Clare Britton Winnicott  1907-1984

I was privileged to be taught by Clare Winnicott one afternoon a week for about eight weeks in 1963, whilst on the Barnett house child care officer course - a literally unforgettable experience.

Clare Britton was born in 1907 and died in 1948 in her mid 70s. Having worked as a youth worker she went to the LSE on the Certificate Course in Social Science and Mental Health. Clare Britton was County Welfare Officer in Oxfordshire during the war, responsible for the evacuee programme- and took a particular interest in the children in the 5 homes she was responsible for, for children who had ‘failed in their billets’. It was there that she started to work with Donald Winnicott, paediatrician and the child psychiatrist responsible for their treatment programmes. She subsequently gave evidence to the Curtis Committee on the needs of separated children, leading up to the 1948 Children Act.

In 1947 she was invited, in anticipation of the 1948 Act to set up one of the first 3 Child Care Officer courses – at the LSE which she directed for the next ten years. During this time she married Donald Winnicott and trained as a psycho analyst – her analyst during the training being Melanie Kline. After the LSE she worked as an analyst but retained her deep interest in and commitment to the work of child care officers in the newly created Children’s Departments, advising government, giving conference papers, workshops and training sessions (amongst others for the Barnett House students as the guest of one of her former LSE students, Olive Stevenson. Of the hugely influential writing of both Donald and Clare Winnicott over this period her biographer Joel Kanter writes ‘She influenced his ideas on transitional objects, antisocial behavior in children, and therapeutic consultation. She figured out how to do it and he conceptualized it. Many of Donald’s most important ideas came out of their collaboration and her creative ideas. For instance, the term ‘holding’ which Winnicott first used in 1968 came from Clare’s 1954 paper’. I add here that ‘holding’ has been central to my own work as a social worker and in my social work teaching – central to the practice of those who work with families with complex difficulties, through the work of Family Service Units to
the present ‘intensive outreach workers’ in the latest ‘Think Family’ Family Intervention projects.

Of the many people she worked alongside or who were influenced by her ideas, some became very important in social work’s history (amongst them, Lucy Faithfull and Joan Cooper- and others of the first Children’s Officers who were also involved in evacuee services; Olive Stevenson and Phillida Parsloe, distinguished and highly influential Professors of Social Work and editors of the BJSW; and Janie Thomas, the second British social worker (and only one of 3) to be President of IFSW (Janie is the author of the entry on Clare in the Oxford Dictionary of Biographies.

I only agreed to be the ‘presenter’ of Clare Winnicott at today’s meeting when I learned that Olive Stevenson has been unwell and was not able to be sure, when asked, that she would be able to make it. Happily Olive’s website came to my rescue. For the remainder of my commentary on Clare Winnicott’s huge contribution to British child and family social work I shall read (with Olive’s permission) from a Paper she gave in Nottingham in 2009 ‘Direct work with children: The relevance of Clare Winnicott’s teaching to contemporary social work practice’ (to be found amongst the unpublished works on Olive’s website

OS ‘Clare Winnicott believed that social work, an emerging profession was critical to the provision of a child care service that would help the child within his/her environment. By that she meant that social workers had a job to do both with the child directly and for the child’.

(A thought from me) – although best known for her writing on working directly with children, Clare Winnicott would not have recognised the term ‘direct work’ as it tends to be used nowadays as ‘splittable off’ from a relationship-based social casework with the child in his or her environment – in the course of which a social worker acts as a bridge between children, their families, carers and environments.

OS ‘The environment usually but not exclusively is about the people directly involved with the child (of course, the people may sometimes be only in the child’s head at a given time; a kind of virtual reality)’ ‘Clare’s social work was
also rooted in practical activity which was, however, always connected to another reality – children’s feelings. She confronted fearlessly Chief Education Officer, or any administrator she believed was preventing the execution of the right care plan for a child. She was secure in her professionalism.’

