Cedar Barstow

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Cedar Barstow, M.Ed., Certified Hakomi Therapist and International Trainer is the author of "Right Use of Power: The Heart of Ethics." The ideas and examples in this talk are taken from this book and Cedar's training programs in right use of power. The goal of right use of power, as the largest container for ethics, is for people to increase their skill, sensitivity, and effectiveness in the use of both their personal and their professional power. The program has four aspects: Be Informed, Be Compassionate, Be Connected, Be Skillful. By focusing on learning ethics from the inside out rather than from the rule side in, the program engages people in studying and refining their impact and on cultivating right relationship and repairing harm. She lives in Boulder Colorado.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (http://relationalimplicit.com).

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel: This is a conversation with Cedar Barstow. Hi, Cedar.

Cedar Barstow: Hi.

S P: So you're a Hakomi therapist and trainer?

C B: Yes I am.

S P: And you have a particular interest in ethics?

C B: Yes I do—a huge interest in ethics. And it surprises me. When I was a kid, if somebody said you would be interested in ethics at a later date, I would have said, "You've gotta be kidding!"

S P: Yeah.

C B: But here I am.

S P: So how did it come about?

C B: Well, about twenty years ago I was the executive director, administrative director, of the Hakomi Institute. It soon became clear that we needed to write an ethics code and, more than that, we had to create a part of our curriculum that had to do with ethics. As part of the background for this development, in psychotherapy in general about 20 or 25 years ago we were busy trying to understand what the power differential was. In those days it was the psychiatrist up there and the patient down there. The psychiatrist knew all and the patient knew nothing. So the power-differential relationship was a very top-down one that created particular kinds of misuses of power by not considering how important the client's information was or how important the therapeutic relationship was. We were trying to correct that imbalance and make everybody equal. However, it turned out that this strategy caused problems also. For although we're all equal in our being and in

deserving respect and being treated with dignity, there are definite differences that create issues when the respective roles are different.

S P: Hmm.

C B: You know what I mean?

S P: Yeah, yeah. So in other words, it's not an all-or-nothing thing; it's not that there's something overlooked. By saying everybody's equal, you have to pay attention to what the roles of client and therapist are in order to create something that's more appropriate to deal with power.

C B: Exactly. And so in our process 25 years ago, in trying to make everybody equal, we kind of made the idea of having power a bad thing. So if you had power, it looked as if you had power over other people, which meant you were going to manipulate them and force them, mistreat them, take advantage of them, and so forth. So a lot of people decided, "Hey, I just won't have any power." I was one of them. Personally I am very shy so when I saw how people used and misused their authority—teachers, ministers, doctors, and so on—I just thought to myself, "Hey, I can solve this problem by just not being powerful. Not having any power at all. And then I won't cause any harm." As it turns out, I'm not the only one who did that—that a lot of people in the helping professions who wanted to heal people from wounds caused by misuse of power of various sorts—did the same thing. And lots of us decided, well the best way is to just not have any power. And, silly me, I thought, well, if I become a psychotherapist I shouldn't worry, since it's not a power position. Much to my surprise, it most certainly is. And it's a very subtle, engaged, and involved one to boot.

S P: So I want to say how much I appreciate your positioning it [this way]. Because just following it from a logical point of view, obviously it makes no sense to have abdicated power. But, emotionally, it feels very poignant -- wanting to take the power to heal people and at the same time wanting to shy away from power, and I can see that we're not just talking about ethics but we're talking about opening a wound.

C B: Oh yes indeed. Oh yes, yes, yes. It is poignant and one of the things in my ethics program, based on my book *The Right Use of Power*, that's most interesting to people who are in the helping professions is understanding that there are two kinds of misuse of power. One is overusing it—that's the one we know most about—and the other is underusing it. In the course participants come to see the various ways they've been underusing their power. Now, fascinatingly, the actual definition for power is "the ability to have an effect or to have influence." But when you look at it that way, we all need power in order to have relationships that have value and meaning and to fulfill our life purposes. So power is something we want and need to have. But I also think of learning to use one's power wisely and well as a life-long engagement in studying how you affect other people. And making sure that our intentions match our impact. Yet so often they don't. And so the more we can bring those two together, the more effective and skillful we'll be.

