

Peer-reviewed papers

Relating with Self and Others

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Abstract

The emergence of a new family of collaborative therapy is a sorely needed alternative to the individualist and pathologising practices now dominating the culture. This new family of practices focuses attention on the relational processes out of which our conceptions of the real, the rational, and the good are moulded. However, in this shift in focus there remains the question of the individual psyche. What are we to do, if anything, about the psychological life of an individual – emotions, aspirations, doubts, hatreds and so on? And if private life is so rich and compelling, why should we be so enthusiastic about the shift to the collaborative? In reply to such questions I will first develop a vision of individual selves in which we are constituted within relational process, in effect, eliminating the distinction between an inner and an outer world. At the same time, as independent physical beings we do carry with us the traces of our relational history. We are multi-beings, in the sense of carrying resources from multiple relationships. And, while not an “inner world,” we do inhabit a “private world,” made up of myriad traces from the past. In this sense, we are dialogic selves – both in terms of the relationship among the various traces in our private world, and in terms of our public relations with others. New and interesting questions now emerge for the collaborative therapist. How can the therapeutic relationship contribute to the person’s private dialogues? What is the relationship between these private dialogues and the individual’s abilities to carry out face to face relations? How does the therapist expand the potentials of multi-being so that collaborative relations with others are enhanced? My hope is to open dialogue on these issues.

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Professor Gergen was introduced by Sue Levin, executive director of the Houston Galveston Institute, founded by the late Harry Goolishian and Harlene Anderson.

Thank you very much, Sue, for the invitation to join you here. It is especially nice for me because it's an opportunity to see many old friends. My heart is warmed. And I have also had an opportunity to meet a number of new and quite fascinating people. Your invitation has been a gift for me.

Let me return to your remarks about Harry Goolishian for a moment, because it's interesting that during the years before his death we were debating the question of whether the rise of the systemic/constructionist movement represented the end of interest in the individual mind. In an important sense this is the topic of this morning's talk. The Canadian therapist Karl Tomm was also part of these conversations, and to warm us up for what follows, let me tell you about a drama in which Karl and I were involved:

At the University of Georgia a three-day conference was arranged in which a social constructionist orientation to education was to be contrasted with a cognitive constructivist view. The planners arranged as an opening a pair of plenary talks outlining the positions. I was to take the constructionist position, and a revered colleague, Ernst von Glasersfeld, the constructivist. Further, however, two additional talks were invited, the first a critique of constructionism and the second a critique of constructivism. John Shotter served as my second in this linguistic duel. With the positions now polarised, the floor was open to the audience. Critical remarks gave way to hostile attacks, and these were followed by shouting and the waving of fists. Some participants even stood on chairs, the more loudly to assert their truths. We were facing three days of hell.

The planners then had the good sense to stop the formal programme before it became totally chaotic. The therapist Karl Tomm was asked to carry out an intervention. Karl asked if he could interview us, but each playing the part of the other. Ernst and I had known each other for some years, so we could do a pretty good job with this. But as the audience soon

realised, we were not fundamentally antagonistic beings. In fact, both of us carried each other; I was Ernst and he was me. The effects on the conference were dramatic. Hostilities subsided and we could return to our discussions with civility. We somehow understood that we were all living within each other.

This story stands as a précis for what I want to talk about today. Let me begin, then, by taking up the issue of mental life.

The question of the individual mind

In my view, when the family systems movement began, it represented a quiet but dramatic and revolutionary change. Its basic logic was to shift the whole ontology on which therapy had been grounded, and by implication, the Western concept of the individual. It shifted attention away from the singular focus on the individual and his or her psychological functioning – emotional, motivational, cognitive, repressive, and so on. And it placed our attention on the relationships of which the person was a part – a marriage, a family, a community. We learned that you can't just yank the person out of his or her relational context and tweak the psychological process. You must attend primarily to the relationships in which the individual is embedded. Thus, the movement is from the individual to the relational matrix.

This movement – in its expanded form we may call “systemic” – has gone through various phases over the years, for example, structural, Milano, cybernetic, second order cybernetic, and more recently, the system as language based. It was in this latter phase that Harry Goolishian invited me into dialogue with the therapeutic community. When the metaphor of system became linguistic, there was an easy transition into social constructionist ideas. I must say that I've enormously enjoyed the dialogues into which you have invited me, and appreciate as well all I have learned from you.

