Vulnerability and Its Discontents, Volume 2, Winter Edition

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This final issue of Other/Wise concerning the 2015 conference Vulnerability and Its Discontents presents an array of papers taking up multiple facets of vulnerability, and how vulnerability itself can be put to constructive use. Dorothea Leicher's theoretical musings lead us to Rachel Saks' explorations of vulnerability experience in training and supervision. Barbara Schapiro leads us, through the work of Jhumpa Lahiri, to consider the power of art and dreams in the transformation of vulnerability into strategies for survival. Debra Gitterman and John McInerney use their experiences of writing collaboration to bring that very process into immediate experience, which finds a quiet resolution in Mary Dougherty's poetic meditation on unfathomable loss. A brisk turn is afforded by the unique vision of Paul Zelevansky, followed by Sara Bressi's "treatment" of Frozen's Elsa. A dimension of vulnerability that the intervening passage of time has rendered even more acutely relevant is Andrea Rihm's questioning of the intrapsychic struggles of immigration, followed by Leticia Castrechini-Franieck's continuing work with severely traumatized refugees. George Bermudez and Craig Kramer challenge psychoanalysis to address traditionally neglected intersections of self with community, while Lynne Tenbusch examines resentment and devaluation as too-convenient defenses against helpless vulnerability and proposes "skillful vulnerability" as a more humane and adaptive solution. We conclude with Judith Vida's highly personal approach to newly plumbed layers of personal vulnerability.

Paper Summaries:

Dorothea Leicher - Affect in the Management of Vulnerability

Dorothea Leicher opens her collection of musings about vulnerability with the declaration that she will look to affects, as theory and as experience, as the mind-body bridge that facilitates development. Along the way, she shares rich insights about the interplay of movement and gesture, and extends her view to mythology and art, with some clinical implications.
Rachel Saks - Holding and the Dilemma of Inadequacy: Reflections on Group Supervision of Practicum Students

This paper explores the many levels of vulnerability that therapists experience in their training, and also that their supervisors experience. There is fear, shame, self-consciousness, hesitation, self-doubt and pain. But as Rachel Saks continues to learn, even at an advanced point in her own career, vulnerability is easier to tolerate in a playful, supportive environment.

Although she does not make a direct connection between her experience and her students with those of patients/clients, learning to accept our vulnerability is a hoped-for outcome of therapeutic work. Rachel Saks and her supervisees do understand that owning our vulnerability makes us better clinicians.

Barbara Schapiro - Vulnerability and Narrative: The Hazards of Exposure in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction

Barbara Schapiro’s beautifully written paper accomplishes several things: it provides superb summaries of Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories, exploring the dilemmas inherent in the human yearning for intimacy—the profound intersubjective vulnerability required and the attendant risk; it links, further illuminating with a psychoanalytic perspective, these stories of secret selves longing to be known and understood to the remarkably insightful writings of Winnicott, who felt that we all suffer an existential dilemma: the “co-existence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found”; and finally, it reveals the artist’s own personal struggle with vulnerability, yearning for mirroring and the equally powerful yearning for privacy. Picasso famously pronounced “Art is a lie that reveals the truth.” This evocative paper reminds us of the existential/psychological service that art (like dreams) provides for our species: metaphors that both reveal and conceal the vulnerable human self; metaphors with which we can both witness our human condition and distance ourselves from the unbearable transparency.

Debra Gitterman & John McInerney - Two Essays From A Field Study On Vulnerability In The Creative Process

John McInerney and Debra Gitterman, writing collaborators in real life, here offer the reader's version of their collaborative presentation of two essays composed in response to the prompt of vulnerability in the creative process. The way in which McInerney and Gitterman have experienced that vulnerability generates the content and the form of their essays. Then there is the music of their inimitably unique voices which rise from the page. The role of editing is here given unusual consideration in the journey of words to page to eye and ear. Undoubtedly there can be complementarity of writing and editing, but the possible intrusion of a critical, criminalizing running commentary that stops the writer’s heart cold is also considered. These two essays attest to the writers’ efforts to vanquish that hateful commentary, as their liberated voices ring with humility, possibility, care, beauty, and gratitude.

Mary Dougherty - When the Therapist is in Mourning: Exploring the Impact on Clinical Practice

Mary Dougherty's lovely essay is written both inside of and about her experience of unfathomable loss and its inevitable resonance in the clinical practice that proved to be steadying for her. This is a very quiet paper without any large gestures. Mary Dougherty invites us into her presence much as it seems to have been for the four patients glimpsed here. Almost before we know it, we too are in touch with "a feeling of sadness so alive between us."
Paul Zelevansky – Empathy for the Double

The uniquely creative Paul Zelevansky provides a wandering yet cohesive, reflection on the power of visual metaphor and iconic representation to evoke and facilitate identification and empathy. The content ranges from the metaphoric use of animated household objects, expressing romance, personal transformation, and self-actualization, to photographs and other visual images, reflecting social and political purposes. Throughout, his deeply ironic and paradoxical reflections educate us about the imagistic and enactive unconscious.

Sara Bressi - Unfreezing Disney’s Snow Queen©: Consolation Through Vulnerability in a Modern Fairy Tale

Sara Bressi offers a case history of perhaps the most realistic – and truly vulnerable – female character in a Disney animated film, Queen Elsa. Bressi analyzes Elsa as if she were a patient – and in fact, Elsa is so authentically drawn that she resembles the adolescent females that clinicians see in treatment.

Andrea Rihm - Immigration and its discontents: Challenges and tensions between vulnerability and growth

Andrea Rihm raises questions about the intrapsychic struggles and changes that appear to be inherent in immigration – the immigrant isn’t just someone trying to adapt or assimilate in a new place. Immigrants may end up undergoing self-examinations and they may reassess the past while also dealing with their current vulnerability of being among strangers. Migration can lead to a new adolescence of sorts, with questions like, “Who am I? Who was I? Who should I be?”

Leticia Castrechini-Franieck - Giving deeply traumatized refugees the space they need in which to reconstruct the boundary they have lost between reality and fantasy, while they face language and cultural barriers

This moving paper is a testament to many years that Leticia Castrechini-Franieck has been searching for increasingly effective ways to engage therapeutically with extremely vulnerable populations, earlier with street children in Brazil, and here with severely traumatized refugees flooding into Germany from ravaged corners of Asia and Africa.

Winnicott’s invaluable concept of the transitional object informs the introduction of external objects into an unusual configuration of the therapeutic situation, which includes the translator to augment the more usual dyadic process into a triadic one. Though far from what is considered ideal psychoanalytically oriented treatment, the term-limited fortnightly sessions with refugees have been shown to make a considerable improvement in not only symptom reduction but strengthened sense of self.

George Bermudez & Craig Kramer - The Vulnerable Self and the Vulnerable Community: A Challenge/Problem for Psychoanalysis?

This powerful presentation by George Bermudez and Craig Kramer is a scholarly masterwork of exploration, delving deeply into the intersecting configurations of self and community that have too
long confounded psychoanalysis and exposed its severe limitations. With evenly divided attention between the needs of the vulnerable self and the requirements of the vulnerable community, Bermudez and Kramer craft new paradigms for addressing foreground and background issues at the same time. Nestled within this strongly reasoned new framework is a remarkable quantification of the critical mass needed to supply that simultaneous containment and vitality. This is groundbreaking work.

**Lynne Tenbusch – Resentment as a defense against skillful Vulnerability**

In this original paper, Lynne Tenbusch introduces the psychological attitude of resentment as a defense against affective dysregulation or more severe psychic fragmentation. In alignment with Hegel’s formulation of the Master-Slave Dialectic and Nietzsche’s elaboration of "slave morality", she contends that resentment and devaluation of others is an ever present defense or psychic coping whenever there is the self-state experience of helpless vulnerability. Building on Ghent's distinction between submission and surrender, she suggests that "skillful vulnerability" is a developmental achievement, a mature solution beyond resentment and devaluation as defenses against self-fragmentation.

**Judith E. Vida - Crushing (Work in Progress.)**

“Activated” by her enslaving mother’s death, Judith Vida describes the inchoate process/journey that began with the unconsciously organized accidental “stumble”---reading a fictional dialogue between Thomas Jefferson’s slave/lover (Sally Hemings) and his daughter, Martha Jefferson Randolph. This “activation” continues to drive (hence the title, “Work in Progress”) Vida, with “no definable purpose”, through a library of works on otherness, enslavement, and Blackness—an outward exploration towards otherness, an immersion in the language of traumatized and colonized otherness, that seems to be propelled by a healing process (nature’s healing, making the self whole, as Jung proposed). It is a haunting and poetic narrative, capturing the “stumbling” intuition we all experience as we struggle to embrace our unformulated experiences of loss, grief, trauma, hope, and dread.

Judith Vida leaves us the traces of her journey so far, a superbly comprehensive bibliography on the Black experience in America, ranging from the seminal W.E.B. DuBois and Frederick Douglas through James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, continuing on to the contemporary era with Joy DeGruy (“Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome”) and Michelle Alexander (“The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness”).
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AFFECT IN THE MANAGEMENT OF VULNERABILITY

Dorothea Leicher

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AFFECT IN THE MANAGEMENT OF VULNERABILITY

Abstract

There is no learning without vulnerability. Our affects, which developed out of instincts, amplify it. The article explores affect as body/mind bridge, foundation of consciousness, and part of language development (the common denominator being gesture, which expresses affect but is also an early stage of language.). Modern Psychoanalytic interventions (verbal gestures) are illustrated in context. The modulation of affect to a manageable process through interpersonal and intrapersonal attachment processes will also be explored, partly through the author’s experiences and analyses of some myths.
Vulnerability means the ability to anticipate being hurt. It is one of the defining characteristics of life, down to single-cell organisms, who will try to get away from certain stimuli. Vulnerability is an achievement compared to inanimate matter which just gets impacted on by its environment.

Arguably, as humans we have reached the ultimate of vulnerability: partly because we are actually born in a more vulnerable state than comparative species, partly because our elaborate cognition allows us to anticipate danger and pain to a high degree.

I will use Sylvan Tompkins’ concept of affects to discuss vulnerability and its management, because I think it drives pain and comfort. His concept of affect fits very well with relatively recent neurological information which has given us a lot of information about the role of movement-processing brain centers both for language and emotion. In the process I also hope to illustrate the importance of art.

During my professional life, language development has undergone a great elaboration and differentiation, similar to Freud’s elaboration of the developmental stages of sexuality, which in the beginning bear little resemblance to the fully developed skill. We know that language as well as affect originate in gesture, a symbolic movement, and that language centers are close to fine
motor coordination centers. Managing movement is a central life task, and we have developed mechanisms to do it for our own activities but also monitor the action around us. Konrad Lorenz (1952) describes the path from instincts, inborn motor sequences, to affects, which express partially charged instinctual impulses. Affect gets expressed in body posture and vocalization ("Stimmfuehlungslaut") which with us become elaborated in dance and music. Language encompasses a wide range of symbolized movement, from the emotional engagement of myths and poetry to the emotionally attenuated declarative language we are used to in science. We can see the difference of perspective in two illustrations in the appendix, Da Vinci’s “Vitruvian Man” and Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase” We are more likely to associate the static image to “man“ although the “moving image” is more accurate. My thesis is, that because we find comfort in stability, permanence is overemphasized in our declarative language (attachment to ideas), whereas the assessment of movement and change is relegated to the subconscious. By studying the subconscious, psychoanalysis captures much of procedural knowledge. This is reflected in the developmental fluidity of concepts, which has gotten it in conflict with some forms of science, but biologists have a similarly “fluid” perspective since they are talking about history (evolution).

The perception of movement creates the impression of life, as I noticed with a sculpture in the Neue Pinakothek in Munich, where some shapeless blobs of fur on a tree-trunk could be motorized and made to “breathe”. I think that the experience of being part of a group depends on the experience of synchrony (therapeutic applications will be discussed later).
Tomkins has the idea that specific affects are triggered by patterns/changes in the stimulation we perceive: a gradual decrease in stimulation is experienced as joy, a sudden steep increase as startle/fear, a less steep increase arouses interest, chronic overstimulation as distress or in even higher doses as anger. Since we developed surrounded by a great array of biological systems who can impinge on us, an acute sense of how they move has obvious advantages. Both for our own individual mastery but also our being parts of groups, the ability to develop complex models of movement, and heuristics for them, is important (harmony= calm, dissonance = excitement). Art is the equivalent of formal logic for procedural knowledge and we find that people go through great length to practice it. Structurally, affect has a lot of similarity to music with communicative functions both to ourselves as well as the group around us. Music also teaches us to move from one affect to another, an important tool to manage distressing situations (as Churchill famously put it “if you’re going through hell, keep going”). Functionally, affects direct our attention to salient (survival) features in our environment and selectively highlight them. Cytowitz’s (1998) idea that consciousness is a “flavorless” emotion, is an elaboration of that theme. Affects enhance vulnerability: of the basic affects only joy and startle/interest are experientially positive/neutral, whereas distress, fear, anger, disgust, dissmell(contempt) and shame/guilt are aversive, AND we calm down from “positive” affects faster than from aversive ones. For our survival it is much more important to keep us out of harm’s way than to lure us to opportunities, but this also sets us up for the repetition compulsion.
Happiness may be a side product of having averted some danger: Tomkins’ joy is related to a gradual decrease in stimulation (things falling into place).

By the same token, this provides support for the psychoanalytic idea that we heal by liberating people from a restricted affective repertoire: we will not create incessant bliss, but by being able to have an unbiased “mix” we will cultivate emotionally significant lives. Affects shape our interpretation of events as well as our likely behavior.

If we have more aversive than attractive affects, how do we keep from becoming depressed and giving up? One interesting result of affect research has been that social interaction promotes positive affect. This is not accidental: If we look at the “cognitive elite” species (ravens, parrots, elephants, dolphins, primates) they all are very social. Wilson (2012) analyzes the development and advantages of social cooperation. Affective displays predominantly relate to our own group: if we compare intra- and inter-species aggression we can see that intra- group aggression elicits more intense anger, which deals with perceived unfairness, whereas predatory aggression to an out-group is a much less emotional event (except for the victim). Intra-group conflict fostered symbolization to avoid physical fights for status (many fights are settled by affective displays).

Being part of one’s social group is a need that trumps the need for food and rest short of complete exhaustion. Modern psychoanalysis explains mental illness as a conflict between anger and the need to stay within the social group/maintain relationships. In Antisocial Personality Disorders we see affective blunting, since they don’t have a psychological community, but also the vulnerability to addiction (which is part of the diagnosis). Flores (2004) describes addictions
as attachment disorders. The depth of our social need is demonstrated by the fact that solitary confinement is the ultimate punishment, and “existential despair” is the consequence of the highly individualistic existential philosophy. Affects take on communicative functions in groups, providing feedback on

the status of their members from moment to moment and organizing group behavior in an ongoing balancing act. Being a sustained part of a group gives us a sense of security, a psychological approximation of being in the womb, although we have to sacrifice the gratification of some impulses. It is interesting to note in this context that higher social status seems to be associated with decreased sensitivity to affect/emotions and also decreased affective display.

Dealing with our sustained sense of vulnerability and discomfort is a difficult balancing act and therefore has left traces in our myths and religions.

Various myths describe failed attempts at invulnerability: Achilles and Siegfried who are nearly invulnerable get killed from seemingly minor vulnerabilities, as does Baldur, who also represents a nearly perfect being. Persephone’s myth has a similar theme, although in her case her death becomes intermittent, because of her mother’s attachment. The themes of attachment and fertility are interwoven which expresses a biological truth. I believe that even the Christian story of suffering and resurrection is related to the fertility paradigm (hence Easter is celebrated in spring). Let me discuss the experience that shaped that idea, because it can illustrate “affective reasoning”. It started when I noticed that I was irritated by parts of Grunewald’s Resurrection,
(see appendix) especially the “brightness” of Christ’s figure. It just seemed “wrong”. When I started to wonder what would be “right” I came up with the image which I tried to capture unsuccessfully in my illustration (see appendix) I saw a simple scene just at the very break of dawn, with the sky mostly dark except a faint glimmering of light at the horizon. The earth was flat and muddy, with just the faintest suggestion of greenery being ready to sprout (as a match to the suggestion of dawn). Jesus’ figure stood upright, dark and slim, with his injuries from the flagellation and crucifixion visible, although as a recent past. I realized then that what had bothered me about Grunewald’s picture was that it was too ‘triumphant” and seemed a denial of the previous torture, rather than its integration and transcendence (a different “movement”) . I further realized the synchrony between the beginning day, beginning spring and beginning (after) life, which made them parts of a whole. I cannot claim “objective truth” but the multiple synchronies made it an experience of truth (if it moves the same it must be the same).

Back to myths and religion: Buddha also starts out seemingly invulnerable, and is thrown into turmoil by the unexpected experience of suffering and death, but manages to metabolize the experience into enlightenment and compassion.

The stories of “Arabian Nights” develop a similar theme: a powerful king is traumatized by the discovery of the unfaithfulness of his wife, and in a true trauma response, he repeats the situation by re-marrying only to kill his wife at the end of the night, so she won’t have a chance to betray him. Scheherazade, manages to break the cycle with masterful stories that keep him engaged. If we look at the stories, most of them are fairly fatalistic. Over and over the heroes deal with and
sometimes transcend disappointments. One way to look at the overall cycle is to consider it a story of therapy, with the distinction that in this case the therapist did the talking. Scheherazade also stands out as a paragon of courage in submitting to vulnerability her very life is at stake and depends on her trust in keeping the king’s latent humanity engaged to want to hear the end of the story – which has some resemblance to analytic treatment: we trust in the patient’s desire to tell their story and come out of trauma.

Affective resonance in a dyad or group may have a particular relation to joy which is associated with a gradual decrease in stimulation. If we engage with a responsive other or a group in a particular affective state, they are likely to resonate with us, but with reduced intensity, subtly down-regulating our stimulation, which should trigger joy. Solomon and Tatkin (2011) postulate that affective resonance is the cornerstone of satisfaction in a relationship. Modern Psychoanalysis independently developed along similar lines: Spotnitz was interested in engaging people with early relationship trauma (originally schizophrenics) who were too guarded and pre-verbal to engage in object-transference relationships, and was able to develop techniques which did not focus on the cognitive content of what a patient said, but imitated formal features of the patient’s communication (e.g. if the patient asked a question, the analyst asked a question back, often with totally unrelated content) From an affective point of view, the patient’s verbalization was taken as gesture and responded with a reciprocal gesture. It was found that these interventions (mirroring, joining, reflecting) when used repeatedly, did facilitate engagement and attachment even from severely withdrawn people.
Empathic resonance and compassion have healing potential, as the climax of the Parcifal myth shows: the hero is given two opportunities to heal Amfortas, the king of the Grail by asking what ails him and blows the first one by emotional inexperience. He has to make up by a long journey of suffering and is able to redeem himself and Amfortas the second time. When we work with depressives and antisocial personality disorders we have particular struggles to get to the point where we can ask and get the healing answer: Both disorders are characterized by difficulties with vulnerability. In depressives we typically find an anxious reaction to situations that would engender hope in others – depressives not only expect disappointment, but also the absence of comfort, which makes the phobic about it, and they often also show a fear of dependency for similar reasons. People raised to become antisocial have been ridiculed for being vulnerable and internalized that disdainful attitude towards themselves. I believe their repeated victimization of others is a defense against experiencing their vulnerability (just like a maniac is afraid of depression). I have a client who experienced an extensive series of traumata and has overcome them by helping others, not from a “superior” position but by re-experiencing their and her own affects in a attenuated form, and taking meaning in her suffering from her ability to empathize with others.

So far we have talked mostly about basic affects, and I have mentioned the similarity of their structure with music. This becomes especially evident when we look at sequences of affects that follow each other. Tomkins develops “script theory”, the entrainment of repetitive affective sequences shaped by our environment. I do believe that this is a refinement of repetition compulsion: Just as children are born equally sensitive to any sound of any language, but become
sensitized to their native language over the first two years, I believe families have affective profiles and repetitions that the children get entrained into and then repeat because they become a representative of the home group.

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Holding and the Dilemma of Inadequacy: Reflections on Group Supervision of Practicum Students

By: Rachel Saks, Psy.D., Licensed Psychologist, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Chestnut Hill College.

The following are comments made via an online discussion assignment for my graduate level supervision group:

A student writes to the group:

“I don’t know if I did this correctly, but I am constantly second-guessing myself when it comes to treating clients. I have worked with children for several years but I feel so overwhelmed. I don’t know whether I will be offensive or be able to establish the therapeutic alliance the way that is needed. I have been directed to make sure that the treatment plan and crisis plan are done the first few sessions, so how do I begin to build alliance if I am focused on record-keeping and diagnosis? I have been told that I’m on the right track but I’m constantly second-guessing myself. I don’t want to make mistakes or lose clients. I know that when I tried therapy I didn’t continue after three sessions because I felt that there wasn’t a connection but just a focus on technique. I also feel that because I took Techniques I so long ago I don’t know if I will remember how to approach clients? What is my theoretical orientation and does it really matter? Help.”

Here is a response from another student:

“Thank you for your complete transparency here. I felt the same way during my first few weeks when I was doing all new intakes and building my case load. And I still feel that way with certain clients when I have room for new intakes in my book... Use the first few sessions to allow some of your personality to shine through and stay on the same pace with the client within reason. Sometimes I have to assist people to focus a bit because they might be nervous and talkative, but even then, being present and listening IS therapeutic.

