

Burning Bright, Not Out!

Therapist Well-Being in the Face of What We Face

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Abstract

At a recent conference in Lyon, an American researcher declared that we are *all* traumatised, all of us including counsellors, clients, workers, lawyers, activists. I was taken aback thinking, “wait a moment!” I am not willing to believe that, in the face of struggle and adversity, we are all mentally ill. Counsellors/therapists form part of a community circle responding to violence, harm, betrayal, grief and heartbreak. We are often inspired by our clients, their survivance, their resistance and the ways they signal injustice. The academic presenter was likely influenced by theories of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma - ideas that accuse our clients of hurting us. I wonder to what extent *these theories* hurt us or get us thinking in ways that are individualising and unhelpful.

To a certain extent, our sense of well-being may be fostered, or inhibited, by the ideas we hold about the work. I believe it is helpful to remember that we are part of “communities of care”, even if geographically disparate or far flung. Threads of caring may join us, across the world, in trying to alleviate suffering and foster social change for the better. If we wanted “easy”, perhaps we would have chosen a different profession. So I write this article from a particular position, as a Métis therapist, in a colonised country, on the traditional lands of the Kaniienka:haka people. I favour a systemic, response-based approach to my work, focusing on what people “already know and do” (Wade, 1997) and the “small acts of living” that keep humans going from day to day, resisting humiliation and dehumanisation.

In addition to being a counsellor, I am also a teacher at a post-secondary institution. This adds another dynamic to the mix. As well, I administer and teach in an Indigenous studies program, which means I face backlash regularly, from folks who don’t think we should even exist. We face attack as Indigenous scholars and pedagogues, as critical theorists, as allies to

LGTBQ and two-spirit and other marginalised peoples. We get accused of being “anti-capitalist”, or as delaying capitalist progress, as if capitalism was either good or escapable. In trying to build a program of Indigenous teachers, we are accused of being exclusionary and disadvantaging men. The obstacles are many and policies that protect the status quo are abundant.

My colleague Vikki Reynolds (2011) says that we don’t burn out, we get blown up! Here, she is referring to structural violence and institutions that do not respond aptly to support workers or act in ways that uplift people, whether employees or “service-users”. She writes: “I don’t think as therapists and community workers we’re burning out. The problem of burnout is not in our heads or our hearts but in the real world where there is a lack of justice” (p. 28). In the confluence of these challenges, how do I stay well? Vikki and I wrote an article in 2012 organised around a poem by Bud Osborn, a resident of Vancouver’s downtown eastside; it is called “Here we are, amazingly alive in the work: Holding ourselves together with an ethic of social justice in community work.” The article begins with the following thoughts...

“As community workers committed to social justice, we are ethically obliged to find ways to be ‘amazingly alive’ in our work. The sustainability that promotes being amazingly alive refers to a spirited presence and a genuine connectedness with others. It requires more than resisting ‘burnout’ and keeping a desperate hold on hope. We are amazingly alive in our work when we are able to be fully and relationally engaged, stay connected with hope, and be of use to clients across time. Being amazingly alive in our work embraces a rich engagement with a spirit of social justice, and openness to the transformation we may experience as practitioners in this difficult work.”

(Martin-Baró, 1994 cited in Richardson and Reynolds, p. 3)

After recently returning from a six-month sabbatical, in which I was permitted to travel, live aboard, and to work far away from the institution, I am aspiring to keep this alive feeling... well... alive. I will comment on my attempts to stay in the “zone of fabulousness” (Reynolds, 2019) in the body of this chapter.

In 2021, I covered this topic in my recent book “Facing the Mountain: Indigenous Healing in the Shadow of Colonialism.” In these pages, I explored the notion of healing – what is it? How do we do it? I had recently recovered from a second appearance of cancer and from a series of chemotherapy and radiation treatments. I reflected upon how cancer is talked about in our society and how certain practices, and discourses, may precipitate healing while others do not. These thoughts sit in the greater realisation that we only have a certain amount of control in our lives and that there is also something bigger, spiritual, or mysterious at work. I typically begin my presentations, and writings, with the topic of (human and more-than-human) dignity and our relationship of connectedness to everything and to each other.

