

## SELF-EXPRESSION

By Anton T. Boisen

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What is the therapeutic value of letting off steam? This question is often asked in all seriousness by persons who have just been introduced to the mysteries of psychoanalysis. Impressed by the baleful effects of repressing instinctual drives, they are led to the conclusion that honest feelings are a sine qua non of mental health. If, therefore, we are insulted and feel angry, it is important that our resentment should be given a chance to express itself.

Undoubtedly there is a measure of truth in this view, a truth which has been graphically expressed by an illiterate Negro prophet of my acquaintance. In the hospital, where I knew him, he was a childlike likeable person with a mental age of eight years--as measured by the tests--but possessed of a remarkable stock of quaint phrases and shrewd observations. Among his sayings is an explanation of what makes a man go crazy which may serve as the basis for my remarks:

"What tears a man's mind up worse than mos' anything else is to have something kivered up in yoh mind. It's jes' like as if you shuts up milk or meat. They 'gins to stink. That's what keeps a million thousand people here in this 'sylum. They's minds is all muddied up. My mind used to be that way, but God cleaned it out. God jes' plitely took a scrub brush and scrub it out. But I ain't never been crazy. That comes from worriation, and I never worries. I jes' gets mad and that lets the stink out that quick."

That our prophet hit the nail on the head as regards the causation of mental illness can hardly be denied. Among psychoanalysts and most other psychiatrists there is general agreement that the sense of guilt, attributed to the presence of something "covered up in the mind," is the major causative factor in non-organic mental illness and that it is a factor also in many cases of physical illness. Our Negro prophet has thus stated the essence of the Freudian theory in language which is somewhat more picturesque than Freudians are accustomed to use. "Getting mad" may "let the stink out," and it may thus serve as an antidote to mental illness. What he failed to recognize is that getting mad also has disastrous consequences.

His own case exemplifies this point. He had been "a bad man after the wim-mens," but at the age of thirty-five he had been converted and had set forth on foot from Savannah, Georgia, to carry the gospel of Jesus Christ to the heathen race, particularly to the people of Nineveh. Not until he got to New York did he discover that Nineveh "done been 'stroyed" twenty four hundred years ago. Nevertheless, he continued his journey until he was arrested as a vagrant and brought to the wicked city of Worcester. His prolonged detention in the hospital was chiefly due to his explosive temper.

That he thought of himself as the Prophet Jonas, that he conversed continually with the Man Above and believed that he had a mission to preach to the doomed

city, would not have been sufficient grounds for detaining him, if his sudden outbursts of violence had not blocked all efforts to help him. When interrupted at his prayers, or otherwise irritated he would issue forth from his room and hurl flowerpots or swing floorswabs with such abandon that he had to be kept on a disturbed-ward. Getting mad did prevent the development of morbid bitterness and sullenness within him, but it made him a social problem and closed his door to freedom. All my efforts to change his attitude were of no avail. When I would try to help him see that violence was contrary to the religion which he professed, he would reply, "What for the Man Above give me these two fists for, if it ain't to fight?" It seems clear that, like Christendom of today, religion had meant for him an attempt to control his sexual aberrations, but it had not affected his aggressive tendencies.

Of course no intelligent and experienced psychotherapist would for a moment be satisfied with our prophet's solution. Its inadequacy was one of Sigmund Freud's early discoveries, as he tells us in his fascinating autobiography.

When Freud began his professional career, he and his partner, an older physician named Breuer, developed a method of curing certain types of mental illness. That method consisted of getting the patient to talk of the forbidden desires which he was trying to keep covered up. They called this treatment "catharsis," and they believed that the healing process was dependent upon bringing unacceptable "unconscious" cravings into clear awareness.

But Freud soon discovered that catharsis alone was not sufficient. He found that whenever for any reason his personal relationship with the patient was impaired, his most brilliant results were destroyed. He concluded therefore that the influence of the physician was an indispensable factor. Only as the patient trusts the physician or accepts him as a representative of authority, is there any curative value in talking about his problems with him. Confession in and of itself is not sufficient. There must also be the sense of being forgiven by a representative of society at its best.

The inadequacy of mere catharsis may be demonstrated on the back wards of any mental hospital in the cases of unfortunates who have given way to the uninhibited expression of their primitive impulses. It may be seen in the cottages of any reform school, whose inmates have been committed precisely because they have been given frank expression to their antisocial proclivities. It may be recognized in the devastation which has resulted from the flaming hostilities of the recent war and in the danger of further disaster which may result from the free expression of hostile feelings on our part and on the part of the Russians. The feelings thus expressed may be honest enough, but a vicious circle is established which it is hard to break through.

