



The Secret Garden Why Group Therapy Works

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Many persons who grew up one or two generations back were introduced, by way of a parable, to the mystery and power of what we now call group therapy. The parable took the form of a children's story called The Secret Garden by Frances Burnett.

Three children discover an abandoned, overgrown garden behind a high stone wall and a locked gate, a garden closed by the owner of the English country manor after the death of his beautiful young wife. The owner has withdrawn into his work, abandoning to the care of housekeepers his fragile, lonely and crippled son. As companions to the unhappy young master come a girl, embittered by the loss of her parents, and a boy of the nearby village, uneducated and impoverished, but gifted with a deep sense of connection to the world of nature.

The three children meet secretly to clean, tend and restore the garden. In the process they achieve much more. The self-pitying cripple learns to walk; the bitter, spoiled girl finds a reason to live; the village boy makes two valued friends.

How does this story of children in a garden tell a parable of the process and power of group therapy? It tells how three unlikely friends come together again and again in a secret place, each bringing hurts or deprivations as well as strengths and resources of which they may be only vaguely aware. It describes how they clean out the tangle of old, overgrown brambles and, in the process, help each other nurture new growth in place of the old. Several elements of the process seem essential for gardening or for therapy.

First, the garden meeting place is secret Why does this matter? Because we, like those children, sometimes need a safe, private place to uncover old wounds, untangle old brambles; learn to take the first clumsy steps toward a new way of walking in

the world. It is hard to discard our crutches when we fear we may fall on our faces, hard to take off our mask when we think our ugliness will repel those whose love we need, hard to expose our tears to what we sense are uncaring eyes. The privacy of the group offers a safe place to practice our humanity.

Second, the gardening is done in the company of several unlikely companions. Why? Because we may need privacy, but we do not need solitude for our gardening. Companions help overcome our self-imposed isolation, our sense of specialness, our self-pity. They help us discover that we are more alike than different, that persons we would disdain to know have something to offer us and that people we fear can, if we will risk it, be trusted. The story of the secret garden is, like group therapy, a story of the healing power of friendship.

Third, gardening involves pruning, replanting and weeding over an extended period of time. Gardening, like therapy, is not a get-fixed-quick pastime. Nor is it simply a comfortable, supportive gathering for a fast game of "Ain't it Awful." Just as the children in the garden challenge the crippled boy's defeatism and the girl's bitter self-pity, so companions in group therapy offer challenge as well as comfort, honest feedback as well as hope. There are habits of thought to be pruned, new self concepts to be planted, new ways of speaking or acting to be nurtured. The damage done in years of neglect, abuse or crippling self-hate cannot be undone except by long hours of patient gardening.

Finally, gardening means learning to ally ourselves to the healing and life-giving forces of nature that are around and within us. In the story the village boy fills the role of therapist He is not superhuman, not stronger or better than his companions. But he has acquired a perspective and a wisdom that he passes on to them, a wisdom about how things-and people grow. Being more in touch with his own natural self and less encumbered with the false selves and unhealthy attitudes of his companions, he is able to help them discover their own kinship to nature, so that gradually they learn to feel at home in a world in which they had thought themselves to be aliens.

The healing power of the group lies in all of the relationships between its members. The therapist is

only a more experienced gardener who knows something about how to prune and how to plant. Therapy works the way gardening works, through patient cultivation of the natural gifts that God has given us.

Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them, which makes it possible for each to see the other whole against the sky.

-Rilke

