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## Discovering the World in the Individual: The World Channel in Psychotherapy

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### Summary

Many therapists today are raising questions about psychotherapy's contribution to politics, its responsibility, view, and influence on the world. This article addresses one aspect by elucidating the reciprocal relationship between the world and the individual as this relationship appears in individual therapy. It offers a process-oriented theory in which the individual's relationship to the world appears in what is called the "world channel." Client can find world channel phenomena emerging spontaneously from their experience and can with or without the help of a therapist, unfold the events in this channel. This theory does not prescribe how to act in the world or how to be politically correct or even socially aware. Rather, the theory and method allow unexpected and individual behavior to emerge from a client's signals, dreams and fantasies. By caring for and unfolding individual experiences in the world channel we learn more about our specific roles and contributions to global history.

### INTRODUCTION

The world today is troubled by ongoing conflict, starvation, poverty, migration of refugees, and struggles to create just and lasting forms of government. As national boundaries are erected and destroyed, it becomes apparent that to survive we must learn to get along with one another and deal with issues of multicultural diversity. Again and again, each of us must wonder about our particular role and responsibility in the world.

In this light, we must ask how to improve individual psychotherapy's contribution to social and

political issues. How does individual work help discover our role in collective life? Or is it possible that individually oriented psychotherapy is irrelevant? Do we have theory and practice that validates the individual and focuses on that individual's relationship and responsibility to the world?

## BACKGROUND

Traditionally, individual psychotherapy has not focused specifically on the individual's role in "outer" worldly events. Politics, social activism, organizational development, conflict resolution and international mediation, ecology, and economics have for the most part remained separate from the individually oriented therapeutic domain. There has been too little theory to draw these fields together; hence the recent criticism that individual therapy has not contributed positively to the course of world events (see Hillman & Ventura, 1992; Sipe, 1986).

Critics have said that individual psychotherapy draws our attention away from the world and keeps us secure in our individual worlds, perhaps even blinding us to the realities of world events and the social and political factors that influence individual life (Elgin, 1980; Gurtov, 1979; Lafferty, 1981; Mack & Redmont, 1989; Schur, 1976; Sipe, 1986). Others point out that therapy may have inadvertently drawn unrealistic boundaries between ourselves and our environment (Fox, 1993; Macy, 1991; Roszak, 1994), and that an individualistic trend in humanistic psychology has isolated and blinded us from interaction with the larger world (Bayer, 1990).

Some critics go so far as to propose that practitioners of individual therapy collude in maintaining the status quo instead of helping people become independent and critical citizens (Anderson, 1974; Szasz, 1963). Therapy is seen as catering to middle- and upper-class White people of European-descent, whereas turning away from the pressing social issues of people of color (Boyd-Franklin, 1993; Franklin, 1993; Hardy, 1993; hooks, 1993; Schur, 1976). Others stress the need for group therapy as opposed to individual therapy to foster the understanding of self-awareness as social awareness (Dreifus, 1973; Gurtov, 1979; Sipe, 1986).

Social movements and activists, such as the feminists, claim that work on yourself as an individual cannot be separated from the moment in history, the political climate, and social structures in which we live. For example, feminist theory postulates that it is not possible to separate a woman's individual work from the cultural models and rules that have sculpted the view and treatment of women throughout the ages. Therefore, all individual work is connected to social pressures and enculturation and vice versa. Similarly, Paulo Freire (1992) and Frantz Fanon (1968) recognized the connection between inner oppression and outer political structures and domination. The feelings that the oppressed have are internalized feelings of their oppressors. Consciousness of this fact leads toward liberation.

Some religious and spiritual teachers, such as Martin Luther King, Christ, Buddha, Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hahn, and the Dalai Lama, as well as some religious groups, have contributed to our understanding of the connection between spiritual attainment and worldly service (e.g., see Ingram, 1990; Jorns, 1931). The field of liberation theology (Gutierrez, 1988) stresses the

commitment to service firmly based in an understanding of history and the liberation of the poor and oppressed, integrating the sense of inner freedom with sociopolitical liberation.