Curative effects result only when, somehow or other, the entire situation is raised to a higher level and the troublesome impulses are dealt with in the light of the deeper longings of the heart and of the possibilities which ought to be realized.

"Getting mad" and giving honest expression to one's anger may thus be constructive if it is incidental to a deep desire for reconciliation and is accompanied by a clear recognition of the values which are involved. It may

also be curative if the expression of hostility meets with a soft answer or with the turning of the other cheek, and the consequent assurance of love and acceptance.

Herein lies the task of the therapist, whether he be physician or pastor, teacher or parent. He must be able to cut the vicious circle which has been established in persons who have felt themselves rejected and have, in consequence, been giving expression to a natural resentment. He must rely upon the principle that circular behavior has also a positive aspect. Just as condemnation and punishment tend to set up a vicious chain of events, so also socially integrative behavior tends to induce the same kind of behavior in others. The effectiveness of the therapist will then depend upon his capacity to win the confidence of the person he wants to help, to see through his eyes, to think with him about his real problems and to kindle his faith in a better self which can be realized. He must then be able to set him free from fear and guilt and anxiety so that he can strive for the achievement of his true objectives in life.

The entire process of psychotherapy, or "counseling" is reducible, then, to the principles of confession and forgiveness and re-education. It is not dependent upon any particular techniques but upon the inter-personal relationship between the physician and the patient. Wherever the patient trusts the physician enough to unburden himself of his real problems, wherever the physician is interested enough to listen intelligently and sympathetically, there curative results are likely to follow, even though the physician's theories are defective and his techniques clumsy.

This does not mean that insight and skill on the part of the physician are unimportant. Psychotherapy involves always some give-and-take, and there is need of true insight and delicate technique in order to establish the necessary relationship with the patient and to think with him constructively about his problems. The true therapist can never be neutral, or "non-directive," any more than he can take a "non-judgmental" attitude. The "non-directive counselor," in so far as he is able to help his patient, is actually making use of subtle and skilful techniques of influence; and the "non-judgmental attitude" does not involve moral indifference, but rather the ability to see possibilities of usefulness amid the wreckage of apparent failure, and possibilities of beauty in what seems common-place and unlovely.

In the task of psychotherapy, the minister of religion should be able to bring to bear insights and resources of great importance. Chief among these is the recognition that "cure," or "salvation," is effected, not by lowering the conscience threshold and accepting the primitive cravings and the anti-social impulses as permanent components of the self, but by restoration to the fellowship of the best. This is the essence of the gospel of Jesus and of Paul. It was their discovery that God is love and that in the eyes of love, what is important is not what one is now, but what one is in process of becoming; not outward correctness, but the hunger and thirst after righteousness. Any man, therefore, no matter how full of faults, is worthy of a place in the kingdom of God; in so far as he is striving to become better. And membership in the kingdom of God is salvation.

Closely related to this principle is the insight that the end of the Chris-

tian life is the transformation of the personality. Conversion must eventuate in sanctification, which involves commitment to the remaking of the social order. The elemental human drives have to be reckoned with. They are often so out of accord with the requirements of the better self as to justify some concept of "total depravity." "Spontaneous behavior," the behavior in which we indulge when there is no external pressure, is not likely to be socially valuable. The end and aim of education, of psychotherapy, and of Christian nurture is, therefore, the transformation of primitive human nature in accordance with the requirements of the highest personal and social potentialities.

Is there then any therapeutic value in letting off steam and giving expression to aggression and hostile impulses? The answer may now be clear. Getting mad is better than getting bitter and harboring hatred. It does "let the stink out," and, at least temporarily, it may lessen the inner tensions. But the decisive consideration is the social consequences. The expression of anger is likely to induce hostility and rejection in others and thus to establish a vicious circle. Self-expression is indeed an indispensable condition of mental health, but the question comes: "To which of our potential selves do we wish to give expression?" Not only Christian insight, but present-day psychiatric experience tells us that the deepest desire of every human heart is for that fellowship of the best which, for the religious man, is represented by his idea of God. The realization of our major objectives in life, therefore, demands the transformation of the primitive impulses so that, more-and-more, spontaneous promptings will be in accord with the requirements of the self that ought to be.