

Reflection on Writing Verbal and Non-verbal Communication *in* Psychotherapy

By Gill Westland



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"Listening" to non-verbal communications that run alongside any verbal dialogue from moment-to- moment is commonplace in body psychotherapy. We are familiar with Reich being interested in *how* his patients communicated as well as the content of what they said. This period of his work has been carried on by those following in his foot-steps, and with it privileging the non-verbal communications. This attention to unspoken communications has been less prominent in other psychotherapies, but a number of developments— technological innovations, infant studies, especially researching real babies with their caregivers, and contemporary neuroscience, especially embodied cognition— over the last 20 years has widened the interest in the topic. Furthermore, awareness and mindfulness practices have broken through to mainstream thinking offering ways to stay with our wordless experiences, and not rush to curtail them by jumping into *talking about* them rather than *being with them*.

The germ of the idea for the book arose from an article on the topic of Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication in Body Psychotherapy, which was published in the journal *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*. One of the blind peer reviewers commented that the article was very intense and passionate with a lot of material, and that the paragraphs were more like chapter summaries for a book. I am grateful to this anonymous person. It made me realise how much I was trying to convey in a short article. I duly reworked the article; it was published and it has consistently been in the top 10 most read articles in the journal for the last 6 years. I felt that I was on to something and that non-verbal communication had a wider appeal than the body psychotherapy community.

However, having the inspiration for a book and writing it are another matter, particularly as I had only written book chapters and articles for publication before. An article is like a short sprint; a book more like running a marathon. Added to that,

writing about non-verbal communication, the major emphasis of the book, is somewhat paradoxical. Non-verbal communication is not easily conveyed in the written word. Indeed, I have struggled for some years with how to convey the nuanced interactions that occur beneath and behind the spoken words in body psychotherapy. Body psychotherapy, as I understand it, is not just non-verbal. It includes thoughtful and reflective ways of communicating with non-verbal communications, quite often by using spoken language in particular ways.

Nevertheless, I was able to put a book proposal together, and obtained a contract to write the book for Norton. The work on the proposal took about four months. That project brought my ideas into a broad structure and then each chapter was fleshed out with more detailed content. At times it was like doing a jig-saw puzzle; having the pieces, but not always being sure of the fit of each piece where. Gradually it took shape. I took inspiration about how to go about the writing from my work with colleagues in the U.K. when we had engaged in a project to develop UK Competencies for Body Psychotherapy. We wanted to write competencies from a "bottom up" place, i.e. from our personal experiences of what we were actually doing— not what we thought we should be doing to meet real and perceived orthodoxies. This was in contrast to looking at training manuals, published books and indexes to develop competencies, which came later. Initially we kept our work-group small. We had known each other for a long time and were comfortable with our own therapeutic identities. This was important if we were to feel safe enough to tell each other what we actually did without fear of criticism for being different. We always started with lunch to warm us up with some social time together. Then we reflected on a topic - e. g. what's the first thing we each do when a potential client contacts us? How do we think about that? What else is going on? What do we feel, sense, intuit? How do we pick up information? Some days we made more progress than others, at times,

we became mired in words as we tried to articulate what we were really doing and how we conceptualised that. Giving examples, in confidence, of composite clients helped keep everything grounded and rooted in actual clinical work. So these were the principles; the difference was that I was doing something alone this time.

Next, I needed to decide in what register to write. I looked at how other psychotherapists write and took the advice of a colleague to be simple and straightforward; I also wanted to be evocative. The book would be theoretical, but I wanted it to have heart and feel alive to the reader. I did not want to get lost in an erudite discussion of something that in practice is immediate, creative, spontaneous and intuitive. One way I did this was to start chapters quite often with a clinical vignette, written without much, or any introduction and intended to take the reader straight into an experience of the clinical interactions. The theoretical underpinnings came later on and were interspersed with how the psychotherapy developed. Additionally, I wanted to choose words deliberately; words chosen because they are hard or soft on the ear to make a particular observation.

For the writing of the book, I also recognised the power of groups and that I required support to keep going. I was advised by friends, who had already written books, that writing is sometimes a slog and requires dogged perseverance. I assembled a small group of friendly professionals who worked somewhat differently from myself, but would also understand my topic. These read chapters as they were ready enough. I worked sequentially through the chapters, forging new ones, sending them out to my readers, then reworking earlier chapters. There was a continuous process of writing, leaving a chapter to the readers, rewriting, then reworking a chunk of chapters. The original book proposal kept me on track and

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stopped me from getting too divergent. I kept the feedback group small and did not tell many others about what I was doing so I could live with my project without too much external distraction.

I sought advice from other authors about how to organise my writing on top of my usual work. The almost universal answer was that I had to find my own way, but all were willing to tell me what they did. So my way evolved. I mostly wrote in blocks of three days and preciously guarded these days. The writing had a rhythm to it. Day 1 was often difficult, and like warming up to something. I did not know where to start, could not get a feel for where I was. My husband helped here and advised, "just write what comes to you, you can sort it out later". I wrote and warmed to my task. I used a laptop and by late afternoon often had had enough writing, but I was also a bit more warmed up and getting into the flow. I printed off what I had written, went to a local cafe and worked there making notes by hand and reworking paragraphs. On day 2, I was really enjoying writing and totally absorbed. I rewrote the work of day 1, but elaborated on it and added in ideas; the words were flying. I worked for hours and then again my husband would suggest, firmly, that it might be time to stop as late evening came. Sometimes I did, sometimes not. At the end of day 3, I was ready to pause. I had done re-writes and usually had a sense of where I was going. I jotted the ideas down, ready for when I resumed. Then there was a pause of 1-3 weeks. I was not consciously thinking of the book and yet I was living with it all the time and it was working in me.

As I wrote, I attempted to stay present and to write with embodied awareness. I noticed my thinking, feelings, sensations and imaginings as I wrote, and then, as I read what I had written. In my writing sometimes a paragraph or chapter is more theoretical, but I attempted not to lose sight of other levels of experience. Writing the client composites was fascinating. I assembled a fictitious client and then let my imagination construct the therapeutic process. As I wrote about the detailed interactions they came from the immediacy of the writing and seemed to have a life of their own. I did not seem to be able to pre-plan. Sometimes, I wanted to feel something different or wanted the client to do something to fit my theoretical point and it would not happen.

Gradually the book was written and then there was the decision about whether it was ready enough. I recognised that I had been changed by the writing and would write differently, if I were to start again. And, it was time to let it go; it was exciting, frightening and I would miss the process. Now it is for readers to decide how they relate to it and to respond.

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