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The Therapeutic Relationship as a Context for Reformation

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Introduction

Luther's lifelong struggle with melancholy and anxiety is well documented in his own writings as well as by Luther scholars. Luther notes the importance of his relationship with Johannes Staupitz, his mentor and spiritual advisor in addressing the inner torment he experienced and the significant effect this had on his theology and quality of life. This paper explores Luther's relationship with Staupitz as an important context for the transformation of Luther's personal life and the concurrent reformation of Luther's theology and understanding of grace. Their relationship serves as a framework for understanding the importance of the psychotherapeutic relationship as a contemporary context for reformation.

Luther and Staupitz

Various scholars have written about Luther's upbringing and early life and how this contributed (or not) to who Luther became as the priest, educator and reformer. Some such as Erickson attempted to apply modern psychotherapeutic theories as a means of understanding Luther.[2] It is clear that Luther grew up in a medieval German family where he, "grew up fearing God, knowing that he was supposed to love his neighbors and that priests served as God's special instruments for mediating divine power. He heard Bible stories and worshipped the Triune God, whom he learned to approach largely through ritual."[3]

In his young adult years, Luther's piety reflected a medieval understanding of God and the world. This included believing in a God with superhuman abilities that could be mediated by saints. However, this medieval world view also included demons and witches who had superhuman powers and who were in defiance of God. Rituals were an important means of manipulating divine power in order to combat evil forces.[4] Luther learned in his family and from the theologians and spiritual teachers in his Augustinian order that sinful people were only capable of responding to selfish desires within. Hamm notes the belief at this time would have been that

> Sinful people [could not] feel the love of God or make a true repentance in loving accord with Christ's passion but [could] only go as far as the sorrow for sin that comes from the egotistical motive of fearing punishment. These sinners are like the criminal who is led to the gallows and regrets his crimes not because he understands them as

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[2] Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History. (*New York, Norton, 1958).
[3] Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther Confessor of the Faith,* ed. Timothy Gorringe, Serene Jones, and Graham Ward. (New York: Oxford University Press. 2009), 12.
[4] Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation,* trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 12-13.

> such or inwardly abhors them but because he is afraid of the gallows. Therefore, every sinner who does not have God's justifying and reforming grace is only capable of a shabby kind of 'gallows remorse.' The merciful love of God entering the soul is the only thing that brings sinners back into God's orbit.[5]

This medieval world view and theological understanding led Luther into an ongoing state of anxiety and tribulation regarding his own salvation and relationship with God. Luther's image of God was that of a relentless judge who required perfect repentance and atonement for every sin without the possibility of remission unless there were acts of confession and repentance with true remorse and good works.[6] This ongoing lived experience of believing in an accusing and angry God, increased Luther's desperate need for purity and holiness. Consequently, the need to confess even the smallest offense was a source of great suffering and anguish for Luther. Luther himself wrote,

> Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that [he] (God) was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God and said, 'As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!' Thus, I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.[7]

Luther met Johannes von Staupitz in April, 1506. Staupitz in his role as vicar-general of the Augustinian order became an important mentor and spiritual advisor for Luther. He recognized Luther's potential to become a priest and teacher and was supportive of his pursuit of advanced theological education. There is little written evidence of the early conversations between Luther and Staupitz, however, the focus of these conversations seems to have been primarily pastoral in nature."[8] Later in life, Luther notes the impact of these conversations on his theological understanding which profoundly also affected his personal life.[9] Luther "emphasized both in letters to Staupitz and in reminiscences about Staupitz that he owed his ground breaking insights to his elder."[10]

Staupitz, in his role as Luther's spiritual advisor, opened up a different understanding of true repentance. Luther discovered that,

> First, the love of God and God's righteousness is not an end point but a starting point, a love that is not strained but owes its existence to the encounter with the suffering

[5] Ibid., 15
[6] Ibid., 40
[7] Helmut T. Lehman, general editor *Luther's Works. Career of the Reformer IV. Vol. 34,* ed. by Lewis W. Spitz, (Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 336.
[8] Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation,* trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmands, 2014), 16.
[9] David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation. (*Durham, NC: Duke University Press.1980), 4-6.
[10] Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther; Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 16.