I completely hear what you’re saying. We’re all new therapists and it’s easy to second-guess ourselves and get in our heads. Thanks for sharing so openly and allowing me the space to respond and share my experience with you.”
I am struck here, not only by the honesty of the first student’s post, but also the supportive and helpful tone of the response. The student has the courage to not only tolerate, but also to share, to communicate about her feelings of inadequacy. The student respondent not only reassures her, but normalizes the feelings and joins with her.

Reading these posts, I found myself reflecting back on my own experiences of group supervision in a psychoanalytically-oriented doctoral program. While I learned a great deal, I do not recall experiencing the same kind of support, and I suspect I was not nearly so honest about my own sense of not knowing what to do or how to be as I assumed the role of therapist for the first time.

I know that for me this self-conscious cautiousness began long before graduate school. As the child of two therapists – my father was a psychiatrist/training analyst and my mother practiced as an analytically oriented clinical social worker -- I was steeped in the language and perspective of dynamic psychology from a young age. My parents’ work was a mystery to me in many ways, and the patients that my parents cherished so intently were strangers to me. These patients were tended to by my parents in an intense and focused way that captivated and preoccupied them. Though I yearned for the kind of nurturance and care that I imagined they gave to their patients, I was naturally protective of my own wants and needs. I hesitated to seek out that care directly. My father, a Holocaust survivor, was loving but remote. Though he dedicated his professional life to working long term with
difficult and demanding traumatized patients, I sensed that it was important to him that I be okay. He worried at a distance, and I could see how much worry pained him. I worked to portray myself as well, even if I did not always feel that way. Under such circumstances, it is no wonder that I developed and made use of what Winnicott (1960) terms a “false self.” So much of how I presented myself to others was motivated by an internalized pressure to sense what others want, and deliver it, rather than express my own feelings and ideas in a less guarded, more authentic way.

In significant ways, this tendency of mine was activated by aspects of my graduate training experience. Participation in analytically oriented training can be an exquisitely vulnerable experience, one which brings up any number of conflicts, wishes and fears for students, each with his or her own history and associated transferences. For many, the supervisor becomes a parental figure, poised to validate or disapprove of the emerging therapeutic identity of the student. Students wonder if the professor will approve of and feel pride in their clinical accomplishments. They might worry about being rejected by the supervisor, or long for some special connection to develop. In similar fashion, peers become siblings who alternately provide comfort and protection or compete for attention and approval.

In my graduate training, group supervision was an ongoing course experience and central feature of the curriculum. Students met weekly to present and explore case
material from their practicum and internship placements. This model continues to be a standard feature of graduate psychology programs. The expectation is that students share their work as novice therapists with professors and fellow students. They are asked to present their clinical material and explore associated feelings about the experience of treating clients and to solicit guidance from the supervisor and their peers about how to go about this work.

I clearly recall the anxiety associated with presenting cases in these classes as I strove to deduce just what the professor expected of me and to deliver that in the presence of other students. I worried that my flaws and weaknesses would be revealed to my supervisor and peers, much to my shame. I felt quite constrained by not only the wish to please my professor, but also the various ways that the other students might respond. Would they feel dismissive, competitive and disdainful or supportive and empathic?

This, thankfully, got better over time, and was certainly influenced by the role of the professor acting as group supervisor. When a professor was attuned, accepting and nurturing, I felt more secure. Security allowed me to be more spontaneous and authentic and creative. A different professor, more opaque, neutral and academic in style evoked a more stilted and careful response from me. I suspect that the tenor of my supervision experience spilled over into my performance as a therapist. When I felt more self-conscious about how I would discuss a case in group supervision, perhaps I was more stiff and remote with that patient. Conversely, if I felt that the
group would be supportive and collaborative about a case, I suspect I was more authentic and present with that client.

In one of life’s many ironies, after many years I now find myself in the opposite role. As a professor at Chestnut Hill College, tasked with leading group supervision, I am keenly aware of the vulnerable position in which my students find themselves. They do not yet know just what they are doing, yet they are asked to share their experiences and performance as therapists with both me and their fellow students. To them I am a support and source of expertise, but I also function as an evaluator. I know that they cannot truly learn to counsel others in a meaningful way without attending to their own vulnerabilities and emotional responses to their clients. Yet, I am also aware that they risk shame if they present their true selves to the group and do not feel accepted.

I recall one of the more interesting discussions I recently had during a supervision class. A student shared that she was struggling to engage a particular patient and feared that she had alienated him and failed to form an alliance. She suspected that she had come off as stiff and overly professional, and that he had found her distant and hard to relate to. Other students chimed in, humorously imitating the uptight “therapist selves,” that they felt they sometimes turned into when they became anxious about “messing up.” We reflected together about the difficulty negotiating between developing a professional identity and maintaining appropriate boundaries while still genuinely being in the room with their patients.
There is, of course, a parallel process occurring in group supervision. If I, the supervisor, do not bring my true self into the room, then how can my students feel safe enough from shame to be authentic about their needs? Returning to Winnicott for a moment, the false self emerges through the process of introjection, of internalizing one’s experience of others. If spontaneous expressions are met with disapproval, then the child becomes overly motivated to please others. The conditions that allow the true self to emerge and become integrated are responsiveness, reassurance and attunement (Winnicott, 1960). My task, as I see it, is to provide a good-enough holding environment for my students to tolerate their own vulnerability. The supervisory room must become a transitional space, where they can play with their ideas about how to meet the needs of their patients. It is through supervision that they can begin to integrate the need for a sense of competence and control over the process with humility about what they can accomplish as clinicians.

Winnicott (1971) states, “It is in playing, and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.” He goes on to assert, “Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together.” (p. 54) Cannot the same thing be said of supervision? And if so, what conditions must be met for this playing to occur, and for my students to discover their creative, therapist selves? Winnicott (1971) speaks of an intermediate area,
between the subjective and objective, where fantasy and reality meet to create a shared experience. For such a transitional space to be created, the relationship must be one of reliability and trust. As the “good-enough” supervisor, it is my responsibility to create and maintain this relationship, not only between myself and my students, but also between the students and their peers.

Providing this environment has been a challenge for me in that it involves some interpersonal risk. I must present myself as capable of containing their anxiety. At the same time I hope to help them internalize acceptance of vulnerability and inadequacy. So, I cannot just play the role of “supervisor” or “professor.” I have to involve my true self in the process. I struggle to show them that I can play and be vulnerable, and also be capable and safe. I often give examples of mistakes that I made as an intern and later as a therapist, and then encourage them to support and supervise each other. If a student becomes too vulnerable and begins to share more with the group than they may be able to tolerate, I work to contain them without making them feel embarrassed. My hope is that they internalize my “mothering” in a way that encourages them to become a part of the holding environment. If they can accept and support vulnerability in their peers, then they can risk shame themselves and reach out for help when they find the work challenging.

Winnicott asserts that if adults can manage to “enjoy the personal intermediate area” of play, “without making claims,” that they can develop a shared culture of common experience. (1971, p. 100) He links the development of a safe transitional
space, a play space, with the development of shared values, ideas and beliefs. In my approach to the working graduate students I am attempting to facilitate the development of a supportive culture in the space of the supervision group. Within a supportive culture, graduate students can risk vulnerability and explore their own inadequacy while creatively developing their therapeutic selves.

I would like to conclude by sharing another student’s response to my supervisee’s post, which I hope illustrates the shared culture I am working to create in group supervision:

“I feel a lot of the same feelings sometimes and I think that is normal for someone in your (our) position. You’re just finding your feet and your own style and that will take time and practice for sure! I know it’s hard not to worry about making mistakes and doing well in a session (I know I do) but for me personally, the more I worry about it, the more I get stuck in my own head and make more 'mistakes'. I find that if you put all your attention into what the client is saying rather than trying to focus on your style or whether or not you've messed up or what question you should ask next the session flows much more smoothly and with a natural progression! Easier said than done for sure (still working on it!), but my teachers in the past who have practiced clinically have said that even after years of practicing there are still things they wish they could do differently in sessions. I found this particularly comforting because it speaks to the idea that while everyone wants to live up to their own idea of 'the perfect therapist' you’ll probably always have things that you wanted to change, but as long as you are your genuine self and do your best to be what the client needs you to be, someone to listen to them, you’ll be successful!”
References


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Vulnerability and Narrative: The Hazards of Exposure in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction

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The Latin root of the word “vulnerable” means wound. The term involves an opening or exposure and the susceptibility to pain. In a psychoanalytic context, we think of vulnerability in terms of the undoing of ego defenses, a collapsing of those barriers that protect us from emotional pain. Most often that pain involves our dependency on others, a dependency that exposes us to rejection, loss, and shame. Without vulnerability to the pain of dependency, however, the experience of genuine intimacy or love is not possible.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning fiction writer Jhumpa Lahiri (1999, 2008, 2015) is perhaps one of our finest contemporary chroniclers of the complications involved with such emotional vulnerability. Her work reveals a contradictory dynamic at play: on the one hand, the wish to open ourselves fully, to be exposed and vulnerable in order to be understood, known, and therefore loved; and on the other, an equally compelling need to remain private and protected, to secure a secret self that is invulnerable to the outside world. Her characters often harbor secrets—secrets invariably involving loss and shame—and her plots revolve around the revelation of those secrets and the often unexpected consequences. The hazards of self-exposure and intimacy, along with a recurrent alternation between closeness and distance, not only characterize the central themes of her fiction, but inform her imagery and narrative perspective as well.

The paradoxical dynamics of vulnerability that distinguish Lahiri’s work can be illuminated by Donald Winnicott’s (1963) ideas in his paper “Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites.” In it he writes of discovering
in himself a need to assert “the right not to communicate . . . a protest from the core of me to the frightening fantasy of being infinitely exploited” (p. 179). He also refers to this fantasy as “the fantasy of being found” (p. 179). He goes on to explain, “Although healthy persons communicate and enjoy communicating, the other fact is equally true, that each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound” (p. 187). This view can help us to understand the contradictory fantasies involved in the communication or exposure of secrets in two Lahiri stories from her collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999).

The opening story in the volume, “A Temporary Matter,” concerns a young, married Indian American couple, Shoba and Shukumar, who are each lost in their own private grief over the death six months earlier of their baby, who was stillborn. “They had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house,” we are told, “spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (p. 4). Both have become sealed and isolated. Shoba has thrown herself into her work, while Shukumar has become lethargic, unable to leave the house. The story begins with their receiving a notice that for the next five days their electricity will be cut off for one hour each evening due to power line repairs, the “temporary matter” of the title. The first night the power goes out Shoba recalls that during power outages in India as a child, family members were all made to share something in the dark. This leads her to propose to Shukumar that they do the same, that they “tell each other something we’ve never told before” (p. 13).

And so for this temporary period, each night in the dark they reveal to the other a private, shameful secret, the “little ways they’d hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves” (p. 18). At first the confessions are fairly harmless: Shoba admits that the
first time she came to Shuk’s apartment, she peeked in his address book to see if she was in it; while he relates how he was so distracted by his feelings for her on their first date that he forgot to tip the waiter, returning to the restaurant the next morning to do so. As the evenings progress, however, the secrets become more shameful. Shoba reveals that she lied to him about working late when his mother was visiting; that she didn’t like a poem he had published; and that she failed to alert him to a dab of pate on his chin at an event while he was speaking to the chairman of his department. Shuk admits that he cheated on a college exam, that he exchanged a sweater-vest she had bought him as a gift, and that while she was pregnant, he ripped out a photo of a woman from a fashion magazine and carried it with him for a week. As the reader expects, these confessions in the dark effectively serve to bring them closer together, and on the fourth night, we are told that they “made love with a desperation they had forgotten” (p. 19).

The narrative point of view of this story is third person, limited to Shukumar. We hear what Shoba says, but we are never privy to her inner thoughts and feelings as we are with Shuk. Thus we are as shocked as he when on the fifth evening, after a candlelit dinner in the dark, even though the power has been restored, Shoba turns on the lights to reveal her final secret: she has been looking for an apartment, has found one, and is moving out. We are told that Shukumar is “sickened” yet also “relieved” (p. 21). He then divulges his ultimate secret: their baby was a boy and he had held him in his arms in the hospital while Shoba slept, before he was taken away. Shoba had wanted the baby’s sex to be a surprise, and Shuk had promised himself never to tell her. Shoba’s face contorts with sorrow; she turns the lights off, the two sit at the table in the dark, and the story concludes, “They wept together, for the things they now knew” (p. 22).
To me this story is heartbreaking. It shatters the fantasy that if one’s most vulnerable, shameful self is exposed to the beloved other, it will be understood, accepted, indeed loved. We think the story is going in that direction, only to have the rug pulled out from under us. Lahiri understands the limitations of ever fully knowing the private inner world of another human being. This view is continually enforced by the narrative perspective of her stories, which is almost always limited to a single character, and most often, as with this story, in third person rather than first. The intimacy and identification that the reader would experience with a first-person narrator is eschewed in favor of the more distant third.

Yet as distant and sad as this story is, it is not completely bleak or despairing of the possibility of closeness, love, or genuine intimacy. Towards the beginning of the story, in the midst of the blackout, Shuk and Shoba observe an elderly neighbor couple, the Bradfords, walking their dog together down the street. Shuk sees them once again at the very end of the story, (before that mournful final sentence), “walking arm in arm” in the “still warm” evening (p. 22). One could interpret the warmth and closeness that the Bradfords represent as serving, by contrast, only to make the lack in Shuk and Shoba’s relationship all the more sharp and painful. Still, the very presence of this couple suggests hope in the possibility of lasting intimacy. Shuk and Shoba also seem to me better off at the end of the story than at the beginning: they have confronted and shared their secret shame and grief, and they are weeping “together” even as their permanent separation is acknowledged. Some of my students have in fact read the story more optimistically, believing that the couple’s last moment of shared sorrow and truth suggests the possibility of mending the marriage. Though that is not my experience of the ending, one
of the strengths of Lahiri’s fiction is that it can allow for competing interpretations as it inhabits paradox without needing to resolve it. At the end of the story, Shuk and Shoba are at once together and separate, open and closed, and this paradoxical state again calls to mind the contradictory motions in Winnicott’s view of human communication at the deepest level.

“Interpreter of Maladies,” the title story of the collection, deals similarly with the exposure of secrets and the fantasy that if our most secret, vulnerable self is revealed, it will be understood and embraced. The story is set in India where the Indian American Das family is sightseeing, led by their guide, Mr. Kapasi. It soon becomes apparent that the Das marriage is strained. As Mr. Das takes photographs at some of the sights, Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi converse in the car. She learns that when not serving as a tour guide, Mr. Kapasi works as an interpreter for a local doctor, translating patients’ symptoms and maladies. Mrs. Das finds his occupation impressive and “romantic”—he has the responsibility of communicating and making meaning out of other peoples’ pain and suffering. “So these patients are totally dependent on you,” she tells him, “In a way, more dependent on you than the doctor” (p. 51).

Mr. Kapasi, however, views his job as “a sign of his failings. . . . In his youth . . . he had dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides” (p. 52). He also associates the job with the death of his son at age seven from typhoid. The doctor he works for was his son’s physician. Mr. Kapasi had originally taken the position to help pay the medical bills. His wife, unlike Mrs. Das, “had little regard for his career as an interpreter” (p. 53) as it only reminded her of their lost son.
and, we are told, she resented his ability to help save other lives. Here, as in “A Temporary Matter,” a dead child lies at the source of a shattered marriage. From a psychoanalytic perspective, perhaps it is the terrible vulnerability of a helpless, dependent child that always unconsciously threatens intimacy in Lahiri’s world.

Mrs. Das’s romanticizing of Mr. Kapasi’s occupation spurs some equally romantic fantasizing about her within him. Mrs. Das hands him a scrap of paper and asks him to write down his address so that she can send him copies of the photographs her husband is taking. This leads Mr. Kapasi to imagine them carrying on a secret correspondence: “In time she would reveal the disappointments of her marriage, and he his. In this way their friendship would grow, and flourish” (p. 55). He dreams of an idealized communication between them in which “He would explain things to her, things about India, and she would explain things to him about America. In its own way this correspondence would fulfill his dream, of serving as an interpreter between nations” (p. 59).

Eventually, as Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi converse, Mrs. Das reveals a secret: one of her children, her son Bobby, is not her husband’s. She explains that no one knows and that she has kept it to herself for eight years. She tells Mr. Kapasi that she felt overwhelmed by motherhood and so isolated and lonely in her marriage that she made love one afternoon to a temporary houseguest, a friend of her husband’s. She describes how terrible this secret has made her feel and of the terrible urges she has experienced since, including, she says, “the urge to throw everything I own out the window, the television, the children, everything” (p. 65). After this revelation, she presses Mr. Kapasi to speak and interpret her suffering. She expects that this exposure of her pain will elicit
his empathy and understanding. “I’ve been in pain eight years,” she cries, “I was hoping you could help me feel better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy” (p. 65).

Mrs. Das’s confession, however, only serves to shatter Mr. Kapasi’s illusions about her. He is “depressed” by her revelation and feels “insulted that Mrs. Das should ask him to interpret her common, trivial little secret” (p. 66). He asks, “Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?” (p. 66). The story ends as a group of monkeys attack Bobby. Once again, a vulnerable child is at risk. Mrs. Das’s carelessness is partially responsible as she has spilled some puffed rice that attracted the animals. Mr. Kapasi chases the monkeys away. The story’s final image is of the slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi’s address falling out of Mrs. Das’s purse and fluttering away in the wind.

As with “A Temporary Matter,” the narrative perspective of this story is third person, limited to the male character, in this case Mr. Kapasi. We understand Mrs. Das only through her dialogue and Mr. Kapasi’s descriptions of her. We are granted access into his consciousness alone, and thus our sympathy and identification are primarily with him. It is curious that Lahiri, as a female writer, should choose so often to narrate her stories through the perspective of her male characters. The central female character remains, to varying degrees, an object of mystery, of the male’s fantasies, and ultimately of rejection or betrayal. Thinking psychoanalytically, it is perhaps the untrustworthiness of the female in Lahiri’s fiction, associated as well with the maternal, that makes the exposure of secrets and vulnerability so particularly risky. This may shed some light on the prevalence of those dead or threatened children in her work as well.

The symbolic imagery in “Interpreter of Maladies” plays with an alternating dynamic between intimacy and distance. Mr. Kapasi and the Das family visit the sun
temple in Konarak where they view the sculpted wheels of a chariot, representing the wheel of life, and carved with “countless friezes of entwined naked bodies, making love in various positions, women clinging to the necks of men, their knees wrapped eternally around their lovers’ thighs” (p. 57). This reminds Mr. Kapasi that he has never even seen his own wife naked. He then fantasizes about Mrs. Das:

He looked at her straw bag, delighted that his address lay nestled among its contents. When he pictured her so many thousands of miles away he plummeted, so much so that he had an overwhelming urge to wrap his arms around her, to freeze with her, even for an instant, in an embrace witnessed by his favorite Surya. But Mrs. Das had already started walking. (p. 59)

The description of the address “nestled” in the bag is indeed almost womblike. The fantasy of an idealized intimacy and erotic embrace is countered by the reality in the above passage of the woman walking away. Similarly, the scrap of paper on which Mr. Kapasi writes his address, having been ripped from Mrs. Das’s magazine, contains on it “a tiny picture of a hero and heroine embracing under a eucalyptus tree” (p. 55), further enforcing the idealized fantasy that is lost in the wind at the end. Finally, Mr. Kapasi takes the family to visit a sight “where a number of monastic dwellings were hewn out of the ground, facing one another across a defile” (p. 60). A defile or chasm repeatedly separates Lahiri’s characters, opposing the yearning for closeness and union that equally defines them.

While Lahiri’s characters often seek to expose their secrets and exhibit their wounds in a bid for love or understanding, the stories as a whole seem to recognize that the individual is ultimately and inviolably isolate. From Winnicott’s perspective, this is
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not necessarily something to mourn or lament. “At the center of each person,” he argues, “is an incommunicado element, and this is sacred and most worthy of preservation” (p. 187). The personal core of the self needs to remain invulnerable to exploitation from the outside world. The question Winnicott poses so perceptively is: “How to be isolated without having to be insulated” (p. 187), a question that Lahiri explores as well.

In a series of three linked stories in her second collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), Lahiri presents the character Kaushik, an aloof and emotionally remote photojournalist, who has never fully grieved the death of his mother when he was a child. He is drawn to war zones and refugee camps, but confesses to feeling “untouched” and “unmoved” when behind the camera. Towards the end of the final story, he finds himself on a beach in Thailand. He had once almost drowned off the coast of Venezuela, we are told, and “since then he had not swum in the ocean, no longer trusting it” (p. 325). He recalls that his mother had loved the water. A fellow vacationer convinces him to take a small boat out to a reef. Once on the water, he “felt the sun strike his skin. He wanted to swim to the cove . . . to show his mother he was not afraid. . . . He held on to the edge of the boat, swinging his legs over the side, lowering himself. The sea was as warm and welcoming as a bath. His feet touched the bottom, and so he let go” (p. 331). The story breaks and switches point of view after that, and we learn a few pages later that Kaushik had been in Thailand at the onset of the 2004 tsunami, and that he has drowned.

Here that most maternal of images, the sea, proves once again to be treacherous in Lahiri’s world. Yet that is clearly not the whole story. Though it results in his death, Kaushik’s immersion in the sea also represents, as Lahiri writes it, a moment of profound release and a blissful letting go. I am reminded of Winnicott’s remark, reflecting his usual
penchant for paradox, “May I be alive when I die” (C. Winnicott, 1989, p. 4). One’s death cannot be shared—no escaping the self’s ultimate isolation there—but the key is not to be insulated from emotional aliveness even, or perhaps especially, at the moment of death.

