

# TRANSFORMATION HAPPENS

Listening to the guidance, following the path, and accepting the opportunities and help along the way

**D**ixie Black, RCC, has been in private practice in Vancouver since 1987. From 2009 until 2022, she was also deacon at Vancouver's Christ Church Cathedral. While she has recently been appointed Deacon Emerita in retirement, her counselling practice is busier than ever. She also recently retired as adjunct faculty at the Vancouver School of Theology. The story of how her career has unfolded is inspiring not only for her work and dedication but also for how she met opportunities that appeared along her path.

A childhood trauma that today would be called adverse childhood experiences with symptoms diagnosed as complex PTSD led to a referral in 1972 to a psychiatrist who used Gestalt therapy.

"I didn't know what Gestalt therapy was at the time, but he literally saved my life," says Black.



"There's something much greater than me that's actually been guiding me, sometimes pulling me, sometimes pushing me," says Dixie Black, RCC. "I have had the good fortune to be able to hear it and the good sense to listen."

She also didn't know then that she would become a Gestalt therapist. Married out of high school and soon a mother, Black took a certificate course in peer counselling. By age 27, she was volunteering as a counsellor in Calgary while her paid job was selling life insurance. After a move back to Vancouver, she continued volunteering as a counsellor and was so good at it, her supervisor started paying her \$10 an hour.

"I was thrilled to be getting paid for what I was doing — I couldn't believe my luck," she says.

She was naturally but unwittingly using a Gestalt approach, which a colleague noticed and directed her to the Gestalt Experiential Therapy Institute of Vancouver. Though she didn't have an undergraduate degree, she was admitted to the program conditionally and graduated. Black and some colleagues then opened Canada's first clinic for over-spenders, which launched her practice.

She continued her training and education throughout her career and later got a master's degree at the Vancouver School of Theology, but how that came about... well, that's another story.

### **WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL?**

I didn't have a religious background or spiritual training. I went to Sunday school as a kid for a few years, but I didn't really believe in anything. As an adult, I explored many spiritual traditions, mainstream and alternative. While doing so, I felt called to Christ Church Cathedral. My first thought was, "I don't want to go to a Christian institution." It took me two years of discerning and thinking I had the wrong

message. But it was a persistent voice so I joined; everything fell into alignment and my work began.

Fortunately, there was a woman curate who helped me understand the mystical side of Christianity, and two RCCs who founded the Cathedral Centre for Spiritual Direction, offering spiritual and philosophical education to counsellors and psychologists. I went back to school at age 55 and got a master's degree, and in 2009, I took vows for ordination as a deacon. I also had a full-time counselling practice as an RCC.

### **TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT GESTALT THERAPY.**

Gestalt therapy isn't just a model of therapy. As a whole philosophy of life, it completely changed me. I started having some experiences while doing the psychological work I needed to do for myself. I did holotropic breathwork and was having altered state experiences — entering a trance state to access other dimensions of reality. I soon realized that this was something bigger than me, so I studied more deeply into other traditions and therapy models, such as Carl Jung's depth psychology, Buddhism and Buddhist meditation, and Wiccan ritual.

### **YOU HAVE SAID THERE IS LITTLE DISTINCTION BETWEEN CLINICAL AND SPIRITUAL WORK. CAN YOU EXPLAIN?**

Well, there really isn't any distinction except that when people come for clinical work, it's typically issue oriented. The client has a goal to change

behaviours and patterns or a desire to heal past experience. Spiritual work emerges out of that healing. It brings the client to the broader perspective of the meaning of life — those existential questions.

Sometimes a client will choose to use a spiritual lens for their work — called spiritual direction or spiritual accompaniment. In that case, psychological barriers to awakening can appear, and we work psychologically with unresolved relationship issues or past trauma. Either way, I find that they go hand in hand.

A common temptation is spiritual bypass, a term introduced by psychotherapist and Buddhist teacher John Welwood to describe a "tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to

sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks."