Near the end of the 20th century, many therapists are beginning to open their eyes and realize that therapy can no longer be done independently of social events. Therapy's boundaries are permeable, shaped and influenced by society, culture, and history. Systems and chaos theory, as well as social psychology, has made it almost impossible to view the individual human being in an isolated fashion, devoid of cultural or social context.

The work of Maslow (1977) and Rogers (1977), as well as recent developments in humanistic psychology, has made strides toward closing the gap between the individual and political experience (see Dworkin, 1989, p. 11; Greening, 1984). In his article, "The Humanistic Ethic—The Individual in Psychotherapy as a Societal Change Agent," James Bugental (1971) suggested that a natural outgrowth of individual psychotherapy is "a heightened concern about . . . society and . . . increased potential to express that concern in effective ways" (p. 11). He stressed that psychotherapy must not be focused on the "adjustment" of the client to society, but rather on the development of personal awareness that interacts with the world and attempts to change those elements of society that he or she is not in agreement with.

Gradually, more therapists realize the necessity of addressing pressing issues, such as race, gender, violence, women's rights, war, nuclear threats, and ecology (e.g., see Bloch, 1994, p. 283; Devall & Sessions, 1993; Fox, 1993; Roszak, 1994). This tendency toward a more global vision of therapeutic work appears in aspects of family therapy (Gould & DeMuth, 1994), ecopsychology (Macy, 1991; Roszak 1982), feminist psychology (Kaschak, 1992), radical therapy (Sipe, 1986), peace psychology (Galtung, 1978), Freudian psychohistory (Demause, 1982; Gay, 1985), and aspects of Jungian analysis (Samuels, 1993). Charles Bayer (1990) heralded this global vision as follows:

A fresh genre of therapists—most of whom will not operate under a recognizable therapeutic banner—will emerge. The healers of the spirit will be far less concerned about the self and much more committed to the health of the larger political body. A simultaneous concern with the environment, the preservation of the physical world, will accompany the new populist humanistic epoch. We will realize that none of us can be whole in a dying world, (p. 20)

Many therapists and spiritual practitioners are searching for a theoretical framework that makes possible this vision connecting inner-directed work with world events. Some say that such approaches might combine Western and Eastern psychological and spiritual practices and theories (Mack & Redmont, 1989, p. 342; Sipe, 1986).

This article focuses on one such framework. It presents a process-oriented approach to individual therapy that stresses awareness of the natural role of the individual in the world scheme. It does not prescribe worldly action nor demand its appearance, but rather discovers the natural way in which our individual process directs us toward interaction with the world and

social action. This approach does not preclude the necessity of group work or direct social and political action, but rather accompanies it.

## PROCESS-ORIENTED PSYCHOLOGY

The field of process-oriented psychology (process work)—developed by Arnold Mindell and the process work communities *in* Portland, Oregon, and Zurich, Switzerland—provides a theoretical basis for the interaction between individual work and the world (Mindell, 1985, pp. 55-68). Rather than focusing on any distinction between what is intrapsychic and what is related to the outer world, process work focuses on the flow of perception. It asks: "What do I notice and how can I help these experiences to unfold?" Process work has been applied to large multicultural group work with diversity and conflict problems, to work with comatose patients, relationships, addictions, extreme and psychotic states, movement work, and shamanism. This article focuses specifically on the world aspect as found in individual work. Discussions of process oriented multicultural conflict and large group work can be found elsewhere (see Mindell, 1989, 1992a).

Process work is based on phenomenology (Goodbread, 1987; Heidegger, in Collinson, 1987; Husserl, in Collinson, 1987, p. 128; Mindell, 1985) focusing on experience without judging or labeling it ahead of time. The process worker first notices and then helps experiences to unfold. Just as the ancient Taoists studied the inherent patterns and flow of nature, the process worker attempts to study the natural rhythms and patterns of experience and to align himself or herself with this flow.

Dichotomies—such as inner and outer, matter and psyche, or psyche and psychology—are replaced in process work by following perception and awareness (Mindell, 1985, p. 55). This phenomenological approach notices what is happening and appreciates its flow. From a relativistic viewpoint, there is no absolute differentiation between inner or outer.