Winnicott believes that the “hard fact” of the individual’s permanent isolation is “softened by the sharing that belongs to the whole range of cultural experience” (p. 187). The dilemma he describes of “the co-existence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found” (p. 185) is most evident, he claims, in the artist. Such contradiction might best be expressed in metaphor and might also, according to Winnicott, “account for the fact that we cannot conceive of an artist’s coming to the end of the task that occupies his whole nature” (p. 185). This in turn can help us to appreciate the repeated contradictions involving communication and self-exposure in Lahiri’s fiction. As Winnicott understood, one purpose of art and literature is to bare our wounds and thus to help us feel less alone in our aloneness.

Addendum: After this paper was written and delivered at the 2015 IFPE conference, Lahiri published a fascinating article in The New Yorker (2015, Dec. 7) about teaching herself Italian. The piece traces her obsession with learning the language and reveals that she is now writing exclusively in Italian. (The article was translated from Italian into English.) Her reflections on this process highlight the same paradoxical dynamics as discussed in my paper: secrecy and exposure; the desire to be known and to hide; to transgress and to protect the self. The article also touches on the uneasy relationship with
the maternal that I observed in her fiction. She refers to Bengali, her mother’s language, as her “mother tongue” but with which she feels a “disjunction,” a “distance,” an “absence” (p. 30). English is her “stepmother,” but she needs to reject both mothers in a bid to discover a separate, independent expression of self.

As Lahiri writes in her secret Italian diary, she takes pleasure in the fact that “No one suspects, no one knows. I don’t recognize the person who is writing in this diary, in this new approximate language. But I know that it’s the most genuine, most vulnerable part of me” (p. 34). She continues, “I rediscover the reason that I write, the joy as well as the need. I find again the pleasure I’ve felt since I was a child: putting words in a notebook that no one will read” (p. 34). Yet she claims that her “sole intention” is “to be understood, and to understand myself” (p. 34). She wants to be visible, understood, and known, but not too visible or known. “All my writing comes from a place where I feel invisible, inaccessible” (p. 35). Her success as a writer, however, has made her feel too visible and recognized. She concludes that she feels “more protected when I write in Italian, even though I’m also more exposed,” and though she feels that “a new language covers me,” it is “a permeable covering—I’m almost without a skin” (p. 36).
References


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Two Essays From A Field Study On Vulnerability In The Creative Process

John McInerney

Debra Gitterman
VULNERABILITY IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Abstract

Where do we encounter our vulnerability? How do we respond to it? These questions prompted a conversation between John McInerney, LCSW, writer and psychoanalyst, and his editor Debra Gitterman, writer with an abiding writer's block, in which they explore the emotional ground traveled by each while working on John's book. They draw parallels between the editing process and psychoanalysis in terms of what transpires internally and between writer (client) and editor (therapist). For John, the experience as writer is one of overcoming fear and avoiding feelings of fragility. Debra, unable to tolerate feelings roused by looking at her own work, fosters John's writing by responding with positive feedback and challenging him at times to reach greater clarity in his ideas. By helping another person get closer to authentic and clear expression through the ritual of writing and revising, does an editor experience vicarious transformation without risk to self? What does the writer gain from the editor's attention? What does the editor gain from the writer’s response? What insights, if any, does this inquiry offer about the process of psychoanalysis. Each of the participants responds with an essay.
I’m here as a psychotherapist and a writer who is writing a book about my work and who has turned for help to an editor. Part of the problem is that I have a touch of ADD and my writing tends to bounce around in a way that makes perfect sense to me but not to anyone else. To help manage my writers’ insecurity I needed someone who could reassure me that I had good-enough writing chops to take-on a long-form project. Debra, it turns out, needed someone who was patient and encouraging to help her with her ten year-old writer’s block. Debra will tell you more about her and our process in her presentation. I will describe what I believe is at the root of the problem for the writer and indeed for all of us. My perspective is informed chiefly by my practice in the Ordinary Mind school of Zen Buddhism and also by my psychotherapy practice, which is rooted in the psychodynamics of the Interpersonal school founded by Harry Stack Sullivan. (Evans, 1996). For now I can say that Debra and I have managed to create a reasonably safe space for each other to work in. We respect each others’ vulnerability and we’re loyal to each other.

I always like to put things into a larger context. It helps me feel grounded. For instance, whenever I visit a new place, even if I arrive very late, I like to walk around the neighborhood to get my bearings before I go to sleep. In a similar vein, as I addressed the theme of this conference–vulnerability–I thought of looking up at the sky and feeling miniscule in the same way that my Neolithic Celtic ancestors did. Their response to feeling vulnerable was to become the first astronomers. They built the great monument at Newgrange more than 5,000 years ago and a thousand years later they built Stonehenge. They intuited that if they could figure out what
was going on up there in the sky they would figure out what was going on down here on earth. They tracked the phases of the moon, worked out when the solstices occurred, identified Orion the Hunter and other constellations. This knowledge helped them make the transition from their hunter-gatherer culture to agriculture and along the way they developed religion and the ideas of salvation and an afterlife and all that good stuff. So the take-away is, feeling vulnerable can really take you places if you are willing to go with it.

It’s one thing to acknowledge that you have an id, an ego and a super-ego doing battle with each other deep in your homuncular psyche – if you do acknowledge that or believe it. It’s another thing to simply confess that you are vulnerable. I suspect vulnerability is one of those concepts that every generation has to come to terms within it’s own time. Doing so may be a kind of maturational goal like developing an observing ego or managing ambivalent and contradictory feelings. My parents had two world wars, an armed insurgency, a civil war, and a period of immigration and return to their home country to help them get used to the idea that they were vulnerable. All this happened before they had reached the age when one inescapably feels ones’ inherent vulnerability, which is about the age that I am now.

Most recently though, in 2010, Brené Brown (Brown 2010) gave a TED talk on vulnerability, which you can find by searching YouTube under her name. If you do, you will be adding to the six million hits the speech has already gotten. Because of those numbers I’m guessing that Ms. Brown who is a professor of social work at the University of Texas, is responsible in some part for the current wave of interest in this topic and perhaps indirectly for the title of this conference.

In any case, two events preceded Brené Brown’s now famous talk and I believe, those events prepared us to hear and respond to her in the way we have.
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They are: the fall of the World Trade Center towers on 9/11 and, four years later, Hurricane Katrina.

What do those events mean in our national psyche today? A few weeks ago, mindful that we are a year out from a presidential election, and with that question hanging over me, I watched Nick Lowe sing “What’s so Funny About Peace Love and Understanding” to a room with less than a hundred people in it. He wrote the song way back in 1974 for Elvis Costello, and after watching and listening to him sing it in such an intimate setting I had to tell myself, “there is not a simple answer to this question”.

In 1907 the psychologist and philosopher William James (James, 1970) tapped into our basic vulnerability when he said that the first part of reality is the flux of our sensations. “Sensations”, he says “are forced upon us, coming we know not whence. Over their nature, order and quantity we have as good as no control. They are neither true nor false; they simply are.” He goes on to say: “It is only what we say about them, only the names we give them, our theories of their source and nature and remote relations, that may be true or not.” – The emphases are all mine.

James meant that we are part of and subject to the elemental forces of nature, and that it is the flux of nature’s events that gives rise to our sensations; which we then translate into feelings, thoughts and behavior.

Now you may or may not accept that position. Some people prefer the idea that your feelings are an innate part of your identity and character, that they are of you and have nothing to do with whether the wind blows from the north, south, east or west. I want to suggest that the tension between these two notions makes for its own kind of glorious truth that creates our vulnerability in the first place.
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I hope that introduction gives you an idea of some part of what we will talk about for the next hour or so, the flux of our sensations, which are the vaguest, most intangible aspects of our human experience.

What we say about them, the names we give them, our theories of where they come from, what we think they are and how they all relate to each other may be true or not, James tells us. In other words, what we do in the process of living, which is the same as saying “in the creative process” or “in the process of psychotherapy”, may be true or not.

“Well”, you might ask, “in the moment-to-moment of being, how do we translate sensations into words and actions?”

And more to the point, not just any words and actions but words and actions that hang together in such a way that they tell a story that makes sense and by a kind of verbal and behavioral alchemy recreate something like the original and long gone sensations that the writer, (you could say patient) has felt so that the reader (you could say therapist) can get an idea or have an experience of what the original sensation was.

For the talking cure to work there has to be a decently close approximation between the words spoken and the sensations felt; on both sides. The same is true for story-telling whether written, on film or on stage.

And when you put into that mix, something Samuel Beckett once said to his interpreter Lawrence Harvey, as quoted by James Knowlson (Knowlson, 1996):

“Whatever is said, is so far from the experience”, the whole enterprise, if it didn’t already, seems tenuous and fragile.

To me, this all sounds very weighty. You might be a patient, therapist, writer or editor, it is no small thing to create a narrative, or a self, if you like, that has a degree of integrity.
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When I speak or write my story, I know that it is true or not. Or do I? If I do, in the case of writing, why do I need to write it, then re-write it then revise it and re-write it again and make 3, 4, 5, or 10 drafts and then abandon the entire effort for years or forever or send it off into the wind as I once did with a folder of handwritten notes for a novel by putting it on the roof of my car at a thruway stop while I put my coffee in the cup-holder and then drove off without noticing that the pages were fluttering away behind me. I didn’t miss the pages until I got to my destination an hour later and I didn’t love them enough to go back for them. Instead I went crazy for a few days because I didn’t know who I was without them and I was ashamed of what I had done. And then I found a version of myself that I could live with comfortably enough to get by on for a while.

Writing is a search for self-experience, for self-discovery. Sometimes I find myself on the page, sometimes I feel held by the words that I write. Sometimes I feel that I am reaching too much for a thing I cannot grasp. In the Rogerian (Rogers, 1957) sense, when I write, I make my own mirror. In the Winnicottian (Winnicott, 1965) sense I make an environment that will hold me for a while.

My pain as a writer is the pain of the isolate who longs to connect; first with myself, the “me I think I am” as I call it, and then with others. I don't mean to stack the two in order of priority but to be true to myself is to be vulnerable enough to make every moment a negotiation with what it means to be myself.

My experience of crafting a sentence in an essay or a line in a poem is a moment-to-moment experience of crafting a part of myself. Even if I am writing about the moon, I am writing about myself, like it or not. Sometimes it is agonizing, sometimes it is hopeful, sometimes joyous. If everything flows smoothly, which it occasionally does; a poem lands on a
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page, a string of sentences makes a satisfying paragraph, that’s great. When it happens I miss the agony but I know that I just have to share the work with Debra and it will come back–but only as much as I can bear. Because of her grace and kindness it is never too much. It could be too much if I shared with the wrong person. Then, I might withdraw from writing, confused by a reaction that does not seem to touch any part of the me that I see on the page; that in fact, breaks the mirror.

It is only because Debra has pushed me and pushed me to find that vulnerable self in my writing that I have been able to make the book I am making. And in finding that vulnerable self my experience is of opening a door to a new world of discovery and exploration that allows me a greater sense of ownership of the end result.

As an aside, although I’m not a musician, I did play conga in a three-piece band for a couple of years and one of the things you learn from doing that is to be a really good listener. Music is a collaborative venture. If you are open to going wherever it takes you–and it does take you to unforeseen places–you can have a great time and so will the people around you.

So writing is a bit like playing conga with the band and letting myself be taken by the music. When the music is playing me it sounds better.

Life gives me a sense of the continuity of myself, a sense of a “me I think I am”. The writing experience adds a layer of trustworthiness to that self, a sense that this “me I think I am” can be sturdy and robust as well as vulnerable. My Zen meditation practice adds another layer that underlines both the discontinuity and the uncertainty and opens me up to an awareness of the impermanence of all things. I know that living on this earth with vulnerable humans like myself can be a trial, a heart-break and a joy. Indeed it is the only source of joy I have, that and the joy of wild nature from which all my inventions spring.
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The world as it is, is all there is. There is nothing to replace or substitute for it. Accept it or reject it as you may, it’s all you have. And it’s what has you, for as long as you’re around.

I know that everything is impermanent. I know how fragile joy is. There is a part of me that has never grown out of my childhood sense of vulnerability and sweetness. I know that I have always felt vulnerable but I also know that I have not always known that I did.

As I say this I remember the movie Birdman with Michael Keaton in the title role and also something Ian Holm once said, “the trouble with being an actor is that there’s nobody there”.

Another way to say that might be to quote the Harvard philosopher Alex Watson, (Watson, 2014): “We neither are nor contain anything that remains identical over time. Even at one moment of time, we are not one thing. Rather we are a multiplicity of interacting systems and processes.”

And I know that that is true.

To discuss the vulnerable self is to discuss the shifting self, the self that is inseparable from nature, the self that is an illusion, the self that is the me I think I am, that is continually forming and falling apart, that, in our digital world is both situated and distributed at the same time, that is a multiplicity of interacting systems and processes. This rather confusing self is the one that we all know and struggle with in our daily life and in our therapy or in our meditation practice or our creative practice—if we have one—but it's the self that we don’t always talk about because it’s there and not there at the same time and trying to get a hold of it is like trying to hold on to a soapy two-year old that wants out of the tub. It's the self that writers know because it’s what they live with. But I think all creative people live with it. Which really means all of us, whoever and wherever we are.

Now I’ll tell you a story of how I recently, well, ten years ago, came to meet my vulnerable
self face to face, for the first time in a long time. This is the self that I have most recently written about at Debra’s urging.

In June 2005 I was bitten by a tick, (though I didn’t know it) and by Fourth of July weekend I had developed an abscess in my right armpit at the site of the bite. The abscess was treated but it’s origin was not identified. About a month later I started experiencing random symptoms that could have been neuromuscular and within a few days had what felt like a minor stroke. That prompted me to take off from work and for the next three weeks my symptoms increased and grew to include chronic severe pain.

By Monday, August 29th 2005, I had lost a considerable amount of weight and my symptoms included Bell Palsy and partial paralysis below the waist. No amount of medical attention had been useful or helpful up to then but that day, which was the day that Hurricane Katrina struck the south coast, I was admitted to the hospital.

Within 24 hours, and to my great relief I was diagnosed with Lyme disease. I spent the entire rest of the week laying in a hospital bed watching the aftermath of that devastating storm on live television. I wrote a chapter for my book on the psychological and emotional events arising from, and following that week. It proved to be a painful exercise but because I wrote that chapter I was able to make a transition in the book to writing about some ideas that I hold dear and that are fundamental to my way of looking at the world.

Before writing about my illness and the fear of death that went with it, I could not imagine how I would write about those ideas at all. However, once I had reached a certain point in the writing, my imagination took a leap off a cliff and before I knew it I had found a path to a place that I could not have conceived of before. This experience will be familiar to those of you who have reached a similar point in your own journey.
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The book chapter that I wrote does not contain the following story:

When I thought I had fully recovered from my illness and was ready to go back to work I had an appointment with my infectious diseases specialist and told him I planned to go back to work the next week. He laughed out loud. I was shocked and offended.

“Look,” he said, “maybe you can go back the week after next, but I don't want you staying over”. (I live upstate but my practice is in NYC) “You can go down, do a light day, come back the same day and see how you feel. If it goes ok you can go back the week after that. Your immune system is still very fragile.” So that's what I did.

Everything went well. I drove to the railway station, got on the train, enjoyed the two-hour trip down along the Hudson River. It was a beautiful fall day.

And then we got to Penn Station and everyone stood up to leave the train. I started to feel anxious. Lots of people were moving around in a small space, bumping into each other, hefting bulky suitcases, elevating their energy level and steeling themselves for the city hustle.

It felt like too much for me to deal with.

I’m far from a country mouse but that's what I felt like, timid and uncertain. I decided to wait till everyone was off the train and I could take my time rather than get caught up in the stampede.

I waited by my seat, letting people pass as they would. And when the way was clear I went to the doorway of the train to step on to the platform. The crowd was surging up the escalator. My anxiety kicked up a few notches and turned to fear.

I had been travelling the same route for 15 years. What was there to be afraid of? But no matter how I tried to rationalize it to myself, all I could do was go back to the empty train car and sit down. I was afraid of being jostled and pushed, afraid I might get hurt.
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I didn’t understand what was happening to me. I’m tough, I’m resilient, I’m stubborn, I’m a fighter.

I was afraid, I felt vulnerable and I couldn’t believe I felt that way. I was shocked at myself.

I waited till everyone had gone up the escalator, then I left the train and made my way to the street.

In this state of mind I couldn’t take the subway, so I took a cab to my office.

On the way down-town, sitting in the back seat of the cab, I found myself rationalizing my experience, making it not just about me but about all of us. I thought to myself, “Suppose we all feel like this all the time.”

I thought, “Suppose we all feel fragile and vulnerable but we just push it aside to deal with whatever we have to deal with every day; to deal with the rough and tumble of everyday life.”

And that thought, that I had a little more than ten years ago to the day, in the back of a cab going downtown, led me here.
Debra Gitterman

The poet Ed Hirsch reads poems twice at readings. As an audience member, I've appreciated that second reading. I'm going to begin with a poem. I'll read the poem again at the end of the talk and name the poet at that time.

GHOSTS

There's a ghost in this house.

She walks the floors unseen, unheard.

Come. Follow her.

In this room she sees a boy,
soft-skinned, lean, not yet long,
sitting too close to a television set,
the shag carpet beside him
cut by a spear of afternoon sun.

He kneads his right fist into his left palm
until each knuckle sounds,
eyes intent on the screen.

Then kneads left into right.

The ghost, a child,
sees a woman come from the kitchen—
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the mother, who is also a person,
but right now only a mother—
drying her hands on a dishtowel.

She wants the boy to play outside.
Her eyes are wide and wild,
hers voice, pitched with contempt.
The ghost child looks worriedly at the boy
who doesn't move his eyes off the screen.

Upstairs now in a blue-green bedroom,
the ghost child sees a girl
on an unmade bed reading
while snacking on chicken bones
that she tosses unfinished into a blue trashcan.
In a few days, under crumpled tissues and discarded poems,
the smell of rancid meat will fill the second floor.
The whole family will recoil, but the smell will offend the mother most.
Voices will rise, doors will slam.

In a bathroom past a short hall,
at the far end of a large bedroom,
tins of polish orbit a shoe-shine box.
A stained rag lies in a soft heap
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on a countertop clean of colored wax crumbs.

A man, the father, looks up when the child enters,
as if he can see ghosts.

I collect ideas about the role writing plays in society that I use as ballast against a counter-impulse to keep quiet. Here is one: literature is a historical record of human emotions. I can accept the inherent value of recording history. A new favorite is by historian David Christian:

"We are blessed with a language, a system of communication, so powerful and so precise that we can share what we've learned with such precision that it can accumulate in the collective memory. And that means it can outlast the individuals who learned that information, and it can accumulate from generation to generation." (2011)

In other words, I tell myself, by writing and publishing we add to a knowledge bank from which current and future generations can benefit. As parent to teen step-children who are thirsty for experience and wisdom, this makes immediate sense to me. It is another compelling reason to write and to publish. Nevertheless, I am challenged to write.

For the first ten years of my adult life I adapted to the imperative to be silent by making visual art—mute paintings, drawings and sculptures. Another way I skirted this prohibition against articulation—against knowing my mind, against being heard (even by me)—was by keeping a journal and never re-reading what I wrote.

Nevertheless, having played a role in advancing John’s writing, I'm here today as his editor and as a writer.

I consider myself a failed writer not because I don’t publish or because I lack a professional writing career, but because I avoid the uncomfortable feelings that come up around editing and revising. Quite simply, I can't bear to look at what I've written. My self-critical eye is
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indiscriminately excoriating.

I have no problem generating work—putting what Wordsworth calls the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (1999) onto the page—but I can't go back with a cool mind and objective eye to revise. I can do that for others quite well and easily.

Unfortunately, the magic of inspiration—what makes a poem a compelling object—happens in revision. Thomas Edison's characterization of genius applies: 1% inspiration, 99% perspiration.

When I edit my poems, I will often dishonor the original impulse by revising what's on the page into a different poem than it started out to be. Then I'll find fault with the revision and revise that into another poem. And so on. The poem becomes a palimpsest—a single, layered poem concealing its history. As conceptual art that's interesting, but conceptual poetry is not my intention.

I avoid writing in typical ways: by doing chores and developing demanding alternative careers. I don't go to writing conferences because I feel that I haven’t earned the privilege. I watch my friends' books get published and see their work change their lives by moving their careers and minds forward, while mine, in this respect at least, remains stagnant. What once compelled me to publish—and I have only done it once—was when a friend, the editor of Post Road Magazine, asked me for two poems for an upcoming issue. He was in a bind and I was able to overcome the prohibition in order to help him out. My desire to help prevailed over my unease.

The poet Larry Levis said that the most important part of being a writer is tolerating one's bad writing. That's what I haven't, as yet, been able to do. So what is a writer who can't edit her own work?
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With much pain, I pushed past my difficulties to complete a master's degree in creative writing in 2006. The structure of graduate school and having a community of writers helped. It felt important to me to complete the degree. At graduation the director gave each graduate a walking stick because, he said, this was the beginning of our journey as writers. My writing process, however, was not sustainable outside of school. The walking stick wasn't enough. What I needed was not the object, it turns out, but the relationships that were behind the object.

I know that what I go through is common. There's nothing special about my writer's block. Most writers have antics they use to avoid writing. And even successful, well-known writers are squeamish about sharing early drafts of their work.

