact be helpful to speak to one. They do not pay anything toward their sessions, although many people do pay a significant amount in transport costs, getting to the sessions. And this in itself can be problematic, when people feel the expense of something they feel they don't even need. Many of the steps usually taken by a person seeking psychotherapy, recognising that they have an emotional problem, making the decision that they need help, making the appointment, getting there, paying for it, each step reflecting and becoming a part of their own commitment and engagement with the process, all these are absent in the C4C process. On the contrary, here people are obliged to attend a process, which raises people's resistances at the best of times, and the challenge of how to engage people in such a deeply personal process is ongoing.

Many people do decide to use the first session as an off loading, cathartic opportunity. At this time many people might speak about some of the terrible things that have happened in their lives. There is often a lot of emotion, and people often feel some relief having off loaded. But this doesn't necessarily change anything, and although they may feel some relief for having got it out, 'and given it over to me', it doesn't necessarily help them manage any differently when the next emotional storm arrives.

The C4C process

One of the most consistent questions I have asked myself over these past 8 years is, what is in fact helpful, what is it that facilitates a process of psychological healing, and in what way can I best assist people to engage with their own journeys. What can I do to inspire and motivate people to take themselves and their lives seriously. This paper is all about that. I suppose I take the child and youth care workers and their lives very seriously, and I take the fact that they have this opportunity, C4C, to begin to heal themselves, to gain a greater knowledge of themselves, I take that very seriously.

So the question... What helps, in fact has a very simple answer, I believe. I believe that relationship helps, I believe that once an individual and myself have found a relationship anything is possible. and this can happen on the team level as well. I have found that trust develops very quickly when I am not frightened of being honest about my feelings. I can make observations which are not critical or judgemental but which might be difficult to hear, but which say to the person, or the team, I see you, and it is okay, and inevitably people engage and want to reveal more. A persons relationship with his or her self deepens, and become more robust and reliable. In my experience People often have a deep seated desire to reveal aspects of themselves which have caused them the greatest shame, and in so doing are often freed up to forgive themselves, and to move on. This is part of that innate capacity that human beings have to heal, that given a facilitating environment or context, the human psyche inevitable moves toward wholeness. We can also have a lot of fun and play, but our underlying work together is always very serious. The answer is simple, the practice may well be more complex.

At some level it is all quite simple, if we understand some of basic emotional needs we understand that we need to be seen. We need to feel understood, because understanding reassures us that there is a place for us, that we belong. As human beings we need to feel who we are is okay, that what we feel, and what we have experienced, is okay, and then, with grace we will be able to put all these things in context and to forgive ourselves, and others, for how it is, and how it has been. I think it is helpful when we can begin to understand that all of who we are, and each one of our life experiences, wonderful or traumatic, contributes to the texture of our lives, contributes to who we are and any attempt to cut out, or deny parts of our lives, is akin to Cinderella's ugly sister cutting off her toes in order that she fit into someone else's shoes. We must become comfortable in our own shoes, in order that we find our own standpoint.

However, in the course of a life time, whether it is 10 years or 70, a lot of complexity develops. We become defensive in situations and circumstances which do not feel safe, or accepting.....and this defensiveness may well

be unconscious. We do not even know that we have started to cut off parts of ourselves, or that we have locked some experiences and feelings deep in the recesses of our psyches. We begin to grow layers around ourselves, we no longer rely on our selves, our feelings and thoughts to guide us through life. We take the cue from other who tell us what to do, what to feel, and what to believe. We get into further trouble, and start to have difficulty finding our way out, we don't even remember when we got lost. We feel anxious and stressed.

A large proportion of the people I work with have lived traumatic experiences or hold deeply painful stories which have become locked up, deep within themselves. They are not able to be free of the feeling, or images, and have lost confidence in their ability to find any peace. Maya Angelo says it beautifully when she says 'There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you'. And there can be no greater feeling of neglect and abandonment, when in such isolation one must bare so much pain.

The untold stories.

Oswald Mshali's 1968 poem captures this process.....He says

Man is,

A great wall builder

The Berlin Wall

The Wailing Wall of Jerusalem

But the wall

Most impregnable

Has a moat

Flowing with fright

Around his heart.

A wall

Without windows

For the spirit

To breeze through

A wall

Without a door

For love to walk in.