## STRUCTURE AND CHANNELS

Process work is sensory-grounded and notes that people use their perception, differentiating it into those elements of experience that are closer to our awareness (primary processes) and those that are further away from our momentary awareness (secondary processes). It also notes that perception is structured in terms of the sensory channels or pathways in which information manifests (Mindell, 1985, 1988). Process work recognizes familiar sensory channels, such as visual, auditory, proprioceptive (body feeling), and kinesthetic (movement), as well as a relationship channel that identifies those moments when I discover myself through my relationship to others, and a world channel that appreciates those moments when my process

turns toward my relationship to the world.

Let us consider the relationship channel (see Mindell, 1985, pp. 14-54; Mindell, 1987). The concept of a relationship channel provides a doorway to our understanding of the interaction between ourselves and others, and subsequently to the world. Debate about the validity or nonvalidity of the therapist bringing her or his own feelings into the therapeutic situation are shifted toward the focus on awareness and perception of those moments when I, as a therapist, or anyone as an individual, discovers herself or himself through interactions with others (Buber, 1970; Friedman, 1984; Fromm, 1941; Homey, 1939; Jung, 1954; Laing, 1965; Rogers, 1980; Sullivan, 1953).

The relationship channel draws on field theory (see Koffka, 1935; Lewin, 1972; Mindell, 1992a, pp. 15-20) that describes a field-like atmosphere permeating and influencing all levels of experience, including relationships, group interaction, and the entire world. Field theory postulates that it is impossible to separate what is happening to you from what is happening to me; that my feelings and thoughts are an integral part of my interactions no matter what I am doing or where I am. By consciously stepping into the relationship situation, the therapist respects the pathway of the momentary process and, maintaining an overview, helps it unfold.

## THE WORLD CHANNEL

The concept of a world channel (Mindell, 1985, pp. 55-68; Mindell, 1993, pp. 41-46) as applied to individual work expands this field theory to include our interactions and perceptions of the world around us. The world channel concept implies that there are moments when I am aware of being influenced by the world around me and that this is a meaningful and significant aspect of my experience. It takes seriously moments when I experience the world as a sensory channel through which I understand and experience myself. Before describing this channel in greater detail, let us look at some of the roots of the world channel in early and modern thinking.

## ANTHROPOS MYTHS

For many indigenous peoples the natural environment is understood as a living and influential being that requires human representation. Indigenous groups and Taoist adepts looked to the environment to know where life was going and to seek consultation.

Some early people viewed the world itself as *a* huge anthropos or human-like figure. Early Christians viewed the world as the body of Christ. The ancient Chinese experienced the world as an anthropos figure called Pan Ku. When Pan Ku died, his breath became the wind, his

bones the mountains, and his hair the trees. Early Hindus called the world-body Atman (see Mindell, 1989, pp. 33-69; Mindell, 1990, pp. 33-34; Mindell, 1992a, p. 18 ).

A recent description of the anthropomorphic quality of the environment is James Lovelock's (1979) controversial Gaia Hypothesis. Lovelock describes the entire biosphere as an enormous, living system that regulates itself and ensures survival. He calls this being "Gaia," the Greek word for Mother Earth. It has properties that are more than the sum of its parts. Mindell describes this human-like being as a "global dreambody" (Dworkin, 1989, p. 75; Mindell, 1987, 1989). Joanna Macy's (1991) eco-self and Theodore Roszak's (1994) eco-psychology define a fundamental and reciprocal bond between human beings and the ecosystem that must be rediscovered and cared for. Eastern spiritual traditions stress the interrelated nature of all things, describing this variously as the All, Eternity, the Universal Spirit, or Atman (Capra, in Walsh & Vaughan, 1980, p. 63).

## MODERN SCIENCE

Quantum theory has broken away from Newtonian thinking, postulating that it is no longer possible to separate the observer from that which is observed (Capra, in Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). We find anthropos-like concepts in Bohm's "one world," Sheldrake's "morphogenetic field," and in general systems theory's understanding of the world as a web of relations in a unified system (Mindell, 1985, p. 56).