Brené Brown has spoken powerfully and ground-breaking about being vulnerable—about, she says, quoting Theodore Roosevelt, "the man in the arena daring greatly" (2012). It is he who deserves our sympathy, respect and admiration, not the critics, Roosevelt says. Through hard work and risk-taking, Brené Brown was able to get into the arena. But what if you can't get into the arena? What if desire and willingness to be vulnerable, along with a decade-long course of psychoanalytic psychotherapy that was objectively successful in all other areas, are not enough? What then? How does one become unblocked?

I thought it might be useful to speculate about how I got to this place and to talk about how John and I are working to extricate me.

Thomas Mann said, “A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people.” (1947). Because language was difficult for me as a child, mastery of it was also inordinately important.

My background:

• Despite success in school, in some ways I was a slow processor (a function of either
a learning disability or psychological trauma or both), born on the heels of a verbally precocious older sister and into a family of facile processors, it seemed to me, who placed a high value on verbal communication.

• My mother, with 4 kids under the age of 6, was understandably overwhelmed. On top of that she was not particularly skilled at dividing her attention. She lacked attunement and a capacity for self-reflection, and although she was warm, fun, and clearly loved us, she was highly critical. There was absolutely no pleasing her. Her criticism was thorough and relentless.

• My father had a more humane approach to child-rearing, but, in accordance with the gender conventions of his time, he was mostly absent, working day and night as a psychoanalyst. In addition, his poor judgment and a blind spot for his family resulted in painful and sometimes dangerous neglect.

• The difficulties I had were not apparent to my parents, teachers or friends. In high school, I got straight A's; I was in honors classes; and I had friends. I was successful in college too.

My relationship with writing started with a death. At age 16 I visited my 80-year-old grandfather in the hospital. He’d been unconscious for several days after having been admitted a week earlier to adjust the medications he was taking for Parkinson’s disease. As I understand it, when he entered the hospital he was given contradictory medications that filled his heart chamber with fluid and caused his otherwise strong heart to fail. When the heart monitor flat-lined, my mother and grandmother grabbed onto his body and cried his name in what sounded like shock, pain, and reproach, as if in dying he was doing something wrong, unthinkable. My eyes moved from their figures to my grandfather’s expressionless face on the white pillow and I
saw a tear slide from one of his closed eyes. The eruption of anger and grief at his dying and that stray tear troubled me. My grandfather had never spoken much and for the past ten years Parkinson's disease had kept him from talking at all. To process the experience, I wrote in a journal that a friend had given me as a birthday gift years before and I kept writing for 7 years.

I never read what I wrote and I never shared what I wrote with anyone. When I was 23, however, a personal crisis pushed me to look back on my life in order to figure out how I had gotten there. I reread my journals for the first time then, more than 15 of them. I was surprised to discover in them a compelling and complete narrative of my life at a time when I myself was feeling shattered. There was a whole self on the page. By reading my journals to others, I was able to share my self with others for what felt like the first time. "You're a writer," a therapist told me.

At the time, however, I considered myself a visual artist. I spent the next years making art, getting well, and exploring relationships and the world. It would be a dozen years before I would return to writing, in part out of a need for story and specificity, which wasn’t satisfied by making visual art.

When I did return to writing, I made it my professional focus. I had early successes: I was accepted into writing workshops and eventually into a competitive graduate writing program.

What I find interesting is that in my 20s and 30s I failed as a visual artist in an uncannily similar way to how I'm failing now as a writer. As a visual artist I had talent and received positive attention from my peers and some teachers, but when the natural next step would have been to share my work publicly, I stopped sculpting and painting.

There are strategies for extricating oneself from writer’s block– or, in my case, from being unable to review and edit my work–and I tried many of them: writing groups, writing coaches,
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self-imposed deadlines, therapy, country living. I tried lowering the bar: I told myself, “finish one thing, just one thing, build on that.” But each lowering of the bar led to a further reduction in output. Nearly 10 years later, I'm not really writing.

When John invited me to do this panel, I said yes without hesitation. The subject—vulnerability—is close to my heart.

In the work John and I did to prepare for this conference, we discovered that I lack a non-critical, psychological space to revise, play with, and make discoveries in my writing. There are parallels here, of course, with Winnicott’s holding environment and the good-enough mother. I lack a holding environment.

We also discussed an incident that occurred when I was 11 that created an imperative for me to keep silent. So even as I pursued self-expression, I was moved by a stronger impulse to not put words to what I saw, thought, heard, and felt.

When John and I first started working together a couple of years ago, he'd write at the kitchen counter and I'd write on the couch. Within minutes, invariably, I'd be asleep. At some point John confronted me about this, and we shifted our contract. I stopped pretending to write, and John paid me to edit his work.

In order to write this paper, I decided to lean on the friendship and growing trust between John and me and to try again.

As I've edited John's work over the past two years, I've seen him be vulnerable and take criticism from me. He was frustrated by my feedback at times, but I knew that he was not going to fall apart. And with each draft I saw his writing get stronger. When we first started out, several rounds of revision were needed for John to clarify his ideas and get himself on the page. Now he brings a near finished product on the first go-around. He's internalized the editing process and
taken me with him as a good object whose advice and guidance is valuable.

Safety and comfort come slowly to me. With John as a new writing partner, I needed to feel that I had value to him separate from my ability or willingness to write; I needed to be acknowledged as an intellectual peer and as a competent and valued editor. I needed John to not be defensive when I pointed out that a particular kind of feedback from him unnerved me. I needed to see him trying to adapt as I discovered and communicated the kind of feedback that I needed. And, lastly, I needed an opportunity to take a risk so that I could lean on him.

John needed many of the same things from me: to feel legitimate as a writer; to feel that he could help me as my editor; to sit side by side as we went through his edited drafts. We both needed a lot from each other and it took effort, patience, and openness.

John has suggested that I lack sufficient ego strength to know that there's good stuff in my drafts, to ignore the critical self-talk, and to trust the editing process. In our work together, in essence, I borrow his ego to edit my work. This rings true to me.

John and I have circled back to where we started. What I couldn't tolerate is exactly what we are doing. We sit and write together. Instead of sitting separately, as before, we sit beside each other looking at the same computer screen. Sometimes when John senses that I'm feeling particularly raw, he might put his arm around me as we work. Comparing our process to a therapeutic one, I say, "You don't put your arm around clients". And John says, "No, But I convey the same safety and comfort in a different way."

Our process still feels new and not fully tested.

The poem I read at the beginning is mine, of course. Its polished state and that I'm sharing it here is a result of our process. It's a poem that I wrote many years ago. At some point in the weeks leading up to this panel, I shared the poem with John, and he and I worked through it line
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by line. John didn't know that he was going to enjoy editing my poem. And I didn't know that his feedback was going to work well for me. It was spontaneous. Our work moved the poem to a place where I'm comfortable sharing it today. And it gave John and me as a team more confidence to help each other.

GHOST

There's a ghost in this house.

She walks the floors unseen, unheard.

Come. Follow her.

In this room she sees a boy,
soft-skinned, lean, not yet long,
sitting too close to a television set,
the shag carpet beside him
cut by a spear of afternoon sun.
He kneads his right fist into his left palm
until each knuckle sounds,
eyes intent on the screen.
Then kneads left into right.

The ghost, a child,
sees a woman come from the kitchen—
the mother, who is also a person,
but right now only a mother—
drying her hands on a dishtowel.
She wants the boy to play outside.
Her eyes are wide and wild,
her voice, pitched with contempt.
The ghost child looks worriedly at the boy
who doesn't move his eyes off the screen.

Upstairs now in a blue-green bedroom,
the ghost child sees a girl
on an unmade bed reading
while snacking on chicken bones
that she tosses unfinished into a blue trashcan.
In a few days, under crumpled tissues and discarded poems,
the smell of rancid meat will fill the second floor.
The whole family will recoil, but the smell will offend the mother most.
Voices will rise, doors will slam.

In a bathroom past a short hall,
at the far end of a large bedroom,
tins of polish orbit a shoe-shine box.
A stained rag lies in a soft heap
on a countertop clean of colored wax crumbs.
A man, the father, looks up when the child enters,
as if he can see ghosts.

References


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When the Therapist is in Mourning: Exploring the Impact on Clinical Practice
By Mary Dougherty - IFPE conference, Philadelphia - November 2015

Following the news that my husband had 18 months to live, he and I made the decision to try and live our lives as we had been: he as a professor of photography and film, who also made films, I as a Jungian analyst, and we as partners, parents and grandparents.

Our three-story brownstone in Chicago, housed our lives with his studio on the third floor, my office on the second floor, and our family space on the first floor.

We concentrated on making small adjustments to accommodate his treatments and doing "work-arounds" of his growing limitations. This flexible approach seemed okay for more than a year because I was working at home and could attend to his shifting needs. During this time, I informed my patients of my husband’s illness as it felt appropriate.

Eventually his illness required me to stop working. I told my patients at that time, that I would most likely return in three months. He died one month later. I emailed each of my patients to inform them of my husband’s death and set the date for my return to work.

During this time, I was blessed with the support of friends and colleagues who emailed me poems and reflections. A particular poem by Lawrence E. Johnson (2009, p.53) challenged the idea of getting back to normal and actually embodied how I felt.

Here is an excerpt:

*He was my giant tower against the stretching sky.*
*He was the answer to my every question.*
*He was my normal.*
*And he is gone…*  
*too quickly gone …*  
*and I am not ready to go on,*  
*So tell me,*  
*someone tell me, please, where,*  
*where is my normal to go back to…?*
I too, did not know how to go on. But in returning to my practice, I found that the work itself provided me a foothold for how to begin. Today, I will reflect on the effect of the mourning process on my analytic work with four patients. Susan was a patient who had been in analysis most of her adult life having seen three different male psychoanalysts before coming to see me. When her second analyst died, who by all accounts saved her life, she began analysis with the third. She saw that analyst for a number of years and after he died, she sought analysis with me.

From the beginning of our work together, Susan lived in fear of getting old and dying in which she avoided being fully alive. She was haunted by an early memory of seeing an old woman staring out the window into the courtyard of her apartment building where she was outside playing. This memory seemed to represent a dark anxiety that overshadowed her ability to play.

During the first session after my return to work, Susan expressed her condolences for my loss. She then expressed her worry about how our work together would change as a result of my having lost my husband. I acknowledged that she had expressed my very concern – that I was in mourning and that I missed my husband. But I also told her that I planned to continue working because I didn’t want to lose both my love and my work. She then added that she didn’t want to lose me.

In this same session, her fantasy about our being girl friends surfaced again. Susan and I are the same age and our transference is infused with the “girl friend” archetype. Through the years, we have discussed the loss of the analytic holding that would occur if we were friends. She felt conflicted about having gone to the public memorial for my husband but not having been able to go to the private Shiva at my home even though she knew she would have felt uncomfortable being present among my family and friends, not to mention my personal grief.

We sat together with this conflict as well as with the palpable sense that the loss of my husband had changed me and therefore changed us. We knew that we would continue to work together but did not know how this change would affect the work.

Don came into treatment because his parents had died within three months of each other. A mutual friend recommended that he see me, in part, because of my recent loss. During his first session, Don said that he did not want to wall off his feelings of missing his parents by just continuing to meet the demands of work. He was an executive in an advertising firm.

Don had grown up in a rural community in a neighboring state. With the death of his parents, it was his job as the only boy of 5 children, to distribute the family
possessions and eventually to sell the family home and the land. He traveled from Chicago to the family home on weekends to begin the arduous task of sorting through his parents’ belongings.

He reported that when he went home one weekend, he expected to feel sadder than he did but wasn’t able to because his sister was there. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to feel sad but that he needed to put on a smile for others. Several weeks later he reported the following dream: *I was walking downstairs away from other people and coming to the bottom of the steps realizing that my father and mother had died in a plane crash. I broke down crying.* He saw that the “emotion” in the dream was his emotion, but that he was not actually allowed to express it because his parents died as very old people. I asked him if he had been younger would he be allowed to cry? He wasn’t sure.

My sense was that both of these patients suffered a schizoid-like form of self-experience in which they felt compelled to please others alongside of holding themselves apart from real connection. I came to understand that as I was sitting with these patients, we were in a transitional space in which their long-standing unmediated fears and prohibitions overlapped with the real world of death and impermanence. Being with these patients in this overlapping space of neurotic and real suffering allowed them to shift, at least temporarily, their normal ways of interacting.

Susan’s normal avoidance of facing “the precarious foundation upon which we are perched” was confronted by the actual death of my husband. Don, likewise, was unable to engage his normal avoidance of feelings when the feeling of sadness was so alive between us (Epstein, [M.] 2013, p. 14).

I too had to let go of any attempt on my part to find a normal analytic way to interact. There was no room for pretending to know. I found myself within a heightened awareness of being in a transitional space with each of my patients that felt more opened and vulnerable. During this time, I had begun meditating, listening to meditation tapes and reading books like “Being with Dying” by Joan Halifax. These activities supported me to be in this more vulnerable space, and allowed me to tolerate the precarious footing of my own analytic stance.

While those in my practice expressed their sincere condolences to me for my loss, they made use of me in this more vulnerable space in very different ways to serve their own analytic needs. I will describe two other patients whose analytic needs could be characterized as existing along a spectrum from “how to be alive in the face of death” in contrast to “how to let old patterns die into new ways of being alive.”
Jill started analysis with me after having gone through three months of treatment for breast cancer and during the six months of follow up radiation. She was on leave from her position in upper management at a prestigious research center. Much of our early work together dealt with her physical discomfort and her worry about how her illness would impact her college age son. She then told me that she was also suffering from the second great tragedy of her life — the sudden death of her first love, Joe. They had separated from each other in their late 20’s, went on to marry other people and then both had gotten divorced. Their reconnection had reignited a rich and rewarding love relationship, which they lived for 14 months prior to his sudden and unexpected death.

Jill felt alone in her mourning for Joe. While her friends were very attentive during her cancer treatments, they worried that her reaction to Joe’s death was out of proportion. While the focus of our sessions was often centered on the psychic strains and the physical demands of her cancer treatments, she insisted that the real tragedy of her life was the loss of Joe. She described how his love had opened her to the lost parts of herself that had been constricted within her married and her professional life. She was afraid she would lose these parts again now that he was gone. Alongside of articulating and affirming these parts of herself that she had found with Joe, we also experienced points of convergence in our work together, that gathered into a sense of renewal. I believe we had found ourselves somewhere in the territory of “sitting with just our breath, we may find that in losing all that we have associated with life, we discover anew – life within us — raw, elemental and pure” (Halifax, 2008, p. xii).

Julie was aware that she needed to let go of old patterns that were killing her. As a fine arts photographer, she struggled to feel confident in her creative work in the face of the “real” gender bias of the art world. Alongside of and perhaps because of her own struggle, Julie mentored many younger women in the arts. Despite her genuine support of these younger artists, she, nevertheless, compared their success against hers that never seemed to be enough.

Julie also valued her home and family and cherished gatherings at meals. But she also feared that her role as “wife and homemaker” worked against the serious pursuit of her creative work. Despite the fact that she worked very hard in all of her endeavors, there was a self-critical voice that drained energy from her actual creative-making, whatever choice she made.

About a year ago, Julie reported that her physical therapist was helping her relax the cramping she had suffered from years of clenching by paying close attention to the constricted muscles that cause the pain. It reminded me of the idea that “it is not as important to find the cause of our traumatized feelings as it is to learn how to relate
to them” (Epstein, M. 2013, p. 17). Together we speculated that these physical problems were linked to the years of the internal pressure she put on herself to be more fierce in relationship to her work. Julie decided to hold off any surgical procedure in order to give physical therapy a chance to work.

It was around this same time that Julie had decided to hire younger artists to support her art making practice: someone to help her organize and execute the larger projects she was ready to take on. But then she questioned herself about needing too much help and wondered if she was just being spoiled. I wondered out loud with her if she thought Richard Serra or Theaster Gates worried about hiring too much help when implementing their large projects.

As she took these steps to support her own creative work, Julie felt that her photographic practice was in a more open space and felt more prepared to take the next step in her life. I suggested that when she prepared to take the next step in her life, she was setting forth her intention. Setting our intention is all we can do ... along with a readiness to live that intention along our way to death.

I don’t think I could have said that prior to my experience these last two years of effort to accept the unfolding of my life as it is.

Once again Joan Halifax sums up my experience:
“Dying became a teacher for me, as I witnessed again and again how spiritual and psychological issues leap into sharp focus for those facing death. I discovered caregiving as a path, and as a school for unlearning the patterns of resistance so embedded in me and in my culture. Giving care enjoins us to be still, let go, listen and be open to the unknown” (Halifax, J. 2008, p. 5).

Bibliography:

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“The Father of the arrow is the thought: 
How do I expand my reach?”
(Paul Klee, The Pedagogical Sketchbook)

Can two household objects find love?

I recently completed a short film, a romantic comedy about an Oven Mitt and a Spatula, which follows the ups and downs of a relationship between two familiar objects. To mirror the conventional Hollywood plot, I will identify the Mitt as male, and the Spatula as female. Over the course of the film, the Oven Mitt expresses his thoughts and desires through very simple gestures and the singing of various American pop standards from the 1930s and 40s. The Spatula for her part has even fewer options for action as she can't twist or bend, but in response to the Oven Mitt's movements and expressions, stretches the definition of what a Spatula might hope to become.
The bodies of the Oven Mitt and the Spatula are structurally defined by the ways they serve the human hand, in particular protecting it from sources of heat in the kitchen when carrying a hot tea kettle, or frying an egg. In the spirit of the Paul Klee quote, oven mitts and spatulas literally expand human reach, but in the context of the film, try to expand their own sense of possibility. Before they are puppets who mime human qualities, the Oven Mitt and the Spatula are everyday consumer objects. So to watch and root for their transcendence, we have to think beyond their qualities as expendable and replaceable tools that live inside kitchen drawers or hang on hooks. A clip from the film:

https://vimeo.com/149034478

It is the Oven Mitt’s face that carries the weight of signaling consciousness, sometimes supported by a hopeful wave of his thumb. Two dots for eyes and a straight line for a mouth is a familiar stand-in for a face in children’s drawings and comics, and the Mitt makes “eye contact” with the viewer as he passes through various emotional and physical states. While the Spatula doesn’t have an identifiable set of eyes, her responses to the Mitt are made believable because he does. But while the Mitt appears to think and feel different things, the two dots and the straight line remain essentially the same, except when they are bent and twisted by an action. Nonetheless, different states of mind seem to reside in the Mitt’s psyche: he appears to experience pleasure, sadness, confusion; he considers his own state of mind, and attempts to change. He sings songs that express his hopes and dreams. He dances, he remembers, and later in the story he tolerates a haircut.
This tension between the object’s commonplace destiny, and the possibility that it might escape beyond it, may create a deeper identification in the audience; a desire to nurture things that have not been nurtured before. And when two characters move towards each other in the familiar romantic comedy arc--first in friendship, then perhaps in conflict, and finally in love--the audience is encouraged to root for a happy ending. Yet why would an audience believe that the Mitt and Spatula would be receptive to their care and concern? I can’t be sure, but like the Mitt and the Spatula, the audience has also come a long way, and as Bob Marley reminded us: “In this bright future you can’t forget your past.”

**FEELING INTO**

(Walker Evans)

The most striking idea for me in a brief Wikipedia etymology of empathy, is the German word *Einfühlung*, translated into English as “feeling into.” The description goes on to draw a distinction between empathy as an active
acknowledgment of another’s sadness and pain—to step into their shoes—and emotions like compassion and sympathy through which one might recognize another’s need, but not presume to share in it even if there was a desire to help. For example, what is the emotional cost, or reward, in watching a TV ad for impoverished children, and then sending a charitable donation?

GRACE

(Lynn Johnson)

I have long had an interest in Fred Rogers, the creator of the famed TV show Mister Rogers' Neighborhood.

In addition to having been a showrunner for NBC, and a scholar of early childhood development studying under people like Benjamin Spock, Eric Ericson, and Margaret McFarland at the Arsenal Center in Pittsburgh, Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. While to his great credit, he never inserted religion into any of his TV work, his philosophy and creative thinking was very much a product of Christian values as he understood and practiced them. In the essay “The Theology of Mister Rogers,” poet William Guy explores Rogers’ pedagogical and social practice on television in regard to concepts like grace, which in theological terms refers to a divine spirit immanent in the world that operates in and inspires virtue in human behavior.

“It is important to stress that what is being proposed by Mister Rogers is not some dire dreariness of perpetual soul-numbing servitude, some permanent state of deprivation and interiority, but rather a system of “grace upon grace,” a system in which what had once been the sole prerogative of a few will achieve an infinite multiplication that redounds and accrues unto all.” (William Guy)

In 2008, my wife and I moved to Pittsburgh from Los Angeles, and before too long I made contact with Rogers’ production company. While Rogers had died in 2004, the people at the Fred Rogers Company were more than welcoming, and eventually I pitched an idea to create a series of one-minute videos called MISTER ROGERS FOR ADULTS. Built around video, audio writings from their
archives, these would not be directed at children or parenting, but at adults, and focused on Rogers’ thinking about work, relationships, and many other existential challenges and opportunities.

In one example incorporating a 1980 interview segment from Mister Rogers Neighborhood, Rogers has a conversation with a wheelchair bound young boy (Jeff Erlanger) who is quadriplegic. He asks him about how he came to be disabled and in a wheelchair, and what his life is like. Then they sing a Mister Rogers Neighborhood song together called "It’s You I like," and Rogers changes some of the words from “It’s you I like, it’s not the clothes you wear” to “It’s not your fancy chair.” This generates a smile and a laugh from Erlanger.