S P: Yeah, and so it's interesting because a starting point is not so much power per se but observing how you affect other people. And so that's a very nice way to shift from power as an abstraction to [power in] relationship.

C B: Yes, The right use of power is totally about relationships. And for people in the helping professions, there are really two kinds of power. There's our personal power and our positional, or

role, power. And these two are linked but different. Our personal power is non-mutable; it's our birthright ability and need to have an affect, to have influence. In our lives, we lose, find, refine, develop, and claim our personal power. We become empowered, disempowered, and empowered all over again. And it's a whole process as we develop our relationship with our personal power. So that's all that's really going on even when we have, in addition to that, positional or role power as we do as psychotherapists.

Role power on the other hand is very mutable. It comes with the position, and people often get into trouble when they mix up these two sorts of power, their positional with their personal power. So, for a little example, this is not in the world of psychotherapy, but it's still a potent example. I have a friend whose husband is an airline pilot. So, she would be at home with the kids for three or four days at a time. During these times she would be fully in charge of the whole scene. And he would come home after four days of being an airline pilot, which is quite a big positional power position. And he would walk in the door and take charge. He would start ordering people around and continue to be an airline pilot. Not surprisingly, this behavior was very disturbing to their relationship. So finally they worked out a very simple but actually quite effective plan. When he came home, he'd walk in, say "Hi, honey, I'm home," take off his pilot's cap, hang it on a hook, and say, "I'm no longer an airline pilot. I'm dad and husband now." And it worked; it really helped. And that often happens with people who are psychotherapists. We take our clients with us, their distress, their concerns, rather than leaving them in the office, or we take our personal life into the office. So in many ways our two types of power can get confused.

S P: Yeah. So, what can we do to be more aware of the situational power? Or to use our personal power in an appropriate way?

C B: Well, there are lots of things we can do. In my course, one of the classic exercises I use is to get people to divide up into pairs. One person takes the role of client, while the other gets to play psychotherapist. So in that process they become mindful and watch what happens in their body, thoughts, and feelings when they're in whatever role they're in. And they begin to discover some pretty amazing things. In their bodies, the person in the up-power role generally sits up a bit taller, looks a little farther ahead, breathes with a sense of calmness, and has a sense that their personal life is not with them but left behind. Meanwhile the client, in the down-power role, has a much more vulnerable feeling and is relaxed in a different way, because they know that this process is going to be about helping them. So we sometimes have trust issues coming up. How do I know as the client if I can trust this other person? And that means I might be a little guarded in order not to be too open or trusting. And the "client" notices that they can be more easily influenced or may even have a tendency to idealize the psychotherapist. Sometimes the person in the client role may be coming from the old paradigm where they're thinking, "I know nothing, and this psychotherapist knows everything. So everything they say will be absolutely right and useful."

S P: So as you're talking, what I want to share with you is that I really appreciated that description you gave of the physical sense that the two parts have. I'm hearing you with a visual in my mind of almost two different shapes or textures where I visualize the therapist as something of a strong cylinder, you know not rigid, but solid. And the client as something that is more flexible inside and either soft and permeable or with a rigid outer-casing to project their soft and permeable space. And so it feels very physical.

C B: Yes, and that's one of the things that people notice in this exercise. But, interestingly enough, each person has a chance to be in both roles. As a result, it becomes clear to them that one of their responsibilities in the up-power role of psychotherapist is to help empower the client to use his or her role more powerfully and more effectively and thus to benefit even more. And so some of that involves teaching your client that actually their inner awareness, their sense of their own body, their sense of what's happening—all these things are really useful and important for the effectiveness of the psychotherapeutic relationship. This may be a different way that a client is learning about how to be in relationship with somebody who is in a position of authority. So part of the therapist's job is thus to empower the clients to use their role more skillfully. And that's something that often psychotherapists don't think about. They need to be aware and sensitive as psychotherapists that their clients, the people most at risk of being harmed by misuses of power, are generally not very skilled in relating, are in a great deal of suffering, and are not very functional in the world. They are thus much more at risk.

