

Smith College Studies in Social Work

Book Review: *Celebrating the Wounded Healer Psychotherapist: Pain, post-traumatic growth, and self disclosure* by Sharon Klayman Farber (2017)

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In *Celebrating the Wounded Healer Psychotherapist: Pain, post-traumatic growth and self-disclosure*, Sharon Klayman Farber (2017) takes the atypical step of focusing on the pain of therapists rather than the distress of clients. For a profession so conditioned to minimize therapist vulnerability or need, this book challenges the reader to recognize the reality that many therapists carry their own histories of trauma, grief, and mental illness, even while treating clients. This book demands that the reader face the primary danger in therapeutic work (both individually and in our collective professional consciousness), the error of minimizing how therapists are affected by the past in ways both beneficial and problematic (Farber, 2017). Farber divides the work into two sections: background information describing the concept of wounded healers and a space for invited therapists to share their own stories.

In the first half of the book, Farber context for acknowledging that personal pain may be woven into the history of the therapist. She begins by tracing the long tradition of the wounded healer, across spiritual and cultural conceptualizations, adding gravitas to the role of the current day therapist and justification of the book's investigation. Farber notes the risks to wellness experienced by therapists: distress from containing another person's traumatic experiences, from working with folks who could be harmful, or from one's own personal history of loss, abuse, or struggle. Within this longstanding tradition of healers who carry their own burdens, Farber recognizes that clients might benefit or be harmed from the distress of their therapists.

Actualized malpractice and supplanting client need with a therapist need has been an active risk from the earliest days of psychotherapy, and Farber demonstrates this with into the boundary violations and dual relationships engaged in by Freud and his contemporaries. To prevent the reader from thinking this is only an issue of the past, Farber provides recent accounts of prominent therapists and academics who struggled with their own emotional or physical challenges before, during, or after their work with clients in ways that could sabotage the treatment. This serves as a needed reminder to therapist readers to keep vigilant in their own work.

With respect to the resilience of so many therapists, Farber also highlights the common occurrence of post traumatic growth, which can spring up alongside a therapist's suffering, leading to greater compassion, skill level, and connection to others. This is one of the highlights of the "Celebration" that Farber intends, shining a light on the fact that therapists may be triumphing similarly to their clients, while honoring their mission to prioritize the wellbeing of their clients. This offers hope for both client and therapist readers.

In the latter half of the book, Farber shares the firsthand narratives of therapists who own their injuries, disappointments, and sorrow in order to share how they try to make sense of this as within their own journeys. Contributing author therapists acknowledge a plethora of issues including grief, transgenerational trauma, sexual abuse, parental mental illness and addiction, personal mental health issues, parental death, infidelity, self-loathing, family suicide, political violence, and deep shame- a range of issues that would be common in any community mental health center. Initially, it seems surprising to hear about so many therapists, social workers, and psychoanalytic practitioners struggling with serious, personal impediments. But this reality quickly becomes obvious and familiar. Despite tendencies to see therapists as accomplished

experts, rather than people who may be navigating their own distress, therapists are both, just as clients are both. As the reader, it feels like a privilege to bear witness to these life stories. Each journey to wholeness (or the chance of greater wholeness) is unique, and in the writing as healing that Farber advocates, one imagines this as (and hopes this was) a liberating experience for these therapist authors.

The pain and posttraumatic growth to which Farber refers in the title are directly investigated through history and personal stories of contributing authors. Self-disclosure noted in the title appears to reflect the acknowledgement by these therapists to the readers of their own distress. While individual reflections of therapists and their personal growth amidst difficulty can be found (for example, Harris, 2009) and this personal reflection is a necessity of relational work, this book offers a substantive collection of such narratives. In this way, the story of the burdened healer is normalized, and the unique road traveled by each therapist storyteller is honored.