This is common in most religious communities. Some people believe that to be spiritual means that life should be smooth and untroubled when a state

of spiritual status is attained. Contrary to that idea, the reality I experience for myself and others is that life often asks more of us than it did before we became "spiritual."

### **WHEN YOU SAY, "TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE," WHAT DOES THAT MEAN TO YOU?**

Typically, we see life working in a straight line — I'm here now and I want to get over there. I make progress and it feels like one step forward, two steps back. But it's a very linear model and

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not how healing works at all.

Transformation is actually done through working in spirals. We come to the same issue or defence or behaviour in the spiral again and again. But each time we come to that place in the spiral, we come with everything we've learned since the last time we were there, and we continue to grow. So new beginnings and new endings are happening all the time in a cyclical way. Transformation is not an event but a process.

### **HOW DO YOU HELP PEOPLE COPE WITH UNWANTED CHANGES LIKE DEATH, DIVORCE, JOB LOSS, OR COVID-19?**

Through a psychospiritual lens — if people come with a religious perspective, or a spiritual perspective that isn't religious, or even a scientific view, as quantum physics has a way of explaining life — there are often teachings that help make sense of what's happened. Buddhism is very good at this, much better than Christianity actually. Even though it wasn't a change you wished for, how do you get to a place of integrating that meaning into your life? It requires coming to some acceptance that this did happen, I didn't want it and I'm powerless to change it. The only thing I can change is my attitude towards it. That helps prevent an identity as victim from forming. Grieving is really critical — the grieving process is named and honoured whatever the loss.

### **WHAT KINDS OF CHANGES ARE YOU SEEING IN SOCIETY? WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL HOPEFUL?**

Many people are more afraid and when we're afraid we are vulnerable

to acting out. Many have lost trust in major institutions like school, church, government, policing, even our medical system. Disillusionment, economic uncertainty, and climate crisis all contribute to additional mental health stress.

What brings me hope is that while crisis can bring out the worst in us, it can also bring out the best. After hurricane Fiona hit in the Maritimes, people abandoned individualism and came together as a collective to help neighbour and stranger alike. It gives me hope that when things are hard, most of us will come together and help each other.

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Young people make me hopeful. I have three grandchildren in their 20s and they, along with their friends, continuously impress me with their thoughtfulness. They're much more sophisticated than I was in my 20s. As a generation, they are better informed and see through some of our typical political and media speak. They are more transparent about mental health issues and quicker to ask for help. Though not religious or even spiritual, their values demonstrate goals of a meaningful life rather than material pursuits. They know there are limitations in their lives.

### **WHAT KINDS OF CHANGES HAVE YOU SEEN IN COUNSELLING? HAS YOUR OWN ROLE CHANGED?**

I have noticed a shift in emphasis towards the models of therapy used with clients and less attention to the importance of the therapist's relationship with the client. It takes months, even years, for a client to develop enough trust in a therapist to allow the vulnerability of their core wounds to surface. For many valid financial reasons, the delivery of short-term issue-oriented counselling is offered. It is helpful to solve problems but doesn't replace the long-term work towards true transformation.

My sense of my role as a counsellor hasn't changed because my training required self-awareness, self-honesty, and ruthless self-investigation.

I went through three years of very intense training with the same 14 people. Then I was in a supervision group for seven years with the same six people. I worked with one therapist for 17 years. I was expected to continue to do my own work to be accountable as a therapist. My role is to stay out of the way and use my skills to help the client find answers relevant to them. That hasn't changed.

### **WHEN YOU LOOK AT IT ALL, HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR CAREER THUS FAR?**

The work is a privilege I continue feel grateful to have the capacity to offer despite my age of 74 and living with Parkinson's disease. People appreciate the experience and wisdom I bring to my work, and I continue to learn from them as we work together in such an intimate way. One of my own excellent Gestalt teachers went from her last session to her death within about 10 days. I remember deciding then that that's how I want to finish my life. ■