The Path of Psychotherapy

Matters of the Heart

Ira David Welch

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Gannon University

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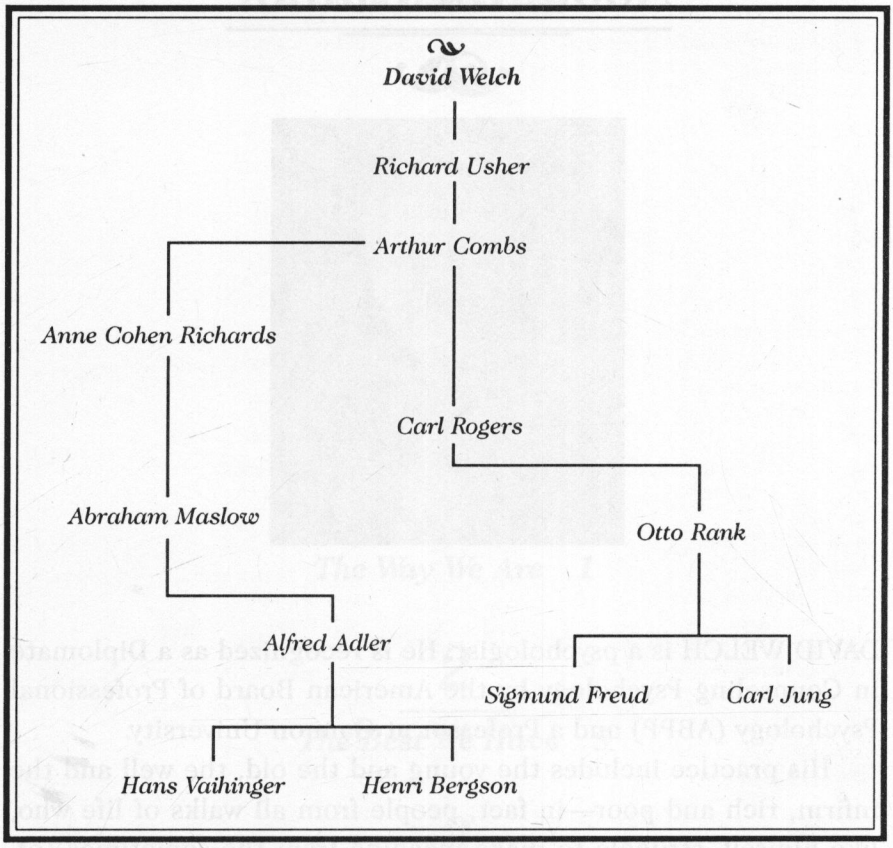
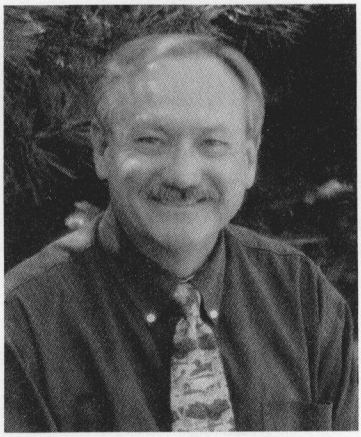


This is my family tree.
It is still growing. I anticipate that other branches will appear but for now I dedicate this book to my teachers who influenced me, some up close and personal and some from a place and time far distant. I honor them and I hope I serve their teaching well.

About the Author



DAVID WELCH is a psychologist. He is recognized as a Diplomate in Counseling Psychology by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP) and a Professor at Gannon University.

His practice includes the young and the old, the well and the infirm, rich and poor—in fact, people from all walks of life who, like himself, struggle to make meaning from the sometimes (often?) puzzling mysteries of living.

Preface

I live in a small town. It is a community of farmers, ranchers, cattle feeders, small business owners, teachers, and families. It is a little place in the midwest that can easily be the butt of jokes about naive hardware store owners, the farmer's daughter, and innocent basketball players.

The turmoil of the times often seems to have passed us by. The fears that are so present with many are not daily intruders in the lives of the people in my community. The strife of our cities, the battles of youth gangs in drug wars, the morality of national politicians, or the economic struggles of oils cartels come to us only on the evening news or from the headlines of the newspaper sharing space with the softball scores or listings of all-conference soccer players. Our power breakfast is more likely spent at a coffee shop than at an exclusive club. The tragedies of life reported to us on television and in the newspapers often seem distant from this, to all appearances, protected place. Some might cynically dismiss the depth of our understanding as shallow, hopelessly naive, and uninformed.

The great political economic, social, and fashion decisions are made and lived out some distance from our homes. While it is true that the rush, tumult, and wariness of the city with its constant news of exploitation, violence, drugs, and death isn't a part of our daily lives, in matters of the heart we are as sophisticated as any urbanite.

