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The Therapy of Allowance, or Master's Degree in Anything

Ask Master Don-or-NonDon if you have an important question about life, liberty, or the pursuit of anything. He is convinced he knows quite a bit. He even purchased a master's degree in "Anything."
(By Don Hadlock, LMFT, from old Process Therapy Institute website)

"WHAT, YOU DON'T KNOW ALL FIFTEEN STAGES OF DIFFERENTIATION OFF THE TOP OF YOUR HEAD?" HE ASKS, DEADPAN.

I, a trainee on the second week of a supervision group, freeze, desperately searching through all the lists and categories I learned during the last two years of schooling... and then see mischief in his eyes and flood with relief: He is joking. Wait, can you joke about these things?!

Don Hadlock, my mentor at the Process Therapy Institute, together with his life and work partner Carol Hadlock, was undoubtedly the best thing that happened to me as a therapist.

For many years of my work and studying in America I felt I never quite fit in—too quick to respond, too darkly humorous, too argumentative... It is only when I started working and training with Don and Carol in my clinical practicum 19 years ago that I was finally able to relax, learning to embrace all parts of myself... What a relief it was to have my Russian-Jewish cultural and personal quirks not just tolerated, but truly welcomed and even appreciated!

In addition to supervision, a weekly "mirror training" was an unusual, intensive experience. A trainee therapist would be observed in a session through a one-way mir-

ror, and a supportive, experienced trainer would offer feedback in real time through an earpiece. I still remember many of these sessions vividly, as if they'd happened last week.

In one memory, with Don observing, the client talks about a string of bad decisions in her youth that led to a series of "rotten" and abusive relationships. She talks about letting go, forgiving those men, whom she sees now clearly as broken and abused themselves... To me, she appears collected and well-integrated, even tough, and I am impressed and pleased with her generosity.

Suddenly, Don's voice is in my ear: "Has she forgiven herself?" While not sure where that is coming from, I nonetheless repeat the question out loud.

Instantly, the client is quiet, pensive. Then she starts crying. Don's question unlocks the grief and self-loathing that were waiting all these years to be processed and understood. She connects with the young woman she had been, desperate, but also determined and strong, who did what she needed to do to persevere and escape the nightmare, thus leaving the past behind. The client is finally able to feel compassion for that confused and lonely, and so brave girl. Regrets and shame subside, no longer required to keep her moving. In my memory, at the end of the session I see a glimpse of what's possible—a woman, finally at peace.

I, however, remember feeling completely bewildered: How did Don know what to ask? She didn't bring up self-forgiveness, yet he sensed it was the missing piece...

Now, I look at my confused and frustrated past self with smile and compassion. It would take me many more years to accept that Don didn't have to know, but instead he would trust his experience and inquisitive intuition to guide his shot in the dark... and then deal with whatever transpired—whether profound release, or client's frustration, or no response at all.

Today, it is still Don's voice I hear when I tell my supervisees: "I have some news for you. The good one: You cannot do it wrong—it is the client who decides how to use your intervention in the moment, and you—staying present and intentional—will follow them and work with whatever reaction comes up. Unfortunately, it means there is also bad news: You cannot do it right either. It is still up to the client to decide how they choose to work."

And as I see the relief on my budding therapists' faces – my favorite supervision moment every time—I think: "Thank you Don, once again, for this gift."

—Master Don-or-NonDon,
Why do fools fall in love?
Signed, Unknown

—Dear Unknown,
Fools fall into everything. They fall into holes, into trouble, into merriment, as well as into love. The dictionary definition of fool is one who does not know he is not watching where he is going. The good news is, if enough fools fall into something, it will soon fill it up so there will be no risk of us falling into it. Hoping to meet you at the bottom of the heap,
Master Don-or-NonDon

Don loved making sense of the workings of the world. Partial to experiential in-the-moment work, with his engineering mind, he was always making sense of the inner mechanics of therapy, consciousness and growth. Looking for common unfolding processes with various humanistic approaches such as Gestalt or psychodrama, he translated it all into flowcharts as brilliant as they were visually flamboyant.

