

Freedom from the past

Taking the idea of emptying ourselves in group supervision, so that we can be present to each other and the supervisor, **Robin Shohet** looks at how we can work on ourselves to bring about the healing of others

Interview by **Christina Breene**



I love you I'm sorry



Christina Breene: What made you want to be interviewed for the final chapter of your book *Supervision as Transformation*?

Robin Shohet: What really clinched it was reading about a psychologist in Hawaii who was assigned to a violent ward for the criminally insane. His philosophy was that if these people had come into his life, then there was something in him that needed healing. He believed that they had appeared to show him what was unresolved in him, so he must start with gratitude to them, and then ask for forgiveness for their having to carry what was unresolved in him. The method he practised is called Ho'oponopono, an ancient Hawaiian method of healing, which is essentially about complete freedom from the past for those who are willing to practise it. It is described in the book *Zero Limits*.¹

You could argue that this is a very self-centred position (I hope you don't), but the results, which are very well documented, show the opposite. Within a few months much of the ward had emptied. What was left was completely different – no more locked wards, and the patients that were left were organising themselves to run the ward. The implications of this are enormous. It says that there are no problems out there, none whatsoever. And if I see a problem, then I need to clean up my perception – like looking through glasses that are dirty and seeing the world as dirty. The world is a projection of my state

of mind and to help others I need to start with my perception of them. I am still assimilating these ideas into my practice, and my personal life, which I increasingly see as the same.

CB: Can you say more about your thoughts on love and group supervision – what does that mean to you?

RS: I have been a group supervisor for over 30 years and I am still in awe of what can happen there. Let me start with the 'how' because in essence it is very simple. When a supervisee asks to present a client, I ask the group to pay attention to what is happening in them. There is no way of getting it wrong as long as they just notice – it can be a physical sensation, a thought, a fantasy, an image or a feeling. The important thing is not to filter – to say 'this could not be relevant', or to think, 'I can't say that – it's not nice, or it might just be my stuff.' Typical responses might be, 'I am suddenly feeling very weary', or 'I switched off', or 'I feel sad', or 'my heart is beating very fast', or 'my neck feels tense'. I make sure everyone has a voice by going round and asking for a few words or a sentence or two at most from each person.

For example, a member of the supervision group is sharing about a client who has lost his daughter in a road accident when her car crashed because the brakes apparently failed. She had relatively minor injuries but, as she got out of her car, she was

hit by a drunken driver who had been speeding and lost control. The group is in shock and we feed back our individual responses – anger, deep grief, a sense of powerlessness. One of the group feeds back that she keeps thinking of this sentence: 'It's my fault.' The supervisee nods and says, 'Yes, the father blames the drunken driver, but he also feels it is his fault for not having had the car serviced before she left, and that might have caused the original accident.' A whole new area opens up. The supervisee wonders if the guilt about the service is masking something, and the supervisee says that her client has a lot of guilt about leaving his wife, which they have not explored. He had promised himself he would look after his daughter.

CB: Do you explain that these sensations, thoughts, ideas, images, feelings are part of what I would call the field? Or is that irrelevant to you?

RS: I believe that once you start talking about a client, it is as if you have brought them into the room. They are in the 'field', to use your expression. The theoretical background to this way of working, which I discovered only after I had done it, is a mixture of mindfulness, working with our countertransference, the here and now and modes 5 and 6 from our seven-eyed model described in *Supervision in the Helping Professions*.² This is about mirroring and parallel process, where we take what is going on with us as supervisors as a mirror for what is going on between supervisee and client. In the group we have four or five mirrors – front, back and sides, so to speak. A very powerful mirror which uses the different reactions of the members.

This method also has echoes of family constellation work where a member of the group is selected to play a role in a person's family and immediately starts to take on the characteristics of the person they are playing. Whether we have a rational explanation or not, I have seen this embodiment of feelings and behaviour so many times that I do not doubt the phenomenon, but how to use it is the important question.

