

# *The Place of Eros in Therapeutic Work*

by Phil Byrne

*"...the soul's individual ability to love is divine, and that transformation by love is a mystery that defies."* Erich Neumann - *Amour and Psyche*

The night my mother died I held her in my arms. She told me that she loved me. And I told her that I loved her. In the moment that I said it, the boundaries between 'Mother' and 'Lover' dissolved. The room had been full of many things in the last hours of her life, but just then it was dominated by Eros. Deep intimacy inevitably involves desire for the other. And desire is erotically charged. I know that when I am interested in someone, when I really want to know who they are, there is an erotic element. It may or may not be the dominant theme, but it is frequently the crucial factor in allowing me to take risks; to know and be known.

Eros is dangerous. He is feared by all the Gods, and this is brought home again and again in myth. Jove makes the point particularly well when, with disarming honesty, he talks about how humiliating and shaming being overcome with lust/desire has been for him. (Not disfiguring enough for him to do without it however, since he then goes on to make sure that Eros won't forget him in future!)

That desire and shame are so close together is one of the paradoxes of Eros and what we long for most has the power to expose what is most unformed and shadowy in us. It takes something as powerful as desire to force us out into the open so that we are revealed not just to the other, but to ourselves. Over the last year or so my emphasis in my own therapy has moved from - or perhaps through - the relationship with my therapist toward what I can only call my relationship with a greater one-ness, with the Self. The strength of the erotic component of the therapeutic relationship facilitated this. Because of Eros I allowed my therapist to matter to me. She became an important 'other' in my life, it became a 'real' relationship. I experienced the desire to fuse, and as that desire underwent a series of transformations, so did I.

When Eros is present in work with a client we engage with that aspect of therapy where love is involved, and with the kind of (feminine) consciousness which emerges 'in an authentic encounter with another' (Neumann). This must also involve an 'aspect of suffering and separation'. There are those clients whose very first session 'sizzles' with erotic energy. When this happens, on one level I relax very quickly. I take more risks, am more direct more confrontative because I know that the charge between us will 'hold' the relationship together, they will stay because their desire nature has been activated. It is as though Eros becomes a magnet which allows work on other levels to proceed. Even after one session these clients may come back and fight with me, or sulk or accuse, but they 'want' me. I am already important. They have let me in and I have let them in. They matter to me also, and I imagine that somewhere, subliminally, this is known to them. On another level precisely because of this level of contact I am more vulnerable and alert; less 'knowing'.

Though so far in my work I have not had to struggle with the temptation to act out sexually with a client, I have struggled with the dangers of more subtle abuse within sessions. This is a complicated area because the authentic encounter requires a real presence in the relationship, a need to desire the client fully in that moment, to want to have them for 'ourselves' just as Eros attempts to take Psyche for himself. This is where the confusion lies. In those moments when I allow Eros to overtake me, the client is at risk - and so am I. Sedgewick's 'V model' (where the upper arms of the V represent places of lesser identification between client/therapist and the lower part of the V places of greater identification) is very useful in describing the challenges present in these states of fusion engendered by erotic energies.

Samuels made the point that, 'sexuality has to be present for its symbolic meaning to be interpreted .... no eros, no analysis'. I had worked with three therapists of different persuasions before coming across my current therapist. While the previous work was valuable I was not aware of being erotically engaged. I never 'loved' these people, and I never

'yielded' to them. There was no experience for me of the surrender which is so integral to the erotic process.

Where there is little or no discernible erotic energy in the transference/countertransference of the initial stages of the therapeutic relationship, I find that I spend a great deal more time on pre-alliance work, the 'warm-mirror', containment and support and the building up of trust. Looking back over my practice and reflecting on clients with whom I felt the work never really 'came together' (something was missing), I realise that these are clients, by and large, whose sessions lacked Eros. I suspect that I was unconsciously 'waiting' for elements of coniunctio to emerge in the process and working with the assumption that this is in some way a measure of the soul's well being.

Winnicott once wrote that a mother keeps her child alive by her interest in it. Interest, desire and eroticism are inextricably linked. Perhaps this is why, on a very ordinary level, I feel sad when I do not find a client desirable. Sad for them and sad for me. It seems such a great privilege and a pleasure to have an individual's beauty revealed to me, perhaps after months or years of wondering what kept them alive in this world, or indeed what keeps us alive in our encounter. And sometimes I am left wondering.

Neumann makes the point that only after Psyche has 'fallen in love with Love' is she no longer in danger of regression. Through her separation from Eros she begins a process of stabilising her ego, and I am suggesting that the trials of the alliance phase (the therapist becoming more known through processes of disillusionment and so forth) are a parallel with the trials of Psyche in her search for her lost Eros.

It's also possible to work with a different perspective - though the two are obviously not mutually exclusive - and bring into focus what is happening in the so called 'field'. The value for me in doing this is that I begin to experience my clients (and myself) as less 'trapped' in our individual histories. Eros becomes more accessible and the emphasis shifts to our participation in co-creating and being created by the numinous. Our mutual efforts and struggles no longer focus on what feels lacking but become a reflection of our contribution to the development of Soul and the humanisation of Eros. Though not every client may be able or willing to express this consciously, holding this as my overall framework increases my sense of our mutual dignity and 'already-whole-ness'.

By its nature, the therapeutic relationship is intimate. The notion of a loveless, childless relationship is anathema to the human soul and this is both a gift and a hazard. To experience desire for the other and to experience being desired by the other, is to experience being alive. Individuals who get themselves into therapy, often at great personal cost are making a statement about their longing for life. During her early life, though revered from afar, Psyche was alone and desolate. A place of real despair had to be reached before she was led to what seemed to be her death. It eases some of the pain of a loveless union (which of course is not a union at all) with the loneliest and most untouched of my clients when I remember this.

At the end of the myth Psyche and Eros, after they have become 'lawfully married', give birth to their daughter, Pleasure, whose heavenly name is Joy. It seems to me that there is a place for lawful pleasure to be had in the work with people, a place for love and enjoyment and delight in the beauty of another being. In those moments we are both blessed and there is Joy.