Being greatly influenced by Eastern spiritual philosophies he would make countless charts and teachings about "releasing attachments, being in the moment, connecting to Source..." With his white beard and kind round face, I often imagined him as a "Buddhist Santa Claus." He believed that the only way to invite our clients to release suffering and let go, would be for ourselves first to come from a place of ease and well-being.

While inspiring, this challenge also made studying with Don quite frustrating at times. "Just release resistance, people," he would say, "release resistance! Allow what is—remember, all is well..." He made it look easy, too easy. "Whether or not it is clear to you, the universe is unfolding as it should..." I didn't then recognize the quote from Desiderata poem (Max Ehrmann, 1927), and would feel my frustration rising: How can I "just release" my pain, my tension, my worry... Is he "bypassing"? Is he really that enlightened? How do I get there?

What was not clear to me then is that there is no "getting" or "staying" there, only patiently returning to that state of allowance and acceptance; catching myself slipping into countertransference and coming back anew with more awareness, over and over, often without a client's even noticing...

Thankfully, he didn't just preach, he showed us how to get there, into the therapeutic openness and connection of "I am ok, you are ok"; compassionate curiosity, creativity, both daring and tender playfulness... "Into the eye of the storm", into the pain and darkness we were invited to go with our clients again and again, to transcend and emerge on the other side with a larger sense of self and a wider perspective of ownership, liberation and healing. And all that with a good dose of gentle humor on the side.

—Master Don-or-NonDon,
Is there a way to connect to the source, that profound silent stillness out of which all springs?
Signed, Tim

—Dear Tim,
Some people try to sneak up on it so as not to disturb the stillness, but alas this does not work. Others try to search for the spigot with which to make the connection, but alas this leads only to eye fatigue. Some clean house and release all the junk that is covering it, only to discover that the connection is already there. One who needs to keep cleaning,
Master Don-or-NonDon

Some people preferred Carol's down-to-earth, straightforward kindness—a safe relief from Don's daring style. I loved them both; still, as he tried to teach courage to all of us, I remember at times resisting his fearless challenge, preferring to experiment with safety and creativity at my own pace.

In another mirror session, processing a dream where the client was trying to run away from a hideous monster that kept pursuing her, I suggested she “redream” and complete it in the “here-and-now.” Together we started running from the monster, brainstorming more ways to hide in the imaginary scene.

In my memory, I am hearing Don in my earpiece: “Let’s face the monster. Tell her to stop and look back. Let’s confront him.” Again and again, I choose to ignore him, and again and again the monster catches up with my client. She is scared; perhaps so am I, for I don’t want to follow Don’s suggestion. Isn’t my job to help the client be safe, to protect her? Yet there is no safety from her monster in the dreamland she describes – no matter where we hide, there he is.

I am hearing impatience creeping up in Don’s voice; he really wants me to be brave. The dream is stuck in the loop. Finally, I give in: “Stop. Turn back and look at him. Tell me what you notice.”

The client agrees. She gasps. She reports a terrible burning smell... She has an insight, a memory from 9/11 in New York, where she was that day. Feelings are coming to the surface; a chance is here to work with the trauma that the monster represents... Our time is up. A sense of disappointment at the missed opportunity is burned into my memory.

During the debriefing, while Don was not thrilled with me, he was supportive: Nothing is a mistake, I did what I could when I was ready for it. A valuable lesson is learned—I don’t want to wait till the end of the session for a permission to face my fears—a golden opportunity might lie there. My own students, terrified to make a wrong “unsafe” move, will be hearing this story in years to come.

At the same time, while working hard to embolden us, Don consistently invited us to pause and stay still, to get out of the client’s way of processing, to be “a lazy therapist... a placebo for the client to use as they need...” “Your first job is to shine your light, to be present. Your Being is more important than your Doing.”