S P: So, because of their vulnerability, that makes the differential that much bigger.

C B: That's right. So, does that seem like enough about the power differential?

S P: Yes. It feels like you've painted a very vivid picture of what can happen. So maybe if you would want to share some examples of how you can deal with that.

C B: Well actually, if you don't mind, I'd like to come back to that a little bit later. I would like to talk about the ethics program I developed for the Hakomi Institute.

S P: Okay.

C B: And so, in developing this course, I went back and looked at my own ethics training. Most of it—although courses nowadays may be a lot better—had to do with making a list of things to do and not to do or else. We basically got a little paranoid about making mistakes and did a few role-plays of extreme situations that you almost never encounter in real life. So I wanted to create an ethics program that would be much more personally engaging, more related to being in right relationship with others, and that included the fact that all of us, no matter how good our intentions, are going to make mistakes. All of us are going to have impacts that don't necessarily match our intentions. Clients will make projections on us, and we'll find ourselves having cross-cultural communications that are complex. So rather than trying so hard to never make a mistake or have a client who ever experiences any harm, the more important thing is to be able to track the relationship and be able to notice and feel when something is off so that you can address it right away so that it doesn't escalate into a grievance process or a lawsuit.

S P: So that tale's very, very beautiful and very, very healing simply in its intention of shifting from that, in a way, intense, rigid, panicky preoccupation with avoiding mistakes to actually understanding that they're going to be part of the process and that the focus instead should be on tracking the relationship and being in the presence.

C B: Yes, and in fact that's where body-centered psychotherapists have a great advantage because body-centered therapists are so well trained to track what's going on in their client's body and see how it matches with the client's words or what's happening with the client's feelings and how these feelings show up in the client's body and using mindfulness and paying special attention to the

quality of the relationship. And this is the best training I know of to help people be able to use difficulties when they inevitably come up to deepen and clarify their relationships.

S P: Yes. So, in a way, I know it's not literally what you said, but I can go a little further and make the case that to somebody who is a psychotherapist, you know, a mainstream psychotherapist, a case could be made that it makes sense for them to be trained in a modality of body-centered psychotherapy in order to increase the tracking skills that are actually going to help them improve their ability to have a framework for dealing with mis-attunement and wrong use of power and find corrective action.

C B: Exactly. Yes. So that piece was going to be a really important part of the Hakomi ethics program. And that I wanted it to be something that wasn't "Oh, learn these seven things, and then you'll be a good ethical therapist." I wanted it to be something that was a constant and lifelong engagement that was really interesting and not just a matter of memorizing things, of memorizing rules and following them. So, I looked at four different aspects of the right use of power and identified them and related them to each of the four directions because I like that model. So I'd like to describe each of these four. Would that be okay?

S P: Yeah, yeah. Great!

C B: So the first one, which I place in the **east**, is about being informed. And the task here is to be open to receiving and using relevant, current, and important information from within and without, and to hold ownership of and responsibility for one's personal and role power. And here there's a polarity that needs to be managed inside between getting too much information and being overwhelmed and too little information and being in denial and ignorance.

S P: Yes, so we're talking about [the need for] information. But it's not something where it's a passive role vis-à-vis information; it's a very active role of looking for the right amount and kind of information.

