

Warmth in the Big Freeze - January 2013

by Jo-Anne Sexton

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It's upon us again... we're prepared... hats, scarves, gloves, "sensible" boots are worn, kettles boiled in the morning for the car windscreen and not just the morning cuppa. Conversations amongst us are peppered with references to icy or good road conditions, risks of snow showers and that technical, yet almost child-like question we ask when it does arrive, "is it sticking?"

This time, we're ready for it!

I am reminded of the white-Winter of 2009, the Christmas and January of which will be remembered by many for some time to come. We didn't see it coming. The suddenness of the freezing temperatures, snowfall and ice which literally stopped us in our tracks, resulting in many a physical injury from skids and slips. This chilling, uncomfortable,

unfamiliar physical environment we found ourselves part of. Unable to leave our houses, unable to travel, unable to work or go to school, suddenly a forced isolation was upon us. While initially, the thoughts of not having to be exposed to such physically uncomfortable conditions, was a welcome excuse to stay indoors, in the familiar warmth of our beds

or living rooms, very shortly afterwards, something seemed to change.

Other feelings began to creep in... vulnerability, powerlessness, helplessness, threat of depleting resources; fear of harm or physical injury; our old coping skills or mechanisms weren't proving to be as effective in dealing with the

sudden and unexpected obstacle which we were all faced with.

This isolation was beginning to feel overwhelming. We experienced a sense of being disconnected. Not just from our environment, but more importantly, from other people.

What struck me during this time, was a realisation of a somewhat similar process in counselling. This process can be felt as frightening, unfamiliar, one we don't know how to find our way through or know what resources

accepted and is given the space and time to uncover their resources, choices, feelings which up until this point, may have been hidden from view, or outside of our conscious awareness. In connecting with the client at his/her level of emptiness, fear, loneliness, despair etc, the client has a new experience of relatedness and being connected with another person and themselves, which has a profound impact. Our emotional numbness begins to

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suspended due to the dangerous road conditions. The impact of this on the city and its inhabitants was significant, as people's priority became how to get home or fears if they would be stranded. I have never experienced a rush hour in Dublin like it before...

the stillness... the silence... apart from the muffled sounds of footsteps in the snow and hushed traffic, which wasn't and couldn't



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are within us to tackle it. That uncomfortable disconnectedness which we can experience; a disconnectedness from our true selves, in our relationships and generally, how we feel about our place in the world. Once we face this disconnectedness in counselling, change begins. Carl Rogers speaks of the importance of the experience of a relationship, a therapeutic relationship, where the individual is truly met in their isolation,

slowly thaw. Sometimes we need to let go of our rigid structures, beliefs, our way of being in relation to others, in order to become aware of new possibilities which had up until this point, been unknown to us.

In the midst of all this coldness and snowy isolation, I too shared in an unexpected and surprising experience. On the night in question, the buses in Dublin City Centre were temporarily

go anywhere fast. I noticed how many people were looking down, concentrating where they were walking to ensure they didn't slip. It was one of the eeriest experiences I have had in Dublin City Centre.

But then, I became aware of something else. In the mass isolation, frustration, fears around trying to get home, I began to notice a comforting warmth, energy and support

which were completely unexpected given the circumstances. Through this shared experience, shared distress, we were completely able to relate to the other stranger's predicament and an awareness of how we were all experiencing a similar level of discomfort. The weather was an emotional leveller, unlike the economic climate, which seems to have generated high levels of hostility, anger, sense of inequality and injustice; this was something different.

In the silence, we had found a very real connection with the other person.

Something which I discovered translated to neighbours, as we were presented with an



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opportunity to establish new connections. We now had a new opportunity for relating to each other, seeing how they were managing; if they needed help or support in terms of shopping, clearing pathways. Our old familiar neighbourly facades, structures and roles had been removed. Our desire to connect and difficulty with feeling

disconnected to others, was also witnessed in town on a Friday evening. On a cold, snowy night in early January, pubs were packed to capacity as our tolerance levels for isolation seemed to lead to a sense of cabin fever. We needed other people, we needed to be outside our own world, we needed to relate to and connect with others.

Van Kalmthout * talks about Therapy and the experience of our relatedness, as an “existential meeting”, or a person-to-person contact. In this relationship, both individuals (Therapist and Client) meet each other at a deeper level. It is this deeper level of connecting with the other person that “allows us to see and experience each other as we actually are, not as images, patterns and facades” (2006, p.159).

Who knew that without the routine of our traditional and usual way of being in relation to those around us, the gift the weather presented. From this, I was reminded of the idea that sometimes in our difficulty, isolation and without our tried and

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tested coping skills and resources, we discover new, untapped resources which once experienced, are hard to forget.

Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow...



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REFERENCES

* Martin van Kalmthout: Person-Centred Psychotherapy as a Spiritual Discipline. In “Spirituality and Counselling; Experiential and Theoretical Perspectives”. PCCS Books, UK (2006) Judy Moore, Campbell Purton (eds)