But, what do we do with the individual at that point? We understand that, yes, relationships are important, but in many

ways we are still hanging on to the traditional idea of the individual. We understand that families are important, but very often our therapeutic encounters are with the individual (especially given the complications of getting the whole family into the room.) So we waver between, “yes, relations are central,” and “yes, it’s the individual’s psychological problems that are critical.” And we wonder, for example, if systems are made up of individual, psychological beings, or whether psychological beings are created by systems...or something else?

Relational being

I more or less see myself as a practical theorist, that is, working theoretically in the service of enriching practices. So it is this “something else” that intrigues me. It does so, for one, because the dualist vision of an interior mind reflecting an outer world has long been philosophically problematic. For example, we have never solved the dualist problem of how the “outer” world is or is not registered by the “inner” world, or how one mind can understand another mind. And there is the individualist tradition that is sustained and supported by reifying the concept of “mental process.” So, one of the challenges for me has been how to understand that the individual is not a private individual whose life is lived off the public stage, alone in an inner sanctum, but is a relational individual through and through. After sketching out a potential answer, I wish to touch today on some implications for what this might mean in terms of therapeutic practice.

Now a lot of what I’m going to say in the next 15 minutes or so, you can find an extended account of in my book *Relational Being* (Gergen, 2009), but since no one reads anymore... [all laugh].

Look, here I am speaking: talk, talk, talk. Where is it all coming from? It’s easy enough to see it coming from somewhere in my head, as if I am originating these words “in here.” But, that’s a kind of optical illusion. Yes, the words are emitted from my mouth, as a single, biological individual, acting in this moment. But there’s not one word from my mouth that has not

come from some past conversation or relationship. It is not precisely me who is speaking. My words are the outcome of a thousand conversations of which I've been a part. Every word has its origins, for me, in those conversations. Those relationships were required to make me meaningful in the first place.

Now extend that idea for a moment. Take the gestures of my hands. These are intelligible movements for you. It makes sense to you that I move in this way. Now consider the way I'm standing, and my gaze – where is it directed? And the modulation of my voice. Where does all that come from? I mean why couldn't I just say, "let me tell you about it" [shrieking] [all laugh]. That would sound crazy.

All these actions are imported from somewhere else, from previous relationships. None of them originated in my head. I didn't make up these movements. In a sense they are like language – born in the process of social coordination. And the same may be said about what I'm wearing, the styles, the colours, and so on.

Now consider: if you took away from me every action that did not originate in relationships, what would I have left over? Breathing? Digestion? Walking on all fours? I don't know. But not very much that we would call interesting or useful in terms of the way we live our lives together.

Psychology as relationship

But what about psychology, all our talk about our feelings, emotions, thoughts, desires, values, and so on? From what I have said so far we would have to conclude that all this talk originates in our relationships. We don't have mental talk because we have mental states for which we simply must have names. When you stop to ponder, what is a "mental state" in any case? But we do live by this language, and we could scarcely participate in cultural life without it. So, let's consider how we could reconceptualise everything we have called mental, as relational action. Let's take everything that we thought to be *inside* a person's head and treat it as action within relational process language.

First consider the idea of “thinking” or “reasoning” – a primary focus of Western traditions over the last three to four hundred years. I mean we train people to be rational thinkers. We put them in educational systems to perfect their reasoning powers. If they are not rational we give them drugs or put them away. Being rational is the mark of being human. But what is it to reason or to think? Consider: I have students who write papers, and I might write in the margins “good thinking”. But what do I know about what went on in their heads? I don’t know anything about their mental process, or indeed if they have a mental process. Indeed, I don’t know if I am thinking. How would I know this? How did Descartes know he was thinking? All I know is that that student before me has written an essay in a proper form, given the tradition of the way people like us write essays. That student has learned to be skilled in a particular way of writing, and because I participate in the tradition that recognises that kind of writing as “rational” – or as good thinking – then I can evaluate it.

It’s rather fascinating when you get down to it. Why do we presume that thinking is primarily something we express in language or with words, as opposed, for example, to playing basketball or playing with a child? Why are we so sure that these activities are not really the true carriers of thought? We seem to carry this strange vision that “language is thought” conveyed outwardly to others, and thus believe philosophy, for example, represents a higher form of thought than music or dance.

