

Mind's Chaotic Periods May Lead To Higher Order

Can a greater appreciation of the nature of chaos help us to understand our internal struggles?

Drawing a parallel to Ilya Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures (see *Brain/ Mind*, May 17, 1979), psychologist Michael Butz argues that the human psyche, like a physical system, inevitably progresses through chaos to reach higher levels of order. If therapists come to see this process as natural, he says, they can re-conceptualize their roles and accomplish more for their patients in less time.

Butz, who teaches at Eastern Montana College, in addition to a private practice, sees chaos as the fundamental mechanism for personal growth. What we take to be a crisis in need of a cure often really represents a change to make positive changes, he says.

He came to this viewpoint after being unsettled by the patterns of progress among his patients.

"The existing models of therapy tend to be grounded in the old linear paradigm, but I've never seen growth or development as a linear process," he said. "Very often people who come to me for therapy would make no discernible progress for the first two or three sessions."

"Around the fourth session, I'd see a remarkable jump. Then they would hover at that level for a while before going any further. This struck me as inconsistent with how therapy is supposed to work, and made me wonder about the models I'd been taught."

Butz became intrigued by the hard-science underpinnings of therapy. Both Freud and Jung drew on the physical laws of thermodynamics, he noted, and Jung had extensive discussions with physicist Wolfgang Pauli.

But the Swiss pioneer became frustrated with the limitations of viewing the psyche as a closed system and began exploring the quantum realm, mythology, and cultural history.

Eventually, Jung and other theorists began to see the psyche less mechanically. Yet no model was developed to fully address the "transformative" human state- the brief transitory periods when our sedate daily lives are disrupted and major changes become possible.

Butz thinks the chaos theory is the missing link. "Chaos as a mythological tool has been around as long as the species," he said. "Most culture of the world grasp the necessity and the pain of transformation, from which emerges the more adaptive person or psyche."

"In the west, though, we don't trust chaos, we tend instead to see its manifestations as disease or pathology. We've thrown out chaos with the bath water."

Butz sees our lives as long periods of stability interspersed with bursts of chaos. These phases, often linked to the life changes or unsettled events, ultimately signifying that we have lived in one state of order long enough.

He treats the resulting anxiety by seeking out a "symbol", often a component of a dream, as a directional beacon for the person's future growth.

And growth is the final goal, not a reversion to some earlier state of comfort. By asking the right question and filling in a few blanks, a therapist who appreciates chaos seeks to "re-stabilize" a patient on higher ground.

"Rather than simply trying to placate or medicate away people's uncertainty, I think we usually need to say, "Let's try to understand what it means and where it's coming from. A good therapist assumes a person is basically well, not sick."

Butz noted the recent discovery that chaotic physical systems can be stabilized by coupling with stable systems. For chaos of the psyche a therapist can be that stabilizer- if one important standard is met.

"I think successful therapists must have endured the pain of chaos themselves," he said, noting that Jung himself reported brief psychotic episodes. "Your experience not only makes you more empathetic, but lets you serve as an inspiration."

Of course chaos doesn't last forever... "Therapy should be enabling," Butz concluded. "A mechanic fixes your car when something goes wrong with it. A therapist's job is to teach you how to fix your own car..."

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