Every time I watch this video, I feel a large lump in my throat. Is this a manifestation of sadness, or gratitude, or a sense of elation that Erlanger can take such pleasure in what is almost a joke at his expense? I have come to think of this laugh as Erlanger's gift to anyone watching.

That Fred Rogers would be compassionate and sympathetic to a child is not surprising, but what he enacts is a kind of deep empathy where he acknowledges Erlanger’s fundamental humanity--the “you” in the song. Erlanger’s disability, his essential vulnerability, is central to his life, and a fact that others can’t easily ignore, but he is not reduced to its terms. I would characterize this by saying that Rogers meets him “where he is,” looks him in the eye in the truest sense of the word, and so in the moments when they sing together, they visibly “feel into” each other.

I would add that this gift of intimacy was and is experienced remotely via a screen, a fact that Fred Rogers was very clear about. His understanding that emotional connection can be exchanged across the space of a television screen--what he referred to as “holy ground”--was central to his philosophy and craft.

LEANING INTO THE MOMENT
We respond to the moment, but at the same time we respond on its behalf, we answer for it. A newly-created concrete reality has been laid in our arms; we answer for it. A dog has looked at you, you answer for its glance, a child has clutched your hand, you answer for its touch, a host of men moves around you, you answer for their need. (Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 17)

In this quote philosopher Martin Buber speaks of encounters where need is expressed and care engaged, as instances of the divine, opportunities that we come upon and are drawn to “on their behalf.” This appeal may come from the eyes, the touch, or a felt sense of need but it requires a purposeful, intrinsic, leaning into the moment that everyday life makes available. For Buber, it is essential that these “instances” be understood as immanent, not visitations from on high. What does it mean to “answer” in this way? As a call for help anticipates a response, and a conversation requires it, Buber is talking about an acknowledgement, a confirmation of another’s existential presence in the world.

The Oven Mitt and the Spatula, like other puppets, serve as ideal foils, or mirrors for this kind of relationship as they will not reject us, judge us, or make unreasonable demands. In the case of the Oven Mitt though, his expression at times can be said to verge on the “pathetic,” but the notion of pity would seem to undercut the kind of engagement that Buber describes and Fred Rogers enacts. The pitied is implicitly inferior, as well as weak, even if the rescuer believes they can raise him or her up from their abject state. A question to consider: Can one feel empathy for someone or something that cannot help itself?
Accepting our responsibility to meet the child, the animal, or the stranger where they are, we also identify with their fragility and need, because we recognize things about ourselves in them. This may include the sense that we are, as Franz Kafka might describe it, vulnerable puppets and prisoners of forces beyond our control, in need of solace and dreaming of redemption.

**FACEBOOK**

Social media provides many opportunities for contact with other people’s faces through photography and video, and Facebook is the most extensive network certainly for people of my age. The minute-by-minute opportunity to see what the people in one’s friendship cohort are thinking about, or experiencing, through the insertion of pictures and/or commentary, is both miraculous and banal.

Consider an informal test case of life on Facebook:

On February 6 of this year, my wife and I celebrated our 47th wedding anniversary and our youngest daughter posted this picture on her Facebook page with a loving but sardonic tagline which we thoroughly appreciated. Taken in Iowa City in 1968, it generated several comments (36) and “likes” (73) over a three day period, many from friends of both our daughters (some of whom we know personally) and some from our friends. A number of the comments noted how much our younger daughter looked like my wife, and some spoke to the many years that we had managed to stay married. All of this was gratefully received.
and enjoyed by us, but should we have felt flattered by the attention?

One aspect of this chain of comments and responses could be attributed to a sense of nostalgia: This is what we looked like back then in a fashion appropriate to the styles and values of our peers. But of course our daughter’s friends did not experience this time except through other images. If they felt nostalgia it was for an ideal created by movies, television, and photography including no doubt pictures of their own families. On the other hand, an essential connection to this lineage was through my younger daughter’s resemblance to my wife, so the commentary was also a celebration of her. All hail genetics.

Then, from the perspective of our daughter’s friends, there is also the possibly patronizing notion that we were “cute” versions of parents, accessible and unthreatening. And does the recognition that while we once looked this way and don’t any longer, make the photo sad in its blunt reminder of what is lost? A comfort to the young who are many years away from this kind of celebration?

Photos are undeniably charged points of contact with the lives of others, invested with the touch of time, circumstance, and place. But when we look at an image of a face do we in any sense answer to a “moment” of contact or revelation and take responsibility for an emotional and psychological investment? Or should we just accept that the image is fungible evidence we can share of what we understand, or believe to be true and real?

FILL IN THE BLANK:

In the aftermath of the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the strangulation death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, NY during an arrest for a petty crime, many street protests around the country were built around the phrase (on t-shirts and a twitter hashtag) “BLACK LIVES MATTER.” While this was a rhetorically astute way to connect the specifics of these incidents to the broad history of racism in America, it strongly asserts an ideal of what the public should be addressing and feeling: to acknowledge the “humanity” of African-Americans and to engage a passionate sense of justice and compassion for victims past, present, and future. The repeated appearance of this slogan in the
context of video images from cell phones and twitter feeds roiling the social media ocean was also a reminder that the public manipulation of feelings towards sympathy or guilt was a powerful means to a political end.

**WE ARE ALL___________!**

Casting a fraught shadow over the police shootings were the Moslem jihadist attacks in Paris in December 2014 at the offices of Charlie Hebo magazine and a Jewish kosher supermarket. The emotional cry of “WE ARE ALL CHARLIE HEBDO” (again circulated by hashtags, t-shirts, and signs) was perhaps raised to the level of dark comic absurdity by the front ranks of world leaders participating in a mass solidarity demonstration in Paris. The point here is that the BLANK which can be filled in by whoever we define as WE (victims of oppression, advocates for freedom, sympathetic bystanders, guilty westerners, politicians in need of moral re-branding) carries an enormous burden weighted with both justified fear, and self-serving sentimentality.

Because I can see or project myself inside the circumstances of another’s BLANK, do I empathetically share their loss and pain or just “LIKE” it, echo it as something that I agree with like a Facebook post?

There have recently been published reports that Facebook is exploring the idea of an EMPATHY button to extend the idea of “like” to expressions of sadness or sympathy. Feeling into with a click. The rhetorical presentation of a public mourning—whether through ad hoc memorials of stuffed animals and balloons, or repetitive channeling of news images on a screen—demands attention which often calls out for some idea of healing or “closure,” a word flogged by print and broadcast media when the expression of despair is not a rhetorical option. This wish for resolution is both public and intimate, like an overheard conversation.
Sadness and sympathy for others? Sadness and sympathy for myself? Empathy for the double.

WHY DOES EMPATHY MATTER?

In a 2006 essay I wrote for the American Journal of Psychoanalysis called PRESENCE: THE TOUCH OF THE PUPPET, D.W. Winnicott was a touchstone for thinking about an audience’s identification with puppets and other inanimate things. In Playing and Reality, he describes a seven-year-old boy who is brought into treatment after exhibiting several symptoms of distress including systematically tying up the furniture in his house with string. Winnicott eventually learns that the child has developed a fear of abandonment after a series of events in which his mother was necessarily absent from home—including time spent in the hospital for depression and giving birth to a second child. Winnicott comes to the conclusion that the boy was denying his fear of separation through various symbolic attempts to enact connection. This mapping of the image of the string to the perception or kinetic sensation that it represents, corresponds to the infant’s developing ability to absorb other qualities and levels of description through manipulation and play.

I referred to two objects as being both joined and separated by the string. This is the paradox that I accept and do not attempt to resolve. The baby’s separating-out of the world of objects from the self is achieved only in the absence of a space between, the potential space being filled in the way that I am describing. It could be said that with human beings there can be no separation, only a threat of separation. (Winnicott, 1989, p.108)

It is the destiny of puppets to represent both fragility and resilience. Punch gives and takes the punch for all of us. So it is possible to identify with them, even
while recognizing that removed from the life support of the puppeteer (or the audience’s suspension of disbelief) they might return to being cloth, string and wood (and therefore die) or resume their pragmatic lives as an oven mitt or a spatula. In the end, while the puppeteer controls the physical or metaphorical string, the audience extends its belief by “playing along” and keeping the connection alive. In this sense they answer for the puppet’s need.

To paraphrase Winnicott: people can live with the threat of an unbridgeable gap between lived experience and the sign, but the gap is ultimately unacceptable. That is, we can acknowledge and celebrate our existential autonomy, but cannot give up the need for connection and investment in people and things. Is this the “potential space” where empathy resides? Is empathy what you find when you meet and feel into another person--“where they are”--in the middle of the bridge between separation and connection?

To return to where we began: “The father of the arrow is the thought. How do I expand my reach?”

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Unfreezing Disney’s Snow Queen©: Consolation Through Vulnerability
in a Modern Fairy Tale

Sara Bressi, Ph.D., LSW

Introduction

Film stars and fictional characters are often used as sources of identification for children and adults alike. Anna Friedberg (1990) writes that obsessions with particular characters become “institutionally sanctioned fetishes” that engage the mind’s desire to incorporate a beloved character; to literally and figuratively internalize this ego ideal. This dynamic has been crucial to the success of The Walt Disney Company’s empire in recent decades. Children encountering Disney princess films seek to inhabit the skin of the princess through devouring their clothes, crowns, and jewelry, and other toys and merchandise that help them become a beloved and esteemed heroine.

From a postmodern perspective, and as many psychoanalytically-informed readers of cinema have noted (Gabbard, 2001; Kaplan, 1990), films in particular are compelling because they both look at and are looked at (Kaplan, 1990); they are commentary on the psychological and relational experiences of the audience and at the same time construct viewers’ meaning-making around these experiences. Thus, this form of media represents a powerful canvas for exploring identity construction and developmental crises of the child as well as those of the child within the adult.

In 2013, Disney released the film Frozen©, its newest offering in its princess genre to US audiences and since then, the film has become the highest grossing animated feature of all time. Frozen©’s main character, Queen Elsa, has achieved a cultural resonance that seems to have surprised even the executives at Disney. Frozen© is the first Disney princess film to be written by a woman, namely Jennifer Lee. Although Hans Christian Andersen also receives billing, as
the concept for the film was inspired by his tale *The Snow Queen*, published in the mid-19th century, the film’s narrative bears little resemblance to Andersen’s icy tale.

Frozen©, like all fairy tales, as noted by Bettelheim (1975), tells a story replete with danger, loss, imprisonment, recovery, transformation, escape, and lastly, consolation. However, the film is strikingly compelling because it diverges from the old-school Disney princess tales that obfuscate complexity and multiplicity by presenting heroes and villains that are unidimensional, monolithic and unambiguously good or evil. Likewise, the film *disintegrates* prior Oedipal tropes that were centered around a feminine vulnerability created by an obliterated mother, taken advantage of by a cruel envious older woman, and is resolved through passive submission to a rescuing prince. In these stories, vulnerability is something to overcome (Nikolajeva, 1998).

Instead, Frozen©’s biggest and most profound departure from those other princess stories is that Elsa’s relational consolation and escape from early experiences with neglectful caregivers is achieved through surrender to her vulnerability within the holding environment of loving encounters with her sister. Overcoming for Elsa is achieved in entering the most vulnerable parts of herself through a reparative loving relationship -- and thus the themes of the film are symbolic of the developmental needs of our patients in the consulting room.

While prior Disney princesses oft represented the status quo patriarchal construction of the feminine in the flat, unfailingly cheerful, doe-eyed princess awaiting rescue from Prince Charming, Queen Elsa is far more subversive and breaks these traditional boundaries. Elsa is more representative, and thus intensely identified with, because her character is a complex tapestry of part-objects openly struggling against core anxieties around loss and abandonment. Through Elsa’s magical power of creating icy and snowy projections, her self-parts become visible to the audience over the course of several developmental transition points, including her
transformations from child to adult, from princess to queen, from daughter to orphan, from victim to perpetrator, from villain to hero and from child to mother and back to child. Elsa’s self states as they traverse this developmental plane are literally projected by Elsa for the audience to experience her internal world. These include the sweet bumbling Olaf which represents Elsa’s happy child self, full of adoration and love for her sister; her snow monster that displays the villainess rage of a retaliatory bad object, and her icy castle that manifests the profound stalwart loneliness of a neglected and unattended child.

Early in this narrative, after an innocent yet intense display of love and affection for her sister during play, she is cloistered by her parents, and taught very directly to control her emotional states and subvert her need for nurturance from others in an endeavor to protect the people she loves. Elsa’s mantra of “conceal, don’t feel” creates her existence where she is literally and figuratively imprisoned because of fears surrounding the destructiveness of her intense human emotions. And thus, a perfectionistic control freak is born. Stephen Mitchell (2002) wrote, “the more endangered we feel, the more control we seek, the more illusory are the controls we strive to maintain, the more vitality seeps out of our lives (p. 27)”. Mitchell’s language of “seeping vitality” happens before the audience’s eyes and Elsa morphs from a fun-loving child to a cold, shivering hermit.

Elsa develops a sense of self fueled by a perceived omnipotence over valued objects. As a result, she is thrust into a subjective complementarity in which, as Benjamin (2004) writes, she identifies as either doer or done to. Elsa is deeply afraid and lonely, unable to find in others a recognition of her own developmental needs, and thus, she is unable to feel any safety in the presence of others (Chodorow, 1979). Elsa laments openly in the film about always having to be “the good girl,” and indeed, the audience, in seeing Elsa cry behind her bedroom wall, witnesses the done-to complement to Elsa’s doer-identity -- she is the person who must maintain
the love of her parents by not hurting her sister and by controlling her destructive powerful emotions. And after all that work, she loses her parents anyway, and then is left with only her sister to destroy her or be destroyed.

Elsa’s character illustrates early separation and individuation-related developmental challenges as explained by Winnicott in his discussion of the transition from omnipotence to object usage and by Klein’s proposed shift from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive one that occurs ideally in the context of a good-enough caregiver-child relationship. Winnicott, in his text *Playing and Reality* (1971), defines object usage as different from object relating. He writes, “the thing that there is in between relating and use is the subject’s placing of the object outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent control; that is, the subject’s perception of the object as an external phenomenon, not as a projective entity, in fact recognition of it as an entity in its own right (p. 89).” But of course with object usage one assumes way more risk as it also places the loss of the other outside one’s control. Yes, to love means letting go. And to be loved, means the same.

As Winnicott (1971) envisioned, caregivers survive the destruction of their young children by neither retaliating or withdrawing, but by providing acceptance, and a sense of safety in the face of their destroyers. Elsa’s caregivers withdraw from her and also retaliate (as we can imagine Elsa feels responsible unconsciously for and even punished by their death). In the narrative, the audience treks through Elsa’s enactments of bad caregivers -- she withdraws, retaliates, withdraws again and retaliates in quick succession. As her sister Anna embarks on a provocative act of separation from Elsa in declaring her desire to marry Prince Hans, Elsa comes undone, and becomes the destroyer. She retaliates against Anna for this act of separation, and then withdrawals once again in her escape to the mountain.
On this snowy mountain, the audience actually feels her relief as she lets go of the full force of her emotions in creating her ice castle. She sings, in the film’s famous musical number, that she is “one with the wind and sky”. She submits in total, and melds with the elements, unafraid of her power, and free from containing her conflict. She annihilates her goodness by choosing a lonely, frozen existence. When Anna pursues her one last time to her ice castle, Elsa literally blasts Anna’s heart with an icy projection of her own isolation, loneliness, and rage. She further conjures a snow monster to chase Anna away forever.

As Mitchell highlights, omnipotence sounds nice -- what better way to avoid loss than to be in charge of everything -- but it is ultimately imprisoning and lonely. Conversely, the ability to use an object allows for the subject to achieve separation and individuation, to experience their thoughts and feelings as their own, and to understand that separation from the object will not result in their own demise or the personal destruction of the object. It renders the doer/done-to complement useless. Individuation requires an active incorporation of the good and the bad in an integrated form. It elicits the third space -- a space outside the complementarity of doer or done-to, a space as Benjamin (2004) writes, that “permits desire,” where one can be loving, hating, reap the rewards of relationships, but also suffer losses. This space is vulnerability. This space is where good and bad objects intersect. This space affords surrender (Ghent, 1990).

Ultimately, Elsa’s reparation is delivered through the unconditional love of Anna, who protects her sister with an act of true love, and who refuses to retaliate or withdraw despite Elsa’s desperate attempts to destroy her. In her despair, Elsa’s tears allow Anna to survive. This moment is the culmination of a successful repetition compulsion. Elsa’s tears are felt by Anna. In other words, Elsa destroys, but Anna survives this destruction. This allows for Elsa to experience vulnerability in the context of a safe and loving other -- and to finally experience
herself as both good and bad all at once. With Elsa’s tears, her developmental fear of loss and her disavowal of her vulnerability melt away.

**Conclusion**

Amid all the noise of an ever-expanding world of media, Frozen© further constructs the discourse of vulnerability and its relationship to gender, separation and individuation, and developmental loss. More specifically, the film illuminates the internal world of girls and women of our time who are constrained by a different outcome of the patriarchy-namely a widespread relational press to *deny* their vulnerability. It highlights the dangerousness of a cultural shift towards the message of, “You can be anything you want to be, as long as you are good at everything.” Elsa’s story is a cautionary tale of the pressures modern-day princesses feel to be perfect, restrained and contained under an avalanche of expectations to *lean in* and do it all.

The processes of letting go of an archaic sense of omnipotence in our relationships, tolerating ambiguity, and vulnerability, and of internally reconciling good and bad internalized objects are themes that resonate in clinical work with people of all ages. After thinking so much about Elsa, I realized why: She is everywhere! In the consulting room, we consistently encounter the adolescent girl or the adolescent girl inside the adult whose goodness seems elusive because she is too busy with murderous rage. Or perhaps we might call to mind the hyper-controlled patient in midlife who is longing for nurturing and a recognition of her own needs, but is so angry at everyone all the time for not doing things her way.

Through this depiction of Disney’s snow queen and her relational field, we are all confronted with somewhat of an atypical princess story that deals directly with the complexities of a developing self and our basic need to be visible, separate, differentiated people that are both good and bad all at once. As such, the developmental themes of Frozen© discussed above allow for this fairy tale to tap into fantasy about the power of our emotions, the danger of losing those
most precious, and the ways in which these things are internally managed and overcome. Through Queen Elsa we directly encounter the power of a loving dyad in the creation of self, and the intergenerational fall out of frozen failed situations of caregiving. As therapists, it challenges us to recognize and experience in another way how the vulnerability we inhabit and seek in our patients, in the context of a dyadic relationship, is important for grief processes to occur, as well as for icy castles to be shattered. We seek vitality in frozen ground.

In these respects, Frozen© breaks the ice that has crusted over the genre of the princess movie. The very imagery of frozen water, and melting ice, conjures an acceptance of constant transformation in an uncertain world; namely that everything moves between numerous states, or places of being, and has the capacity to change shape under the right conditions.

References


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Immigration and its discontents:

Challenges and tensions between vulnerability and growth

Andrea Rihm

We live in a time of marked fluidity. Some call it hypermodernity (Lipovetsky, 2006), some liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) while others yet have argued that migration is one of the defining features of our time (Esses, Deaux, Lalonde & Brown, 2010; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). In fact, it is estimated that one in every thirty people does not live in their country of origin, representing the greatest number recorded in history (Esses et al., 2010; OIM, 2013; Ravanal, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, Bang y Kim, 2010) For many, life—and the continuous search for better life conditions—translates thus into a series of “comings and goings” (Núñez, 2005).

The sociologist Eva Ilouz (2007) has argued that one of the greatest changes psychoanalysis introduced in our culture was ushering in a new emotional style; one that incorporated the possibility to rethink and reformulate the position of the self in relation with its own past. One could argue that immigration does the same.

Immigration confronts migrants with the uncertainty of an open-ended destiny, one that needs to be redefined within the frame of new cultural referents. Immigration challenges people to rebuild a sense of identity, to change and to integrate into a new culture, while simultaneously developing a complex process of mourning the loss of their

1 The study in which this presentation is based received support from CONICYT/FONDAP/15130009
culture of origin (Lijtmaer, 2001) and still remaining attached to their previous history in order to maintain some sense of personal coherence (Akhtar, 1995; Arfuch, 2010, Camilleri & Malewska-Peyre, 1997; DeFina, 2003, Grinberg & Grinberg, 1996, Tummala-Narra, 2009). Adding even more complexity to this already complicated scenario, all these challenges must be faced without having their former social network available and in the midst of an unknown environment, which makes it more difficult to display previously successful strategies to deal with stressful situations.

Winnicott (1971) posited that culture works as a liaison between past, present and future, constituting a transitional space that is shared by individuals and the community where they belong. Thus, culture provides a sense of continuity through individual development, operating as background. In the same vein, Boulanger (2004) has characterized culture as the familiar context where persons “immerse” every day. Therefore, the backdrop offered by culture is often taken for granted and goes unquestioned and naturalized. As Yi (2014) argued, we tend to live in a “culture-blind” fashion most of the time. But immigration disrupts this sense of continuity and calls into question precisely what seemed “obvious” before, because it brings to the fore the experience of difference (Ipp, 2013). Immigration can set the stage for a period of great vulnerability.