To summarise the proposal so far, everything we call thinking is an action within a tradition of relating. If you’re not a participant in that tradition, acting according to its conventions, you can not easily be described as possessing rational thought.

Now consider the process of memory. We say, “I remember”, and ask others, “What do you remember?” as if memory is a mental process which we can access. And neurophysiologists continue to search for where memory is located in the brain. For over 40 years they have searched for the “store house” of memory, and we have never found that house, because memory, like thinking, is not something we

have but something that we *do* in traditions of relationship. Consider: you send your child to her first day of school. She returns home and you anxiously ask, “Oh Sally, tell me what happened in school today.” Sally responds, “I moved my left foot forward, and then my right foot, and then my left foot, and my right foot, and my left foot, and then I turned to the right, and repeated moving my feet.” [All laugh.]

That reply simply does not count as good memory. Rather, you want Sally to give you something that approximates to a narrative, a story that has a point to it. You want to know how something good or bad came about, what led up to it and how she responded. Similarly picture yourself on the jury stand and you’re asked to give an eye-witness testimony to a crime you have observed – what happened at a particular time and place. You reply to the attorney’s question with something like “black, shot, run, jump, crash”. Is that a memory? Not quite. It is more like nonsense. The attorney asks again, “Now tell me again, what happened? And you repeat a set of single words. Probably you’ll be held in contempt of court because nobody can understand you. Why? Because your memory is not put into a conventional narrative form. In a conventional story, each event is ideally related to the other events, and everything else is ruled out, And there’s a point to it all, what the story is all about. So, if you recall, “it was a dark night and I heard a shot, and then I saw someone running across the lawn, and he jumped in a car and raced off, and then the car crashed . . .” Ah. That’s a memory! In effect, my memories are not strictly my own. They are relational achievements. We learn how to do them, and when, where and with whom.

What about the emotions? The emotions, we are told, are built in biologically. There are some six to eight basic emotions, all hard-wired and universal, so we’re told. Interestingly, however, there are long-standing disagreements in the field as to what the basic emotions are. For example, is boredom an emotion, or tenderness, or what about a sneeze? These may sound like silly questions ... until you try to answer them. Indeed, when you stop to think about it, what exactly is an emotion? How would you know you had one? What are

your criteria for judging what falls into the category of emotion and what does not? The Oxford dictionary defines an emotion as a “strong feeling,” but what after all is a “feeling”? And if you search the dictionary for the definition of “feeling”, you find that it is an “emotion”. So, we don’t actually know what either one of them is, because they’re mutually defined. We can’t somehow get at the ‘thing in itself.’ [knocks on the table] All we have are expressions. Expressions, or outward pressings of the interior.

So, let’s treat emotion as a form of public performance. (Indeed, the word finds its origins in the 16th century, when used to speak of a public disturbance). As a client, I can’t come to you as a therapist and say [in a smiling and jocular fashion] “you know what, I’m so damned depressed”. You won’t believe it, because I have not performed depression properly. I have smiled, spoken lightly, and with bodily animation. If I am “truly depressed” I should speak more slowly and gravely, perhaps with stooped shoulders and slumping into a chair. Now you might take me seriously, because I am acting properly within our tradition. Depression is a relational achievement, appropriate to certain times and places. I can’t jump up at a dinner party and say, “you know what, I am so depressed”. And if my friends ask, “why, why” I cannot respond, “Oh, I don’t know. I just suddenly became depressed”. You’ve got to have a reason of some kind to make depression intelligible. Something must have happened, and it can’t just be anything at all. You can’t easily say, “well, I got this letter in the mail today and I won the lottery for \$5,000 and I’m really depressed”. That borders on nonsense. But if you say, “I got fired today and I’m really depressed”, we might well say, “Oh, I am so sorry ... can you tell me more.”

So depression is a social activity. It’s social in the way it is performed, and in terms of when and where it can be performed. Historically speaking, we didn’t have depression 200 years ago. We made it up. It’s like we have made up a disease, and now a tenth of the population has it. The health costs for treating depression mount into the billions, and we didn’t have to create the “illness” in the first place.

But to return to my main point, we can begin to see that everything we have formerly considered to be “in the mind”, can more legitimately be seen as taking place within relationships. The implications of this view are far-reaching.