The process of healing requires that we shine light in our darkness, that we open the doors to the rooms in our psyches which have been slammed shut, protecting us against our pain, suffering, and significantly, our awareness. I believe it is the process of becoming whole again, gathering all the parts of our selves back again.....or as Carolyn Myss says, 'calling our spirits back.' We must breach these walls if we are to understand what has happened to a person.....what was the traumatic incident, what is the ongoing pain or sadness, what is the experience that is too difficult to live with, and yet one is not able to live without it. How often will people describe trying to get over something, to put it behind them, to get on with their lives, only to find that this situation or experience, lands itself firmly in front of them day in and day out.

Once that terrifying place has been exposed, and the individual has been able to express some of the feeling, and feel some relieve, then it becomes possible for a healing process to begin. It is extraordinary to contemplate how much emotional energy gets used up, keeping these feelings at bay, and how, once the person has begun a process of healing, they find their minds clearing, able to think again, with lot more emotional space available for their present day lives. Indeed Rumi tells us that "The wound is the place where the Light enters you." and indeed in this work the wound is very often the first step in a long journey of healing. It is the invitation, the call for help.

The context.....understanding the influences

When people begin this process they have often not questioned their lives in any real way. They might appeal to God....why me, why does this happen to me, but they seldom question their lives. I suppose questioning is one of the first steps of becoming conscious, and becoming conscious is a vital part of a healing journey. It is important to gain a bigger picture, a bigger understanding of what has happened in our lives, to gain some perspective of the different influences, the different attitudes, beliefs and ideologies, which may have prevented us from finding, and valuing, our own thoughts, feelings and voices. Those influences which have kept us bound with feelings of impotence, at the mercy of external agencies to direct our actions and define our sense of worth, out of touch with our own feelings and thoughts. These external agencies, range from the most personal, our relationships with our parents, our care givers, our families, communities, teachers, priests and so on.....to the macro influences such as the political systems which have dominated our lives, and the lives of generations before us. It is helpful, indeed necessary, that we understand the impact of these different influences, not only on ourselves, but also on the generations which came before us.

There is no doubt that our earliest relationships have a profound effect on how we feel about ourselves and how we manage our lives and relationships later in life. We know that it is important to experience 'good enough' care and that many factors contribute to our developing well enough through childhood. We know that many people in our country have grown in single parent families, often in poverty and the myriad of extremely difficult circumstances associated with poverty. That parent child relationships have often been fractured and although the extended family has provided a cushion in life, this is often not without tremendous emotional complexity. The

ravages of poverty often lock people in dark rooms of despair, with no idea of how to liberate themselves And often no thought that they could. Often I feel people have been silenced before that could even speak. Our cultures all have traditions which silenced children, in mine, 'children should be seen an not heard', and I have found echoes in all other cultures with whom I have worked. How much courage it took for a young woman to confront an older man, as she went against culture and tradition and what is called respect. And what a relief when she found that she could be respectful when she did so, and that the old man listened.

On the macro level I feel it is important to recognise the impact that the history of our country has had on the psyches of all the people of our land. Steve Biko one of our great heroes understood how the denigration of the culture and sense of self of a people, rendered them impotent, without a voice to control their own lives and this in turn left generations of people with a sense of inferiority, with no feeling or thought that they could or could even desire, to change the circumstances of their lives. As part of the solution he felt "It became more necessary to see the truth as it is', and that "The first step was to make the black man come to himself". Indeed the only way to become free of these forces is to become aware of them, to become more self conscious. Maya Angelo puts this process quite simply.. 'take a day to heal from the lies you've told yourself and from the ones that have been told to you." A day of such reflection would indeed be a good start....She offers the locus of control to the individual by first look to yourselves, and only then look to the other. But she also raises, I think, an important dynamic....when we are not aware, when we are not conscious we do not understand what is happening to us, and so we give it an explanation which probably has nothing to do with the truth. Indeed the truth will set us free.

Perhaps a helpful question that we need to ask ourselves is who, or what, occupies the driver seat of our lives? what is the basis for our choices and decisions, do we in fact feel we have any choice, and do we make any decisions. The more unhappy a person is, the less likely it is that they are controlling their own destinies, or exercising any choice. Many people live with a lot of rage. And while the circumstances and challenges of many lives are enough to evoke significant rage, it seems that this is compounded by feelings of impotence in situations where by rights a person should be able to assert themselves. Very often people feel at the mercy of the expectations of other, to which they are unable to say no, and this because they often do not feel they have the right to say no. Yet they start to feel used up, relationships of goodwill are replaced with feelings of resentment. Until the individual begins to restore a sense of self they will not be able to set realistic boundaries, and they will not be able to establish a sustainable balance in their lives.

