

NOW YOU SEE ME: PSYCHOTHERAPY AND
THE SPIRITUAL OPTICS OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

ANGELA R. FERNANDES
MA Psychology, Seattle University

e-mail: fernandes.angela@frontier.com mobile: 919-812-6419

With help from the works of eminent clinicians and thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Steen Halling, Adrian van Kaam, and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, I will reflect on my clinical experiences as an intern psychotherapist working with chronically disturbed individuals at a community mental health agency. As I struggled in an environment that demanded manualized, evidence-based treatment, I discovered my very own style of working with clients that is rooted in my ability to 1) see another person with the clarity they need, 2) be open to the often painful complexities of human experience and 3) allow my clients to *see and know me* in a relationship that is profoundly and emotionally intimate. This is not so much a treatment modality as it is a way of *being with others*, a way that is open to exploring – with curiosity and wonder -- the mystery of the person sitting before me.

Totality and Infinity was Emmanuel Levinas' (1969) groundbreaking masterpiece on the ethics of being human. He writes that our greatest freedom comes through our responsibility for other people without the expectation that our regard will be returned. As psychotherapists, we work with clients who have often been dehumanized, forgotten, cast aside, or who remain unseen and on the periphery of life. Psychotherapy can open up new possibilities for seeing another with a greater clarity, as well as opportunities to be seen and understood through the eyes of another loving soul. Levinas writes "Ethics is the spiritual optics." How we see another informs the way we treat that person, but the Face of the Other is always calling out to us to do no harm; to act with courage and kindness. We are continuously called to look again, to take a closer look. This is the very literal meaning of respect: "to look again."