

# The Therapist and the Suffering Servant

Rabbi Howard Cooper

*Happy are they who know that their heart cries out from a wilderness; and silence blossoms on their lips.*

(Avraham ben Yitzchak, 1883—1950)

He appeared at the end of the day. Suddenly. Out of nowhere. I had seen my last patient. I was ready to go home. The end of another day. Thank God.

I opened the door to leave my consulting room—and there he was. Standing still, staring—or so it seemed to me—fixing me with that gaze, that look I came to know, and hate. And love. Those eyes which looked inside me until I could not bear it any longer. The emptiness. The loneliness. The endless horror of it all.

But now, that first time, he just stood there, passively, waiting. Waiting for me, it seemed. How long had he been there? What did he want? How could I get rid of him?—these were my first thoughts. Later I asked another question, simpler still: who was he?

Moments passed. I stood there awkwardly and as I looked at him I became aware of a kind of disgust rising in myself. He seemed hardly human. I couldn't tell if he was young or old, carefree or past caring. His face was wrapped up, as if he had something terrible to hide. A wound, a scar, something so deep it would be there for all to see. But all I could see were the eyes, watching. Watching my disgust trying not to show itself.

He must once have been the tallest of men but now, now he was bent over, as if he was carrying a great weight on his back. The thought, the cliché, came into my head: he looks as if he's carrying the problems of the world on his shoulders. I was appalled. I felt sick. For over twenty years I'd often used this image with my patients. But I'd used it ironically, helping them to see that of course nobody need carry the world on their shoulders. That feeling that it is up to us, and us alone, to look after others, take on their burdens, always be there to lend the helping hand—all this omnipotence needs to be analysed properly. How often we live with the fantasy that we can save the world. That way lies madness, fanaticism—and bloodshed. One of the tasks of therapy was to help people to learn to hold the balance between their creative potential and their human limitations. This included taking responsibility for themselves, not others. Or so I thought.

But he was to teach me something new, something astonishing. He showed me something not spoken about in any of the books. It was he who delivered me from the prison of my own preconceptions. He and I were still

standing at the threshold. Perhaps it was curiosity, perhaps it was my tiredness, but I asked him to come into the room, and gestured to him to take a seat. I sat down, and waited for him to begin.

Silence.

No words. No movement. No restlessness. No nervousness. Nothing. Just his look, steadily piercing me through. I felt uncomfortable. This was strange. I didn't understand why I couldn't look at him but I felt that if I looked something terrible might happen. A glass shattering into a thousand pieces. But I knew he was looking at me. I felt I was being observed from a great distance, and at the same time he was much too close for comfort. I shrank into my chair, hugging its sides, wanting to disappear. I was being seen. I began to feel I was being seen through.

I realised I was feeling annoyed: I was tired, it was the end of the day, he had no appointment. I didn't even know if he could pay. Who was he? And why did I feel so uncomfortable in his presence? I was used to silence in sessions. Silence was one of the tools of the trade. As a therapist I knew that the emotions evoked in me by the patient are often a clue to what the patient may be experiencing without being aware of it. These split-off feelings, projected unconsciously into me, could help me reconstruct parts of the inner life of the patient.

The silence continued. I shifted restlessly in my chair. But whose discomfort was this? It was mine. He was planted there in his chair, like a stunted tree, solid and unmoving. I was the restless one. It was as if he was taking root there, and I was the stranger passing through.

I was fast sliding into a kind of helplessness. I needed him to speak to me. I was feeling useless and inadequate. 'It must be hard', I said, 'to have come here for help, to talk, yet be unable to speak'.

Nothing. Silence. A breeze outside the window. I was beginning to feel quite powerless. Is this what his silence was telling me? About his powerlessness, his feelings of hopelessness? Feelings that I was now carrying for him. It was not unusual for a patient to use silence as a means of communication.

Or it could be that he was getting to know me in this way, trying to build a trust in me, joining with me from inside of himself, fusing with me, trying magically to feel safe by being part of me before he could risk words to pass between us. No, that wasn't it. Another hypothesis formed itself. Was his silence an act of defiance, a disguised appeal for help, testing me to see if I would reject him as I felt everyone else must have done? But his look was not defiant. In fact he didn't look as if he wanted anything from me—but that could be a defence against his neediness.

I was feeling desperate. None of the theories fitted. This was something else. This was outside my experience. My anger bubbled up inside me, my defence against the impotence I was now feeling. Who the hell did he think he was, pushing his way in like this? It was all very well for his silence to be a means of communicating something, but I didn't need this. I was about to speak, to reassert my professional authority, to tell him to come back

tomorrow at a proper time—when a sudden thought was born. Perhaps he's come to save me.

