

The Wisdom of Emptiness:

The Mysterious Conundrum of Human Presence

Dr. Erik Craig

Psychologist in Private Practice

Santa Fe, NM, USA

The unique relational situation of psychotherapy calls upon us as therapists to remain open, truthfully attentive and responsive, to whatever happens to emerge in the shared co-created world of the therapeutic encounter. What does this mean for those of us who have given our lives to understanding and serving those who come to us for a new experience of being, a new relationship, a new understanding of themselves and their worlds?

Though we are guided by countless recommendations from scientists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, philosophers, and spiritual guides on how to cultivate such radical openness, in the end, we step into the therapeutic encounter stripped of all techniques and constructs. There, in that unprecedented living moment with a virtual stranger we must each find our own distinctive ways of being-with-one-another, two human existences setting out together through an unpathed, unnamed forest.

How can I know that what I am feeling, seeing, and understanding is faithful to the other? How can I, as the Wisdom of the East suggests, “purify my mind” when, as Auden wrote, “The desires are the heart artist as crooked as corkscrews.” I once understood psychotherapy as a “radically selfless activity” but now find such selflessness unrealistic. Radically attentive presence is the most I now hope for and even that is fraught with uncertainty. How, then, can I be fully present in this relationship, which demands that I be with and for the other, while the other is also present with me but fundamentally for themselves? And why do I so often suspect that I am ultimately the one who is rewarded more deeply by these encounters essentially structured for the benefit of the other?

These are but a few of the doubts and wonderments that arise in me as one called to this work of attentive care. What are your own?