Self as multi-being

Let us extend the vision of relational process by considering again our conception of the person. If we are essentially carriers of relationship, we can begin to see the person as made up of multiple potentials, each drawn from or bearing traces of a complex relational history. You represent – in the present moment – a massive body of unrealised potentials. Imagine this, and again I simplify, but let’s say I have a relationship with someone, take for instance my father when I am a small child. I’m living with three brothers and home life is chaos; in no way can my mother handle the fighting, the zaniness, the endless disruptions, the litter. My father comes home at the end of the day, and she says “John, you take care of it”. Now, John has this rather Prussian background, and he takes care of it very well. He has a loud voice and a big strap. So there’s a process in motion out of which my Dad becomes a bellowing authoritarian, and me this sort of frightened child who tells lies and hides in closets. We co-create each other in these ways (and as I learned, my father was far more than this).

Now I emerge from this relationship as a person who can imitate my father. Like von Glasersfeld, I carry my father as part of my potentials. And I can also perform that child; he remains as a potential. And I know the dance steps. I know how they are done, how the relationship goes. I carry all this in the same way that I carry all the words I’m speaking now.

Of course, that’s not all I carry. With my mother I had a totally different relationship. For example, as children she read to us at night the most wonderful stories. I’m all cleaned up by the maid, snuggled in bed, and I’m just enjoying every minute of it. I could imitate my mother as well, along with an older brother who’s authoritarian like my father, and a younger brother who lets me be a nurturing teacher, and so

on. And I must add David, my best friend in the early years, Thomas in high school, and so on and so on. Lets also add girlfriends, my teachers, ministers . . . and the books I've read, the movies I have seen. I've lived out uncountable heroisms and played the role of villains galore. I carry all of them.

Now we're not talking about cause and effect here. That is, I am not the result of a social influence process, with a personality shaped or caused by my parents, my friends and so on. Let's abandon the idea of cause and effect in terms of human relations. In each of these we co-constituted each other. It was a process out of which we came to be the people we were in that relationship. So I carry the others, but I also carry the self I became, and the process or, as I call it, the choreography of the relationship.

The relational challenges of multi-being

Let me talk briefly about therapeutic implications. Now I don't pretend to be an authority on therapy at all. I have enormous respect for what therapists do. I was basically trained to be a scholar, and when it came to dealing with an anorexic daughter, I was absolutely helpless. These were some of the most difficult years of my life. There was nothing I could do that seemed to make any difference. You take on such cases every day, you have successes, and I stand in awe. But you've been kind enough to let me reflect with you, and I can only hope these reflections can enrich your valuable efforts.

Now let me share with you the drama that's about to unfold. (And I do this tentatively, as I have spoken very little about these matters before. Thus, let us look at these remarks as an invitation to a conversation about therapeutic directions and potentials.) In a sense, my concern here is with the limits of language. We've inherited a tradition of therapy going back to Freud where treatment consists primarily of dialogue. The field of therapy derives from a belief in the powers of conversation – with different restrictions, different emphases, and different vocabularies, depending on the therapeutic stand-

point. But it's all predominantly conversation. The question that concerns me is the limits of conversation as a means for bringing about lasting change. Is there another space of understanding that would suggest or invite alternative practices?

Consider this. If you can get into the perspective I've developed so far, you can imagine that the multitude of potentials I carry could be represented by a large wing of possible ways or potentials for being. You as therapist bring to the room another wing. In our conversation together we put the



wings together, and we "make meaning" together as we bring our potentials together in conversation. On what do we focus our attention. There are at least two major possibilities here. One of them is to deal with or treat or respond to what it is I'm bringing to the room. Let me call these *relational residuals*. What are the sources of distress or anguish here? Well, surely I'm going to carry a great deal of conflict, because embedded within the residuals of all those relationships are going to be different values, different ways of life, different "voices," things that are really important or real to me, and they're going to be in conflict.

When you stop to think about it, basically the only way you can get along from moment to moment is by suppressing most of the conflict. Consider: what should you be doing right now that you're *not* doing? I mean, if you begin to think of all those emails you haven't answered, all those neglected people who would really like a phone call from you or a visit – like your mother, a good friend, perhaps one of your children – or reports you were supposed to make, deadlines long past, your broken appliances, and so on, bills you haven't paid, things that don't work anymore, you will lose your focus here. Indeed, you may even begin to feel you shouldn't be here; it's an excess; you may begin to feel guilty. In effect, if you can't suppress virtually everything else but what's going on here, you may be on your way to the exit. So every moment in life that you really enjoy, that really is fantastic, requires an enormous suppression. The capacity to suppress is an emergent skill, that we may or may not have sufficiently developed.

