



Awakening Clinical Intuition: An Experiential Workbook for Psychotherapists

A Reflection

by Terry Marks-Tarlow, PhD

For me, writing is like a river that runs through my veins, coursing more deeply than any other current in my life. Along with being a clinical psychologist and artist, I am also a wife and mother. I used to feel guilty about the intensity of my preoccupation with writing, as if this meant I didn't love my husband and children enough. I've come to realize the falsity of that fear. If I don't take care of myself fully first, how can I possibly serve others? This realization has freed me up. I now experience my personal history as marked by twin births. The birth of my body occurred more than 50 years ago, signaling my physical arrival on Earth. The birth of my spirit occurs in an ongoing fashion, through my writings, outside of time. This second birth feels like a successive awakening, an integration of intellect, passion, and spirit. This is the realm where I cobble together meaning on the grandest scale.

My first book—*Creativity Inside Out: Learning through Multiple Intelligences* (1996, Addison-Wesley; foreword by Howard Gardner)—emerged to resolve an early career crisis. This happened right after I graduated with a Ph.D. from UCLA. I had based my dissertation on a prospective study of depression, choosing a project that seemed quick and dirty. In reality, the topic didn't interest me in the least; meanwhile my passions had lain dormant for years, while I thrashed my way through graduate school, prioritizing sanity over fulfillment. As I slowly came up for air, it dawned on me that creativity is what moves me most.

So I became a consultant for the Lawndale School District, working with teachers to fashion a creativity curriculum. The final book emerged out of our collective vision that creativity is the key to holistic learning. I had jumped fields to take on this project, and upon finishing the book I had yet another sobering insight. I wasn't really interested in the field of education; and clinically I

didn't work with teachers or even kids. Worst of all, I had taken ten years to study and write *about* creativity largely because I hadn't been ready to dive fully into my own creative process.

As I result, I began immersing myself in the arts. I danced. I practiced yoga. I drew. Novel ideas were coming in droves out of a newfound fascination with nonlinear science, particularly fractal geometry. Intuitively, I sensed fractals are profoundly related to nature's creativity and psychological complexity specifically. After much studying, I took the plunge into my own unconscious, in search of my own insights. My second book, *Psyche's Veil: Psychotherapy, Fractals and Complexity* (2008, Norton; foreword by Daniel Siegel) emerged. Blood, sweat, and tears were packed into the pages of that case-based book, which I also illustrated myself. It took 12 years and three drafts to write. The real challenge was working my way through the profound aloneness I felt working out my ideas, plus the terror of being considered crazy in what I "saw." I imagined colleagues would perceive me as making things up. I anticipated the shame of being laughed at and intellectually dismissed for off the wall, rather than cutting edge, ideas.

The process of writing *Psyche's Veil* was a bit like climbing a mountain. But I persevered, and was proud of doing so. In the end, I discovered that reading that book is almost as difficult as writing it had been. Despite the clinical content, the material is quite abstract, based on pure math and science. This easily scares away most clinicians. I also learned that the feeling states that surround the writing of any book can very easily exude from its pages, which in turn can stimulate the very same feelings in the readers themselves. I had been scared to write the book, and now people were scared to read it.



Inner Freedom by Marks-Tarlow

While gratifying to complete this behemoth task, I was also clear I didn't want to repeat it. I chose my next topic as a means to break through the intense struggles and isolation I had felt. I hoped that *Clinical Intuition in Psychotherapy: The Neurobiology of Embodied Response* (2012, Norton; foreword by Allan Schore) would provide a sharply contrasting experience. I wanted to stay connected with readers from the start. So I imagined the book's narrative as an open invitation into a relational dance. This time I sought a broad, rather than narrow audience. I wanted to address all psychotherapists across the great theoretical and professional divides. Most importantly, I strove to

hold the reader in my heart from the start. Rather than lead with heady abstractions, instead I offered clinical and personal stories filled with dialogue as a means to share my vulnerabilities and internal processes. I wanted to be fully accessible and transparent. I wanted to be fully grounded in embodied awareness. I was scrupulously honest about how I faced the uncertainties, ambiguities, and chaos of clinical practice—how so often I flew by the seat of my pants as I reached for internal guidance. The book adopted an evolutionary perspective. I used animal stories to illustrate the common emotional foundation and neural limbic circuitry found in all mammals. I aimed to strip away human hubris that we are the only

creatures with empathy, grief, a sense of justice, or the instinct to play.

It took me only one year to research, write and illustrate my third book. For the first time, I was behind the task of speaking, training, and giving workshops on the topic. Almost immediately, I felt ready to give birth to its most recent companion, *Awakening Clinical Intuition: An experiential Workbook for Psychotherapists* (2014, Norton; foreword by Allan Schore, reviewed in the pages of this journal). I had thoroughly learned my lesson that it is a lot more fun to dance with readers than to struggle alone. In this forth book, I tried to take the process a step further. Not only did I again hold the reader continually in focus, but I simultaneously strived to pay as much attention to myself. I wanted to walk my talk, by integrating all facets of my body, mind, brain, and spirit holistically as I wrote. In striving to provide exercises and opportunities to tap deeply into one's own grounded foundation, I wanted to do the same with myself. I yearned to proceed without struggle. I envisioned letting my unconscious lead the way only and precisely when it was ready to do so. To honor this vision, I wanted to wait until my fingers itched to fly. If I didn't feel fully inspired in this way, I vowed not even to sit down at the keyboard.

Happily, *Awakening Clinical Intuition* emerged in a matter of months, even more quickly and effortlessly than *Clinical Intuition in Psychotherapy*. To conceive of and manifest the workbook proved to be an act of pure joy. Thankfully, my psyche was fully aligned with the subject matter. I could trust my own perceptions, reflections, and impulses while remaining connected to the reader. There was something luxurious about relying so heavily upon my own intuition as I wrote about intuition as a valuable resource. I reached a new level of



Tree of Life by Marks-Tarlow

integration. Gone were my previous fears of being a fraud. Vanished were self-doubts about offering something of value. I no longer needed reassurance from others. What remained was the pure high of self-expression—a high I'm convinced touches upon the magic of psychotherapy when we succeed in helping others to find their own voices, hearts, and histories.

I write these reflections without yet reading any reviews or receiving feedback on *Awakening Clinical Intuition*, for it is just now launching

into the world. I am eager to discover whether my own spirit of joy has successfully leaked into the pages. My hope is to inspire all sorts of psychotherapy practitioners, both seasoned and newbies alike, to muster up the courage to cultivate their own idiosyncratic perception and clinical style. At this point in our field, great pressure exists for accountability and empirically proven methods. While this is important, I sincerely believe scientific approaches must be counterbalanced by artistic and intensely personal sensibilities.

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Psychotherapy is serious business: blood, sweat, tears, doubts, and fears are a regular part of our jobs. Yet, despite the gravity, pressures, stresses, and challenges, when it comes down to the minute-to-minute implementation of theory, no cookbook can guide us. Only through intuition can we tap into the richness of the moment and the fullness of the whole context. Only through intuition can we touch deep enough in ourselves and others to encounter true novelty that is necessary for embodied change. When we tap into our own intuition in service of guiding others, we offer inspiration, modeling, and safety. This helps our clients/patients to likewise find their own internal lights as guidance through the thicket.

Terry Marks-Tarlow, PhD, is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Santa Monica, California. She teaches effective neuroscience at Reiss Davis Child Study Center. She does yoga, dances, draws, and generally strives toward a balanced life through embodying her values. She is available for psychotherapy, talks, and trainings through her website: www.markstarlow.com