People are often also desparately unhappy and angry when they have deep seated feelings and experiences that have not been heard, and for which they feel there is no resolution. Any number of mothers who have lost infant children have described the deep grief they hold for their children, a grief that simply seems to have no place, a grief from which they cannot find respite. It is only when they start to talk about the child again, and to consciously make a place for them in their hearts and lives, that some of the grief abates. So much grief is intensified as people attempt to go into their futures, feeling they must leave the dead behind, before the time is right. They also often feel that the dead can no longer be a part of their lives, (most often because someone else is in their drivers seat) and in an artificial, forced way they attempt to cut themselves off and to move on.....this inevitably is problematic. We must find the right place for the dead, and for the living.....and we have to get to know ourselves in order to know what that right place is for ourselves.

What do we know about the human psyche.

We know that while each person has an intensely individual and personal journey, there are no two souls who are the same, and at the sametime we know that there is much that we have in common.

We know that we might be born with the essence of who we are, and that this in turn may affect how we respond and react to the world as it presents itself to us. We know that there are a normal range of events, traumas, and suffering, from which we seem to naturally recover in the right time. The trauma of child birth, for mother and child, the death of some one who has lived a long and full life, a failed love affair, etc. We have pain and suffering, and we recover, but sometimes we don't, and sometimes it is too difficult to digest that pain, or trauma, and so it gets locked away, either consciously or unconsciously. And we are never free of it. It visits us in dreams, in feelings, in the fear of falling apart if we should let the feelings go. In the dark these feelings grow and grow in strength, and become more and more foreboding.

What helps.....The psychic map.

I believe It is helpful to understand that ones personal story finds its echoes in collective stories. The language of the psyche seems to be the metaphor and the story, with permeable edges which are able to accommodate every persons response and identification. It invites a deeper engagement which goes beyond the intellect, and rather gathers ones feelings, imagination, and spirit, the psyche. All peoples and cultures on the earth have, for eons, handed down stories, rituals and symbols which act as guides for this journey called life. The function of the story seems to reassure the individual....your journey is deeply personal, and yet it's echoes are found in the stories of all human beings. We are not alone, although in the depth of our darkness we can feel that way. Our experience is often not unique, although in the depth of our suffering we can feel that we are the only people in the world to face a particular situation. It can be reassuring to find that others came to the same experience, before us, and still others will come after us. Rituals grow and emerge in cultures, marking significant life transitions, holding and supporting people as they make their way through challenging and painful times. These all facilitate the process of healing, of becoming whole again. When these fail or are insufficient, we need to engage in another way.

There is a particular story I like to tell to the people I work with, a story which I feel sets out a kind of psychic map for what a healing process might ask of us. It sits as a kind of backdrop for the journey they are being invited to engage with. If you would indulge me I would like to share an adapted version of the original story with you.

The story takes place more than 5000 years ago, in Sumeria, or what we today would call southern Iraq. 5000 years ago.....in a country on the opposite side of the world, with a culture that could not be more different than yours or mine.

A woman lives a particularly superficial life, happy to indulge in material possessions, along with concomitant delights and passions. She goes short of nothing, and lives a life with almost no reflection. Very often it is hardship and suffering, traumatic or life threatening experiences which evoke reflection. One day she is called to visit her dark sister who lives in the dark depths of the earth. Well it is well known that a descent to these depths can be quite dangerous, aren't we all a bit frightened of what we will find if we look too deeply into ourselves? more often than not people are very frightened of what resides in their depths. Our heroine asks her helpers to come and fetch her if she has not returned after 3 days, and sets off on her journey. She must pass through 7 gates, and at each gate the gate keeper asks that she remove yet another item or clothing or adornment. She is not happy with this situation, but at the same time she can only proceed if she obliges. Her commitment is strong enough.And so at each gate she disrobes. This is a process of slowly becomes more and more honest with herself, and her reality. No longer does she deny who she is, or hide behind an idea of herself. This ultimately leads her to the den of her sister, stark naked. No longer does she have any defenses, or a persona to hide behind, her feelings are raw, and out there.....and her sister rages. It doesnt matter what our heroine says to try to bring her around, her sisters rage is such that she cannot hear her, and cannot 'get over it'. She suspends her earthly sister from a meat

hook, and proceeds to torment her. Does this sound familiar,?? is there any one in this room who has not ever felt so angry that you have not been able to think straight, where the feeling carries you, as if your mind, or ego, has been suspended..... This is an image of feelings so strong that the ego, or in this case Innana, is totally overwhelmed.