Maybe because of the magnitude of all these changes and challenges, many descriptions and analysis of migratory experiences are quite somber, leaving aside its brighter dimensions; dimensions that often relate with the experience of cultural opening and personal growth (Akhtar, 1999; Bobowik, 2013).
This article intends to reflect on how this tension between increased vulnerability and self-growth unfolds, often marked by experiences of profound inner contradictions. To do so, it will draw on the experiences of Ana and Jaime\(^2\), two Colombian young adults who migrated to Chile in their early twenties. It will be argued that – despite what cultural trends might mandate regarding autonomy, agency and fortitude – in their cases, the acceptance of the vulnerability and uncertainty triggered by immigration was key for them to become increasingly comfortable with the overall experience, and to attain meaning and growth from it. Their experiences also show that immigration played a major role in their processes of repositioning in relation to cultural norms of class and gender, in a way that allowed them to gain greater personal freedom.

Ana and Jaime are both professionals, and in Colombia they belonged to the upper-middle class. Their personal safety was not endangered at the time of their migration, and they chose to do it for financial reasons: Ana migrated hoping to develop professionally, and Jaime migrated with his parents due to economic hardships related with the political crisis in Colombia in the early two-thousands. From various angles they could be categorized as privileged, and hardly exemplify what one envisions as migrants facing conditions of social vulnerability. This particularity often has meant that others have called into question the legitimacy of their migratory project, and confronted them with the question, “Why don’t you go back to your country and fight to improve the situation there?”

\(^2\) Names have been changed to protect confidentiality
For them, the process of becoming migrants has also meant the process of embracing their decision to leave Colombia, and authorizing themselves to stay away. They chose to stay in Chile despite the fact that they could return. And it is in that decision, constantly renewed, where the interplay between vulnerability and growth takes place. Not even their privileged situation in Colombia could protect them from feeling the hit of immigration and the loss of a sustained sense of who they were. Vulnerability unavoidably sneaked in. As Jaime expressed:

“It’s like someone removes the floor from under you, like someone takes away that protective thing..., uhmm... which is like to be left unprotected, like to exit a shell, like some of your..., of your protection is taken away, that which makes you be you.” (B, p. 64)

The loss of that “protective shell” entails the loss of certainty, of the cultural “know how” of the implicit knowledge of how to manage and how to be. As Ana put it:

“You arrive here and..., you are no one really..., and you have to start creating a path, start..., like to find your way [...] it’s like to be thrown at a place blindfolded..., to see what you do, where you go..., that’s how it was.” (A, pp. 28, 144)

This profound sense of loss was something they had not weighted or fully anticipated. They had experienced the departure from Colombia as a traumatic moment, despite the hopes they harbored for the future, but what struck them the most was how different culture felt upon their arrival. They had not expected that despite sharing such a significant degree of cultural heritage (including the language) both countries could
embrace such different ways of life. Santiago struck them as a socially fragmented city, highly classist and turned inward, where people barely talked to their neighbors and moved among their own circle, where celebrations were always indoors and involved talking more than music or dance. They felt that the sense of community they had experienced with their neighbors in Colombia was no longer available, and that somehow, culture did not offer a sense of protection in times of crises anymore. They described feeling profoundly lonely and many times disoriented and lost. They also experienced different forms of discrimination based on their nationality. Thus, for them immigration was an emotional process that could hardly be conceptualized in clear and simple terms. On the contrary, it was inhabited by experiences and emotions of inner turmoil and contradiction. As Jaime said:

“For me it’s like… too many crossed emotions, when I think of the migration issue, my migration it’s like I suddenly feel so… so… like sometimes I feel like… like…like I see the entire thing being so complicated. When we first arrived… lots of discrimination. So I feel something very angry, but it also happens to me that Chile represents like a rebirth and many positive things too, so it’s like a thing, like with mixed feelings.” (A, p. 77)

This experience of not being able to come to terms with one stable personal position regarding immigration appeared to be unsettling for Jaime, but also expressive of the impossibility to reduce the complexity of the experience. Immigration presents itself as a process that cannot be understood in dichotomous terms of either/or. Rather, it calls for a perspective that can suspend judgment and tolerate being present in all those
multiple experiences, including experiences of increased vulnerability. In this regard, it is possible to think that for Ana and Jaime immigration lifts the veil -- or the illusion -- of having a unitary sense of self, making clearly visible the contingency of their identities. Or, to use Adrienne Harris’ (2009) concept, how their identities were softly assembled, and how they could be something else, someone else.

Jaime and Ana felt that being no one was challenging and threatening in terms of their identity, but it was also an opportunity. As Jaime expressed it:

“The fact of being able to leave a country and enter a place where nobody knows you, enables you to...like to reinvent yourself or to experience those...those aspects that you hadn’t experienced much.” (B, p. 20)

Their narratives converged at this point. They both felt that their identity was stumbling; they were questioning their previous ways of life and constructions of themselves. Distance from their homeland had given them a new perspective on things, and that was challenging but not entirely bad, because it had offered them the possibility to “meet” new aspects of self, or to become reacquainted with some they had become estranged from in the past. In the words of Jaime:

“In my identity appeared a more political side, more rebellious. I don’t participate in any political party...but my critical side, more political, more reflexive [appeared], more like...identifying with social demands [...] I feel that over there the issue of, of, of war, to attack guerrilla, the paramilitary issue...is like...even though I wasn’t close to it, but what was on the news, is like there is no possibility
to think and reflect because it is like everything is happening so fast and there is no ‘stop and look’ and I felt that here in Chile I was being able to do that: stop and look at what Colombia was, what I was [...] I connected with childhood stuff... I went back to being a child in terms of creativity, of, of being reflexive.” (A, p. 334)

For Jaime and Ana, immigration opened up a space to take some distance from previously expected roles related with class and gender, which in turn was experienced as a profoundly needed step to embrace who they were and develop a more authentic relationship with themselves and others. Jaime, after being a medical student in Colombia decided to transfer to a social sciences program, explaining:

“Had I stayed in Colombia, I would have studied something more applied, something that could give me money [...] like if one had grown up in a certain school, from that school most likely you would go to a certain university [...] but I feel that here one can modify that...that linearity or, like, that predictability or, like, like what is expected from you because you belong to a certain social class.” (A, p. 338; B, p. 22)

Ana also felt that being away from her country, her family and their expectations had given her the opportunity to leave appearances behind and start living with more personal freedom:

“It is incredible that house and home are here. Not in Colombia. I feel more like a tourist in Colombia. Here I feel calm. That’s the vision now, like the safe part here [...] because I was finally able, because I finally could do my things here. Grow up,
develop, get to know, be crushed, move forward, get a job here, have a life here. Maybe a life that I couldn’t have had there because I had to keep up appearances, try to please my family... things like that, you know? Like to carry that weight all the time, that weight to be signaled, all waiting to see what was I doing, what I didn’t do... not here. Here I am calm. Here I am myself. And that’s key.” (B, pp. 88-90)

These narratives show how for Ana and Jaime, immigration was closely related not only with multiple losses (which were undeniable) but also with cultural opening and self-growth. Their stories convey how, at some point in their immigration trajectories, more than struggling to hang on to their previous sense of self, they embraced the vulnerability of not knowing and took it as an opportunity to enrich their experiences of self. This does not mean to completely let go, or to relinquish who they were, but rather, to embrace a multiple-hyphenated identity. As Ana sharply expressed when reflecting on her process of transition to life in Chile “obviously it doesn’t mean that I have to stop being Colombian!” (B, p. 141).

However, the capacity to hold on to tension in favor of self-growth that they have developed is not always shared by people or institutions they come in contact with. Ana, for instance, cannot be legally Colombian and Chilean at the same time, at least not without staying in Chile for a number of years without leaving the country and visiting her family in Colombia. She feels that eventually she will have to choose. Jaime already chose to become a Chilean national, and so, his legal status falls short to reflect his identity. This represents a failure of recognition, one that is not only experienced in relation with
institutions, but also with people. In fact, they have found that people have difficulty accepting their experience of not being either/or but both and that they are called to define themselves in simpler terms. As Jaime expressed:

“I nationalized Chilean, but I feel that I will be never recognized as Chilean whether it be because one never stops having an accent [...] but it is an issue that is...is hard for one to integrate [...] now I feel integrated, I feel validated, fine, comfortable, but is like that when people ask you ‘where are you from?’ it’s not easy...like for me, the most honest would be ‘I’m Chilean-Colombian’ ‘I’m Colombian-Chilean’ but I know is not something others can accept much.” (A, p. 338).

Following Harris’ (2009) ideas, it is possible to think that for Jaime and Ana the migratory experience opened the possibility to embrace a multiplicity of self-states and that, by doing so, unavoidably installed the notion of difference within themselves which, in turn, favored greater reflexivity. It is as if they had become more able to “stand in the spaces” as Bromberg (1998) conceptualizes it, maintaining “the capacity to feel like one self while being many” (p. 274). However, as Jaime’s words remind us, their ability to embrace multiplicity often is not mirrored or recognized by the people and institutions they encounter in everyday life. Their experience represents a challenge for recognition and reminds us that, as Judith Butler (1999) posited, the expectancy of identity to be coherent responds to “frameworks of intelligibility” culturally defined, reflective of power dynamics more than of subjective experiences. From her perspective, the existence of cases that do not adapt to these rules shows the limits and regulatory purposes of these frameworks of intelligibility, revealing the possibility of alternatives.
In this regard, the concrete experiences of Ana, Jaime many other immigrants show the gap between theoretical developments and everyday life. As our theories move towards greater acceptance and appreciation of multiplicity and diversity, questioning the ideal of identity integration as unity and coherence, many of our cultural practices still embrace that ideal. If the experience of social recognition is key to achieving a sense of well-being, as many authors throughout the years have argued, and to be “feeling at home in one’s body,” to use Erikson’s (1946, p. 74) phrase, wouldn’t the social call for choosing between either/or self-states be a failure of recognition? How could we expect immigrants to hold on to the tension and complexity they have attained if that finds no resonance in the culture at large? Listening to the experiences of Ana and Jaime made me question how long they would be able to sustain their position before closing down the questions and shutting down some dimensions of self in favor of an easier “adaptation.” In this regard, we can hardly expect individuals to stay in a position of not always knowing, embracing vulnerability and uncertainty if society does not move in the same direction. Otherwise, we would be asking individuals – and maybe their therapists and significant others – to individually work through a discontent that goes beyond them, therefore privatizing it. Immigration makes evident the softly assembled nature of individual identity, but also of the host culture, showing that different values and ways of life are possible. There resides the source of the fear it can provoke, but also, the greater opportunity it offers.
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GIVING DEEPLY TRAUMATIZED REFUGEES THE SPACE THEY NEED IN WHICH TO RECONSTRUCT THE BOUNDARY THEY HAVE LOST BETWEEN REALITY AND FANTASY, WHILE THEY FACE LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BARRIERS.
Abstract

Germany now faces a critical issue regarding how to deal with the high numbers of refugees coming from Asia and Africa; nearly 40% of them are deeply traumatized and in need of urgent psychological treatment. Cultural differences as well as language differences turn any psychological treatment with this vulnerable population into a challenge. Moreover, due to the increased number of refugees fleeing to Germany, many psychosocial centres have been struggling to attend these clients’ needs in an effective and efficient way – sometimes leading to the necessity of a short-term therapy which cannot address their full needs.

In this context, psychoanalysis per se seems largely unpractical to be effectively applied to this vulnerable population, despite the valuable features it generally offers in the treatment of trauma. This paper brings an innovative technique grounded in the psychoanalytic theory of transitional objects– the use of a transitional object - where the transference work can be focused upon. The transitional object helps to facilitate communication and assists with the psychological stabilization of traumatized refugees, as it allows the reconstruction of the boundary between reality and fantasy - lost during the experience of the traumatic event. This process enables the clients to deal with their internal world without fearing the splitting and disorganization of their internal world, therefore being able to internalize the transference work.

Keywords: communication, transitional object, trauma, interpreter
The refugee crisis in Europe has drawn attention to those who have been struggling to feel safe and to rebuild their lives in a ‘dream country’. Migration always embodies three phases: pre-migration, migration and post-migration, which together may result in a series of adverse experiences. Prior to migration and during the migration process, refugees may experience traumatic events such as war and violence, followed by torture and persecution. Following migration, refugees are confronted with other challenges. Issues playing a key role in contributing to other levels of distress include the length of the relocation, the degree of similarity between the home country and the country to which they are fleeing, language differences, and access to social support systems, employment, and educational opportunities, as well as acceptance by the new culture. From the need to leave home to the perils of migration, refugees and asylum seekers experience an extremely high prevalence of psychiatric disorders, usually depression and/or post-traumatic stress disorder – PTSD (Slobodin & Jong, 2015). Nearly 40% of refugees are deeply traumatized (Bo Søndergaard, 2013; Burnett & Peel, 2001) and are thus in need of urgent psychological support. Nevertheless, the psychological centres in Europe are overcrowded and are unable to assist all of the refugees. Given the length of time and the expense of psychoanalytic treatment, it would not be feasible to apply psychoanalysis to such a large number of vulnerable people, despite its valuable contribution to the treatment of trauma. Recent studies report positive outcomes for short-term interventions, like narrative exposure therapy (NET) and cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), when it comes to reducing trauma-related symptoms. Nevertheless, hardly any clients are in fact free from PTSD at the end of such interventions. So far, an intervention cannot merely focus on isolated symptoms, since other dimensions of personality, such as improvements in relationships, and social/cultural identity, should equally be included as indicators of intervention (Slobodin & Jong, 2015).
This essay proposes a novel form of intervention which is grounded in the principles of psychoanalysis. It focuses on stabilization-work as a safe way to engage with this vulnerable population - the use of transitional phenomena to build communication while reconstructing the boundary between reality and fantasy which is lost during the experience of the traumatic event.

**The Psychoanalytical Theoretical Background**

In 1895, the term ‘trauma’ is presented in Freud’s work as an experience that may be caused by either a single central event or by the amalgamation of several partly traumatic events (Freud, 1895). With trauma implicated in the aetiology of neuroses, treatment intervention was based on catharsis as well as on the psychological processing of traumatic experiences. In 1920, Freud conceived trauma as an excess of external stimuli which overwhelmed the protective barrier against overstimulation, therefore causing a lasting disturbance in ego functions, including a loss of ego integrity (Freud, 1920). Later, he understood trauma as a balance between internal and external danger (Freud, 1926b) – the ego was assaulted from within (instinctual excitations), as well as from without (adverse experience).

The features of an individual’s reaction to the traumatic experience are grounded in feelings of helplessness, which in turn are rooted in the trauma experienced at birth, alongside the loss of the ‘containing object’ (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989). Unquestionably, immigration consists of leaving behind one’s roots and moving in search of something still unknown and unclear. For this reason, a deprived refugee, metaphorically speaking, may be compared to what Winnicott referred to as the ‘deprived child’. Without doubt, any form of immigration not only involves a withdrawal from the ‘mother country’ for the individual, but also a loss of something good that has been positive in one’s life up to a certain point in time. In most
cases, the withdrawal might last for a period of time which is longer than the containment feeling can be kept alive (Winnicott, 1971, 1984). When that occurs, the transitional space needed for ‘interplay’ between the culture of origin and the new culture (between the past and the future) remains restricted. Indeed, the new country obviously will be unable to fulfil all idealized expectations built on the losses left behind. Hence, the feeling of not being contained is to a certain extent real and not just phantasy. Due to different circumstances and depending on each individual’s personal experience, this can also trigger the feeling of not belonging anywhere – the feeling of being an outsider (Franieck & Günter, 2010) – which in turn challenges ego cohesion (Freud, 1895). Undoubtedly, by undergoing adverse situations, refugees and asylum seekers will probably experience their phantasies in a concrete, non-symbolic way that will inhibit abstract thoughts and symbol formations, while sparking fears of ego disintegration and disillusion. Consequently, the boundaries between the inner world and the external world (phantasies and external/real objects) become blurred, and the ego feels threatened (Caper, 1997; Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989). Symbolization necessarily arises when separation from the object, ambivalence, guilt, and loss can be experienced and tolerated – (symbolization is used to overcome loss). Indeed, symbols are needed not only in communication with the external world, but also in internal communication (Winnicott, 1984).

"The capacity to communicate with oneself by using symbols is, I think, the basis of verbal thinking—which is the capacity to communicate with oneself by means of words. Not all internal communication is verbal thinking, but all verbal thinking is an internal communication by means of symbols—words." (Segal, 1957: 395-396)

Nevertheless, language issues present a challenge for refugees and asylum seekers. Indeed, often compelled to cope with mourning processes without experiencing a container object their ability to use symbolization might be severely diminished, bringing about a lack
of communication - one of the key issues in the onset of psychosis. Needless to say, in any form of migration, a pattern of factors emerges which triggers anxiety and sorrow: individuals are forced to cope with mourning processes over and over again while facing future uncertainties. Immigration seems, therefore, to put an individual’s whole identity at risk (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989), since some values from the previously introjected cultural ideal have to be sacrificed and/or altered (Franieck & Günter, 2010). Metaphorically speaking, this experience is almost an act of regression towards a primitive state where self-symbolization and language skills still need to be developed.

In this context, a psychoanalytically based intervention would still be the most suitable therapy for this particular population, since the analytical process is per se a process of communication. However, language issues pose another challenge since an interpreter has to be present. Dealing with a triangular relationship leads to an unusual psychoanalytical setting. The interpreter needs to be integrated as an element belonging to the setting (it is often the case that he/she is a symbol of security for the refugee), however he/she does not belong to the client’s internal world, nor have an impact on it. Thus, the psychotherapist must be able to turn this triangular setting into a scenario in which the therapist is the leader (group psychology is being referred to here and not group psychotherapy). There are two things that need to be dealt with in this regard. The first is related to the triangular setting where the therapist should remain aware of the fact that the client and the interpreter share a similar cultural background - in most cases, they share the features of interdependent cultures (Franieck & Günter, 2010) - and respect it. In other words, the therapist needs to not only be able to perceive him/herself as the third person in a triangular relationship, but also to master his/her ambivalence (hatred/jealousy) while rediscovering his/her personal impulses (Winnicott, 1958). In doing so, the client can identify him/herself with the therapist through feelings of loneliness – a therapeutic bond can be constructed. The second aspect that needs
to be dealt with is the immediate relationship between client and psychotherapist, which is independent from the interpreter – and is the focus of analysis, with its verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. “This means that the recognition of projective identification is central to the understanding of the psychoanalytical material ... The client does not only express himself through words. He also uses actions, and sometimes words and actions. The analyst listens, observes and feels the client’s communications. He scrutinises his own responses to the client, trying to understand the effect the client’s behaviour has on himself, and he understands this as a communication from the client.” (Riesenberg-Malcolm, 1999: 39-40). “…[T]he analyst must have the capacity to be affected by the client’s projection- to form countertransference- in order to be sensitive to the client. But he must also be able to distance himself from the projection, so he may observe the countertransference ... The analyst is indeed in a triangular relationship with the client, on the one hand, and his internal object, on the other” (Caper,1997:48). Once again, coping with a triangular relationship is a key part of the process. Although it may appear that in this setting with clients who are refugees or asylum seekers there is an analytic dyad, there is in fact an analytic triad. Metaphorically speaking, the immigration process evokes quite similar psychological responses to those found in the Oedipus complex, since when immigrating one has to abandon one’s ‘mother country’ in favour of a ‘new object’.

Creating a potential space as a technique

This technique aims to offer a potential (safe & structured) space (Winnicott, 1971, 1984), while trying to rescue symbolizations. Clients might feel their traumatic and awful phantasies are condoned as well as contained, whilst they also undergo a process of individuation. An external object, such as a picture with very specific themes and drawings, is presented as a neutral point of communication between therapist and client (Winnicott,

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1 It is no wonder that the Oedipus tragedy begins with Oedipus’ immigration.
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1984). All communication between the client and the therapist will be done via this object and will not be based on direct intervention\(^2\). So, the client’s internal communication is projected onto the external object, while the therapist tries not only to understand what is being said, but also focuses on his/her counter-transference. The interpretation needs to be less verbal, short and more concrete, which could, for example, be achieved by representing what the therapist understands through a picture. Also, the transference needs to be understood as an emotional relationship experienced in the present - that is, the “here-and-now” \(^3\) (Riesenberg-Malcolm, 1999). Two examples of this external object are presented below:

- **Discussion**

The use of this technique has shown some improvement in the client’s emotional state after 10 months of treatment, based on fortnightly sessions\(^4\). Although the clients reported that they still had some PTSB symptoms, such as physical reactions, difficulty concentrating, and difficulty falling or staying asleep they also reported that they felt more self-assured in their

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\(^2\)One needs to keep in mind that due to what they have experienced, most of the time, any direct interventions might trigger mistrust as well as shame. Mistrust between therapist and client can reinforce an alliance between client and interpreter, which changes the setting.

\(^3\)The aim is not to give interpretations of the client’s past history; since this could evoke more flashbacks as well as intense feeling of distress. The “here-and-now” needs to be worked out as an expression of the client’s past in multiple transmutations (Riesenberg-Malcolm, 1999).

\(^4\)A fortnightly session is not enough; however, in the current context it is a luxury.
daily lives. Of all the clients who underwent this technique, only one abruptly interrupted a session (due to aggressive behaviour) and another two forgot the appointment on one occasion. Apart from these incidents, there were no other absences, no delays to the session, and no interruptions. In some cases, the clients were able to spontaneously talk about their traumatic event without fearing their ego disintegration. Depressive clients who used to wear only black clothes in the end came to the session wearing colourful clothing. Impulsive clients who used to leave the session began to stay for the whole session. By the end of the treatment, most of the clients could understand my “verbal thinking” before the interpreter was able to translate it; however, they still depended on the interpreter to express their own “verbal thinking”. With regards to the interpreter’s role in this context, this technique gives more freedom to the therapist, since the basis for communication between client and therapist takes place using the external object.