C B: That's right, and also looking at it through the lens of your professional code of ethics and guidelines and looking at it from your own inside sense and from the information you're getting from your client. And there's an interesting principle here. I call it the 150% Principle. This means that although both client and therapist are 100% responsible for the health and truth of the relationship, the person in the up- power role, the therapist, is actually in 150% responsible. In other words, it's part of the role of the psychotherapist to track and attend to any difficulties in the relationship. And so this particular principle helps things out a lot because often difficulties escalate because the therapist is saying, "Oh, I didn't say that." And the client is saying "Oh, you did say that. And, well, that's the way I took it." So the situation escalates and gets bigger and bigger and bigger. But if the therapist is remembering that s/he is 150% responsible, they'd be more likely to say, "Oh, you took that to mean something different. Tell me about that." This is the 150% Principle.

Then there's the second aspect that I place in the **south**: compassion. The task here is to explore and hear from one's history, habits and beliefs about power and authority and to stay in one's heart with compassion and concern for the well being of all. And the polarity here is between an over-focus on yourself resulting in self-absorption or an under-focus on yourself, meaning you're unconsciousness.

S P: Hmm. So again, in that moment of paying attention, being on that ridgeline between self-absorbed and unaware, there is that mindfulness of the therapist who is navigating that zone.

C B: That's right, and that's a huge zone. And also in that territory, a lot of people feel as if they have to choose between power and heart. Either they're going to be compassionate or they're going to be strong. In reality, however, we don't have to choose, and actually it's a much better use of power to be in your power and in your heart at the same time. So I have a number of exercises where people practice connecting and linking those two up. It sounds very obvious, but in the realm of psychotherapy it ends up being not as obvious as we thought.

S P: No, it's not. It feels like a big thing to remember that being in your heart and your power is not something that's mutually exclusive. Yeah, own your power, have heart, stand in your power, stay in your heart.

C B: Yes. Okay, so then in the **west** is the aspect of being connected. And the task here is to stay in right relationship, even in conflict, taking responsibility for one's impacts even if unintentional, and repairing and self-correcting to prevent further or future harm. And here is where we repent and reduce and repair harm as a part of the right use of power. The polarity now is between being over-responsible and under-responsible. So that's between taking everything as your fault and nothing as your fault.

S P: Yes, I see. And again I'm noticing a sense that's it's not something that is an abstract quality, because it's about you as the therapist in connection to your client, and it's about you in connection to your baggage. So, it is very relational.

C B: Absolutely. You often hear people saying, "Don't take it personally." Well, actually, when we're getting feedback from clients, we need to take a little bit of it personally. Because almost always in my experience when my clients have some feedback they want to give me that might be hard for me to hear, like "You're always too close to me," which I did hear once even though I was sitting three feet away, obviously it was a dynamic that we began working with and that became part of the process. But if I had taken it totally personally, I might have gotten defensive, or I might have said, "Oh no, I'm not. This is the normal place where I sit. This feeling is your problem." But if I take it a little personally, that's useful therapeutically. And so I don't want to take all of it personally, but I do want to take some of it personally since it's useful. Is this particular aspect clear now?

S P: Yes.

C B: Okay, so the last aspect, which I place in the North, is about being skillful. And the task here is to develop the wisdom to know what is right, how to think and act proactively, when to persist and when to let go, how to use feedback and how to take good care of one's self. And here's how we use power to promote well-being and serve the common good. That's the highest form of the right use of power. And it takes enormous skill to use power really well in this sense. One of the polarities here is knowing when to persist and when to let go. This is a fascinating polarity to work with. When do I hang on to this situation, and when is it wisest and most skillful to just let it go?

S P: Yes. So again it's interesting to see how that is something that is not just a decision that comes from rote learning, but something that is the result of experience and engaged, mindful experience.

C B: Absolutely.

S P: So I'm struck as we're coming to the end of this conversation. What I'm struck by is that "ethics" is not simply about learning rules. You have outlined a path of increased wisdom through experience and the relational quality of what makes a good therapist. I mean it seems like something that is much vaster, and I'm struck also by the beauty of the right use of power as a path to becoming a good therapist with integrity.

C B: Yes. Yes, you listen very well. That's exactly what I was hoping to communicate.

S P: Yes. That was very, very powerfully communicated. Thanks, Cedar.

This conversation was transcribed by Alex Curtis.

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