Dignity as Central to Well-Being

Through my work supporting people who have been harmed by violence, I came to understand more fully the importance, and healing power, of dignity. This understanding developed more fully after studying/working with colleagues Allan Wade, Linda Coates and Shelly Dean, with response-

based practice (Richardson, 2023b). Dignity and dignity-driven practices are central to this type of approach. One significant teaching, from Allan, says “Whenever people are mistreated, they resist in some way.” Their resistance, sometimes visible, sometimes more private, serves to maximize their safety, and/or their dignity, in the midst of a degrading or humiliating situation. Dignity’s presence is signified by a sense of expansion, self-worth, being seen (through the eyes of love and appreciation). It fosters an experience of connection to others and to the world, offering a sense of belonging and place (Yes, I matter/I belong here).

Dignity is a pervasive energy with which we are born. Babies may enter the world, from a gentler place, full of openness, life and are ready to love. Over time, through disappointments, harshness and humiliation, children experience wounds or wounding, deflating that expansive sense of connection to all things. Depending on the harshness of the world, they may even dim their light, retreating in self-protection. As adults, and professionals, we also carry our sense of dignity into the world and into our place of work. This energy or sense of dignity is enhanced by collective care, the esteem of colleagues and mutual support. Sadly, many adults today work in settings they describe as ‘toxic’, where they do not feel safe or respected. If they are harmed, little or nothing is done to repair the transgression. Working in institutions may mean that these dynamics exist and that we find groups where we can share, resist, support and strategise. In my university workplace, I am surrounded by enough loving, good-hearted people that I feel relatively buffered from the harshness and systemic violence. In my work as a counsellor, I am connected through a network of supervision, collaboration and mutual support, in a number of teams, groups and communities. The presence of care and respect increases the likelihood that I will have good days. It is satisfying to feel I am doing a good job, overall, of being present for people in the context of counselling work. This sense of connectedness acts as a buffer against depression, sadness, disappointment in that I do not have to endure disappointments, or tragedies, alone. For me, dignity means I am offered the love, care and appreciation of the people around me, my family, friends, colleagues, clients/community members, and importantly, even people I do not know. Being treated with kindness in a shop, at a gas station, or in daily interchanges, matters muchly in how I feel about the day.

Interconnectedness & InterConnections

At the risk of verging into the academic, I think it relevant to add a few words on the topic of interconnectedness. In my world, many Indigenous scholars, thinkers, teachers talk about interconnectedness as being central to Indigenous practice, worldview and philosophy. In the world of family therapy, Gregory Bateson drew from ideas of interconnectedness, advocating for the dismantling of silos, and disciplines, in favour of working with a sense of ‘oneness.’ Bateson was often credited with inspiring the mainstream (e.g. non-Indigenous) ecology movement and brought a wonderful reverence for the natural world into the systemic thinking of the helping professions (e.g. family therapy) (Bateson 1972). For me, the understanding that ‘my well-being is caught up in your well-being’, relates to the social aspect of dignity and our need to esteem one another on a daily basis. This is central to my well-being. These notions and practices are deeply embedded in Indigenous ways of doing and being.

Where do I end and you begin?

Believing that we are spiritual beings having a human experience, part of my well-being, as a therapist and an instructor, also relies on contextual boundary setting. It is important for me to acknowledge my sphere of influence and those situations in which I have very little power. I fear disappointing people by not being able to help them, so I may offer things that appear kind (e.g. unsolicited advice, individual encouragement) but do not change things systemically. In this way, I risk depleting my own reserves of energy.