I suppressed a giggle. And put the thought away. I'd seen too much cheap religion to be taken in by this. Messiahs were a dime a dozen. On every streetcorner you could find some God-intoxicated prophet who would promise you salvation, who could save your soul for the price of a pint. Liars and hypocrites, selling you some heavenly real-estate if you would only turn from your sinful ways and see the light.

Our ancient need to be rescued. Our feeling deep inside us that something is terribly wrong, with ourselves, with the world, that our situation has some intolerable quality at its very centre, and things must improve. We cannot accept that this is the way that we are: fragile, dependant, struggling, unredeemed. Surely someone will come, from Olympus or Jerusalem or from the lotus blossom, and save us from our plight. The desire for salvation. The illusion of salvation. The illusion of salvation from outside of ourselves. Someone will come and make it all better.

Perhaps he's come to save me. The thought wouldn't go away. I wanted to hurt him. I didn't need any help. I was the therapist—he was the patient. He was making me sick. Why couldn't I look at him? In my head I shouted at him: 'What do you want with me? For God's sake tell me what's wrong. You're suffering. I can feel it. I can feel your suffering. You're in pain. Admit it. You're a joke, a sick joke. God must have been looking the other way when he made you, friend'. All this going on in my head. All this hate, all this denigration, all this disgust. As he sat there. In silence.

I felt shocked. Something was happening here. Something new. This wasn't just my counter-transference—me feeling his unacknowledged God-forsaken feelings, me feeling the disgust, the self-hatred, the self-denigration that belonged to him: persecuting feelings that he had received from others and were now how he felt towards himself.

It wasn't him. It was me. These were my feelings he was exposing. He may have been the victim of these feelings too, but I had no way of knowing that for certain. How should I read his silence? I only had the text of my own responses to study. And my text was confused, ambiguous, perhaps corrupted over the years. How could I ever know who he was? He was here with me now—and forever beyond my grasp. Unreachable. All I had was his silent presence. And out of the midst of his silence he was looking at me—and I was seeing *my* suffering and *my* pain. And my lack of worth. As if he was a mirror. In him I saw myself: weighed down with suffering, burdened with pain. He was carrying them for me.

Who could believe this? There was a mystery here that made no sense, but was real nevertheless. I was here to help him, but it seemed as though he'd come to serve me. This was definitely not how it was supposed to be. Despairingly I entered into the non-sense.

Why had he taken on this burden of serving others? How could I ever know? It is the question to any of us who know within themselves this urge

to serve, to devote their lives to supporting others, to giving selflessly without hope of reward, with no expectation except more of the same, day after day. But in the space created by his silence I could only ask the question of myself. Why had I chosen my path, to take on this weighty responsibility, being a guide, a healer, a companion on the long journey back, back home, and then on, into the unknown, into the darkness?

As a dutiful therapist I had learnt for myself, through my own analysis—and it was in all the literature—how taking on responsibility for other people's problems and feeling them as your own was, inevitably, all to do with mother.

A child who has an anxious or depressed or emotionally deprived mother learns very quickly that it is mummy who needs looking after and protecting. Roles are reversed and instead of the child feeling its own assertive needs and wants can be met by a confident and interested mother, the child learns to deny its own neediness in order to take care of the parent. 'Helping mother' becomes a basic pattern, a false self the child grows into. The good, kind, generous, helpful child grows up to be the good neighbour, and the one who cares for others, and the person who finds fulfilment in one of the 'helping professions'. Except that inside the adult, the needy child cries out unheard in the night: 'But what about me? Who cares about me? Who can look after me?' Yet the knowledge of the absence is too painful. The needs can only be seen 'out there', in others. We learn to carry the cares of the world, wherever we find them. Devotedly looking after others, we are really attempting to look after a neglected part of ourselves. We try to heal in others the wound we carry within ourselves.

As I sat there, in his silent presence, I knew I'd been through this a dozen times for myself: I was healing my own wounds in helping others towards healing. But was it true of him too? It felt like he had perfected the art of carrying the wounds of others. Had he had no mother at all? It made no sense. And right now it was the only sense I could find.

But as he sat there, so perfectly still, healing his pain was the last thing on my mind. I felt that his silence was oppressing me, almost attacking me, inviting me to add to his humiliation, crush him even further, like an insect, like vermin. It felt that, perversely, this *untermensch* actually wanted my aggression. He wanted to be the victim and keep the moral high ground. In my fantasy it felt so good to pour out my moral wrath on him. He could take all my bad feelings. He could take them all away: my anger, my loathing, my contempt, my murderous rage. He wanted it. He wanted it all. He wanted to be oppressed and struck down. He wanted to be the silent scapegoat for all my blackest passions.

Silence was his way of showing me my own darkest instincts, my own hatred and violence, my own wish to destroy, to murder, to annihilate him. To complete what Abraham could not do. To complete what Roman soldiers could not do. To complete what Hitler's henchmen did not do.

