

On Supervision

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Safran makes an essential distinction between will and willfulness when discussing the quality of interaction. Willfulness has the desperate feel of trying to force any moment to be bent to the needs of oneself. To not be able to recognize the intricacies of interaction because one is stuck in their own impinging needs. It comes from a fear that attachment is fragile and connection is broken if one tries to assert one's needs directly. Conversely, will is borne out of the faith that the world is fairly benevolent. One does not need to be a slave to one's outcomes because one believes that the future will bear out well enough. This is also related to the idea that if one can hold connection and all of its limitations, one can have compassion for interpersonal losses, failures and intermittently find some comfort in self and other.

This distinction is key and we try to come from a place of will with and for the supervisee and his/her patient. We start with the idea that all will go fairly well as long as we can embrace the subtleties and the underbelly of any interaction. As long as we can withstand and not disavow darkness, it will be all right. It is even okay when one of us cannot stand or needs to disavow because the other will be there to find a light to guide us. Disappointment and failure does not need to be experienced as catastrophic, even in the face of real tragedy.

There is an experience of mastery we can offer anyone we mentor or teach in our own acceptance of being unknown/unknowable to ourselves and others. There is no complete connection. If we are lucky, life becomes a long lesson in the art of losing gracefully. We can bring calm to meet the fear that we are all ultimately alone in our struggle. Having wrestled with our own isolation and disappointment allows us to offer faith in connection and in our ability to help patients and supervisees hold hope despite their own weaknesses. There is a paradox there. No one can alleviate the singular reality that we are alone and in the dark but acceptance of that somehow allows us to be soothed and held, even momentarily. We learn to take what we can get and appreciate it. Interacting in this way helps the supervisee learn to tolerate their own fear and blindness and gain a feeling of confidence despite their own and our own lacking. The seeing is in the lacking, in being okay in the lacking; we don't have to - can't if we want to - get it all right. We are making a concerted effort but we are relaxed in our delivery; as much as we can, we come from will and not willfulness. The supervisee does not need to become us or see it our way. They need to learn to have faith that they will see at all, that they will sometimes be very alone in the seeing, that they will have to hold on despite their best efforts being unseen and unknown, many times over. Good supervision does not appear to be in any one ability or another, it is more in the mindset in which we enter the endeavor. We have to be a little loose and a little bendy. We attempt to enter therapy with our patients in a similar way. How do we add some comfort, acceptance, love to this person's life? How do we aid in any small way to lessen the burden of existence; of loneliness? How do we get some comfort for ourselves in doing this? This kind of work can bring us moments of real joy and connection woven amongst our inevitable disappointments.

Sometimes supervision and treatment can have that battleground feel where parties are wrestling over what is "true." This tends to be a fairly profitless albeit unavoidable endeavor. When we find ourselves trapped in this type of interaction, if we cannot agree in the seeing, maybe both of us are bound up in some relentless need to be the *right, good or sane* one;

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we have slipped into willfulness. We can back down then, unless it is a question of real safety, and circle back and try again in a more relaxed way. We try to see the supervisee's or patient's fear that if they let go, if they get lost, they will be lost forever. They do not always have the experience of losing and surviving, of losing irretrievably not only others but versions of the self one must shed in order to survive, tunnels of identity that were carved and held by lost parts of the self and lost connection to another. We cannot give them that experience if they have never had it but we can model our own flexibility. That's when we extend a hand and demonstrate that maybe we are not lost for good, only confused for a little while and can navigate our way back.

There are core lessons about withstanding failure to be found in grief. When we lose the people we love, when we lose versions of the self that we once depended on, the illusion of control is absorbed; we are humbled, if we are fortunate, we learn through experience how to discern our own will from willfulness. These experiences shape who we become and force us to grow around and through exposures; what we once hid from ourselves is shone as mostly facade. Loss is a bedfellow one can never misplace; one can only learn to warm to it and accept it lying there. One can never shed the notion that tragedy is absolutely real and at work somewhere, all the time. To lean away from it is to cut off one's own vitality but before one can stand again, one must first learn to accept what feels like disintegration, to bear what feels catastrophic and survive. To get lost in one's head, lost in darknesses new and old, lost in real fear and panic. To get lost in the unfathomably deep pockets of shadow in the human psyche, one's own and that which is shared with others. It can be such a lonely cavern, full of despair. The flip side of the pain is finding a level of bedrock endurance; there is freedom in there as well. One can come back knowing what is worth seeing, what is worth lighting up and what to shed.

We can come back from loss and disappointment knowing that we cannot know it all, we can't always get it right. We learn that we cannot even present our own wholeness to ourselves or others without having to whittle it down to this or that. There is something that aches about that but also something that is relieving. Everyone is in the same boat; there is a togetherness in that elemental aloneness! If only in fleeting moments, we practice tolerating and bearing witness to others' shadow without having to disavow or reject our own. We can learn the value of dwelling there with our patients and supervisees. There comes a level of confidence that one can soothe in despair and create warmth in the cold; one can laugh at one's own ridiculousness and smallness. One can find comfort in limitations, in fractured moments of pleasure. Nothing has to be or can be absolute or complete. Nothing has to be just how one wanted it to be, in fact, that might be a prison. Alongside our patients and supervisees, we keep trying to come from a place of will and wisdom, to employ effort and calm, to have integrity in our work, and reverence for the vital roles played by both fortitude and failure.