Born December 25, 1915, James Bugental died peacefully at home on September 18, 2008. Those of us gathering there that day noticed a lightness around his body and something of sweet release in the air. As a founder of Humanistic Psychology and widely recognized as a master Existential Psychotherapist, Jim will be most remembered within the web of his Humanistic affiliations. However, for a significant number of us who are drawn to in-depth existential and spiritual concerns, he will also be revered as a pioneer of transpersonally-vital psychotherapy.

Jim’s transpersonal vitality must be characterized with a lower case “t” and with an emphasis that is determinedly experiential. To the extent that Transpersonal Psychology is a field based in the reference systems of spiritual or psycho-spiritual thought, separate and distinct from those systems of thought considered to be “Existential” or “Humanistic,” neither the leading theoreticians of the field nor Jim himself considered him to be Transpersonal in this formal sense of the capital “T.” Being a secular humanist, Jim rarely drew upon the conceptual systems common to the Transpersonal discourse of his lifetime. I expect he would be more resonant with the recent “participatory” movement in the field that succeeded him (Ferrer, 2002, 2011) insofar as it privileges felt experience over theoretical constructs. While he respected the work of Ken Wilber, for instance, such as the distinctions between prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal, he did not reference this any more than he referenced other abstract theoretical constructions, such as id, ego, and superego, consciousness, personal unconscious, and collective unconscious, or Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. As a practical phenomenologist, Jim privileged the messy complexities of lived experience over the neat orderliness of conceptual schemas. By the same token, even though he identified himself as an Existentialist, the legacy for which he will be most remembered by those who knew him is that of an existentialist with a small “e”; an adept at working with living experience rather than a philosophical authority. Since systems of psychology (or theology, or philosophy, et cetera) tend toward codification of their respective constructs in the process of being formalized (thus sporting that capital letter), their constructs are typically formulated in a nominative vocabulary, which is prone to stasis. So, Transpersonal theory and Existential philosophy are not the same as transpersonal-existential experiencing, which is dynamic and verb-like in its liveliness, always beyond fixed conceptual formulations.
Not only did Jim understand that the map is not the territory, he knew that the territory of living, unfolding experience could never be adequately mapped, simply because it refused to sit still. Which is not to say he did not try: he loved conceptual maps and constantly played at creating and clarifying psychological constructs. Nevertheless, he always returned to the elusiveness of actual experience, recognizing that life is an impermanent flow, a mysterious stream which began we know not where, with shifting currents, eddies, whirlpools, and banks that seem to contain it, but which are liable to be breached by life’s inevitable floods and droughts. In the river of life, Jim taught that one can – out of hope or fear - resist the flows and backwaters in which one finds oneself, or – out of courage and mindfulness - open to the “full catastrophe” and full magnificence of existence, and respond to these immensities without hesitation or compulsion.

As Jim taught, to be open and responsive in the world rather than closed and reactive is to be vitally present here and now. To seek to live one’s own life and source oneself from one’s heart’s desire rather than to live someone else’s life, a life one may have been nominated for by one’s parents or society, is to seek, and embody, authenticity (Bugental, 1976, 1980, 1987). To the extent that an impulse for self-realization arises from within rather than being programmed from the outside, the intimately personal search for authenticity reveals itself to be exquisitely transpersonal, in that one comes to source oneself from beyond the ego and superego. In the flow of mindful experiencing, neat conceptual categories dissolve in the ever-changing tide of non-conceptual presence. It is in these senses that Jim was a transpersonal pioneer of the practice of presence in psychotherapy, a skillful guide for those of us inclined toward seeking our more authentic nature.

