

Reflections on *The Schopenhauer Cure*

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is three-fold. It is first to identify important themes from *The Schopenhauer Cure* by Yalom (2005) that were most salient in my own view as related to the group therapy process. The second purpose is to describe previously held assumptions about the group process, and to discuss how the group process portrayed in this novel challenged those assumptions. The third purpose is to demonstrate correlations between this novel and my assigned reading for this course.

## Five Important Themes

In my view there were five essential themes presented in this novel. The first is confronting mortality the question of how to live in response to this inevitable end. This theme was most powerfully portrayed in the character of Julius, the group therapist. Julius was diagnosed with malignant melanoma in this story, and as such, he becomes the protagonist who models how one ought to die (Yalom, 2005, p. 316). He lives up to his oft quoted ideal from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. That is that, "We should live in such a manner that we'd say yes if we were offered the opportunity to live our life again and again in precisely the same manner" (Yalom, 2005, p. 331).

The second theme is of emotional attachment and the experience of intimacy with others. Philip is the character that most profoundly demonstrates this theme. In order to escape sexual compulsion, he devoted himself to internalizing the ideas and becoming the embodiment of Arthur Schopenhauer. In doing so, he was able to defeat his own compulsion, but at the great cost of emotional attachment to and intimacy with others. Another important character, Tony, said it this way. "Schopenhauer has cured you, but now you need to be saved from the Schopenhauer Cure" (Yalom, 2005, p.

330). Philip after much resistance (Gladding, 2012, p. 96), eventually learned to experience real intimacy, express feelings directly, to receive feedback, to offer feedback directly and to self disclose (Yalom, 2005, p. 330).

The third important theme is again demonstrated powerfully in Philip's character. It is the human need of being understood. One of several crescendos in this story was Philip's brief lecturette in which he described succinctly how the ideas of Schopenhauer helped him overcome his sexual compulsion. Speaking about Schopenhauer's belief that the "sheer awesome power of the sex drive" was in fact the most "fundamental force within us," he explained that, "for the first time in his life, he felt completely understood" (Yalom, 2005, p. 288). Admittedly, he did not claim this was the sole reason for his being cured of his compulsion. It was rather the impetus that drove him to "leap off of the wheel completely," that is the wheel of unappeasable human desire and attachment. He summarily states, "That's what Schopenhauer did, and that's what I've done" (Yalom, 2005, pp. 288-89). It is of extraordinary importance that while modeling his life after the ideas of Schopenhauer seemed to cure Philip of his sexual compulsion, it was being understood and accepted within the group process that set him free from his purposeful isolation from others.

The fourth important theme is the "here and now" interactions within the group process. This theme was most memorably apparent in an interaction between Julius, and Bonnie. During a session, Bonnie was working through feelings of unimportance in comparison to all others in the group. Julius asked a simple question to redirect Bonnie's attention from her wrong beliefs about herself to the "here and now" where "it could be explored firsthand." The question he asked was, "Who in this group is more

important than you and why?" (Yalom, 2005, p. 158) This theme was also apparent in the attention given in the story to non-verbal cues (Gladding, 2012, p. 260). The most attention grabbing non-verbal cue occurred when Pam returned to the group for the first time after her trip to India where she found Philip, her former lover, to be a new member in her treasured therapy group. Philip, who had demonstrated a remarkable ability to remain stoic in and through many awkward exchanges could not escape the power of the non-verbal cue. As the story goes, Philip, being questioned about the palpable tension between he and Pam, "shook his head slightly" and his face was now flushed. This said volumes to everyone in the group (Yalom, 2005, p. 176).

The fifth and final important theme is that the "Counselor is an actor, not merely an observer." Philip had been devoted to the idea of "observing the passing show" as Schopenhauer had been. The group process challenged this ideal as Julius pointed out an inevitable reality that Philip could no longer avoid. He said to Philip, "If you're to be a counselor, you must enter the social world." He continued to say, "I would bet most of those who will consult you in your practice will need help in their interpersonal relationships, and if you want to support yourself as a therapist, you must become an expert in these matters - there's no other way" (Yalom, 2005, p. 333). This theme was also apparent in a different way. Even Julius, the group therapist, was an active and contributing beneficiary of the group process. Yalom (2005) points out within the context of the story that, "One of the major side benefits of leading a group - a fact never stated in professional literature - is that a potent therapy group often heals the therapist as well as the patients" (Yalom, 2005, 95). This was certainly the case with Julius in this group.