> of the 'sweetest redeemer.' Second, the biblical sense of repentance should not be understood in terms of human doing but as a fundamental reversal in attitude and emotion ... Third, this existential change of direction is not a human achievement but is the grace of God, put precisely: it is not changing oneself but being changed.[11]

Kolb observed that what was most notable about Staupitz was "his concern for good pastoral care, for comforting scrupulous, distressed, distraught believers like Brother Martin."[12] He goes on to note that,

> When Luther came fretting about his inability to do his best in order to earn grace, Staupitz pointed him to God's merciful degree of salvation, which he was conveying to this troubled conscience through the wounds of Christ. Luther should look to them. Slowly Luther's understanding of unconditional grace, the impossibility of human contributions to salvation, and the total perversion of the sinner's relationship to God through sin came close to Staupitz's. Both insisted that embracing God involves both cognitive and emotional engagement with him.[13]

It was in the context of this relationship with Stauptitz that supported Luther to transform his understanding of God from one that was filled with wrath to a God that was gracious and loving. James Jones while writing about this transformation for Luther noted that,

> Psychologically speaking, a figure-ground shift has taken place. At first, God's judgment was in the foreground and his mercy in the background. Now his mercy is in the foreground and his judgment in the background. Christ now radiates love rather than provoking us to fear … Psychologically, we have moved from fear into love, from terror into desire, from Christ as judge to Christ as ideal.[14]

In the context of the gracious relationship with Staupitz, Luther's image of God evolved to include the love of Christ freely given to believers. Luther wrote,

> At last, by the mercy of God, mediating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, he who through faith is righteous shall live.' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.[15]

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[11] Ibid., 17
[12] Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther Confessor of the Faith.* (New York: Oxford University Press. 2009), 39.
[13] Ibid., 40.
[14] James W. Jones, "Luther and Contemporary Psychoanalysis: Living in the Midst of Horrors," in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times 2009, e*d. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 75.
[15] Helmut T. Lehman, general editor *Luther's Works. Career of the Reformer IV. vol. 34,* ed. by Lewis W. Spitz, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 337.

It is clear that the relationship with Staupitz provided the grace-filled context for Luther to undergo a major psychological shift, a personal reformation. This experience undergirded his theological shift to understanding grace which sparked the Reformation.

Webster's Dictionary includes in its definition of reformation the acknowledgement of the beginning of the movement in the sixteenth century that challenged some of Roman Catholic doctrine which resulted in the formation of the Protestant church. It also defines reformation as, "the act of reforming: the state of being reformed."[16] It is in this latter sense that the therapeutic relationship will be discussed.

The Therapeutic Relationship

Clients request therapeutic assistance for a variety of reasons. Here are a couple of common scenarios:

> David,[17] a 42 year old man, married twelve years with two children aged ten and eight comes into therapy because his wife felt it might be helpful. He doesn't know why he has no motivation in his life. He says that he 'loves his wife and kids' but doesn't know 'what the point of it all is'. He observes that, 'I have a good job, and make decent money, we've bought a house and the kids are doing fine but I thought there'd be more to life. I just have no motivation to do anything. I don't know what's wrong with me.'
>
> Jamie and Kelly have been married for five years. They have come in for counselling because they 'seem to argue about everything these days.'

Will these clients encounter a "Staupitz" when they seek help? What kind of relationship will develop? Significant research has been done regarding the importance of the therapeutic relationship as it relates to the process of healing and change.