As a champion of experientially-rigorous therapy, Bugental emphasized the healing power of moment to moment awareness well before the practice of mindfulness became fashionable in psychology (Walsh, 1976). Concurrently, he emphasized the therapeutic power of intersubjectivity before its adoption by relational psychoanalysis and feminist psychology. As a clinical practice of mindfulness, his understanding of presence (1978, 1987) had two aspects. It included the capacity for receptivity, allowing for the strengthening of such qualities as sensory awareness, empathic attunement, and intuition. Additionally, it goes beyond mindfulness as simply and calmly paying attention to what is, by including the practice of relational courage in daring to be expressive within the therapeutic exchange. During a period in the 1990’s when we co-taught introductory classes in Existential-Humanistic Therapy at the California Institute of Integral Studies, I would mention that there is a striking parallel between his understanding of therapeutic presence having both receptive and expressive dimensions and the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of awakened presence (bodhi), which joins the wisdom of empty-openness (sunyata) with the compassionate expression of skillful means (upaya). Jim appreciated that the conjoint aspects of therapeutic presence he discovered made sense in this higher octave of unconditional presence.
Among the first psychologists to stretch the purpose of psychotherapy to include a search for authenticity (1965), Jim was an exemplar in seeing through the social conditioning and psychological resistances that constrict one’s capacity for being genuinely and fully oneself. Opening to the being that one is, the unfolding process underneath the mixed feelings and misshapen ideas of who one takes oneself to be reveals an authentic nature that is thoroughly transpersonal. Following both Heidegger (2001/1987) and the sensibility of developmental psychology, Jim understood that the path of becoming true to oneself proceeded along a continuum. One had to address more gross confusions and self/world estrangements before attending to the more subtle fixations obscuring one’s true nature. While Jim worked primarily on the noisier emotional knots and mental fixations that characterize “psychological work,” he was well aware that the continuum of authenticity stretched to include spiritual realization. As early as 1965, Jim put it like this, “As one approaches the stage of letting go to the suchness of Being without striving against it, one is attaining to full authenticity” (p.33).

In the practice of psychotherapy, Bugental was adamant in his sentiment that we’re not healing illnesses, we’re freeing capacities that have been restricted. Therapy does not improve one’s authentic nature, but loosens and frees up those inhibitions which impede its spontaneous display. Depending on how severely one’s openness and responsivity has been restricted, the range of potential freedom extends from simply increasing social adaptation (and the sense of belonging that goes with that) all the way to realizing the unconditional, trans-egoic suchness of being (tathata). In respecting both a developmental continuum and this transpersonal potentiality of human being, he was informed both by American visionaries such as Maslow and Tillich, and European philosophers such as Heidegger and Buber.

In 2005, the Association of Transpersonal Psychology, in conjunction with the School of Holistic Studies at John F. Kennedy University, honored Bugental with a Pioneer of Transpersonal Psychology award. This award, supplementing a 1991 Pathfinder Award from the Association of Humanistic Psychology, recognized the practical and inspirational transpersonal leadership Jim exercised for holistically-oriented and presence-centered psychotherapists. Organized by ATP Board member and JFKU chair of Transpersonal Psychology, Ray Greenleaf, the occasion of the Pioneer Award was a day devoted to presentations by former students of Jim who were now senior faculty and esteemed clinicians in the community. That this honor was bestowed while Jim was still alive and in attendance was a joy for us all.

Among the presentations given that day, the Chair of the first accredited Transpersonal Psychology Program in the world (starting at JFKU in 1979), Bryan Wittine, a Jungian analyst, spoke of how his individual therapy and subsequent professional training with Jim proved to be the most important education he received in what has been a highly educated and distinguished career (Wittine, 2005). Molly Sterling, a much loved Bay Area therapist and partner in the James F. T. Bugental Corporation, spoke of having one foot in the existential and one foot in the transpersonal world in her practice of
psychotherapy (Bradford & Sterling, 2009). Kirk Schneider spoke of how his recent work on awe (Schneider, 2004, 2009) expresses a depth spirituality emerging directly out of Jim’s experience-near approach. Cheryl Krauter addressed how the essence of Existential-Humanistic Psychotherapy as practiced by Jim is the ground within which her Transpersonal therapy practice is rooted. I spoke to the integrative Contemplative-Existential Psychotherapy courses I have taught for over twenty years, which are based on Jim’s work and informed by Existential philosophy intertwined with Buddhist thought and contemplative practice (Bradford, 2007).

Jim’s dedication to the trans-egoic exploration of life was fierce. Perhaps his transpersonal sensibility is best expressed in the following passage from Psychotherapy and Process (1976), which remains to this day a classic introductory text on experience-near therapy. As he put it,

To me, God is a word used to point to our ineffable subjectivity, to the unimaginable potential which lies within each of us, to the aspirations which well up within us for the greater truth and vividness of living, to our compassion for the tragedy of the human condition, to our pride in the undestroyed but endlessly assaulted dignity of our being and to something more. To the sense of mystery within which we always live if we are truly aware and to the dedication to explore that mystery which is the very essence of being human. (p.139)

Following Jim, the search for authenticity challenges us to live the paradox of taking a firm stand - in all seriousness and sobriety - within the life we find ourselves living, and to let go of clinging to any particular stand – with all levity and willingness to be drunk on life - letting flow the unending, never beginning, always changing river which carries us along into greater and greater awe, awareness, and compassion for self and other.

Jim Bugental.
Photo: Nader Shabahangi
References


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