To underscore the need for skills in suppression, consider a common therapeutic challenge. Here we find people (ourselves included?) who cannot escape some dominant voice, a voice that says “you're no good”, “you're a failure”, “you're a fake”, “you won't be able to do that”, “you'll never amount to anything”, and so on. We all have these voices there in the background, and sometimes they can be very intense. The negative voices can be crippling.

In addition to the challenge of suppression, there is the equally important necessity of what could be called *relevant accessing* – that is, the ability to access a voice that you really ought to have present. What we commonly call conscience is a case in point. When we are on the verge of engaging in actions that are morally wrong, can we open ourselves to the voices that help us to inhibit such actions? We may be attracted to behave in ways we know, in our heart of hearts, are wrong, but can we actually hear the beating of that heart? To illustrate, I am an adolescent; it is after school and my friends and I are on the third floor of the school building. We happen on a loose locker that has come off the wall. So we take this locker, a large metal piece, and drag it down to the stairwell. Then we

proceed to throw it over the railing. Crash, bang, three flights of stairs! We laugh deliriously and run like hell. What were we thinking? We don't know. We just did it. It seemed right at the time.

How often do we get into trouble for just those reasons? We cannot access those voices that tell us "hey don't do that, that's not a good idea, get a grip". (I'm using voice here metaphorically) I could be an incessant gambler and realise one day all the family money is gone because I can't access the voice; perhaps I can't "stop myself" from the extra drink, the second dessert, taking a little from the cash register, injurious gossip, and so on. So, on the one hand, we must become masters of suppression just to get along each day, but to suppress everything and we've got no conscience, no breaks to stop us from going over the cliff.

Now I think in some ways talk therapy can be quite effective in dealing with these relational residuals. For example, there's a sense in which narrative therapy attempts to suppress a dominant but damaging voice, (the problem story), to locate a minor but more promising residual, and to build a scaffold by which this residual becomes dominant.

In effect, this is taking the voice that's quiet and building it up to the diminution of the more damaging voice. Similarly, with collaborative therapy, one listens acceptingly and probingly to the client's story until the point at which the story begins to be transformed. The narrative becomes something else and, in a sense, a new voice begins to take over.

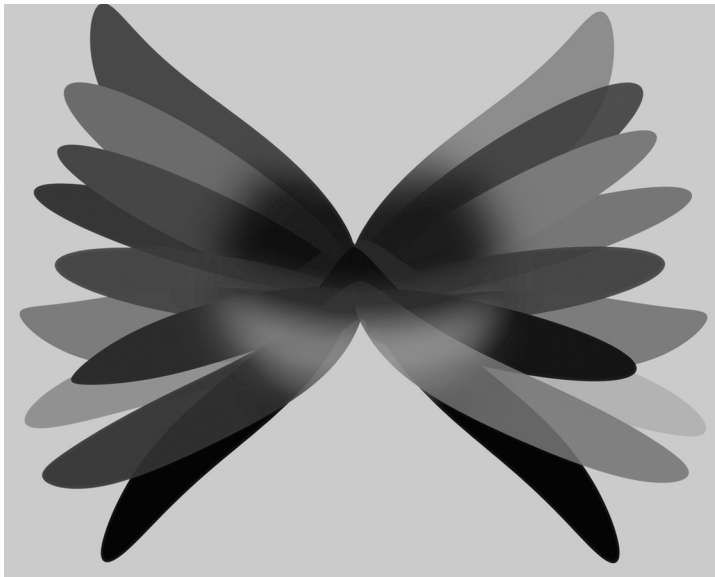
And there may be something in the therapeutic relationship itself, regardless of content, that is very important in transforming the residuals. The simple fact of listening with caring concern is in fact a relationship that becomes an entry into the residuals. Here is now a voice that may variously say, "I am cared for", "I'm validated", "I am valuable", or "I will be ok".