Carl Rogers was one of the early psychologists who wrote about the importance of this relationship. He noted, "If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth and change, and personal development will occur."[18] He went on to describe three crucial attitudinal qualities for a therapist: "realness or genuineness; nonposessive caring, prizing, trust and respect and empathic understanding and sensitive and accurate listening."[19]

Yalom an existential psychotherapist concluded that:

> It is the relationship that heals – and that is the single most important lesson the psychotherapist must learn. There is no more self-evident truth in psychotherapy; every therapist observes over and over in clinical work that the encounter itself is healing for the patient in a way that transcends the therapist's theoretical orientation.[20]

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[16] Merriam Webster Dictionary accessed Oct. 9, 2017 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reformation

[17] Pseudonyms have been provided for the clients in order to maintain confidentiality.

[18] Carl Rogers. *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961) 1.

[19] Carl Rogers, Freedom to learn. (Columbus: Merrill, 1969).

[20] Irvin Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy.* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 401.

Ashbrook, referring to Donald Winnicott's term "holding environment," described the characteristics of therapeutic facilitation this way:

> These holding environments include ... a structured time and peopled space; personal relatedness; an implicit and sometimes explicit, recognition of our mutual humanity; an intention to put ourselves at the service of the person coming for help; identifying and using the distracting and disruptive; and an explicit expectation that the client wonders about the kind of persons we are as well as carries assumptions about how we will work together.[21]

Later research has demonstrated that regardless of the theoretical approach of the therapist, the quality of the relationship that is established between the client and therapist is crucial for healing and change to occur.[22] It is now commonly accepted that no matter what the theoretical approach, the therapeutic relationship remains crucial.[23] Miller et al in researching the crucial elements regarding the therapeutic relationship named them "common factors." The "common factors" include: (i) extratherapeutic factors belonging to clients and their environments (40%); (ii) the therapeutic relationship or alliance (30%); (iii) therapeutic techniques (15%), and (iv) expectancy, hope and placebo (15%).[24] While there is ongoing research and discussion regarding these "common factors" and the relevant weighting and the extent to which they support client healing and change, there continues to be an acknowledgement of the significance of the therapeutic relationship. The *I-it, I-Thou* relationship articulated by Martin Buber adds another dimension to such an understanding of the therapeutic relationship.

Martin Buber, the Jewish thinker in his landmark book, "I and Thou" wrote that to be human is to be in relation. He further noted the two basic ways to be in relation: *I-It* which is characterized by a one way relationship which relates to and uses objects and *I-Thou* relationships which are two way relationships based on dialogue. The *I-Thou* relationship could be understood more as a conversation with a trusted person whereas the *I-it* relationship would have a more objective or business-like quality to it. Buber believed that it was through the interpersonal *I-Thou* encounter that the divine was experienced.[25] These indicate two very different ways of being in the world where the I in the *I-it* relationship experiences the world as one composed of objects located in time and space where no difference is made between people and objects. The *I –Thou* relationship is based in dialogue wherein one encounters another with mutual awareness. Buber notes that I- thou relationships are characterized by "presentness" where the present is not "the abstract point between past and future" but "like the eternal now of the mystic, it is the present of intensity

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[21] James Ashbrook, *Minding the Soul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 64.
[22] Alexander Bachelor and Andrea Horvath. "The Therapeutic Relationship," in *The Heart and Soul of Change: What Works in Therapy,* eds. Mark Hubble, Barry Duncan and Scott Miller (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 1999), 323-78.
[23] David Orlinsky, Michael Helge Rønnestad, Ulrike Willutzki Fifty years of process-outcome research: Continuity and change. In *Bergin and Garfield's handbook of psychotherapy and behavior change*, ed. M. J. Lambert (New York: Wiley, 2009), 370-390.
[24] Scott Miller, Barry Duncan, and Mark Hubble Escape from Babel: Toward a unifying language for psychotherapy practice. (New York: Norton, 1997).
[25] Martin Buber, *I and Thou,* trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937).

and wholeness" and "exists only in so far as meeting and relation exists."[26] While the *It* of the *I-it* relationships is determined by objective temporality, the *Thou* of *I-Thou* relationships resists being ordered in space and time. Buber wrote:

