

# Intimacy & Separateness in Psychoanalysis

## Warren Poland

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### ~ PART II: The Psychoanalytic Situation ~

#### Chapter 3 – The Analyst’s Witnessing and Otherness

The therapist’s functioning as a witness is of crucial significance, as one who recognizes and grasps the emotional importance of the client’s self-exploration in the immediacy of the moment, yet who stays in attendance without imposing their own supposed wisdom – at least not verbally.

This silent but active presence, this respectful attention on the therapist’s part, this silence of ‘engaged non-intrusiveness’ rather than of abstinence, complements the therapist’s interpretive functions. Interpreting and witnessing go hand in hand, each facilitating the other.

Witnessing by the therapist may have its origins in the therapist’s empathic responsiveness or offering a holding environment, but it is a therapeutic function changed by maturation beyond those roots.

Witnessing reflects advancing self-other differentiation, the client’s growing individuation and self-definition, even while taking place within the intersubjective clinical field.

Witnessing brings in the open the connection between self-definition and the fabric of human interconnectedness.

It seems to matter to our clients that we *stay*, striving to understand some of what they struggle with, yet appreciating their essential aloneness dealing with the suffering in their own bodies, in their own minds, and in their own lives.

Witnessing is more than just providing a holding presence or empathic resonance.

It matters to our clients that we serve as ‘an other’, one whom they can see as hearing and grasping their reality, the anguish that they go through, who recognizes the crucial importance of their inner struggle, who understands and *witnesses* their suffering and pain, and their efforts to process their emotional wounds.

It can also be quite important to them that they are *seen* as a separate and real person, one alone suffering a private pain that alters their life.

Functioning as a witness to the client’s therapeutic introspective struggles....

Some of what a therapist does can be done for a client by someone else, like a good friend. But it takes the uniqueness of the therapeutic encounter to integrate bits and pieces of what is expressed into a *unfolding process* that extends one's struggles toward insight – beyond ordinary levels of conscious awareness and access.

The uncommon appreciation of powerful meanings that arise from the deep can generally best be obtained from someone who has traveled a significant part of the way along with a person to those depths.

- *Witness is a vitalizing therapeutic function.*

## **Definition**

Freud said that *"it takes two to witness the unconscious"*.

A century of clinical experience has taught us to appreciate the clinical process in which it takes two to witness the unconscious.

One clarification is necessary. The client's unfolding testimony bears witness to truths not yet known consciously. The therapist's participation in observing the client's evolving testimony (story), and especially on that part that strengthens the client by recognizing the client's mastery of 'solo flights', of self-agency, of individual initiatives.

- *For a client's speaking of what they have lived (and suffered through to come to life, a comprehending witness is needed.*

A catalyst to a client's capacity to know and to define him or herself as a unique one among others, witnessing makes personal testimony possible and meaningful.

Being witnessed is more than being pleased at being admired. It is not just an empathic response. It refers to a maturing process born of holding and empathy, but also is an indicator of forces farther along on the developmental line of relational capacities.

- *A time comes when warm empathy is not empathic, when anxiety-limiting containing inhibits rather than facilitates growth.*

Witnessing is more than simple validation or affirmation. It is a kind of recognition, not an exoneration, for what has taken place.

Depth work seeks to maximize openness to personal truths more than to comfort. We strive to look at one's pain, not anesthetize it.

- *Witnessing involves a therapist's active functioning as a client's 'other' who maintains an actively observing presence, who recognizes and grasps the emotional activity in the*

*mind of a client at work, and who is themselves recognized by the client as a distinctly separate person in their own right, not merely as a transference object.*

Witnessing as a therapeutic function refers to the therapist's grasping and respecting the client's meanings and the meaningfulness of those meanings from a position of separated otherness.

- *Recognition of autonomy and respect for otherness are central to witnessing.*

Realization of one's self as a unique and distinct from the actuality of an important other's equally unique self is significant for both of the clinical partners and the growth of that realization in a therapeutic relationship is evidence of profound maturational changes in the relationship.

Attention to this essential otherness allows for an integration that recognized the separateness of the client as a full and unique individual in their own right.

The therapist's witnessing accompanies and follows emergence and exposure of unconscious forces, and the appreciation of these unconscious forces and their power makes possible and enriches subsequent mutual awareness of otherness.