In order to show me myself he would go like a sheep to the slaughter. He would be arrested and sentenced and taken away. On ox-carts and cattle-

trains. And he would say nothing. The sacrificial victim of the world's hatred. And no-one would raise a protest at his fate. Because he wanted it. Because we wanted it. Murder is in our hearts. Murder flows in our veins. We want to cut him down, cut him off from the land of the living. We want to bury him, and those who remind us of him—forever. His passivity kindles our passion. His honesty we cannot bear. We are Cain's children.

Who is more sick? Is it us? Or is it him, with his passive, emotionless defiance, acted-upon but never active; allowing himself to be used and abused—surely this is the one who truly needs to be healed? Exposing himself to a selfless death, satiated with suffering, offering his life for others, meek and mild, innocent before the multitudes, inhuman in his lack of response, inhuman in his silence, inhuman in his refusal to have the courage of Job and cry out against the darkness of humanity, to cry out against his God who puts him to grief—surely this is a sickness beyond compare?

He sat there, silent as a stone, making me hate him, making me despise him. The skill of the masochist to manipulate others in order to get attacked must not be underestimated. And here was the supreme exponent of the art—the masochist of all times. So what, I wondered, were the unconscious fantasies for which he felt he had to be punished? What aggressive and murderous wishes was this oh-so-humble sufferer feeling guilty about? Whom had he felt he ought to love, but had found it impossible to cleave to? Whom instead did he grow to hate so much that the corresponding need for punishment became so enormous? 'Our Father, who art in heaven, horror be thy name ...'

Still silence.

The therapist sits in his chair and avoids the clear gaze of this mute questioner. This session must come to an end. There is no hope here. This one is beyond help. I too am beyond help. We are all beyond help.

I was exhausted. I was empty. No feelings. All around me and inside me there was a deadness, an indifference. This had to end now. He had to go. Then I wouldn't have to answer any more questions. I had been destroyed. It was not that I had failed him. It was much worse: *I* was a failure. I was faced with the meaninglessness of everything I had believed. I was faced with my own helplessness. I could do nothing. There was not even an 'I'. There was just the hurt.

I felt cut off from everyone and everything by walls of pain; and the sense of the solitude of each human soul suddenly overwhelmed me. I had grown accustomed to the superficial, and to the casual cleverness of my life. Suddenly the ground seemed to give way beneath me and I was being buried alive. I found myself in quite another region. The loneliness of the human soul is unendurable. Nothing can penetrate it. Except, perhaps, the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached.

I understood that it was not he that was sick, but me. His silence had come to make me whole. The pain and the suffering I saw in him could heal

me. His refusal to make verbal contact with me was a deeper form of communication than I had realised. He was saying that in human relations one should penetrate to the core of loneliness in each person and speak to that.

I was faced with just how cut-off I was: in my own world of fantasies and thoughts, and opinions and ideas. But unless I have contact with others my existence is intolerable. It was I who was unable to communicate, not him. It was I who longed to move into relation with others—to be understood and share. We live at the edge of a void, a black hole, a heart of darkness. We avoid the void with drink and drugs and pseudo-mutuality, by fighting for success, by scholarship, by social distractions, by hoarding possessions, by the desperate duty of good works, by taking on the responsibilities of the world.

Like sheep that had gone astray from the shepherd, my evasions had led me away from the fulness of life. I had refused to face this ineradicable loneliness at the heart of existence. But he had faced this death-in-life and he had achieved the capacity to be alone. He was alone. And now he was alone, together with me. He had intervened, on my behalf. He had rescued me from my prison.

I opened my eyes. I felt that I had been in a deep sleep. He was still looking at me. He was unchanged. I saw him for the first time. I saw him. He was made in my image and likeness. A moment of meeting. And I knew everything about him. And I knew nothing about him. I had projected everything into him. No wonder I had not been able to look at him—he had come to show me who I was. And it was unbearable. All my inner horrors, my poisonous and destructive impulses, my shame, my worthlessness—all had formed themselves into his experiences, his story, the text of his life.

And they *were* his story, his suffering. But they were also my story, our text, our suffering. We face our darkness if we dare. 'Who would have believed what we have heard? Where had God's power ever been seen—but here?' I looked away towards the window. Suddenly everything had changed. The window was wide open. There were no bars on it. This room, this world, was no prison. Just the sun rising on a new morning, high summer, with glowing clouds like a chariot riding the wind. A pair of swallows were feeding their young. It was a miracle of beauty: real, eternal and simple.

'Behold, my servant will show wisdom: uplifted, above and beyond...'

## SOURCES

Some of the ideas in this paper were developed from: David Clines, *Isaiah 53: I, He, We and They*, JSOT Suppl. Series 1, (Sheffield, 1976).

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