I think people very often find themselves in one or the other of these states. Too much thought, vs, too much feeling. And so people move from a state where there is too much ego control, including repression or neglect, of feeling, to the experience of ego being overwhelmed by an intense build up of feeling. This process reveals itself when people otherwise in control, surprisingly burst out with intense feeling. And very often this feeling is very difficult to contain.

Deep in the cavern it is this scenario which is playing out. After 3 days our heroine has not returned to the surface and helpers are sent down. They arrive in the cavern and very quickly assess the rather desperate situation. They sit quietly as they deepen their understanding of what is happening, and then one of the helpers says.....ooooooh your aching liver. She looks at them.....what is this....ooooooh your aching heart....and so the interaction proceeds. The helpers simply reflecting their understanding of her rage, by speaking directly to her suffering which lay underneath the rage.

Slowly the rage comes down, anhedon dark sister, feeling seen, is overwhelmed with gratitude. How can I thank you, says she.....and they say, by giving them her sister, by letting them take her back up to the surface with them. She, now gracious says, of course, but with one condition, that from that time on, the pathway between them must always remain open. Heart and mind must speak to one another.....intellect/ego must not overwhelm feeling, and feeling must not overwhelm ego. It is a good intention, at least. Indeed, there is an understanding which speaks of the necessity that we learn to hold the tension of the opposites, that we must develop the emotional fitness to tolerate both sides of a situation in order for a new understanding to emerge. This requires both intention and perseverance.

So why is this story so important, and in what way could it be helpful.

The story tells us that the human condition is pretty consistent over time and across culture. That those seeking a deeper understanding of themselves, and of life, can respond to countless calls, to do so. This is the journey of the 'hero', an impulse which resides in the deep psyche of each one of us. It tells us how important it is to become conscious, to become aware of our thoughts and feelings, and then to find an empathy for them, for ourselves, an empathy which empowers rather than weakens.

Our psyches never give up on us, the spirit, the soul cannot be lost. There are always be opportunities to engage with this process, but dare I say the sooner we are able to, the better and At the same time I am very aware that we can only do what we can do when we can do it.

I feel it is helpful to understand that what ever happens in our lives, that it is part of a process, it is part of the fabric of who we are, it is part of what makes us who we are. And so we cannot just cut off chunks of ourselves, or our lives because we don't like them, because they are painful, because we are ashamed of them. Ultimately we must forgive ourselves, and make a place for all the aspects of ourselves, redeemed, and unredeemed.

So these stories tell us that the passage of healing will always require, a commitment, or intention.we need to try to stay awake, we need to have the intention and desire to become more conscious of ourselves. One of the very special woman I have worked who did not engage for the first two sessions, suddenly woke up to the opportunity that she had to begin to change her life. She decided that she needed to start a process of healing a dreadfully painful experience which had hung on her the past 7 years, and which had turned her into an angry and impatient woman. She had some extraordinary results as she followed her own intuitive passage of healing, she felt a lot of pain, a lot of anger, and over a period of time, kept engaging with the feelings, until she found peace, and not surprisingly her anger had gone and her patience returned. She says that if a person does not make a decision to heal some aspect of their lives and then proceed to take the necessary steps, not missing out any steps, then nothing will happen. Healing ourselves is a very serious business, it requires commitment, discipline and a good deal of courage. If we do not get involved with it nothing will happen.

We are obliged to become as honest, and to be as true to ourselves as is possible. That is the passage through the gates. And this is vital, because this is how we begin to become more conscious, more self aware, how we slowly rediscover our own points of view, perceptions, judgements, realities, morality. We can only overcome what has been imposed on us, by starting to listen to what is us. This is Biko's black man coming home to himself. and Maya Angelo's appeal that we confront the lies we have told ourselves, and the lies we have been told to us. and while this might feel like an awesome challenge, most people simply feel relief once they do so.