## MODERN PSYCHOLOGY

Social psychologists, family therapists, and systems theorists (e.g., see Hollander & Hunt, 1972; Minuchin, 1974; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967), as well as interpersonal therapists (Buber, 1970; Friedman, 1984; Laing, 1965; Sullivan, 1953), stress the intricate connection between the individual and his or her environment. Lewin (1972) described a person's "life sphere," whereas Gestalt theorists defined an individual's "psychological field" (Koffka, in Wolman, 1981, p. 449).

Although Jung (1960a, para. 663f) stressed the development of the ego and individuality, he also said that individuation, as well as the process of alchemy, moved toward the "unus mundus" or "one world." He spoke of a collective unconscious that was universal, impersonal, and identical in all people (Jung, 1960b). Jung's (1960c) study of synchronicity was also a major predecessor to the world channel theory. He postulated a connecting thread, or non-causal principle, that exists between physical and psychological phenomena. This connecting principle explained such phenomena as telepathy and "meaningful coincidences" between the

world and its observer.

## HOW THE WORLD CHANNEL ARISES

Process work appreciates connection between the individual and the world by noticing how the world channel arises spontaneously in each of us. It takes seriously an individual's verbal statements about the world, dreams about groups, worldly imagery, and the occurrence of synchronicities. The perception that events are happening in the world channel is a meaningful and important element of individual life that can be fostered.

Like the relationship channel, the world channel is a composite channel comprising all the other individual sensory experiences. Although the world channel is made up of other channels, these cannot be separated out into, for example, its visual or auditory components without destroying the overall world channel. Mindell and Mindell (1992, p. 68) described this as an "irreducible" experience that, if broken down to its individual parts, loses its meaningfulness.

The world channel emerges when we are attracted to the natural environment and animals, the world or world issues, the weather, other countries and politics, wars, political leaders, or anything larger than an individual or relationship. Sentences, such as "the world is strange" or "so much is happening in the world, it makes me cry," indicate the presence of the world channel. A long look outside at the environment or a quick glance out the window can also indicate the world channel. This depends, of course, on the person's individual experience.

The world channel is present and tries to get our attention when we speak of things happening in the world that we are not actively doing. The sense that the world is impinging on us, or a constant focus on particular world issues or events, is an indication of world channel phenomena. The world channel arises when events in the world surprise us. Synchronicities, such as lights suddenly going out, birds squawking, or sudden bangs and crashes at what seem to be meaningful moments, indicate the presence of the world channel.

Some dreams, such as those about political figures, world and historic events, or social issues, indicate the world channel. Dreams about the environment, various forms of government, or street scenes are all world channel dreams. Of course, determining if these are world channel experiences for an individual will depend on the individual's experience and associations to these dream events and figures.

## WORKING WITH WORLD CHANNEL EXPERIENCES

Just as visual information, to be fully understood, needs to be amplified visually, so, too, the world channel must be understood by amplifying contents directly in the world channel. In this

way, world channel experiences are not reduced to purely personal, intrapsychic work, that is, to individual psychology, but are valued as experiences that can be unfolded directly in the world channel.

We have hints of work with the world channel in many places. Mystics and many religious people use prayer, movement, song, and ritual to interact consciously with god and the world around them. Eastern techniques, such as meditation or yoga, help their practitioners move toward becoming one with the Universal Spirit. The Native American vision quest is a typical example of seeking guidance and direction from nature.

Black Elk (Niedhardt, 1932) had immense dreams and visions about his tribe. According to Native American tradition, these visions belong to the tribe and must be taken seriously as messages for the entire people. They are therefore considered world channel dreams and belong to the larger community. Similarly, when the therapist notices the world channel emerging in an individual, she or he fosters this awareness, discovering more about the individual's tasks, responsibilities, or relationship to the world.

To amplify experiences in the world channel, it is helpful simply to ask the person to turn toward the world, toward the trees, the street, other people, and notice what happens when doing this. You might also suggest that the person go on a vision quest, or do a role play with worldly dream figures and then find out how to act on these experiences directly and creatively in everyday life. You might ask the client to sense the atmosphere just near her or him (see discussion of world channel awareness below) or to write something for or about the world. In group situations, amplifying the world channel might mean interacting spontaneously with everyone in the group. In essence, all of these interventions point toward the question: What is my process asking of me just now in terms of my relationship to the world?