Someone once told me that there are only a few ways to restore energy. They are sleep, fresh air and meditation. Working in institutions, which are by nature conservative and resistant to change, there are limits to possibilities for responsive transformation. Even changing a course number takes years (provide written explanation, take it through the ranks to be approved by the senate, etc.). When there are acts of violence or injustice, the means to rectify these situations are limited. They can be harmful or dangerous in that they 'mutualise' the issue (e.g. turning an "attack" into a "conflict") (Coates and Wade, 2004) institutions are not able to prevent backlash against a complainant or deal with attacks that happen off the university campus. Knowing that the very processes that are meant to keep people safe can actually escalate harm can produce a profound sense of "spiritual pain" (Reynolds, 2011). One way to 'be well' in the work is to keep working for change when we know the status quo is harming and killing people. Vikki Reynolds writes:

"If we embrace our work as justice-doing we will use our power as community workers and therapists to transform the social contexts of oppression. By this I mean to work to change the real conditions of people's lives rather than helping them adjust to oppression."

(Reynolds, 2011, p. 3)

And, in contrast to ideas of 'burn out', it is not our clients who harm us, it is the rigidity of systems that reproduce systemic injustice or structural violence against those with relatively lesser power (Reynolds, 2011). This spiritual pain is, well, painful and tends to kill hope. The violence of systems violates my dignity, endangers my reputation (I may be seen as colluding) and humiliates me in front of my community, particularly when others do not know what goes on "behind the scenes" and is protected by confidentiality. I have been loath to utter "no comment" when asked about how a certain situation is being handled by my institution, because people demand accountability. These complex situations take a strip off my dignity and infringe on my sense of well-being.

Restoring Dignity

What to do in the face of spiritual pain caused by institutions and unjust social situations? I have long held the position that therapists who just 'do therapy' may be in fact perpetuating injustice. For example, in a recent interview with Mexican, feminist therapist, Aguirre Solario, I saw an example of how the 'system' may align with men in pathologising women and applying inappropriate, sexist and harmful treatments. Tania reported that, in her work with couples, she sometimes sees 'marital rape,' and the woman's resistance, being mutualised and recast as female sexual dysfunction. In cases where a woman did not want to have sex, and was being sexually assaulted by her husband, the woman would resist in a myriad of ways, trying to uphold her safety and her dignity. If the

husband sent her to their doctor saying his wife was “frigid”, the doctor would treat her for sexual dysfunction. The medical system may not inquire about the lack of consent or the violence in the interaction (Richardson, 2023a). It was through this interview that I learned of the terms coined by Dr. Aguirre Solario, “intimate dignity” and “sexual justice” (2023a). These terms have resonated with me ever since.

I believe those in the helping professions have a duty to counter the colonial code in the helping professions (Todd and Wade, 1994); to reverse the four operations of language that conceal violence and pathologise human resistance. We have a responsibility to take the threads of the social issues out of the therapy room into the political arena. We must attend to poverty, discrimination, exploitation in the social arena. It is important to challenge the idea that we just listen and help individuals process experiences. We become implicated in what we witness and can be compelled to act, without violating confidentiality or the dignity/choice of the client.

Recently, someone expressed worry about increasing violence in their homeland and how that threatens their family. These kinds of conversations become ‘existential’ quite quickly, meaning that we cannot change the conditions that cause harm. We cannot, individually at least, stop the violence of global capitalism, mining companies, cartels and corrupt governments. We can lament, we can cry, we can process pain and fears. For me, the most nurturing intervention is to join with community and groups of affinity. In the 1990s, in Victoria, BC, a solidarity café called “Café Simpatico” existed. Here, people working in the Central American solidarity movement came together to eat, drink, talk and dance. As a venue, it had soul. Finding “third spaces” (see Richardson 2004) to meet, share, strategise and develop a collective political analysis was all-important. Cooking and eating together, lamenting, crying, laughing and hurting, reduced the sense of solitude in grief and longing. Finding one’s people offers some relief from the pain of political violence. People dining together can become ‘a movement’. This is important for therapist well-being. Elements of this collective practice can be found in Reynold’s ‘supervision of solidarity’, narrative practices such as witnessing groups and response-based approaches of ‘orchestrating positive social responses’ for victims of violence and loneliness (Richardson and Wade, 2008). Similarly, the “Fifth Provence” approach, created in the Republic of Ireland by Imelda McCarthy, Nollaig Byrne and Phil Kearney, worked with the idea of sacred space, or “a space apart from the daily society” in which people could speak, tell the truth, and be heard (Byrne & McCarthy, 2007). It reminded me of Rumi’s poem “A Great Wagon”:

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase “each other”
doesn’t make any sense.*

When we find, or create, such extraordinary, liminal spaces, we increase the chance that we may feel well.

