

# Dare to be Present

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As we approach spring – a time to open up towards the outward world – it might be useful to reflect upon the past season and ask ourselves what our experiences taught us. It is with the understanding of the past that we move into the future, to settle accounts and learn from life as a means of continued personal growth.

In November I stood at St Nicolai cemetery in central Berlin under a cobalt blue sky, amidst a wild autumn garden with tall orange elms and no neat rows of boxwood in sight. No petite watering pots, no fancy stones of marble.

As I stood there, beside an asymmetric gravestone in sooty grey, with a pair of bowed twigs in my hand, an old lady came up and spoke to me. Turned out the gravestone beside the one where I stood, waiting for my friend, was her daughter's. The lady had the kind of sadness in her eyes that you will only ever see in the eyes of one who has lost their child. She had those lines in her face; deep and long, as when you age from sorrow rather than time.

I hardly picked up on a word she spoke – my German being more than rusty – but this did not bother her one bit. She kept on talking to me as we lingered for quite some time, under the tall elms, with our toes freezing on the cold ground. Far in the distance beyond the fence, I heard the cars and the city; smouldering with humanity, creativity and flaws.

And there, far from my daily life and psychiatric work, I asked myself what we are really doing with all this time that is given us. The old lady put her hand on my shoulder as a way to thank me for lending her an ear. Somehow we had each found some comfort in our forenoon meeting, amidst the falling leaves, in life as it is and happens, and she had found some momentary repose of the sorrow which people sometimes in fact never vanquish.

It was quite some years ago that I received my diploma and license to practice. Half an eternity, it seems, since the supervisors prophesied how we all had to “count on a few years of struggle.” They referred to psychiatric work at the beginning of ones career, which indeed is the nature of my employment as I write. For the one who is open to learn, the psychiatry offers a great platform, but at times it seems it is just a struggle; everything but a soulful place in the Autumn air as the minutes tick away.

Something that has instilled hope and professional motivation in me during the long autumn and winter, is a master class in intensive short-term psychodynamic therapy (ISTDP) with psychologist and psychotherapist, Ulla Bejerholm Hansen. The focus is on the relational perspective and how early formative relationships to parents and others, manifest in the client’s current private and working life, in the interpersonal exchange with important people as well as in the interaction with the therapist. “Holding” and confrontation are interfaced and reach a parity which has brought with it a breath of fresh air and some momentum to my treatments. It is very likely that people feel they are being taken seriously when the therapist dares to see and convey said observations directly.

“Say it like it is,” Ulla Bejerholm Hansen declares with natural authority, referring to the work of Davanloo, Malan,

Coughlin, Neborsky, McCoulough, Fosha et al. The short-term therapist is expected to – in quite a liberating manner – act immediately, explicitly and fearlessly.

It is a matter of approaching the complex, and to firmly grasp the affects as they manifest through the client's communication and through the transference. It is necessary and crucial to acknowledge and express the unspoken, to endure the tension in the transference dyad, and to address the wall that the tactical defences pose. Without this, what can we achieve? What understanding might we possibly reach? What reconciliation can take place? And do we truly come to terms with destructive patterns?

The psychodynamic short-term models are profoundly relevant in this age where so many people in one way or another avoid emotions – clients and therapists alike – and where it is often asked that professionals resign to shortcuts and quick fixes instead of accepting the complex challenge of the existential experience of life.

As professionals we might run around in the corridors dealing with one task after the other, but how present our we? And what do we truly achieve?

Diane Fosha's thoughts on therapy, and particularly trauma, are noteworthy. She suggests that trauma should be seen as an opportunity for transformation and not as a mere threat to psychological and emotional wellbeing. Fosha is clear that the real threat to mental health and recuperation is "detachment, trivialization, stagnation, and loss of feeling and meaning."

In light of this, I can't help but think that perhaps psychiatry is undergoing a kind of crisis, which possibly in extension could be its opportunity? And as with most crises, there is always an immense opportunity for growth and development.



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This article first appeared in publication in Swedish, in the professional magazine *Psykologtidningen*, no 2/2012. It was originally based on a wider study of psychodynamic models of short-term therapy, based on literature review, a ten-day workshop in Sweden led by psychologist Ulla Bejerholm Hansen, a masterclass in England with renowned US psychologist Dr Patricia Coughlin, as well as a masterclass in Denmark with Dr Jon Frederickson.

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