For example, a Polish American woman had a dream about a social gathering place. She spoke poignantly about the death of one of her relatives. When encouraged to look out and sense the world around her, she began to notice other people and suddenly felt that she had a lot to say and share about life and death. She decided to begin writing about her experiences so that others could hear her wisdom.

To follow any given process, it is important to follow the flow of perception as it winds through the various sensory channels. One of my clients, a middle-aged Western European businessman, felt a bit depressed. He said that he felt put down by inner negative criticism. He started to react to this negative tyrant, but with a very quiet voice. Suddenly, outside there was a loud cracking sound and boom that shocked him. My client was startled and fascinated by the noise. Therefore, I encouraged him to follow this world channel experience by making similar noises. As he made loud cracking sounds, he started to make fighting motions. He said he was fighting for freedom from his inner critic.



Yet when the cracking of branches and the loud boom happened in the environment, we realized that there must be a synchronistic world channel element to his experience. At this moment, his work went from the personal to the planetary. I asked him how he could use that shocking energy in the world. He said that he had been going to local meetings where he felt that children of his community were not fairly treated. He said he had been too shy to speak out about his opinions. He decided that he would take the chance and make a loud boom to stand for the rights of these children. After our session, he did go to those meetings and, although he was shy, he spoke about his beliefs and changed his community's attitude toward the children.

The reader will notice how this process unfolded through various sensory channels. His process began in the world channel when he noticed the cracking of the branches. Then the work flowed through the auditory channel and movement work. Stress was finally placed on the world channel to ensure that he not only focus on his self-criticism, but value his world channel experience and interact with his environment.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORLD CHANNEL IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

By noticing the world channel, we are, as Mindell (1992a, pp. 5-6) says, "deeply democratic." We respect and open up to all aspects of experience. To ignore the world channel level of experience means that we do not completely value the individual's experiences and support only certain sides of people while ignoring others. We create theories that negate the awareness of world channel experiences by narrowly defining what individual work entails.

Without this awareness of the world channel, individual psychotherapy may propagate the view that the individual is separate from her or his social reality. Although there may be significance in shutting out the world temporarily, too much focus on the individual aspect of psychology neglects those moments when an individual's process turns naturally toward world channel experiences and interactions. If, in this case, a therapist focuses purely internally with the client, this may be helpful, but insufficiently satisfying.

Furthermore, it would be presumptuous to assume that people who come to individual therapy are only interested in their personal lives. Many people come to therapy hoping to understand their individual problems, parts, and dreams, whereas others, because of interest or out of necessity, are turned toward problems in society and in their social lives. Psychotherapists can broaden their tools by noticing, nurturing, and assisting experiences in the world channel.

As mentioned earlier, psychotherapy has traditionally been oriented toward White individuals of European descent who have the luxury and privilege of studying and thinking about themselves. This explains why psychotherapy has for the most part not been sought after by people of other colors and cultures. A therapy that is able to work with world channel experiences (as well as dealing with small and large group social issues) may be more open to all

types of people, especially those whose social lives are more pressing and immediate than the lives of people seeking traditional forms of inner work. This orientation may contribute to narrowing the gap between psychotherapy as we know it today, spiritual practices, social work, and politics.

#### BODY SYMPTOMS, THE WORLD CHANNEL, AND CULTURAL CHANGE

In research in body symptoms, Mindell (1982, 1988, 1993; Mindell & Mindell, 1992) and Schuepbach (Schwarz, 1993) have discovered that many body experiences and body symptoms are not only personal but intimately connected with the collective field in which we are living. In essence, aspects of body symptoms are world channel experiences. The importance of following world channel signals and flow between individual work and collective experience can be illustrated in the following that occurred in a process work seminar focusing on large group conflict situations. Here we see how body symptoms are intricately connected to culture and can be the beginning of social awakening.

One afternoon an African American woman stood up. She turned to the group and said that she felt that members of the group were prejudiced against Black people. At that moment, she had trouble breathing and could hardly talk. She said that this always happens when she tries to speak out. Her attention shifted from her focus on the group to her body symptoms.