A major concern for this technique is that the therapist needs to be able to come into contact with, as well as be receptive to, the client’s feelings, wishes, and phantasies (including the traumatic ones) without being dominated by them – neither splitting, denying, nor projecting them (Caper, 1997) – which is quite demanding. Indeed, the focus of the work, unlike the typical analytic session, must be based on a triadic relationship. It is true that most refugees and asylum seekers suffer from psychiatric disorders due to what they have experienced. Nevertheless, despite these adverse circumstances and traumatic events, they are all survivors, which suggests that they might have some singular psychological resources. I understand that many are unaware of their own potential. From my own point of view, the primary purpose of any kind of intervention is to help them to rediscover their potential, their sense of ‘self’.

5 Around 20 clients. 6 This technique is also very useful for pacifying personality disorder clients during crisis intervention. 7 In practice, a precondition for this technique is that the therapist needs to have undergone an analytic treatment and/or is closely supervised.
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The Vulnerable Self and the Vulnerable Community: A Challenge/Problem for Psychoanalysis?

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“The call for community is heard everywhere today—in national politics, in the academic disciplines, in education and even in business” (Noddings, 1996, p.245).

What is “community,” why do so many of us yearn for it, and why should psychoanalysts be concerned with it? This paper proposes that psychoanalysis for too long has under-theorized and underdeveloped its repertoire of interventions with regard to community and large human groups. We propose that people unconsciously experience a sense of social melancholia (Bermudez, 2013) in response to an unmet longing and the inability to mourn the loss or absence of community. Furthermore, we present theory and scientific evidence (evolutionary theory; neuroscience; psychoanalytic theory and emergent practice; and social psychology experiments) to support the argument that the human self will remain dangerously and traumatically vulnerable if we do not address the larger traumatically vulnerable human community. The paper distinguishes between two experiences of human vulnerability: optimal human vulnerability [related to Stolorow’s (2011) existential/ontological insecurity], which allows people to care for themselves, each other, and their overall community; and traumatic vulnerability, which has been engendered by experiences that have entered into the realm of catastrophic trauma [based on Hopper’s (2012) differentiation between catastrophic trauma and strain trauma]. Finally, we will describe several proposed community-level psychoanalytic interventions (“Social Dreaming”; “Open Space Dialogues”; “Future Search and Discovery”), and report on the results of some of these interventions as well as on the insights derived from psychoanalytically-informed focus group-type discussions on the meaning of “community’.

The conference theme, “Vulnerability and its Discontents,” for which this paper was prepared is an allusion to Freud’s famous essay on “Civilization and its Discontents” (Freud, 1930). In this seminal paper, Freud outlines what he perceives as the core sources of conflict between the individual and civilization. Among other arguments, Freud proposes that religion and religious feeling (“oceanic feeling” of “wholeness, limitlessness and eternity”) is primordially generated by infantile helplessness and “the longing for the father”—hence the most primal vulnerability creates a yearning for a protective authority, culminating in civilization’s authority and regulation.

The yearning for and the ambivalence toward human communities are obvious to anyone who cares to look at our species and its global situation: we are all required to belong to some large socio-political group. The United Nations has 193 member countries—and still within those national boundaries we have myriads of ethnic and political sub-units: there are active separatist movements in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, South America, and Oceana! We belong to groups of many dimensions and functions: we belong to multiple identity groups: male, female, Black, White, Latino, Asian, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, generational cohorts (Millennials vis-à-vis Baby Boomers). Most of our daily lives are organized by work groups of varying sizes: for profit and non-profit corporations. As a psychoanalyst I have to ask: why has psychoanalysis, given the universal embeddedness of all human development and functioning in the context of
some human community, not had a robust theory and therapeutic practice regarding large groups, communities, and inter-group relations? Psychoanalysis, with some exceptions (Bain, 1999; Fraher, 2005; Hopper, 2003) has not been much influenced by Freud’s (1990) expansive vision:

“The use of analysis for the treatment of neuroses is only one of its applications; the future will perhaps show that it is not the most important one... It would be wrong to sacrifice all the other applications to this single one” (p. 248).

This paper is an attempt to propose a psychoanalytic path forward. Although Freud’s intuition about human vulnerability seems to point our collective psychoanalytic finger in the right direction, he was disoriented, and so was subsequent psychoanalytic theory and practice, as Walls (2004) has cogently outlined, by the socio-political currents of his day and the biased reading of Darwinian evolutionary theory.

Our paper proposes to illuminate aspects of this seeming paradox between social regulation and our desire for and conflict with it. To that end, the paper will provide an overview of Twemlow’s (Twemlow & Paren, 2006) theory and practice of “community psychoanalysis”; a critique of the concept of “applied psychoanalysis”; and our own evolving views of “community psychoanalysis” (Bermudez, 2013), which includes a summary of an emerging repertoire of contemporary methods for interventions with large systems: “Social Dreaming” (Lawrence, 2003); “Open Space” (Owen, 1997); and “Future Search” (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995). We assert that these interventions are informed by intersubjectivity (Benjamin, 2004; Stolorow, 1997; Stolorow & Atwood, 1992); psychoanalytic complexity theory (Coburn, 2014); and Twemlow’s community psychoanalytic “Mode III” concepts—“psychoanalysis of the community” instead of “psychoanalysis in the community” (Rudden & Twemlow, 2013).

In contrast to Freud’s individualistic understanding of Darwinism, our current understanding of evolutionary process provides two revolutionary concepts, “multi-level selection theory” and “reciprocal altruism” (Trivers, 1971): natural selection works at multiple levels simultaneously, the group level and the individual level. According to numerous contemporary social psychologists, philosophers, and evolutionary theorists and biologists (Haidt, 2012; Hauer, 2006; Greene, 2013; Pagel, 2012), our species has two systems or modules of motivation: an individualistic or egoistic system and a group or communal module. We are thoroughly communal beings whose social and psychological identities are forged in an exquisitely nuanced and complex interaction between community/culture and biology/genes, between “self” and “group self”.

Kohut (1976) had a profound intuition into these two aspects of our being when he proposed that we possessed a “group self,” alongside an individual or personal self. Although Kohut’s “group self” concept has been largely neglected by the psychoanalytic community, we believe it is a profoundly rich contribution, with links to several other theorists (Bion, 1961; Lichtenberg et al., 2011 Winnicott, 1971). The “group self” seems to reside in similar psycho-social territory that “self-object” does: it is both self and non-self, bearing enormous resemblance to Winnicott’s “transitional object” and “transitional space” (Winnicott, 1971). The group self identifies with the group (“group self-object”), and throughout the life cycle creates, modifies, and struggles with the vicissitudes of self-esteem, cohesiveness, and continuity, deeply linked to group membership. Here are two pioneers in the application of Kohut’s “group self” concept:
“The boundaries between the personal self and the group self are vague….One is part of the other and they dip far down into each other’s unconscious structures. When the group is shattered so too will the individual be” (Karterud, 1998, p. 88).

“An ordinary understanding of an enhanced group-self experience might be the experience of Boston Red Sox fans after ‘their team’ won the World Series in 2004. More simply, group-self might be enhanced by feeling pride during the performance of the Star-Spangled Banner. Alternatively, depletion or fragmentation of the group-self might be reflected in the experience of one’s country at war. Initially people, based on agreement with country’s goals and ideals, identify with the war efforts as expressions of their group-self. However, “the group-self may be shattered with various kinds of failures to live up to ideals or to achieve goals” (Stone, 2009, p. 42).

Psychoanalytic “motivational systems theory” (Lichtenberg et al., 2011) proposes an “affiliation motivational system” which seems to be an attempt to address our groupishness. I prefer the term, “communal motivational system,” to emphasize the primacy of “communal motivation”; “affiliation motivational system” seems to suggest that individuals choose to affiliate. Our central argument is that all essential human development occurs and is generated in a communal context: human vulnerability and inter-dependence requires an existential belongingness. We are primordially communal.

The sociologist, Robert Putnam (2000), has been the contemporary voice which most eloquently articulated the dangerous loss of a sense of community in American life. He has proposed that there has been a reduction in “social capital” in our communities, generating numerous social problems because of the loss of social cohesion. However, there have been thinkers throughout the twentieth century, spanning the political spectrum who have decried the loss of community and outlined the dangerous implications for humanity. Here is a sampling:

The conservative sociologist, Robert Nisbet (1953), declared in his prescient book, “The Quest for Community,” that the yearning for community was a powerful factor in the development of totalitarian societies, which exploited that existential and psycho-biological motivation.

Towards the other end of the political spectrum, we discover similar sentiments from the progressive psychoanalysts, Paul Wachtel (1983):

“In all eras people must find means to reassure themselves in the face of their finiteness and mortality. We are ultimately helpless to a far greater degree than we dare admit. Our fragility before the forces of nature…as well as the certainty that death is our ultimate earthly destiny, are unbearable to face without some means of consoling ourselves and of giving meaning and purpose to our lives…the sense of belonging to a community, once provided that for most people. Our present stress on growth and productivity is, I believe, intimately related to the decline in rootedness. Faced with the loneliness and vulnerability that come with deprivation of a securely encompassing community, we have sought to quell the vulnerability through our possessions. When we can buy nice new things, when we look around and see our homes well stocked and well equipped, we feel strong and expansive rather than small and endangered” (p. 65).
[Similarly, we’ve proposed that the “American Dream” is a “cultural complex” (Kimbles, 2014) with which Americans grapple with existential and traumatic vulnerability, often unsuccessfully, resulting in a social malaise—a “social melancholia” (Bermudez, 2013.)]

And still another voice—this one further back in our history—the early twentieth century: Dr. James Jackson Putnam, an American psychologist, who befriended Freud on his visit to America in 1909. Despite his admiration for Freud’s theories, Putnam challenged Freud’s individualistic emphasis. In a letter to Freud, he wrote:

“The point I wish to make is this: the individual is not to be thought of as existing alone, but should be considered as an integral part of the community in which he lives and eventually of what must remain for him an ideal or idealized community. The great schism in everyone’s life is that involved in the instinctive attempt to set one’s self up as having a right to stand alone. The interests of the community are implied in one’s motives and emotions…I feel sure that we should agree virtually as regards these propositions, and so far as I can see the only difference between us would concern the fact that I believe community obligations and interests to be deeply interwoven with the personal interests, and yet at the same time so deeply hidden, in many cases, that I believe they should be considered as forming a part of repressed thoughts” (LaMothe, 2013, p. 2).

This is an extraordinary manifesto from an American psychologist concerning the interpenetration of the personal and the group: it presages many contemporary and even post-modern ideas: for example, “foundation matrix” (Foulkes, 1984); “social unconscious” (Weinberg & Hopper, 2011); “unconscious normative process” (Layton, 2006). It seems safe to say that Freud’s individualistic ethos remained uninfluenced by Dr. Putnam, and despite a number of psychoanalytic innovators, psychoanalysis has remained committed to a psychotherapy for the individual. For example, the Accreditation Council for Psychoanalytic Education (ACPEinc), an accrediting body that sets and implements “Standards for Psychoanalytic Education,” defines psychoanalysis as follows:

“Psychoanalysis is a specific form of individual psychotherapy that aims to bring unconscious mental elements and processes into awareness in order to expand an individual self understanding, enhance adaptation in multiple spheres of functioning, alleviate symptoms of mental disorder, and facilitate character change and emotional growth. Psychoanalytic work is characterized by depth and intensity which are achieved in the context of frequent treatment sessions over a long term” (Accreditation Council for Psychoanalytic Education, 2014-2017, para. 1)

(The members of the ACPEinc include distinguished psychoanalytic training and treatment sites: Austen Riggs Center; Chicago Institute of Psychoanalysis; and the Baltimore Washington Center for Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis!)

This definition seems to me a ghostly rendition of the founder’s original ambitions regarding the potential transformative social force of psychoanalysis. This paper proposes that the human vulnerability that, as Freud asserted, yearned for civilization’s protection and, in his view, generated conflict between ego and group—that vulnerability can and must be addressed by an expanded and socially responsive psychoanalysis. The human self will remain dangerously and traumatically vulnerable if we do not address with a deeply psychoanalytic sensibility the larger
traumatically vulnerable human community. Human communities of any size must deal with two broad types of vulnerability: vulnerability that derives from our universal existential/ontological insecurity (Stolorow, 2011); and traumatic vulnerability that derives from collective traumatic events, natural and man-made disasters, and histories of oppression. Communal structures and processes that facilitate deeply reflective and authentic engagement with the former encourage people to care for themselves, each other, and their overall community. However, communities must also have the capacity to deeply heal communal structures and processes that have been disrupted by collective trauma—experiences in the realm of what Hopper (2012) defines as “catastrophic trauma”. Communal structures and processes that do not respond optimally (“failed dependency”; Hopper, 2012) generate a “social melancholia,” which underlies Robert Putnam’s observations regarding the loss of “social capital” and “social cohesion,” ultimately, a loss of faith in community and collaboration.

This paper’s call for an expansive, socially responsive shift in theory and therapeutic practice has been echoed by a number of psychoanalytic authors (Botticelli, 2004; Hopper, 1996, 2003, 2012; Walls; 2004). However, it does require a reconceptualization of the self and psyche, a new bio-psycho-social conception, co-developed in alliance with other disciplines and epistemologies (social psychology; evolutionary psychology and biology; anthropology; and sociology); and perhaps a reconsideration of Darwin’s ideas concerning “social instincts” (what Richard Dawkins has termed a human “lust for niceness”—our obvious capacity for cooperation and collaboration). Toward that objective, this paper will provide a brief summary of the groundbreaking work of social psychologists on our species-wide evolutionarily-designed psychological modules for groupishness, for cultural beliefs including religion and other rules for living, for a moral code—for example, Jonathan Haidt’s (2012) “hive instinct”; Joshua Greene’s (2013) “moral tribalism,” and Mark Hauser’s (2006) genetically-determined moral code.

These researchers and theorists provide unassailable support for developing a “community psychoanalysis”—a psychoanalysis which needs a new manifesto, which this paper proposes: “Psychoanalysis is the study of unconscious processes that affect individuals, groups, and societies. It aims to understand the unconscious organization and experience of the human mind in all its contextual manifestations, utilizing deep reflective explorations of self, groups, and societies in order to develop meaningful, purposeful, and productive lives. Psychoanalysis, utilizing traditional and newly emergent strategies for inquiry and intervention, seeks to transform destructive patterns of behavior and attitudes at multiple levels: self, group, community, and society.”

A number of contemporary academic psychologists have been reviving a focus and emphasis on our biological, evolutionary design, challenging the apparent orthodoxy of the “blank slate” (Pinker, 2002). The argument for a renewed respect for our genetic inheritance was eloquently articulated by the famous psycho-linguist, Steven Pinker (2002), in his best-selling, “The Blank Slate.” Indeed, it seems fair to say that there has been a revolution in evolutionary psychology that psychoanalysis (in moving beyond Freud’s instinct theory, with development of the “relational turn”) has failed to engage with (with some exceptions: cf. Slavin & Krieger. 1992). Three academic researchers in three fascinating books (Greene, 2013; Haidt, 2012; Pagel, 2012) have synthesized numerous ingenious experiments and observation to generate several persuasive hypotheses concerning the human psyche:
Human psyches are designed by evolutionary processes for cooperation, development, and actualization in human groups and communities (Greene, 2013; Pagel, 2012);

- Human psyches are designed by evolutionary processes to be culturally “toti-potent,” designed to be bound to a group and its cultural belief systems, moral codes, and rules for living (Pagel, 2012);

- There is an “us-them” discriminator module which enhances cooperation within a group, while simultaneously generating group narcissism, intergroup competition, rivalry, and hostility (Greene, 2013; Haidt, 2012).

These evolutionarily-designed motivational systems are scale-free and toti-potent (Pagel, 2012) that is they operate at multiple levels without changing basic dynamics (small group, professional discipline, neighborhood, and nation) and they have no content at birth until they are programmed by experience with a specific group or culture. In plain words, we are designed by evolution, indeed required to join all manner of groups for psychic and physical survival and development, hard-wired to seek culture and rules for living, and we invest narcissistically (Kohut, 1976) in our groups, competing with other groups for resources and psychological status.

A Note on the Concept of “Applied Psychoanalysis”

We take issue with the long-standing tradition in psychoanalysis that the dyadic relationship is real psychoanalysis and everything else is “applied psychoanalysis”—second-rate knowledge and practice. Our perspective is that all psychoanalytic propositions are “applied”: all theory is generated in a particular context and “applied” to a context, including, of course, the traditional psychoanalytic framework. The notion of “applied psychoanalysis” devalues theory and practice in other human contexts: large groups, organizations, ethnic groups, communities, culture, societies, nations—in short, most of social life, which is life.

In addition, I anticipate that some will suggest that the systemic interventions discussed in this paper (particularly, Open Space and Future Search) are not psychoanalytic. We propose that these large group interventions for complex systems change rely on contemporary psychoanalytic principles such as psychoanalytic complexity theory (Coburn, 2014); implicit, procedural processes (Stern et al., 1998; Boston Change Process Study Group & Nahum, 2008); unformulated enactments (Stern, 2009); intersubjective systems theory (Stolorow, 1997). These interventions address the context-dependent nature of subjective experience and identity (Stolorow, 1997; Stern, 2013a, 2013b); and our ineradicable need for mutual recognition (Benjamin, 2004). Wachtel (2009) persuasively argues that psychoanalysis has traditionally overvalued the “inner world” and undervalued the external world and human action, sacrificing a more comprehensive and effective approach for understanding and change. Wachtel cites Harry Stack Sullivan as an exception to this traditional psychoanalytic attitude, attending to actual interaction, and presaging the contemporary focus on enactment.

Community Psychoanalysis: An Emerging Paradigm

Stuart Twemlow has pioneered a theory and therapeutic practice of “Community Psychoanalysis” (Twemlow & Paren, 2006; Twemlow & Wilkinson, 2004; Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004). In this paradigm, Rudden and Twemlow (2013) advocate for a movement from a psychoanalysis in the community to psychoanalysis of the community, proposing a Social/Therapeutic Mind to define the latter approach.
Rudden and Twemlow (2013) also propose a “social intelligence” as part of our species’ evolutionary heritage as primates who have developed “crucial structures for conflict resolution, for mutual caring and for creating clear dominance hierarchies” (p. 203)—a “social intelligence” that enables humans to read others; understand human systems; and navigate social life. Martela and Saarinen (2008) have also theorized that we possess “systems intelligence,” and have explicitly linked it to Intersubjective Systems Theory (IST) (Stolorow, 1997; Stolorow et al., 2002):

Rudden and Twemlow (2013) call this a “social procedural unconscious” and assert that community psychoanalysts provide interventions that enhance the “mentalizing capacities” of communities and hence develop what they refer to as the capacity for “social intelligence,” or as we prefer to call it, “systems intelligence.”

Introduction to Social Dreaming: A Psychoanalyst Encounters the “Group Self”

In a roundtable discussion focused on the challenges of integrating a socio-political perspective into psychoanalysis, Jessica Benjamin (Altman et al., 2006) tells an anecdote concerning a group consultation in Germany, which involved analysis of a dream containing an “obvious reference” to the Nazi regime and wartime activities. To her shock the audience engages (despite Benjamin’s interpretation) in a “blanketing denial” of the reference to Nazi murderous actions during World War II. Benjamin goes on to say that her experience in this context suggested a “kind of collective unconscious setup…that we carry an awful lot of things that are not individual, that are what you might call “transpersonal’ in our political unconscious” (p. 182). Furthermore, she argues that psychoanalysis has colluded in an institutional blindness (similar to that group of German therapists)—a taboo—a “denial of historical forces…” (p.182). It seems that Benjamin is groping to conceptualize two essential ideas introduced in this paper: Kohut's "group self,” a "psychological configuration" representing the collective "which is analogous to the self of the individual" (Kohut, 1976, p. 206); and Gordon Lawrence's "social dreaming,” an approach to understanding dreams that provides access to the unconscious of the "group self" (Lawrence, 1982, 2003).

A Brief History and Description of Social Dreaming

Lawrence (1982, 2003) defines the “social dreaming matrix” (SDM): a process involving a group of participants who share dreams and associations to those dreams, relying on the working hypothesis that the dreams shared reflect a collective cultural product, a social unconscious comprised of dissociated social, political, and cultural experience. A major hypothesis is that the initial dream shared is a fractal of all subsequently narrated dreams, that is, the initial dream provides a pattern, which is replicated in subsequent dreams. There are several other foundational assumptions: the dreams generated in SDM are metaphors for unconscious, disavowed, dissociated cultural and community experience—the unconscious of the "group self"; the dreams in SDM are the shared property of the dreaming community; focus must be on the dream, not the dreamer, which facilitates development of a safe “mental space.” Gordon Lawrence (1982; 2003) was deeply affected and influenced by Charlotte Beradt’s Third Reich of Dreams (1968; a book reporting the dreams of ordinary German citizens during the period of 1933-1939—dreams reflecting their intuitive, dissociated, unconscious knowledge and foreknowledge of the Nazi regime’s intentions; Manley, 2014).
Community Psychoanalysis Focus Groups

In order to explore conscious and unconscious meanings and attitudes with regard to community, we conducted three focus groups (7-8 participants) with students and faculty at Antioch University Los Angeles. The results confirmed our hypothesis that there are unconscious internal representations of community (“inner community”), which are revealed through “social dreaming.” The participants were asked five questions:

1. What are the characteristics of a healthy community?
2. What feelings are evoked by these characteristics?
3. What are the characteristics of an unhealthy community?
4. What feelings are evoked by an unhealthy community?
5. Do you recall any dreams that seem related to a sense of community?