CB: You say this is very simple, yet what to you seems simple, with your natural ability with groups, perhaps belies the complexity. Could you go into more detail?

RS: Yes. One aspect of how I work as a group supervisor is that I give myself permission to interrupt at any time. Sometimes it is in the first few seconds, because several of us have had an immediate reaction as soon as the supervisee has started to share. And then the group members feed back their responses to me and the presenter listens to what resonates, but the eye contact is to me as leader. There is a very important reason for this. It gives the supervisee space to just listen, and not feel overwhelmed, and gives permission to the other group members to speak more freely without having to pay attention to the supervisee's reactions.

CB: What inspires you to stop and how do you know it is the right thing to do?

RS: I observe myself very carefully and also the other group members. There is no absolute way of knowing. I would like to say a word about pace. This method is slow and does not go for solutions at all; well, certainly not immediately. It is initially a very internal process. Some supervisees feel a huge pressure to

produce, to be seen as effective. After the initial culture shock of the method and pace, I see an openness to a slower pace, which is very gratifying. We see how fast can be slow (today's problems are a result of yesterday's solutions) and how slow can lead to transformation as new ways of looking emerge.

I am often asked about the stakeholders, as this is such an internal process. The stakeholders do come in because they are an important part of the picture, and I will describe how in a minute. I would like you to see that this way of working can be a mixture of sharing our internal experiences and also looking at the system and the stakeholders, which is a really good balance.

CB: I am curious as to how you give the stakeholders a voice, as they are a vital part of the case being presented in almost all instances.

RS: Well, after the supervisee has shared some of their client's story, I ask people to share their reactions. This usually produces some resonance to the dynamics of the case. I then sometimes ask people to take on one of the stakeholder roles and listen and give feedback from that perspective. It does not matter if two people take on the same role. This brings the system into the room in a very alive way. So, in the above example, someone might play the father, or the dead girl, or the drunk driver or the coroner and feed back as them. Particularly for people working in organisations, bringing in the stakeholders and the perspective they might have is, as you say, vital.

Once you have taken on board the idea of stopping the story and going round asking for responses, there are plenty of ways of working. Sometimes I go round the group and suggest that each person ask a question. People might ask such questions as, 'What would be the hardest thing to say to your client?' or 'How do you feel when you think about him?' The supervisee makes a note of the questions – it is important that they do not try and answer them on the spot, as the answers might be superficial. And after receiving suggestions from each member of the group, they might choose one or two to go away with as homework.

Please forgive me



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The method I use of noticing our reactions to a presentation does offer a chance for real depth, if not immediate solutions. This has an additional benefit of bringing the group closer together, as we share our responses. Here is an example: I am invited to do a weekend group with a team that wants both teaching of group supervision and to sort out its team dynamics – a tall order. I decide to start with the group supervision but I stress that for it to work they have to be empty. In other words, when someone presents, their reaction has to be to what is being presented and not their unfinished business. If someone presents and a member of the group has unfinished business with them, it might be difficult to know whether this response belongs to the here and now or the history between them.

I stress the importance of being empty and that this work is not about them – their personalities. It means making their clients more important than their personalities. One member says she is not sure she can do that. I respect that and ask if she would be willing to have a go. If she cannot put her baggage out of the picture, she can always pass when it is her turn to feed back her reactions. This person manages herself very well and later goes on to present a case where she felt vulnerable, which means that the method had given her safety. By the time we move on to their team dynamics on the second day, the group members have learned to observe their reactions as opposed to identifying with them. This enables them to share their responses to each other with less charge and the group as a whole moves from a dynamic of conflict to one of cooperation.