> The *Thou* appears in time, but in that of a process that is fulfilled in itself - a process lived through not as a piece that is a part of a constant and organized sequence but in a 'duration' whose purely intensive dimension can be determined only by starting from the *Thou*.[27]

Buber noted that the *I –Thou* relationships live in the "in between" or the relational space that is created in the encounter. Consequently, *I – Thou* relationships are hard to describe because they cannot be captured with analytical language. Buber described it this way:

> If I face a human being as my *Thou,* and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things and does not consist of things. Thus human being is not *He* or *She*, bounded from every other *He* or *She*, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world: nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbour, and whole in himself, he is *Thou* and fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all lives in *his* light.[28]

Buber continued noting that,

> The *I-Thou* experience is so powerful that it is not possible to sustain. He writes, It is not possible to live in the bare present. Life would be quite consumed if precautions were not taken to subdue the present speedily and thoroughly.[29]

As a result, every *I-Thou* relationship must become an *I-it* relationship. However, Buber notes that once an *It* has been a *Thou* it has the potential to be a *Thou* again. Buber also notes that it is not possible to create an *I-Thou* relationship by force of will because an openness to the development of this kind of relationship must be present on both sides.[30] Consequently, it is possible to have *I-it* relationships that never become *I-Thou* relationships.

Martin Buber and Carl Rogers in a famous dialogue, "The Nature of Man as Revealed in the Inter-personal Relationship"[31] discussed the possibility of an *I-Thou* experience in the therapeutic relationship. While Buber believed that psychotherapy essentially was an *I-it* encounter primarily because of the imbalance of power and the lack of mutuality in the relationship, he did acknowledge that in the moments when both "patient and counsellor intuited both sides of the relationship simultaneously, the mutuality demonstrates the client's capacity to see oneself and the other at the same time. It's a sign of healing evidence

[26] Maurice Friedman, *Martin* Buber: The Life of Dialogue (New York: Routledge, 2002).
[27] Buber, I Thou, 137.
[28] Buber, 8.
[29] Buber, 20
[30] Buber 11.
[31] Rob Anderson and Kenneth N. Cissna. "The Martin Buber – Carl Rogers Dialogue: A New Transcript with Commentary. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).

of the efficacy of treatment."[32] This allows for the "breaking-in" of *I – Thou* moments into an *I-it* relationship. Rogers further noted in conversation with the theologian Paul Tillich that,

> I feel at times when I am being really helpful to a client of mine ... there is something approximating an *I-Thou* relationship between us, then I feel as though I am somehow in tune with the forces of the universe or that forces are operating through me in regard to this helping relationship.[33]

Stechler speaking of the role of the therapist describes the therapeutic relationship as one of "dual space." He wrote,

> The challenge for us is to create a dual space inside of therapy. In one space we are neutral, observant, allowing a lot of room for the patient to look inward, and the freedom to be with himself [sic], but because of the reciprocity inherent in the second space, not by himself [sic].[34]

This "dual space" then becomes a crucial component for creating the possibility of an *I-Thou* relationship which supports the client's healing and change.

Clients like David, Jamie and Kelly who come into therapy are rarely tormented in the extreme way that Luther was regarding "devils" or fear of God's judgement. However, clients often come in with fears and other difficult feelings that result from earlier experiences in their families or with others which have left them struggling with their own sense of worth and purpose in life often resulting in challenges in their relationships. Therefore, at the beginning of therapy, the focus is on supporting the client(s) to talk about what brings them to therapy and for the therapist and client to begin to develop a collaborative working relationship.

It is not uncommon for clients to come to therapy looking for the therapist to "have the answer" to their challenging situation(s). This is not surprising since those who show up in the therapist's office have exhausted all their self-change possibilities.[35] So, it is to be expected that the client would look to the therapist for "the answer." However, if we believe the therapeutic relationship is a "resource that facilitates, supports or focuses clients' self-healing efforts,"[36] then it becomes crucial that the therapist does not remain in the position of the one with "all the answers." Rather, the therapeutic relationship provides a supportive structure where within a collaborative working relationship, both client and therapist can support adaptive and creative responses to the client's concerns. It is in this collaborative therapeutic relationship that the potential for Buber's *I-Thou* relationship becomes possible.