The tragedies caused by sex, drugs, death, and violence come to us as distant statistics affecting untold numbers of people whom we do not know. In the end, the tragedies of life, whether planetary, national, or familial, are individual. Statistics reduce to families and individuals and even in this somewhat sheltered place, we suffer death, divorce, rape, battering, abduction, drug abuse, child abuse, gang violence and disease. The pains of life are felt by individual human beings. They mourn death or brutality, whether by cosmic perversity or human design. The emptiness of wasted lives brings pain. The loss of faith in one another is mourned

and in the felt experience of the human condition we live our lives in contact with one another. We are brokenhearted because those involved are known to us. They are our neighbors. Some part of us suffers with them.

In this interpersonal realm of life I do my work. I am a psychologist. My special task is to ponder, study, understand, and minister to the human spirit. Whether this spirit is tortured by a past of damage, tormented by disenchantment, starved by emptiness, weighted down by depression, ravaged by anxiety, or pillaged by self doubt, I do this work one person at a time. If you read my family tree in the dedication and are at all familiar with the people listed there, you know that I am deeply influenced by the theories of the humanistic psychologists. They are a group who believe in the daunting capacity of human beings to screw up their lives and in their equal capacity to unravel life's mysteries and set it straight again. This point of view places great emphasis on the quality of the relationship established between the client and the counselor. This relationship provides the foundation for the clients to find or create resolution to their life struggles. Others, of course, see the human condition in different terms and provide different explanations for human behavior. There are greater differences in theory than there are in practice, however, and we are, of course, all psychotherapists. This book describes how I work; in its contents I hope others will find stimulus for thought, guidance, and a provocation to ponder the meaning and impact of their own work.

This book is about the persons and the process of my work as a psychotherapist. It is meant to inform others, like myself, who minister to the emotional, social, and interpersonal issues, problems, and dilemmas of persons who come to us for help.

Some readers might be psychologists, social workers, clergy, counselors, or marriage and family therapists. Others may be case workers or human service workers in any number of occupations that endeavor to provide help and support for people in trouble. Whatever the title, we are committed to helping those who ask our assistance in finding their way, discovering their strength, developing solutions, and creating meaning where there may have been little. My good wishes go with you all as we walk this path together.

No book such as this comes to press without the contributions of many people. Mostly, I appreciate the careful reading and suggestions made by my colleagues Richard Usher, Fred Richards, Anne Cohen Richards, Don Medeiros, George Tate, and Ann Rader-Tate. I appreciate their help with the book, but more important, I cherish their friendship and love. I also appreciate the helpful reading and comments of two other colleagues, especially in the area of diversity — David Gonzalez and Carmen Braun-Williams. I prize the early reading and suggestions of the students in our doctoral seminar and I wish them well as they travel this tough and tender road of being a professional helper. Thanks to Michele Beadle, Christine Breier, Michael Furois, Mark Hald, Kathy Kravitz, Maio-Jung

Lin, Beth Lonergan, Patrick Maschka, Marty Munoz, Marty Slyter, Marilyn Sosebee, and Jonathan Williamson. I extend the same wish to two other doctoral students, John McKenzie and Nancy Schlie, who read and made suggestions as well. My thanks also go to Steve Long for his editorial help in making the manuscript more accurate and more readable. I would also like to acknowledge the helpful comments and suggestions of the book's reviewers: Mary Jo Blazek, University of Maine at Augusta; Dale Blumen, University of Rhode Island; John Bowers, Northwest Missouri State University; John A. Casey, Sonoma State University; Mary Kay Kreider, St. Louis Community College; Lenore M. Parker, California State University, Fullerton; Susan P. Robbins, University of Houston Graduate School of Social Work. Finally, I am indebted to the folks at Brooks/Cole, especially Lisa Gebo, who is just a delight, and Lisa Blanton, a friendly and patient listener, for their help and guidance throughout the process.

Some have heard me say this before: It was worth the trip.

Ira David Welch

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1

The Way We Are

Psychotherapy is an un-American activity. As Americans, we share a cultural nature, and it is that cultural nature that makes psychotherapy unnatural for Americans. We are, of course, a rainbow nation—a spectrum of ethnicities, nationalities, and points of view (religious, political, and cultural) as diverse as the planet. And yet, anthropologists tell us that any society shares cultural assumptions, regardless of the variety of its individual members. We know as well that we must approach any generality with caution, for however true a thing may be in the general, it may certainly be wrong in the particular. Still, with proper respect for caution, let us venture into some understanding of the nature of being an American.

Any society, any culture operates on assumptions. More often than not unrecognized, these assumptions are accepted by the individual and relate to human nature, physical causality, spirituality, morality, and, for our purposes here, the origin and treatment of mental distress. In total, they form a philosophy, and Americans may be said to hold a philosophy of *objective materialism*.