The mandate not to divulge personal therapist information has been a traditional hallmark of the profession, so the centrality of self-disclosure in *Celebrating the Wounded Healer Psychotherapist* merits more discussion. A continued caution and reluctance for therapists to disclose persists due to theoretical guidance, a desire not to influence the patient, personality traits of the therapist, or a preference for an expert based distance (Sugarman, 2012). While many tout the “need of the patient” as the necessary guideline around whether or not to disclose (Knox & Hill, 2003; Richards, 2018), in recent years the profession has increasingly tolerated and explored the value of self-disclosure in the treatment room (Hill, Knox, & Pinto-Coelho, 2018; Knox & Hill, 2003; Lee, 2014; Richards, 2018; Sugarman, 2012; West, 2017). Both dangers and benefits are present when a therapist chooses to engage in self-disclosure with a

client (Berg, Antonsen, & Binder, 2017; Sugarman, 2012). West (2017) appeals to therapists to reflect upon self-disclosing in particular cases, rather than relying unthinkingly on tradition.

This space of intentional reflection seems to be the book's niche. Perhaps, *Celebrating the Wounded Healer Psychotherapist* will convince readers that therapists are not immune from the pain they help others to navigate. As Richards (2018) notes, patients come to the therapy appointment knowing a great deal about their therapist after a quick online search. These public reflections on therapist struggle may serve to balance the myth of therapists as experts immune to communal distress.

Farber strikes a delicate balance between normalizing the experience of working from one's own pain and highlighting the embedded risks. This is precisely the tightrope that healers are asked to walk: remaining acutely sensitive to one's own vulnerability as a human being in an uncertain world, while being charged with the emotional wellbeing of one's clients. Farber insists that while therapists and clients do not have control over all that was done to them, they do have control over the kind of actions taken to get support. This book offers space for intentional reflection rather than dismiss or denying personal trauma (West, 2017).

Farber takes the language and concepts that therapists are so comfortably applying to clients and challenges readers to think about their own therapist selves in this same vulnerable fashion. Farber requires readers to admit that therapy can be just as healing for the therapist as the client. This will likely feel familiar, even if unspoken, for many readers, and possibly a bit uncomfortable. The possibility exists that in bravely recognizing the mutuality of healing, this can be perceived by non-clinically trained readers as a primary, rather than an ancillary, function of treatment. While the differences between therapist and clients may be less rigid than

supposed, the mission and responsibilities structured in professional codes of ethics are clear-cut and possibly worth re-iterating to prevent a casual reader from misinterpreting this distinction.

Therapist self-disclosure (West, 2017) continues to be an active debate, even amidst the more egalitarian and relationally based therapy work of the 21st century. In terms of direct self-disclosure to personal clients, it is less clear where the book stands, perhaps intentionally. The book itself is an act of self-disclosure, but readers and therapists may feel inspired or justified to acknowledge their pain within the therapeutic relationship, without a formal sense of guardrails in this rocky terrain. A few of the invited authors mention sharing portions of their histories with clients, and one theme of the book is the issue of using clients for a therapist's needs, but no specific recommendations are offered around this personal self-disclosure. However, the need for social support, reflection, and active supervision is a theme throughout the book in the effort to keep the all too human therapist focused on the wellbeing of the client.

While the book's focus on Freudian history and relationally focused work might feel most familiar to psychodynamically trained therapists, the value of contemplating the intersection of personal history with client dynamics is relevant for healers of all backgrounds. Therapists who identify as a wounded healer, as well as therapists and people who appreciate stories of growth will appreciate this work.

The gift of *Celebrating the Wounded Healer Psychotherapist* is that it can affirm the experience of so many people sitting in the therapist chairs. This book normalizes the pain and histories that so often therapists feel the need to hide or keep to themselves and honors the work and bravery of these therapists. Therapy can be a sacred vocation but requires the therapist to humbly own the depth of their own injury and remain aware of its influence. Likely many readers of this book will feel echoes of this in their own hearts. Perhaps readers will add a

chapter of their own story and find more joy in celebrating their own healing and growth. The temptation to be healed by the client before helping the client heal can be tempting to our inner suffering child. Farber reminds us of the danger without demanding that we fear it.

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