Following her experience, she decided to focus momentarily on her body symptoms before going further with her interaction with the group. She experienced her breathing problems as a feeling of cramping in her lungs that she expressed by showing a clenched fist. As she began to go deeper into the experience of making a fist, she started to move and hit out in the air as she angrily cried out about the racial injustice that she experienced growing up as a child. She began to cry and then turned to the group once again and spoke passionately, painfully, and powerfully about the need for all of us to wake up to our prejudices and tendencies to marginalize certain groups. As she spoke, her lungs began to relax as her attention returned to the group and she involved the group in a candid and intimate discussion around racism.

This woman's process was not hers alone. Her body symptoms were expressions of the pain caused by social oppression. They were in great part world channel experiences. Her personal process was everyone's responsibility and therefore involved the entire group in understanding, feeling, and dealing with issues of racism. Her process began in the world channel, as she looked out at the group as a whole, followed her body sensations, movements, verbal expressions, and finally turned to group or world focus. By following and stressing the world aspect of our processes, we discover roots of cultural change.

#### WORLD CHANNEL AWARENESS

By focusing on the manifestation of the world channel we begin to develop what Mindell (1992b) calls a world channel awareness. World channel awareness is a special sensitivity to the atmosphere around us. Just as we develop an increased awareness of our proprioceptive channel or body-oriented feelings and our kinesthetic channel or movements, world channel awareness means becoming sensitized to the environment, sensing the world around us, and giving expression to the field in which we are living, any time, any place.

Until now, this kind of awareness has been left to shamans, mystics, spiritual teachers and saints, and perhaps those performers and artists who sense and work with the surrounding environment. By focusing on the world channel as it arises inside of us, we become modern shamans and artists who express the field in which we are living at any given moment.

To heighten world channel awareness and consciously connect to the momentary field or atmosphere, take a moment to sense the atmosphere around you. What is the ambiance like? What does the world around you feel like? Once you have an answer to this question, meditate on your role in this atmosphere. In your imagination, what does this atmosphere seem to want particularly of you? Finally, ask yourself how you act on your role now. How will you apply this awareness in the world in the next few days?

For example, a White American woman told me that she was a teacher and was feeling bored and uninterested in her work. When she sensed the atmosphere she said that it seemed as if it was swirling. She asked what that atmosphere wanted of her. She discovered that her role was to give up her identity and become a Taoist by following this whirling of nature. How could she apply this in the world now? She said that she wanted to bring this into her teaching by helping people learn how to follow the Tao in their personal lives and in their relationships. One way to do this, she said, was to be a living model of someone who follows the unusual currents of the Tao while teaching. She would become an unpredictable and lively teacher! She later told me that her classes became more interesting for her and her students, as she became more creative and unpredictable.

## GUILT AS A LACK OF WORLD CHANNEL AWARENESS

Have you ever felt guilty, as if you were not doing enough for the world? Where do these feelings come from? These feelings may arise, not because we are too self-centered, but because we are not noticing the world channel as it arises spontaneously inside us in various moments. We ignore this particular aspect of our personal processes and therefore do not follow and unfold experiences in the world channel. This is similar to understanding everything as our personal psychology when our process is happening in the relationship channel. In the moment the world channel arises inside of us, our responsibility is to follow what we experience and help it unfold with greater awareness in the world channel.

In this way, we discover each individual's unique contribution to the world. There are no programs for what someone should be doing, that is, that she or he should be more socially conscious. Instead, if we nurture world channel experience as it arises, we can discover exactly what unique task each individual is drawn to do in the world. For some, working in the world may mean writing and studying. For others, it may mean political work. For others, it may mean prayer. As a whole, world channel awareness can be the beginning of social and political change.

## CONCLUSION

The ability to perceive and work with the world channel in individual work helps narrow the gap between individual psychotherapy, politics, social activism, environmentalism, and all other aspects of the outer world. It does not debate the validity of this connection, but notices that it happens spontaneously inside each individual as the world channel emerges. By noticing the world channel, psychotherapy steps forward in its evolution and contributes to global change.

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