### **Previous Assumption(s) Challenged**

As I reflected on this novel, I became aware of one powerful assumption, now challenged, that I have been making in the various groups I lead. That is that conflict, awkwardness and discomfort within a group are regressive. This could not be farther from the truth, and this story powerfully demonstrates this paradigm altering reality. I realize now that it has been a goal of mine to avoid conflict within groups, rather than embracing it as a necessary step toward growth. Each member of this group received negative feedback at some point along the way, and it was in these moments of conflict that important self discoveries were made, and the interactions became more open and honest.

### **Connections to *Groups: A Counseling Specialty***

There were an innumerable quantity of connections to our primary teaching text. For the purposes of brevity, I will reflect only upon the evidence of the transitions between the five group stages, (1) Forming, (2) Storming, (3) Norming, (4) Working and (5) Closing.

The group described in this novel had already been formed. Julius recounts, “Though none of the original members was still in the group, it had a stable persisting self, a core culture (in the jargon, a unique set of ‘norms’ - unwritten rules) that seemed immortal. No one member could recite the group norms, but everyone could agree whether a certain piece of behavior was appropriate or inappropriate” (Yalom, 2005, p. 94). In other words, rules had been specified and appropriate limits had been set in which positive interchange among members could occur (Gladding, 2012, pp. 94-95). However, with the introduction of Philip to the group, the equanimity of the group was

upset, thus introducing novel anxiety. Philip was a resister (Gladding, 2012, p. 96) to the group process which added to that anxiety and frustration. In a sense, the group was re-formed with Philip's entrance.

The group then transitioned into the storming stage of the group process. This became evident as members began to vie and compete for attention from and power (Gladding, 2012, p. 108) within the group. The most memorable exchange occurred between Bonnie and Rebecca. Bonnie pointed out that Rebecca was "preening" (Yalom, 2005, p. 131). She said to Rebecca that this preening, "Had to be related to Philip's entrance into the group." The insinuation was that Rebecca was using her non-verbal cues (Gladding, 2012, p. 260) to exert power over Bonnie and attention from Philip. This transition from the novel anxiety, or primary tension introduced by Philip's presence to the intra group conflict is representative of the storming stage (Gladding, 2012, p. 107).

The transition to the norming stage became most memorably apparent in an exchange between Pam and Gill. Pam confronts Gill on the illusory nature of his supposed self disclosure. She says to Gill at one point in the story, "You seem to reveal yourself, but you don't - it's an illusion - you stay hidden. Yes, that's what you are - hidden, hidden, hidden" (Yalom, 2005, p.214). This denotes the inappropriate nature of Gill's commentary on his relationships. Pam later points out that Gill's "stories about his marriage have always been about Rose (his wife), and not about himself" (Yalom, 2012, p. 214). This is an example of group norming because implicit in Pam's comment is that such behavior should not take place. Gladding (2012) quotes Napier &

Gershenfeld (2004) explaining that, "Group norms regulate the performance of the group as an organized unit" (Gladding, 2012, p. 116).

The transition to the working or performing stage was most apparent in the group interactions with Philip. The group demonstrated "genuine concern on a deep personal level, demonstrating real intimacy and the reality that control problems had been resolved" (Gladding, 2012, p. 125). Even Philip, the most stalwart resister in the group spoke of the painful events of his early childhood, and what he truly thought himself to be. He admitted that his "Father was distant, and I think chronically depressed. He took his own life when I was thirteen. My mother died a few years ago, but I had been estranged from her for twenty years. I did not attend her funeral" (Yalom, 2005, p. 317). In the final session before Julius' death, Philip revealed that he thought himself, "A monster. A predator. An insect killer. An untouchable. No one who has ever known me has loved me. Ever. No one could love me" (Yalom, 2005, p. 334). This is the kind of self disclosure (Gladding, 2012, p. 125) that can occur in a group who has reached the working stage having provided the atmosphere of transparency, support and trust necessary.

The transition from the working stage to the closing of the group was violently abrupt and tragic. Julius succumbed to the malignant melanoma earlier than expected. The group held their final meeting together in silence at their usual coffee shop down the street in a fog of shared sorrow around a ceremonial carrot cake. It is an example of a kind of premature termination (Gladding, 2012, p. 149), and as expected presented difficulty for the group members. The termination of this group did not mark an end for this remarkable group of people, however. The work performed in this group produced

a bountiful harvest. Prominent among the praiseworthy outcomes, was Philip's new counseling practice, his new student Tony, Philip's mended relationship with Pam and the formation of a new group that would continue to reap the many benefits of excellent group work.

## References

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Yalom, I.D. (2005). *The Schopenhauer cure: A novel*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial. 978-0060938109