I have often said to people that soul, rather than being some beautiful, angelic essence, is rather, certainly at this stage, quite messy and difficult to be with. You see in that cavern, in that room without windows, tends to be the pain and suffering we have endured, but from which we have tried to distance ourselves. Sometimes this is an unconscious process of self preservation, sometimes we consciously attempt to get over it, put it behind us, push it under the carpet, lock the door of the room, only to find it possesses us, and refuses to be forgotten, until it has been properly remembered. We do need to feel it, in order to heal it, and if we allow ourselves to feel it with the intention of healing it, it engages a very different process from just feeling and being swamped by feeling. It engages ego, what must I do to heal this.....Ego plus feeling.....

Significantly The helpers in the story are created out of small bits of dirt removed from under a finger nail. And I believe this is key. Only a little of the right medicine is necessary if a committed ego is engaged. In fact, if you have to give too much medicine, the chances are that the person's ego is not engaged, and they have not, ala Nelisiwe, made the decision to take their healing seriously. A small bit of the right medicine, engages, the psyche's natural healing impulse. and I have witnessed this over and over again....Courageous, and determined people, who see the C4C process as an opportunity, people who put themselves into their own healing process, and who, astonished feel the changes. There is another story I enjoy reflecting on which is Greek story of Psyche. The aspect of the story which is relevant here is one of the tasks, set Psyche in pursuit of her love. Overnight she must sort a huge mound of seeds, far more than is possible in that amount of time. But her determination is strong and she sets upon her task. Inevitably she falls asleep, but, nature arrives to support her in the form of a small army of ants, and by dawn the seeds are beautifully sorted.....

The decision, intention and action, as if a commitment on the part of our egos, or minds, if you will, seem to be vital to ensure that other 'forces' emerge to support the process. It is about taking ourselves seriously, understanding that no task is, in fact, too great, no problem, issue, pain, insurmountable.....but it requires your involvement and engagement. T.S.Elliot says it very clearly when he says this journey ' costs not less than everything.'

So let me highlight what I believe helps,

What helps the person who is helping, and how a person can help themselves.

1) It helps to suspend judgement and to remember that we are in search of a deeper understanding of what is. Judgement is limiting and does not facilitate healing. And we can never know enough of the picture to make accurate judgements, anyhow.

2) It helps to find stories which reflect the emotional journey. These can inspire and motivate and encourage ones perseverance and fortitude for the journey.

3) It helps to gain a good understanding of the influencers in a person's life.

More specifically it helps a person to become their own psychic detective, to develop a curiosity about themselves and their lives, where they have come from, what the influencers have been for them, and for the generations who came before them.

4) It helps to create a life line, starting long before one is born, to beyond the present. It helps to walk though ones life, retrieving memories, the history of hat happened to your people before you were born. The more we remember, the more we remember....

5) It helps to understand that the presenting wound can often act as the gateway to the persons psyche and to their story.

For some the wound has become their whole story, as if for years and years it has sat at the center of their lives, and even come to define their lives. This C4C process attempts to help the person gain some perspective on their life, in order that their pain can take its correct place in their lives! rather than dominating their lives.

6) It helps to make a decision to engage with ones personal story.

Intention is a very powerful factor and our thoughts have the power to create our reality.

7) It helps to keep a daily journal to record ones experiences, feelings, observations, and dreams...etc. Is an invaluable in the process of becoming more conscious. We can reflect and think, and explore how we feel, we can attempt to understand how we feel, why, why, why....We can practice conversations we need to have by writing letters to the person, in th journal, we can imagine how they might respond. Sometimes we can write to God, or to people who have passed. Sometimes we write a letter to our partner telling him or her, how we feel and leave the journal out for them to read, thus provoking conversation.

8) It helps to begin to take ourselves seriously, even if we don't yet feel it.....if we live it we will begin to feel it. It only takes 30 days to develop a habit. Take time to listen deeply to yourself.

9) it helps to understand that there is a natural healing cycle, anything less than what is required, is too little, anything in excess, begins to create a new suffering of its own.

In conclusion In the words of TS elliot.

I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope,
for hope would be hope for the wrong thing;
wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing;
there is yet faith, but the faith and the love are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”

Thank you