And so I learned to sit with discomfort, with grief, with my helplessness to “fix,” to change anyone but myself, with existential limitations of being in a world full of suffering... and to trust that with all that, I am enough. To trust that perhaps my bold presence is a worthy enough offering on our collective quest for peace, just one person at a time – even with my own dark places, passionate nonconformity, twisted Russian jokes and all. For a girl raised in an atheistic, godless Soviet Union—if there is any spiritual spark in my practice and in my relationship with the universe, it is also Don’s gift to me.

—Master Don-or-NonDon,
Where can I get a degree in humor therapy?
Signed, Wondering

—Dear Wondering,
Your question is certainly a laughing matter. You must get the recommendation of 4 people who have said your humor has improved the quality of their life, see the joyful absurdity of the world, and stop taking yourself so seriously. When this is complete, send a registered letter to yourself issuing yourself a degree in humor therapy. Ridiculously yours,
Master Don-or-NonDon

Perhaps my most memorable experience happened during the supervision where Don was teaching us to work with suicidal ideation. It is a sad and scary issue, and understandably, many of us were anxious as we approached it. Don, however, rooted in his spiritual and holistic beliefs, was not afraid of the thought of death, nor of inviting the dark subject into the work. He believed that some parts need to die in order to transcend and re-integrate—“resurrect, re-birth”—and in order to make space for other processes to emerge.

So here he is in the group, so fresh in my mind, asking for a volunteer to demonstrate his use of guided imagery in exploring a wish of death and inviting it to completion. I raise my hand. Don tells me to visualize going ahead, following my wish to kill myself. Not a stranger to morbid ideation, I eagerly dive in. “Let me know when you’re dead.” I am there. “Notice your experience... what you are aware of... is there an image...? Feel how it is for you to see yourself there...” I become aware of a surprising and wonderful peacefulness that overtakes me. I am in a beautiful place, surrounded by sunlight; there is no pressure to do or be any different; no pain; no more responsibilities or regrets... As a matter of fact, it is quite blissful. Don lets me rest in this magical place, and after a while invites me back into my body, into the present, into the room. I feel great.

As I open my eyes, I see that all my groupmates are vigorously scribbling in their notepads, faces scrunched with concentration, so burdened with thoughts, so different from my experience! A thought comes: “Wow, I am glad that my death can be used in the service of learning for others. I guess my life is not wasted after all.”

Immediately recognizing it as a pinnacle of my martyrdom and ridiculous self-sacrificial psychological programming, I start laughing. I am aware that to others I probably look hysterical; it is confirmed by the looks of horror I am now getting; but I just cannot stop, it is that funny. Finally, wiping my eyes from the tears of laughter, I am able to exhale and explain the reason for my amusement. It is a profound release and relief. “See,” Don chimes in, “you didn’t even have to kill yourself to feel better.”

“You’re never going to be whole while you have these physical bodies. You’re connected—you are actually whole—but you can never really fully connect to wholeness with these bodies. ...I’m not sure if you heal when you die, either. You know, you just keep transcending. The whole idea of healing is a myth. It’s the idea that something’s wrong. There is nothing wrong.”

After the practicum I left Don and PTI to explore some greener pastures, but later returned for more wisdom and fearlessness of the Process Model approach. I kept coming back, first as an intern, advancing my learning into Don’s charts and techniques, later as a supervisor and trainer when he needed more people to assist in running the Institute.

All that teaching came useful in January 2020.

I often dreamed of working alongside Don, and got my wish in 2018 for a short couple of years. Little did I know that he would leave us abruptly and without a warning right before the COVID pandemic (“what a lucky escape”, I sometimes can’t help thinking). I like to believe that he went as joyously into the final transcendence, to his

beloved Consciousness, as I did with his help into my restful imagery. With Carol's not working any more at the time, also passing away soon after, we, a few bewildered apprentices, were left to mind the shop without our dear teachers, who for 35 years willed and breathed the place into existence.

It felt like we were children running the house without adult supervision, pretending to be grown-ups in their parents' shoes and too baggy clothes. The pandemic added a surreal sense that "life will be completely different from now on, even more than you previously thought possible". Thankfully, we were also supported by Don's loyal business partner, PTI Executive Director at the time, Don Arnoldy. He stayed with us two years longer than planned, until our knees stopped wobbling.