‘She wrote positively, not negatively, about being ‘professional’, not about elitism gaining power and control, or feathering one’s own nest’. [I add in here that an influential moment I recall from my own history in social work was hearing Janie Thomas (as BASW Chair) making a powerful case for professionalism in social work, and urging that what she referred to as the ‘pathologies’ of professionalism should not be allowed to detract from our pride in our professionalism.]

Olive uses Clare’s own words: ‘Our professional relationship is in itself the basic technique ... by which we relate ourselves to the individual and to the problem....

‘First we try to reach the children, to establish communication and to construct a working relationship which is personal and yet structures.’ ‘Then we try to look at his world with him and to help him sort out his feelings about it: to face the painful things and discover the good things, Then we try to consolidate the positive things with the child himself and his world and help him make the most of his life’ ‘Even if we are not able to help children as much as we would like to do, we can at least attempt to prevent muddle .... or try to sort it out for them so that things add up and make some sort of sense. In this way we can prevent or relieve a great deal of distress’ (From her 1963 paper Face to Face with Children) - ‘what clearer summary description (and more apposite to practice today) could you have of psycho-social casework with children).

[Another aside from me – Clare Winnicott would have had no truck with the ‘no therapy until the child is settled in her permanent family’ attitude still, shockingly, to be heard from some Child and Adolescent Mental Health service workers.]

Clare Winnicott was comfortable about the differences between the psychotherapeutic relationship and the way in which social workers use their professional relationship with a child.
CW ‘A very simple and clear distinction can be made between psycho-therapy and social work... because of the nature of their work and the functions of their respective agencies’ ... The psycho-therapist starts from the inside and is concerned with inner conflicts which hamper social development.... The social worker on the other hand starts off as a real person concerned with external events and people in a child’s life. In the course of her work with him she will attempt to bridge the gap between the external world and his feelings about it and in so doing will enter his internal world too. (Face to Face with Children, 1963) But she also wrote about the importance of team leadership and management in providing the safe and supportive context for sensitive practice. In this short volume papers on ‘Child care and Society’ and ‘Casework and Agency Function’ come either side of a paper on ‘The development of insight’.

OS ‘Clare contributed significantly to the understanding of communicating with children. Bogged down as we are in debates about ‘assessment’ (a word she did not use) her observations are relevant and salutary for us today. .... [she] argues that we are not aiming at collecting information or taking a case history, although this may be important to our understanding and to help children ground their memories. Rather she says “our real aim is to keep children alive and to help them establish a sense of their own identity and worth in relation to other people. By keeping children alive, I am of course referring to maintaining their capacity to feel. If there are no feelings there is no life, there is only existence.”’ (Communicating with Children, 1964)

To do that, relationship (characterised by empathy, feeling with the child) - and not technique is the central element.

CW ‘We are horrified at some of the experiences about the suffering they have been through. To work effectively with children, the first and most fundamental thing we have to know about is the strength of our own feeling about the sufferings of children. (1963)

OS ‘We are still paying the price today of a retreat from our responsibility to reach out and respond to children’s feelings’. Olive says in a section in her 2009
lecture where she explores ‘fears that social workers are entering into waters too deep when they engage in therapeutic play’

In a key paragraph Olive says ‘It is an absolute duty of the organisations which employ social workers to ensure that there are safe places for these feelings [of social workers] to be explored and managed’ [I hope I am not being a hopeless optimist when I take encouragement from recent comments of Moira Gibb and Eileen Munro that there must be a renewed emphasis on social work team leadership and professional casework supervision]

‘Is it always clear (Olive asks rhetorically) that the need in the child’s life for a ‘bridging person’ is taken as a priority, when jobs are divided for administrative reasons or files go unread. Passing children around like parcels between workers to suit organisational models or difficulties would have sent Clare into a controlled rage’. ‘

I conclude with a paragraph from Olive’s paper in which she talks about Clare Winnicott’s vision - which ‘was founded on a powerful moral view of social responsibility to the deprived or disadvantaged and of the child as a whole person, with fundamental and interacting needs- material, physical and emotional. Her vision was that social workers could play an important part in helping to meet these needs. What better for social workers today than to take that vision forward and to work out its implications for contemporary society’.

June Thoburn

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