In 1970, Philip Slater published a book entitled *The Pursuit of Loneliness*. The subtitle was perhaps more to the point: *American Culture at the Breaking Point*. In this book, Slater relates a fable of a man who, weary of the endless chatter of his neighbors, went into the forest to live alone in a small hut heated only by a wood-burning stove. When the winter proved to be bitterly cold, he cut down the surrounding trees for firewood. Then, the summer arrived with searing heat, and the hut, unshaded for lack of trees, became un-

bearably hot. The man cursed the elements. Rabbits raided the man's garden, so he tamed a fox to chase away the rabbits. When the fox ate his chickens as well, the man cursed the treachery of wild creatures. To keep garbage off the floor of the hut, the man devised a system of weights and pulleys. When the strain collapsed the roof of the hut, he cursed its poor construction. To protect his privacy, he kept a loaded gun on his lap at night and in his troubled sleep he accidentally shot off his foot. His neighbors were saddened by his misfortune, so they decided to leave him alone. The man grew increasingly lonely and cursed the indifference of his neighbors. In all this, the man saw no cause except what lay outside himself. It was because of this view, and because of his ingenuity, that he was called the American.

Embedded in this story lies some of the irony and paradox of psychotherapy in America. Some might ask why, if psychotherapy is an un-American activity, so many seem to turn to it for help. Therein lies a paradox. Americans do turn to agencies outside themselves for answers to their personally felt struggles. Yet, in psychotherapy they find a system that frequently asks them to search their experience for answers to internally felt questions. Another irony is that within the discipline of psychotherapy itself, its practitioners are no less American than those who seek their help. Psychotherapists are repeatedly drawn to fads in psychotherapy that offer "unemotional" and/or quick methods for dealing with the challenges of life.

Slater's fable reminds us that we Americans are reluctant to see our own agency in the struggles of life. We tend to believe that problems are caused by forces outside ourselves and are solved by things. When confronted with the ineffectiveness of a life pattern, we do not typically look to ourselves for the source of the dilemma. Nor do we tend to look into ourselves for its resolution. We look elsewhere. Some of us seek a strong *other* to take over our lives. Some ingest substances, natural or artificial, to correct a chemical imbalance or nutritional deficiency, real or imagined. Some might have themselves attached to machines to electrify, stimulate, or, the opposite, to stupefy the brain/body. Some might even resort to surgery. In America, we become disciples, take drugs, and torture

ourselves in response to a philosophy of life that teaches us that problems lie outside the self and are solved by things.

This notion of separateness and objectivity can provide an anxiety-reducing function for a while in the way that any psychological defense does. It holds troubling emotions at bay and dulls any sharp pains that might try to intrude into our awareness. The underlying ache and the nagging discontent become familiar companions, and whatever energy is spent to maintain the defenses becomes habitual, forgotten, and temporarily, at least, unavailable for healthy life. Some, of course, find little comfort and seek another recourse. Some seek psychotherapy.

The process of psychotherapy seeks a center. It looks within—not always for the source or cause of pain, but for understanding. It is a process, however winding, that ultimately causes one to ask, What can I do about my life circumstances? What agency, if any, do I play in my pain and struggles? How can I live with the circumstances of my life? For many human predicaments, there is just cause for guilt within the sufferer. A somewhat more difficult idea is that there are many human situations for which no cause for guilt exists and yet the person suffers. What is vague for many is that regardless of the source of their psychological pain and struggles, real or imagined, some form of psychological relief lies within their control. Psychotherapy begins the exploration of the vague, undiscovered world of inner resources that contains the genuine and lasting relief from psychological pain for which people are searching.

2

The Best We Have

If you are trying to hammer a nail, a crescent wrench is a poor tool—unless it is the only tool you have. Psychotherapy may be seen as a tool, however imprecise.

Psychotherapy *is* imprecise. The psychotherapist and the person struggle together to enter the chaos of living in an effort to bring order, understanding, or peace to a troubled life. It is an often messy process. Some critics would have us believe that the messiness means it doesn't work. In any case, in the rough-and-tumble experience of life, people do often lurch in unpredictable and harmful directions.

Psychotherapy is more about the mind than it is about the brain. It is about mental, attitudinal, and behavioral solutions to mainly mental—that is to say, psychological—difficulties. Psychotherapy is not about physical diseases, and this is not a book about medicine or neurology. When disease is involved, drug treatments and other remedies that involve blood, nerves, chemistry, hormones, germs, respiration, and the like are often prescribed. The role that psychotherapy can play in medical treatment is in helping the person cope with the implications of the illness. That is a mental process and well within the scope of psychotherapy. And so, we are back to banging in the nail with a wrench. As flawed as it may be, it is the best we have to offer. The process of psychotherapy may go against our cultural desire for action and seem on the surface to be a waste of time, even silly to some. Yet, day in and day out, people