Stress

In addition to the spiritual pain precipitated by a lack of social justice in our communities, therapists/helpers face a lot of stress. In an interview I conducted recently with Irish family therapist Imelda McCarthy, she told me that there are 11,000 women and children homeless in her country. She also said that many of the newcomers to Ireland also face housing insecurity (and therefore economic and food insecurity). News like that is heart-breaking. Some would say that, in this work, we have to be prepared to have our hearts broken, repeatedly. I believe this to be true. If we work through a social justice-informed, community lens, we are in a constant movement of feeling joy, sorrow, grief and inspiration. As the planet rotates around the sun daily, I feel blessed if I can wake up with new energy to meet each day. As a Cree prayer says... Kitche manitou (Great Spirit), Newo atoskeyakak (helpers of the four directions), Kitche okāwēmaw (Sacred Mother), Kinanskomitin (Thank you) Peyak kisikaw (for one more day), E awi hiyan (for lending it to me). Kakionewagemenuk! (All my relations). When we wake in the morning, we have truly been blessed with one more day here. In line with this thinking, I follow the wisdom that advises that we 'sleep on it' before making hasty decisions. I think it helps many clients when we talk about this choice, to not be rushed into decisions, to offer time for possibilities to be "mulled over".

Resisting Stress

We are pushed about by the mad sense of rush that has invaded our work and our schedules. Agenda books ache as we try to 'squeeze in' just one more day, or one more hour, in between those already filled pages. In my quest for balance and well-being, I feel stress viscerally in my body. I feel it in my arms and fingers as I type swiftly, processing ideas in those movements, brain working at full speed. Stress tells me to eat, carbs mostly, rewarding myself for my hard work and ability to take on so much without having time to process the day's events. Yet, I know that the antidote to stress can be found outside, in nature. The energy offered by the waters, trees, lands, forests restore mind, body and soul and reminds me that a whole world exists outside the office.

The Medicine Wheel

The medicine wheel is a contemplative, spiritual tool coming from plains (Indigenous) people in northern Turtle Island (Canada/US). It exists materially (in Wanuskuwin, Saskatchewan for example) and as a model or process. Basically, a circle divided into four quadrants point to four aspects of our selves: the emotional, the spiritual, the physical and the mental/intellectual. Doing a scan of how we are doing in each quadrant can be an important regular practice. At this moment, I feel spiritually strong, connected and believe I have spiritual helpers on this earth journey. Physically, I am challenged but not experiencing overt pain. I am aware that I am still recovering from a number of surgeries, my mobility is limited. I am bothered by the fact that I sit all day at the computer and that stress and worry take away my incentive to exercise and eat well. I also respect Quebec winters and am careful about each outing I take on slippery sidewalks. Emotionally, I am relatively stable although moved by daily events and the challenges experienced by those around me. And, while non-Indigenous community members may become distressed or dislocated from social world events, my Indigenous counterparts often enter into irretrievable realms, taken by suicide, substance use, fentanyl poisoning. When Indigenous people become vulnerabilised, they are exploited in society in ways that are painful to witness.

I try to maintain balance in my work, dedicating energy both to the suffering of others and my own needs for wellness, in ways illustrated in Vikki Reynold's video "The Zone of Fabulousness" (Reynolds, 2020). I strive for appropriate action and connection, avoiding over-involvement and becoming a "hero" or a "fixer", while remaining connected to my team or "solidarity team". I must respect people's sovereignty and dignity, aligning with them without becoming responsible for their journey. Mentally, I try to think about beautiful things everyday, including listening to music, beading, appreciating nature and sending loving thoughts to others as a daily practice. It is important to bear witness to one's thought process and to balance 'heavy thinking' with times of lightness and presence (rather than over-thinking and worry). The medicine wheel guides me to take care of each of these aspects of self while reminding me that I am on someone's unceded Indigenous land and that responsibility accompanies that privilege.

