



mindset

BY DAVID STEWART, PHD

the power of understanding

Early in my career as a psychologist, I came across a quip from a Tom Robbins novel that has proven more valuable to me than most of the nuggets of clinical wisdom picked up over my years of treating clients. The quote: *"There is no such thing as a strange person. Some people just require more understanding than others."* Upon hearing this, after a chuckle comes the recognition that there is something profound in that statement. Understanding—attempting to understand—bridges differences between others. Others are "others" simply because we do not know them. Harry Stack Sullivan is said to have written, "We are much more simply human than otherwise." This eminent psychiatrist was rumored to have suffered from schizophrenia so he was speaking from personal as well as professional experience. But what a refreshing outlook! What we hold in common is more important than what creates differences between us!

Honoring the uniqueness of an "other" is central to forming a therapeutic bond, a relationship that can blossom into healing potential. Curiosity is important in this approach to understanding another. And acceptance of the differentness of another is absolutely critical. With those two conditions met, the deep listening can occur that creates the right conditions for the "being understood/feeling understood" feeling that all of us crave. Sometimes this alone is all that is needed to shift suffering towards healing and wholeness.

Deep down all of us want to feel understood and accepted. Do you agree with this? To me this is a practical definition of love. Is there the sense that others understand and accept you? If so, you are lucky indeed. People come to therapy for a variety of different reasons but there is a common core. There is a desire to feel understood and accepted and a need to understand and accept that within us that we fear is strange and different.

Sometimes the therapeutic journey is about getting to know the stranger within. We all have our unfamiliar parts. Meeting them with curiosity and acceptance can lead to transformation, meaningful change. For getting to know our unknown parts, I like the story of how to tame a fox in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. The story begins with the fox explaining to a little boy that he is not "tamed." To be tamed is "to establish ties" and "one only understands the things that one tames." In the story we are told that to tame a fox it is important to be present at the same time each day but at a distance, not too close. As the fox begins to expect your presence, trust begins to develop and grow. With the trust, the distance can be closed and a friend is made. That which was wild has been tamed.

When we first become aware of something about ourselves that is not in keeping with how we like to think of ourselves we may feel shame or fear. Anxiety and apprehension may give rise to the impulse to reject or deny that part of ourselves. It feels strange and different, not welcome, wild and fearsome. In the therapeutic process we begin by accepting the anxiety and fear and approaching that which feels untamed within, at first from a distance and with patience. We meet with a trusted therapist at the same time each week to explore a little deeper until the wildness feels more approachable. As trust develops and understanding grows it begins to feel less strange. As the work progresses, all parts of ourselves are accepted. We begin to feel compassion towards ourselves and from that compassionate place we come to celebrate what once we feared. ❧❧❧

David Stewart, PhD, and Karen Stewart, MA, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at Suite 220 at 811 Ninth Street in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. www.stewartpsychologists.com