While the therapist's capacity to witness as a caring other may grow out of the therapist's providing a holding presence, it goes beyond that in a relationally specific way.

Witnessing may develop from a holding presence, but it implies letting go, it implies respecting the client's essential aloneness (and does not re-create an abandonment of any kind.)

Witnessing and interpreting have a circular relationship. Understandings that come forth from a witnessing position make possible further understanding.

Silent witnessing serves its own vital developmental role for the client.

The process of witnessing becomes most apparent the closer the therapy comes to termination. In a termination phase, there is the maintenance of a firm respect for self and otherness demanded in the face of loss of the shared clinical universe.

### **Case Illustration – As It Nears Termination**

This man was facing the sorrow elicited as he honestly continued to realize and confront the implications of his own earlier cruelty and pain.

Everything had been experienced by him as a hostile power struggle. He felt his existence as an individual depended on his ability to frustrate others while on the surface appearing to be accommodating. (Masochistic)

If the therapy was helped him, it meant to him that Warren had won and he had lost. To him, provoking the other to deprive him was adaptive.

Apparent defeat was for him the secret victory of guarding himself as untouchable. Whatever the actual loss, seeming to defeat him was survival of the self.

*“I’ll give you something to give me something to cry about.”*

His life seems dedicated to his power to seduce an aggressor. (Eg., B.O.) Buried below his masochism and below his deeper sadism was his hidden fantasy of reunion with a good mother, which explained in part how his sadism had come to feel adaptive.

Frustrated and distant as he kept Warren and as he felt for many years, they were both bound in that idiosyncratic way of being-at-one.

Slowly and painfully, behind the shaping of the transference, a genuine separateness and distinction were able to valid and recognized.

Warren came to be known to him as an ‘other’ in his own right, not merely as the immediate embodiment of his ghosts and those of Warren’s ghosts that the client could call forth.

- *They began facing a kind of sadness that was not a depressive blackness but the sadness that can accompany self-honesty.*

“He who increases knowledge increases sorrow.” – Ecclesiastes

As a witness, Warren was there not just to listen, but to hear as his client struggled to acknowledge what he found inside himself.

His client had come far enough that he now had his own ability to know what rang true, yet Warren’s “getting the point” was important to the client.

It now seemed to matter to his client that an ‘other’ could know. Warren could now be alongside him.

- *Warren’s observing and understanding presence helped him define himself as someone in his own right who had a presence as one among others.*

His client was now prepared to stand alone in the spotlight of self-scrutiny, but he was not prepared to live alone in a world unknown by others – as really, no one is so prepared or able to do.

The therapists' presence as a sensitive respectful other who witnessed his growing ability to work at self-reflection also was essential to his client's realization of himself as a unique one in a world filled with unique and interacting others.

### **Witnessing & The Analytic Process**

*Where does witnessing fit in the relational dynamics of the therapy process?*

There is a recognition by the therapist, often on retrospective reflection, of a *shift* having taken place. There is a sense, more than usual, of both the client's and the therapist's separateness. In these moments of witnessing, there is a feeling in the therapist of being fully engaged and the client experienced as somehow more in his own right.

There is relaxed and often new awareness of the client's intact 'otherness' even as they sit together. There is a felt sense of the client's integrity.

- *The unconscious never loses its power.*

These forces combine to somehow integrate a felt sense of genuine respect for the client as apart, as each person being distinct, alert and sensitive to each other, but *two who are profoundly apart even while immediately mattering to one another.*

- *The intensification of witnessing relates to a vital shift in the progressing clinical relationship, to a shift based on separation, with separation negating a fantasied or felt merger or union.*

The psychotherapy process comes about, in the first place, because of the therapist's attitudes.

One fundamental 'therapeutic attitude' is that of *inquiry* – the desire to explore for the sake of understanding taking priority over either wishes to dominate or therapeutic zeal.

- *The analyst's profound and genuine respect for the authenticity of the patient's self as a unique other, an other's self as valid as the analyst's own self. (Poland)*

Whatever the therapist's curiosity, true psychotherapeutic exploration is unlikely to occur without that underlying regard on the therapist's part.

The client, of course, is unlikely to start with a similar reciprocal attitude.