Depathologising Therapists

When I think back to some of Bud Osborn's poetry, it reminds me of the uncomfortable notion that we can or should be well in a society that is sick and dysfunctional. It's not that every aspect of living is corrupt or broken, but our systems and structures lack humanity and care for people, in the multitude of beautiful ways that we show up in the world. In addition to humans, the natural world is also targeted for extortion and exploitation. June Jordan wrote that "poetry is a political act because it involves telling the truth" (Quiroz-Martinez, 1998). Osborn's words below (Osborn, 1999) illuminate the voice of a person society left behind, and who chose to live on his own terms.

here I am
 amazingly alive
 tried to kill myself twice
 by the time I was five
 sometimes it's hard to take one more breath
 inside this north american
 culture of death

so here I am
 here we are
 amazingly alive
 against long odds
 left for dead
 north america tellin lies
 in our head
 make you feel like shit
 better off dead

so most days now
I say shout
shout for joy
shout for love
shout for you
shout for us
shout down this system
puts our souls in prison

say shout for life
shout with our last breath
shout fuck this north
american culture of death

(Osborn, 1999)

Obviously, since time immemorial, society has not been is for everyone. From ancient Rome to the present-day nation states, societies tend to marginalise and extract from the poor, the sick and disabled, those who have already been harmed and then are blamed for their own suffering. It feels irrelevant to talk about whether people/counsellors are or aren't traumatised. The extent to which one feels, lives, gets involved, relates to our capacity to be fully present in rough circumstances. Each person possesses their own ways and means of protecting and caring for the self; community-centered counsellors. When we are mistreated or abused, we resist. Our resistance seldom stops the violence but it creates a small space in which our dignity can live.

Themes coming from the reference list

My reference list reflects some major themes related to personal and professional well-being. Some of the sources address well-being and client work; through identifying my key sources, I am reminded that these themes and approaches can also be applied to myself, and to counsellor well-being. For example, my (co-authored) writings on cultural safety speak to the need for cultural safety in my own life and work (Blanchet-Cohen & Richardson, 2017a). Today, I live in a Canadian province where Métis people (citizens of the Métis nation) are not recognised. This creates a sense of erasure or un-belonging, which is accompanied by a unique set of vulnerabilities. The Métis are recognised as a founding people in the Canadian constitution but not in the French state of Quebec. This, and other policies of erasure, have a negative effect on the sense of well-being and inclusion that relates to identity. In a recent research project led by both emerging and senior researchers, "Indigenous Healing Knowledges," a number of co-authored articles were created for a special edition journal. These articles take up themes of Indigenous well-being, in relation to culture, justice

and anti-colonialism. Many aspects of life in Quebec, including social service work, remain highly colonial. One aspect of this is that the professionals who serve Indigenous people are most typically non-Indigenous; they may not even be “allies” in the social justice sense. Many operate through the “colonial code in the helping professionals” as identified by Todd and Wade (1994). My aim has been to reverse or undo the colonial code and promote heart-filled, collaborative practice, prudently speaking truth to power and being part of a human community striving for social justice.

Yesterday, (March 23) I received notice that my/our application for a Research Chair in Indigenous Healing Knowledges has made it through the first hurdle. I believe that establishing such a research program at my university will help to create a worklife where it is ever-more possible to create a supportive, nurturing work environment. There will be places to ‘share in circle,’ to discuss and process systemic barriers, racist experience and personal harms at work. There will be opportunities to create workshops on various aspects of healing and to work with Indigenous Elders and knowledge keepers. These opportunities will be open to everyone in the community. My hope is that creating a culture of care in an academic setting will make the worklife sustainable, on many levels, through the development of relationships based on mutual and collective care.

All my relations/Kakionewagemenuk!

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