Yet, we may ask, what are the limits of such efforts? Existing forms of therapy are typically addressed to treat a specific issue of self-torment or incapacity – tuning out or tuning in a specific "voice". But the skills at stake are over-arching; they are essentially meta-skills that are essential across time and

situations. Does the focus on the specific contribute to skills in general? I raise this question in part because of the interesting advent of Buddhist practices into the therapeutic landscape. What are called “mindfulness” practices are essentially contributions to skills of the residual world. Meditation, for example, is a means of gaining control over problematic voices, of quelling the otherwise disruptive clamour. If everything is going to hell, I can go in my office and meditate, regain centre, control, some sense of being with the world. The practice can be exported from the therapeutic chamber to all situations. How can our available forms of therapy be expanded so that meta-skills are enriched and fortified, and can be carried into the hurly-burly of everyday life?

Talk therapy and the challenge of relating with others

Let’s turn now from confronting the residuals we carry into relations with the challenge of on-going relating itself. Or, to put it visually, we add another wing, in the form of another. When the wings are attached, so to speak, meaning making is



in motion. To be sure, the state of the residuals is important to how we relate from moment to moment. But when confronted with another person, new demands are made. It's not so much caring for one's crop of clamouring potentials, but of mobilising one's potentials in the art of coordinating actions with another. Or to put it another way, how much does the relationship we establish in therapy carry over into the client's relationships outside this context?

Now I've no doubt that there is some carry-over. I may leave therapy, for example, with a renewed sense of confidence and of direction or a new insight. But what happens to that sense of confidence or insight when you next enter a relationship in which the other is treating you with disregard, or suspicion? What if they are abusive? Can you hold onto what you acquired in that one hour of therapy? Can you take it with you?

I continue to puzzle about such matters, because in daily life we typically have to "make it up as we go along". We can't control the direction of conversation or the unfolding dynamics of relating. We must continuously improvise from moment to moment. If life is an improvisational theatre, how do we help people to meet the demands of ever shifting roles?

Another way to look at it is to ask, what do you learn about the process of relating during the typical therapy hour? I'm not speaking here of the content, but the process; not "knowing that" my problems are such and such, but "knowing how" to move in relationships that would put them behind me. It seems that in most therapy I typically learn how to answer questions, delivered to me by a warm and sensitive person. But how does this translate into my being able to carry out a loving relationship in a time of stress, or to speak to my adolescent child who is now becoming a candidate for monsterdom? How can therapeutic practices enrich my skills in relating?

I have no conclusive answers here. But I do think of Eia Asen's Maudsley group in London. They work with anorexic adolescents, but not simply with the child alone, or with the child and his or her parents. Rather, they bring anorexic families together for a community dinner so they can begin to

trade stories about what they do, and to laugh with each other in addition to the exchange of concerns. They also trade ideas about what seems to work, and what doesn't. And the activities in this way become practice grounds for relating in different ways.

I also think of one of the Taos Institute Associates who's developed a way in which anorexic adolescents can talk with each other about ways they have found to gain weight. What do they use for heuristics in motivating themselves to eat? For example, "What I do is to choose foods that I really, really love and I concentrate on those, and that's the way I do it. How do you do it?" What if we could also share with each other how it is we personally deal with failure. I mean, we all have failures, but for the most part we have learned to get on with life. We don't collapse. How do we do that? Could we share those practices?

I am also becoming increasingly interested in the use of role playing in therapy. I recently witnessed a therapist working with an estranged couple. She had them demonstrate the typical way they might do battle. She would ask them to try to play out the scene together with more positive consequences. In contrast to their sullen faces when they arrived at therapy that day, they left the office animated with laughter. They could begin to see their problems as poor performances, and thus as controllable, something that together they could change.

Let me complete this talk with one more question: How did you come to be a skillful therapist? Because in large degree, there are no strict rules for what you should say. Therapy is quintessentially improvisational. You never quite know what is coming up in the conversation, and you must instantaneously decide how to respond, and to make adjustments as you continue on. How did you learn to do this? Well, you have spent countless hours in skill training – watching others do it, being watched, giving reports on what you've done, deliberating on it. We have learned skills for navigating in the swirling waters of daily life. Now, what if our offering to clients were a little bit more like the training we receive as therapists for skillfully responding to the challenges of daily life?

So I leave this as a question for us all, and I look forward to our coming conversations. Thank you. [Applause]

Reference

Gergen, K. (2009). *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*. New York: Oxford University Press.