



## ON THE NATURE OF DIFFICULTY

by Candyce Ossefort, MA, LPC

With much help and support from many good people, I learned what it was like to soften into hard times. And now, rather than feeling drained and used up by years of difficulty, I feel full, strong, grateful, alive.

*"Most people have turned their solutions toward what is easy and toward the easiest side of the easy; but it is clear that we must trust in what is difficult; everything alive trusts in it."*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Just a few weeks ago, I walked out of the AGPS Annual Meeting in tears. Zorena Bolton had initiated a group dialogue about the current tensions in our country and the world. We engaged in deeply personal conversation about our feelings and responses toward the escalating world situation. We openly wrestled with the complexities of war and compassion, safety and fear. We faced a most difficult situation head-on, together. By opening my heart, in the presence of others, to the intensity of the difficulties in the world, the bewildering paralysis I had been feeling for weeks became transformed. My overwhelm melted into sadness, which overflowed into a passionate call to action. By walking into the center of the difficulty, I was moved from numbness to tears. And I was grateful.

Over and over again—in my own life and the lives of my clients—I see that observing and engaging difficulty, rather than avoiding it or fighting it, leads to growth. Yet over and over again, I find myself, my fellow therapists and friends, and my clients resisting difficulty with every ounce of strength we possess. What is it about difficult situations, difficult relationships, difficult clients, difficult feelings that makes us want to eradicate our discomfort and turn toward what is easy?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines difficulty as "hardness to be accomplished; the opposite of *ease* or *facility*," and says that something is difficult when it is "not easy; hard; hard to understand." It seems that difficulty is characterized by hardness. And what is my automatic reaction when something hard comes flying at me? I harden. Out of fear, I meet hardness with

hardness—to protect myself, to deflect the oncoming strike. And protecting against a hard assault seems to make logical sense. Yet when two hard things collide, such as stone clashing against stone, things tend to bounce violently off of one another, or to break, to shatter.

Since violence and shattering are the results of my naturally hard reaction to difficulty, why wouldn't I want to turn away, to turn toward the deadening easy path? Fortunately, there is another choice: the paradoxical response of softness. If I can access that courageous soft place inside me that resides on the other side of fear, the core that can meet the hardness of difficulty with curiosity and openness, then things don't bounce or break. They shift and deepen. Instead of clashing against the stone of difficulty, in softness I become a pond. As a pond I can observe the stone of difficulty as it slowly sinks into the depths of my being. I can watch the ripples created by the stone as they permeate my life and transform me. Of course, some stones are so big that they threaten to empty me with their violent splashing. But that kind of emptying only means that the ripples of transformation are that much larger, irrevocable, and indelible.

Curiosity and openness in the face of difficulty cause the ripples of transformation to manifest in a number of significant ways. My hardened fear, rage, paralysis, and reactivity give way to feelings altogether different. The hard defensiveness of my fear melts into the approachable vulnerability of grief and sadness, whose tears wash clean the crevices of my heart to reveal the depths of compassion. The rigidity of my rage against the-way-things-are transforms into the fierce resiliency of outrage, which I believe is the source of world-changing action. The dull paralysis of numb avoidance gives birth to a lush and passionate awareness of my true strengths, allowing me to enact my compassion and outrage. And the chaos of blind struggle and reactivity breaks open into the receptivity of discernment, which allows me to make good decisions about difficult situations, such as distinguishing between the time for patience and forbearance, and the time for outrageous action.

Yes, softness in the face of difficulty leads

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about, the grip of his past is loosening. Recently when I added a new member to the group, he was able to voice his anger with me for enlarging the “family” and his anxiety that he would have to leave the group—once again sacrificing himself for the sake of the “new” family.

Another man is prone to deliver “monologues” to the group while seemingly awaiting members’ comments, yet no one responds to him. His words are like a “death blow” to the energy and interaction of the group. When members begin to verbalize their reactions to him, some are careful and considerate while others burst forth with their frustration. They find him boring and uninteresting and they cannot listen to another word! The group learns that he is the third child of aging parents with two older siblings who did their best to drain his parents of their vitality. During violent episodes between his parents and siblings, this man did his best to “blend in,” hoping his presence would be ignored so that he could escape the family conflict. He learned very well how to get others to ignore him and accepts their neglect

absently. In their struggle to deal with troubled children his parents dealt a “death blow” to his vitality by ignoring his needs and feelings. Through members’ feedback, he has become more expressive in the group and members are more interested in him. Recently he told a woman in the group that he did not want her to sacrifice herself in the group by remaining silent (something he has a keen understanding of) because they both lose out. He now recognizes that he has something to offer others—his own vitality.

Obviously, no written statement can do justice to the complexity of these relationships and how these transference patterns get worked through over time. The discovery of transference reactions and their resolution is contagious; as a group helps one member trace the roots of his/her own reactions, they are glimpsing the roots of their own. As the complex matrix of group members’ transferences come to life in the group, it is the group therapist’s task to keep the process in motion. What other arena offers such rich opportunities for understanding and growth?

— Candyce Ossefort, continued from page 2

to transformation, and transformation most often hurts. To trust softness as a response to difficulty’s hardness requires strength, courage, and awareness. And this trust is much easier to come by when I have support and holding from fearless others with me in the difficulty.

Today I find myself at a poignant intersection between relief from eleven years of great personal difficulty, and an escalation of tension and difficulty in the world. When I can lean into the softness I have learned from dealing with my own intense adversity for so many years, I find myself feeling what can only be described as a desire to *give back*. Overcome by a sense of gratitude for all I have received, I feel compelled to respond to the pain of the world by offering myself. That pull to give back vividly illustrates what I’ve been trying to say. With much help and support from many good people, I learned what it was like to soften into hard times. And now, rather than feeling drained and used up by years of difficulty, I feel full, strong, grateful, alive. Now I have the capacity to hold

others in difficulty. And so *they* soften. And so it goes. On and on and on...

Rilke says, “Everything alive trusts in [difficulty].” I know I do.

*This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
Some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all  
even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture.*

*Still treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.*

—Rumi