Throughout, the therapist listens with a disciplined sensitivity, demonstrating acceptance and care for the client while noting their own thoughts, feelings and experiences.

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[32] Dennis S. Ross, "Why Martin Buber Sighed: The Dialogue with Carl Rogers." *Interbeing,* 3, no 1 (1997), 13-19.
[33] Carl Rogers, A newer psychotherapy 1942. In *The Carl Rogers Reader*, eds. H. Kirschenbaum and V. Land Henderson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 74.
[34] Gerald Stechler, "Louis W. Sander and the Question of Affective Presence," *Infant Mental Health Journal.* 21, no. 1-2 (2000), 82.
[35] James Prochaska, Carlo DiClemente, and John Norcross, *Changing for Good* (New York: Morrow, 1994).
[36] Arthur Tallman and Karen Bohart, *The Client as a Common Factor: Clients as Self-Healers,* The Heart and Soul of Change: What Works in Therapy. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 102.

As the therapeutic relationship begins to develop the therapist invites the client to notice what it is like to share these things with the therapist paying particular attention to their feelings, thoughts, body sensations and the judgements they make regarding their concerns. What is it like to be heard, to be received? For many clients, not unlike Luther, they expect to be judged either overtly or covertly. This is often a reflection of their own judgement of themselves or what they have previously experienced from others. When they do not experience judgement in the therapeutic relationship but rather are able to receive from the therapist a gracious and accepting response, the potential for something new emerges. Sometimes this can be experienced as an *I- Thou* moment by both therapist and client and can feel like they are connected to something more.

While the therapist is accepting of the client it is not just a passive listening to the client's concerns. Rather, the therapist brings their professional experience and perspectives which supports their noticing areas where the client may be stuck or blind to their responses. In the context of the therapeutic relationship, the therapist is able to bring to the client's attention these unhelpful behaviours, belief systems and patterns. This can be challenging for the client to face. However, within the supportive and accepting therapeutic relationship the client can begin to trust themselves to address these challenging and sometimes painful areas of their life.

Interestingly, Luther writes of Staupitz demanding of him to bring "real sins to confess" and of the "melancholy" that persisted. He stated,

> Sometimes my confessor said to me when I repeatedly discussed silly sins with him. 'You are a fool. God is not incensed against you, but you are incensed against God. God is not angry with you, but you are angry with God.[37]

While Stauptiz challenged Luther in a way that today would not likely be seen as "therapeutic," because of their relationship, Luther was able to not only receive the challenge but find it profoundly helpful. Staupitz provided Luther a "holding environment" where Luther had structured time and space to experience a relationship, a relationship that helped him recognize his humanity which in turn changed his understanding of God itself. Therapists can learn from Staupitz to trust that the relationship is strong enough to "hold" the challenge that is utilized for the client's healing and change. This kind of engagement brings the therapist and client into the present moment, with the potential for an *I-Thou* encounter. It is these experiences of both acceptance and challenge that facilitate the clients to form or re-form a different self-understanding. As with Luther, clients' experience of grace in the context of the therapeutic relationship can profoundly re-form and transform their lives and their relationships.

This article began with the important relationship between Staupitz and Luther being noted as it pertained to the transformation of Luther's understanding of God and God's grace and the impact on his life. As this relationship was the context for reformation in Luther's life which sparked the Reformation, so too can the therapeutic relationship be the context for reformation in clients' lives.

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[37] Helmut T. Lehman, general editor *Luther's Works. Career of the Reformer IV. Vol. 15,* ed. Lewis W. Spitz, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 336-337. LW 54:15 (table Talk no. 1222: Treatment of Melancholy, Despair, etc."; Nov. 30, 1531).