Did we survive? Yes, we did, don't ask me how. I guess for me, I just felt an obligation and stubborn desire to see Don and Carol's work continued. I felt a responsibility to pass their vision on to new cohorts of students, so they too could learn to be still, and brave, and thoughtfully playful with human suffering and resilience.

To my not-quite-surprise and grateful relief, the Process Model held its own in translation to telehealth. While missing sandplay toys or Gestalt-type experientials with chairs and pillows in the room, the main principles of working in the moment, inviting introspection, deepening in a metaphor, and following processes to completion, still allowed clients to grieve, break through internal barriers, and accomplish whatever work they needed to do.

With time, with some older clinicians leaving to pursue their calling elsewhere while new generations of therapists keep joining us for training and supervision, I became the Clinical Director of the Process Therapy Institute, title once held by Don. I joke that instead of making a career, if you wait by the river long enough, all the ancient Clinical Directors would float by, and then the career will make you. So, for now I am it.

—Master Don-or-NonDon,
Why does my counselor just nod and grunt "Un-huh?"
Signed, Somewhat Frustrated

—Dear Somewhat,
Well, it's the way they have been trained. Most counselors go to the School of Hard Nods. The grunting is one way they keep themselves awake. Noddingly yours,
Master Don-or-NonDon

Don was never concerned with publishing or building fame; but after two years of simplifying and toning down his exuberant charts and collecting articles and quotes from his class recordings, we are finally about to publish a book on the Process Model – a tribute to his life's work. I look forward to a day when his writings will be accessible to the larger public, even if it is 30 years overdue.

I realized I was doing a good job of absorbing and passing on my mentors' wisdom when a supervisee from a different institution, not previously aware of Don and Carol's role in my life, shared her recent dream of an unusual supervision session with me:

"... In my dream I notice you looking beyond me at my background, and I see an expres-

sion of recognition across your face. Next, I see you walking down a spiral staircase towards me, and even more surprising, you are followed by two of your friends. One of them is an older white man with glasses. He has kind eyes and a warm smile. He explains to me that you all used to work together, but about three years ago you had to go your separate ways. But you are now working together again, and you are all so happy about it that the three of you decided to supervise me that day together."

Later she wrote about it in her final class paper:

"We spent some time working the dream, and before the end of our session my supervisor shared that she had two mentors. One of them was an older white man, who wore glasses. He passed away shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, now just over three years ago. So for her, my dream was "as if" her mentor were still with her, guiding and supporting her and her work."

I was and continue to be quite moved by my supervisor's reverie of my dream, both for the positive impact it had on her and in helping me realize that as one of her supervisees, I am now also a member of her professional lineage."

And indeed, it is so. Sometimes, after a particularly lovely session, I come out of the office and notice a graceful white heron crossing a dusky-purple sunset sky. I believe then, that on the other side of that immense one-way mirror, Don is quite pleased with me.

—Dear Master Don-or-NonDon,
You say we must change alone, and need others so that we can change. Why do we need others for our change?
Grateful Universe Student

—Dear Grateful Universe Student,
We change alone to be discrete and because we are the only one who can truly dress ourselves anyway. Yet without seeing what others are wearing, how can we gauge what it is we want to change into. Here's watching you,
Master Don-or-NonDon

Commentary

IN THIS RATHER MAGICAL ACCOUNT OF THE WRITER'S DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF HER MENTORS, we see her taking in their ways of being in the psychotherapy work. We psychotherapists are the instruments we use as we sit with those who come to us, and keeping our instrument tuned is our obligation as clinicians. This is a story of that tuning. What happens with her in supervision sessions allows her to be with patients in new ways. The bravery and the tenderness exemplified by both of her mentors gets internalized and carried forward by her. At the article's end, we see how powerful the transmission was in her own session as a supervisor when an uncanny dream occurs. A beautiful conclusion.

—Molly Donovan