So this emptiness, this willingness to put our personalities aside as best we can, is I believe an act of love, or more accurately allows the love to come through, past our conditioned selves. The group begins to develop tremendous cohesion as we take on different aspects of the case and realise that every case belongs to all of us. When one person is working, we are all working. This idea of one person working for all of us has wider implications, too. Many people will be familiar with systems thinking, with the idea of a sick patient carrying something for their family, a difficult group member expressing something for the group. Extending this further, Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar writes: 'In shamanic cultures, the self is first and foremost a community and only later an individual. In such cultures, illness is seen as an imbalance of the societal self. When a person is ill, the village elders thank him for carrying the symptom for the community, and gather to discuss how to retrieve the communal balance.'³

And this might be a bridge to the forgiveness work. When we realise that our job is not to fix the client, but work on ourselves first in order to heal the client, it changes the dynamic of supervision immediately. It gives permission for deep work on ourselves, which is bound to impact the client group. What I did not say at the beginning when I mentioned the psychologist from Hawaii was that there are four statements that he uses. Remember he sees that they are representing something unhealed in him, so he says: 'X, I love you.' 'X, I'm sorry.' 'X, please forgive me.' 'X, thank you.' I have started using it in my personal life and at first it is quite shocking as it undercuts self-righteous victimhood in one fell swoop. We can apply this to all of our lives, but let's stick to supervision for the moment. I'll provide an example from another recent group. The month before a man had presented and we had focused on him, his countertransference. The following meeting he is quite angry – 'It's not just about me,' he says. 'There is a client out there who

is resistant. This client has been stuck with other therapists.' Knowing that, I explain that there must always be some countertransference or else everyone would have an identical reaction. I sense that focusing on him is seen as some kind of blame for his inadequacy. This time, however, I tell him the story of the psychologist from Hawaii, and how there is an opportunity to heal something if he is willing to ask for forgiveness from the client, however crazy that might seem. He does so and softens and the group softens towards him as he does it. I ask him how he sees his client and he says differently, and adds, 'It's like I was blaming him for my not getting a result, so it was right to ask for his forgiveness.' He wanted to blame the client for his resistance, and those questions helped him to value the resistance.

CB: I am beginning to wonder what the implications for all our work might be.

RS: Any time I see anything out there that is a problem, I recognise it is my faulty perception. No difficult clients or even situations. Of course you don't do it in an emergency – imagine asking a burst pipe for forgiveness. But it is dealing with the judgment – this burst pipe should not have happened. Byron Katie⁴ calls it arguing with reality and in effect you are asking for forgiveness for the judgment. And if the word forgiveness does not fit, a willingness to see the judgment as an error of perception. I have had a hard time with the word forgiveness with all its connotations, but can certainly see huge limitations in the way I see. To work in this way, there has to be a willingness to really take on board that everything we think may have been mistaken. The mind kicks against this.

Returning to therapy, the psychologist from Hawaii is asking us to take the idea that the patient is there to heal the therapist – not a new idea, but really hard to live fully. *Psychotherapy: Purpose, Process and Practice: An Extension of the Principles of a Course in Miracles* also addresses this: 'The therapist sees in the patient all that he has not forgiven in himself, and is thus given another chance to look at it... The patient is his screen for projection... Who, then, is the therapist, and who is the patient?'

Thank you



In the end everyone is both... Each patient who comes to a therapist offers him a chance to heal himself. He is therefore his therapist. And every therapist must learn to heal from each patient who comes to him. He thus becomes his patient.¹⁵

I am suggesting you and I consider this way of seeing things as a possibility, which I know you are open to. By the way, it does not preclude action, but makes it more likely that the action, if indeed any action is needed, is more likely to be coming from a clearer place.

A final comment. One of my partners in work was worried that our courses were not keeping up with the fast-changing world outside. I can see his point but I have a different take. I am suggesting that the best way in a world that is moving faster and faster is to go towards the timeless, the stillness. Keeping up might work for some who can do it, but I am seeing too much burnout for me to believe it is a useful way of being. And when the group can go there, to the timeless, to the love that is there; when we move towards a common goal of seeing the client as ourselves and asking for forgiveness, how powerful to do it together. So my methods are not geared towards knowing the latest theories or trends, but going beyond the illusion of separateness to a place beyond our rational minds, a kind of group meditation. In that way group supervision, love and forgiveness come together. ■

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