The responses to questions 1-4 seemed unremarkable (except for a couple of surprising responses, which will be discussed later): as expected, healthy communities were described as “mutually supportive; nurturant; democratic; having common goals; having pride in everyone’s role; having balanced representation of diversity; having a diminished influence of money; having shared ideals; everyone having a voice.” Consonant with the foregoing characterizations of healthy communities, the feelings associated were: ”safe; connected; place to thrive; sense of trust; validated; peace; relief; feeling mirrored; pride.” The predominant feeling evoked by a healthy community was a sense of safety.

Unhealthy communities, on the other hand, were portrayed as being characterized by “isolation; corruption; poor leadership and political responsiveness; violence; secrecy; scarcity; hoarding; food deserts; torn families.” And the associated feelings evoked were: paranoid; angry depressed; dirty; trapped; not whole; invisible; ignored; animal-like focus on survival.”

Two utterly surprising findings emerged in response to the first question (portrayals of healthy communities) and to the last inquiry concerning dreams representing a sense of community: in response to the healthy community inquiry, two participants from vastly different ethnic and racial backgrounds (an Australian and a Latina) described the uncanny feeling of being unable to shake feelings and images of a negative “inner community” when responding to the request for images of a healthy community. They could not shed images and feelings of “being trapped; burdened with responsibility!” Additionally, for all three groups, the dreams associated with a sense of community were predominantly negative! The dreams narrated were often nightmarish experiences of abandonment and assault, or of aggregations of alienated people, or of a group of people being duped by a leader. Here are some examples:

- One dreamer described feeling “trapped in small classrooms, like a mousetrap; people selling drugs on every corner; and barbed wire on windows.”
- Another dreamer is “driving and the freeway collapses. There is chaos everywhere.”
- A third dreamer reports being at a “music festival where there seems to be cacophony. Young people, staring, appear to be lost.”

It seems evident that an unconscious negative “inner community” representation, in contrast to the conscious intent to imagining a positive, healthy community, appears both in most
participants’ dreams, AND has such a psychological grip on some participants that they are unable to imagine a positive, healthy community, suggesting a potent negative transference to community.

A Social Dreaming Matrix (SDM): American Xenophobia

Our first formal experiment with the SDM was a daylong workshop held at Antioch University in July 2011, the results of which I’ve described and summarized elsewhere (Bermudez, 2015). The focus was on American xenophobia, with the goal of interrogating the communal unconscious with regard to xenophobia. We’ve come to understand that the participants were struggling to make sense of their feelings about America, a social melancholia (Bermudez, 2013), and, astonishingly, were unable to reflect consciously on the implications of the persistent desert and invasion imagery for the SDM theme of xenophobia and immigrants [in a related vein, we must note the work of Mitchell & Harris (2003) and Harris (2012) on the unconscious meaning of the desert (a metaphor for both utopia and dystopia) for Americans]:

A Social Dreaming Matrix (SDM): Whiteness and the American “Group Self”

In June 2013 we organized a two day Social Dreaming event focused on Whiteness and the American Group Self (Bermudez, 2015). We invited members of the academic community of Antioch University Los Angeles (faculty, students, and administrators) and members of the surrounding community.

Despite the low participation of Whites (or because of it), the emergent process was extraordinarily moving and healing. At some point (second day) the realization crystallized that the Whiteness SDM had created a matrix with the emergent properties of a “communal home” for healing a traumatized “group self”–primarily a Black American “group self” suffering from both inter-generationally transmitted trauma (with many allusions to the “Jim Crow” South) (Volkan, 2003; Gorden, 2011; Bermudez, 2015) and more contemporary racial micro-aggressions and assaults directed at Black Americans (The Black “group self” through its “social dreams” initially displayed, what we would call, a reparative ambivalence: dreams of nurturing, healing actions were followed by dreams images and narratives of persecution, terror, loss, and dissociation).

Social Dreaming, Whiteness, and the Psychoanalytic Institute

A social dreaming matrix (SDM) was held at a psychoanalytic institute (April 2014): the SDM focused on eliciting and interrogating the organizational and social unconscious relating to Whiteness at the institute. Held in the Spring, 2014, sixteen members and candidates registered and attended (several who had registered did not attend; a very small number of candidates, perhaps two?; and four people of color: one Black Latino, two black women; one Japanese–American).

After an initial phase of sharing of anxiety dreams (ambivalent, fearful encounters cross racially), on the second day there was a flurry of dreams and associations.
A “forward edge” dream, the final dream, was the following (dreamt by a White woman): “I had to change my doctor. A new physician was assigned to me at UCLA Medical Center. To my utter surprise it was Josephine Baker, but she was not dressed like a doctor. She had a fruit basket on her head, and dressed colorfully. In the dream I was critical of myself. Why this image? She was sharing fruit, healing me. I said to her ‘I think you’re dead but it’s amazing how you use your sexuality.’

‘What are you doing here?’ She said, ‘I’m a doctor.’ I realized she had changed careers. I also realized I was an hour late for my appointment.”

This remarkable dream left us tantalized: we had run out of time! However, the manifest content suggested a challenge to the cultural script that constructed Blacks as entertainers and containers of animal-like sexuality and a psychological movement of the group self to the acceptance of Black competence and goodness: Josephine Baker develops but integrates presumably discrepant elements: sexuality and professionalization; entertainment and physicianly healing.

**Introduction to “Open Space” and “Future Search”**

**Open Space** as an intervention for large groups and systems was developed by an anthropologist, Harrison Owen (1997), who had become disappointed with the traditional ways of organizing conferences and workshops: a series of presenters and breakout groups, followed by tentative recommendations. In the **Open Space** format all participants (the entire organizational system is invited to participate and no one is turned away) begin in a circle without an agenda. The facilitator provides a few guidelines, invites everyone and anyone present to propose a topic they care about for discussion (no topic is denied), and then the topic proposer invites others to join in that discussion. However, no one is required to attend any discussion group, there are no time constraints on any emergent discussion, but you are required to exit a group discussion you find you are not contributing to or learning from. The convener has only one responsibility: produce a short written report of the discussion. In this approach, the whole system can focus and develop concrete next steps on the salient, “hot issues” which require heightened attention. This simple technique has proved enormously successful (even cross-culturally, with groups as small as five and as large as five hundred): it facilitates a radically democratic, non-linear “free associations” and “group associations” process which encourages the emergence of unconsciously censored and unformulated issues (“unthought known”) to be articulated and solutions formulated through self-organizing collaboration.

**Future Search (FS),** developed by Marvin Weisbord (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995), promotes an organization’s or community’s ability to resolve the struggle between old patterns and new paths, helping the participants tolerate uncertainty, empowering participants to co-create the new path by formulating/discovering common ground, thus moving the group into a new future. The process does not allow conflict and “unresolved differences” (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995), whether enacted or symbolized, to maintain stuckness or generate regression. Conflict is surfaced and acknowledged, but the focus is kept on co-creating a future together through discovery of common ground. The model attempts to gather in one space a representative sample of the entire system and essential partners from its ecology: an open “whole system in the room” principle, which is superbly aligned with psychoanalytic complexity theory (Coburn, 2014). The stakeholders/participants represent all sectors of the organization or community and include
potential partners from the surrounding ecology of the organization or community, thereby encouraging the inflow of new information and resources, potentially generating novel perspectives, ideas, and projects, with the intention of facilitating optimal complexity. The Future Search process moves the participants through five stages, which in many ways mimic the psychoanalytic method of revisiting the past to see how organizing principles provide a sense of identity and shape present and future choices, but also respects the power of the present context and the imagined future. The schedule (sixteen hours of sustained work over three days) requires two nights of sleep so that the unconscious through dreaming can emotionally work over, synthesize, and generate new solutions and commitments. This process relies on the well-known “Zeigarnik Effect” (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995; Zeigarnik, 1967), which compels the mind-body-self to continue to work on unfinished tasks and projects.

Mersky (2012), in her review of large group interventions for surfacing and acting on unconscious dynamics in organizations, delineates three characteristics that she feels are essential for success:

- They promote the emergence of the collective “unthought known,” either through direct dream sharing or associations and amplification.
- They include two activities Bion postulated were essential for productive thinking and action: 1. Generation of thoughts, associations, feelings, etc., and 2. A process for productively coping with the emergent “unthought known” (A capacity for reflection and mentalizing).
- They focus the intervention via a theme; however, Mersky (2012) cautions that although a theme is critical for a sense of direction and as a stimulus for unconscious thinking, it must not promote a position, or discourage creativity or encourage splits in the group.

I propose that the three large group interventions (“Social Dreaming Matrix,” “Open Space Technology” and “Future Search”) share these essential characteristics, and are thus powerful methods for accessing unconscious, collective, unthought known dynamics, generating a process for conscious formulation and productive action. Moreover, the three models are designed with open systems ideas and complexity theory in mind, and, I argue, are inevitable extensions of psychoanalytic complexity theory (Coburn 2014).

**OPEN SPACE DIALOGUES and the Psychoanalytic Institute: An Intervention**

Because of much anxiety related to inviting external stakeholders as required by Future Search (potential partners and resources for the institute), a two-day retreat using Open Space principles was organized. The idea was to first surface and deeply discuss all the implicit issues, the “unformulated” organizational “unthought known,” and then follow with Future Search within six months to a year. The Retreat was well attended and successfully addressed many institute concerns. Fifty-five members and candidates attended and generated thorough discussions on 17 issues that participants had raised and formulated themselves. Self-organized small group discussions centered on the 17 themes were followed by a 2-hour whole group discussion/reflection on the overall organizational meaning of what they had discovered and formulated. In addition, participants were asked to rank all the issues according to urgency and
importance for the institute. Three themes emerged as the major challenges that the institute needed to resolve:

- Bullying related to a misuse of authority and intolerance to theoretical pluralism. This was voted the number one issue and systemic/cultural challenge at the institute;
- The lack of diversity (ethnic and racial) at the institute: this has been a longstanding issue for which the ‘Diversity Task Force To Address Homophobia and Racism “had been organized”;
- The organizational and community challenge of managing “transparency and privacy.” (A full report summarizing the 17 discussions was disseminated to the entire institute community.)

Conclusion

In this paper we have proposed that psychoanalysis for too long has under-theorized and underdeveloped its repertoire of interventions with regard to community and large human groups. We have proposed that people unconsciously experience a sense of social melancholia in response to an unmet longing and the inability to mourn the loss or absence of community. We have presented theory and scientific evidence (evolutionary theory; psychoanalytic theory and emergent practice; and social psychology experiments) to support the argument that the human self will remain dangerously and traumatically vulnerable if we do not address the larger traumatically vulnerable human community. The paper distinguished between two experiences of human vulnerability: optimal human vulnerability [related to Stolorow’s (2011) existential/ontological insecurity], which allows people to care for themselves, each other, and their overall community; and traumatic vulnerability, which has been engendered by experiences that have entered into the realm of catastrophic trauma [based on Hopper’s (2012) differentiation between catastrophic trauma and strain trauma]. Finally, we described several proposed community-level psychoanalytic interventions (“Social Dreaming”; “Open Space Dialogues”; “Future Search and Discovery”), and reported on the results of some of these interventions as well as on the insights derived from psychoanalytically-informed focus group-type discussions on the meaning of “community.”
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RESENTMENT AS A DEFENSE AGAINST VULNERABILITY
Lynne G. Tenbusch

INTRODUCTION

My use of the term defense signifies behavioral and attitudinal attempts on the part of a person to protect her or himself from emotional pain extending from short term upset to a sense of psychic fragmentation or annihilation. My emphasis is on a real person struggling for psychic survival. The defensively resentful person is one who suffers.

I will explore the idea of resentment as a protective posture, attitude or defense against the skillful vulnerability required to live a fully human life. I will suggest that an awareness of the inexorable fluidity of the human condition renders each of us vulnerable to the use of resentment as a cognitive and emotional sanctuary. The compulsive chaos of life can entice us into the use of resentment to still the waters of vulnerability.

I will use Nietzsche’s concept of resentment as a framework for my ideas, with a brief outline of Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectic to introduce Nietzsche’s thoughts. I hope to show that the use of resentment has evolved beyond that articulated in Nietzsche’s Slave morality. Also, that my hypothesis about the use of resentment is in fitting with what Nietzsche had hoped for in his formulation of the possible evolution of humankind.

I will advocate that it is not just the victim of a violent attack or repeated psychic assault that becomes Hegel’s slave who calls upon Nietzsche’s resentment as an aid in psychic stability. I will briefly explore Ghent’s concept of submission and surrender as it relates to my premise. Finally I will apply a dialectic approach to the use of resentment and differentiate rapid cycling from a more solid state use of resentment.

HEGEL’S REALIZATION OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

For Hegel, self-consciousness or subjectivity requires a moment of encounter in which two potential subjects meet (The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807) G. W. F. Hegel.1807). Both are
vying for subjectivity, and cannot reach it without the other. Through this encounter, the strongest person will achieve self-consciousness, thereby becoming the Master while rendering the other a Slave, an objectified non-entity. In Hegel’s formulation, only one person can realize subjectivity via the moment of encounter, which also contains within it the possibility of lost potential or objectification. Hence both are locked in an unequal relationship. In short, I can only achieve self-consciousness via your recognition of me. However that very recognition renders me vulnerable, as your observation of me translates me into an object for you, thereby compromising my subjectivity.

HEGEL’S MASTER/SLAVE DIALECTIC

In Hegel’s dialectic, the slave is aware that the master identifies him as an object lacking personal power. Because the master frustrates the slaves’ desire to affirm his pure self-consciousness, the slave is locked into the situation of being the ‘other.’ This leaves the slave with chronic awareness of his otherness, creating fertile soil for nurturance of resentment. The master moves unreflectively through her life. However, being trapped in a powerless situation with no instinctual outlet, the slave can only turn inward to reflection. While the master remains oblivious, the slave becomes resentful and uses that energy to reevaluate the masters from being ‘good’ to being ‘evil’ and themselves from bad to good.

I note that Hegel’s dialectic is one of historical becoming wherein ultimately everyone achieves pure self-consciousness and the dialectic is resolved and history reaches its conclusion. We are interested in the interim – the master/slave difference between independence and dependence.

NIETZSCHE’S USE OF MASTER SLAVE DIALECTIC

Nietzsche’s abiding passion was the human condition. He concerned himself with psychological questions about how to live while fully embracing the fact of our mortality, and embeddedness in a world of immutable change. He wanted to understand how humans have become who we are, so that he, and later we, could visualize possibilities for further advancement. Toward that goal, Nietzsche engaged in a genealogical study of morality and presented the following results.
(Nietzsche, 1887). At the dawn of history, warrior tribes lived within a Master/Slave morality with masters characterized by physical courage, self-confidence, loyalty and ruthlessness. Slaves were considered weak, inferior, patient, humble and charitable. Because the warrior existence accorded with their natural instincts, the warriors lived without conflict. They identified themselves as good and believed that if something is good for them, it is good in itself. Bad was only a footnote, an unreflective addendum referencing ‘others’, the weak tribes they had conquered.

Because Slaves had no instinctual outlet, they turned inward. Thus, in a Freudian sense – which actually originated in Nietzsche– the slaves became repressed and developed an inner life wherein they imagined the vengeful overturn of their captors. This interiority became the birthplace of their resentment but it also nurtured mental development unnecessary to the masters.

In short, the slaves, via resentment, translated the ‘good’ characteristics of masters into evil traits of sinners. Thereby the noble virtues of the warriors were re-valued as the evils of cruelty, arrogance and pride, while the required attributes of slaves – patience, humility, charity, and reverence for authority - became the prevailing virtues of good people. Christianity finalized the ’slave revolt’, in morality with the offer of a heaven into which only the meek had access, and from which they could watch their earthly masters suffer.

I agree with Ridley (1998) who emphasized that it is not the creativity of resentment through which the slave overturns the masters’ power. Rather it is the overcoming of resentment which opens space for further productive agency. This view clarifies Nietzsche’s hope that humans would strive for a style of consciousness deriving from resolution of resentment. Nietzsche believed that a consciousness derivative of overcoming would reflect greater spiritualization or organization of instinctual drives, with increasing courage to embrace this life fully, in spite of our lack of definitive truths (Ridley, 1998).

(The foregoing is a very surface treatment. Further I note that Nietzsche’s depiction of the evolution of master/slave morality may be generously flavored with fiction. He was vehemently opposed to positivist history, and believed that humans need myth, not alleged facts. Hence,
Nietzsche refused to cite sources, use footnotes or restrict himself to purported truths, per requirements of philological scholarship.)

NIETZSCHE ON RESENTMENT

Nietzsche concluded that slave morality rests on a fundamental disposition of resentment, which constitutes its defining feature (Kaufman, 1967). Outrage and a sense of injustice also typify resentment, which cannot be sequestered from power in that it grows in the soil of powerlessness. Slave morality defines itself by what is outside, whereby all forms of otherness become a target for resentment.

Nietzsche further avers that the resentful person lives in the past while resisting life in the present moment. On my interpretation of that view, the resentful person, while closing herself off from perceived threats, also deadens her ability to differentiate potentially trustworthy individuals and truncates her involvement in the world. She then paints all people within a specific group or characteristic with a negative brush. This encapsulation becomes receptive ground for the growth and sustenance of resentment, through which she continues experiencing herself as a victim, externally controlled by someone or something else. Nietzsche’s goal for humanity was advancement beyond reliance on resentment. His belief that the moral evolution of humanity rests on a culture of discipline fueled his hope for a synthesis of master and slave characteristics. For Nietzsche the most important aspect of any morality is the ability to educate ones spirit.

DEFINITIONS

Within philosophy and psychology we find many conceptions of agency. I use the term as a reference to the felt sense of having the capacity to take appropriate action in the service of protecting one’s physical and emotional integrity. I will use agency and personal power interchangeably. Vulnerability refers to the potential for being or feeling defenseless against psychological or physical intrusions.

I will use Webster’s definition of trauma as “…a painful emotional experience or shock, often producing a lasting psychic effect”. (Webster, 1996)
I define resentment in the Nietzschean sense of a psychological state instantiated when someone is unhappy with his situation but feels, or is, incapable of improving it, thus turning to the creation of interior scenarios wherein the object of their resentment is disvalued and judged to be inferior.

ON NOT KNOWING AND RESENTMENT

In the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche (1887) contended that all beliefs are based on need, not “Truth’ with a capital T, because there are no abiding truths. For him, truths are simply errors that we have forgotten are errors (Truth and Lies). Nietzsche is now famous for his statement, “God is dead” (Nietzsche, 1883) by which he meant that the death of metaphysics took with it the possibility of unconditional truths, those foundational beliefs that provide a sense of safety, in turn allowing one to feel that she stands on a firm edifice rather than struggling for balance on waves of change.

For Nietzsche everything we take to be true is a necessary fiction. He deemed these beliefs ‘necessary’ for containing the relentless flux and uncertainty of our world. As humans we need some points of certainty to still the waters of change and navigate the menacing realization that nothing is stable. Absolute beliefs become tools for management of these contingencies. We can create totalizing versions of the ‘other’ to nurture resentment in the service of psychic survival. We saw that, on Nietzsche’s view, this is exactly what the ancient slaves did. Their categorical belief in the masters’ evil steadied their world.

SKILLFUL VULNERABILITY

I propose that skillful vulnerability is an attitude of openness toward that which presents itself, including the attendant possibility of emotional offense. It constitutes an embrace of connective involvements with full knowledge of the necessary prospect of being aggrieved, frightened or terrified at some points during our passage. Along with Nietzsche I submit that a full affirmation of life necessitates vulnerability. The only escape from the full force of potential injury is
psychic fragmentation, resentment, or skillful vulnerability. Further, I suggest that the openness of such vulnerability is founded on a sense of agency as described above.

SUBMISSION AND SURRENDER

Immanuel Ghent’s (1990) differentiation between submission and surrender comes to mind wherein surrender is openness to life and relationships, while submission consigns one’s agency to the other. I suggest that surrender is the channel on which vulnerability flows. Surrender encompasses a state of openness characterized by personal agency. In contrast, submission necessitates a renunciation of one’s ability to act. Submission can be either a prelude to, or a manifestation of, powerlessness.

Because surrender is foundational to the embrace of inexorable flux, it is requisite to engagement in the life changing process of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy for both analyst and analysand. While it renders one vulnerable to hurt, it allows the more ecstatic experiences of life as well as the quiet sensation of connectedness. I propose that Ghent’s surrender, is the preface to and commensurate with skillful vulnerability, and that experienced victimhood is comparable to the powerlessness of requisite submission.

Submission, on the other hand is reactive to a perception of the ‘others’ superiority in the Nietzschean sense. Submission reinforces the dialectic by inverting one’s position from personal mastery to slavery. On this view, submission breeds resentment, because it entails concession of one’s personal power. At the risk of reductionism, I offer the working image of surrender permitting mastery and submission paralleling slavery.

Nietzsche’s Ubermensch or Overman has been interpreted in a variety of ways. My reading depicts the Ubermensch as a person who embraces life’s emergencies with vulnerably facilitated by agency. She/he demonstrates skillful vulnerability in that the organization of her drives sanction satisfaction of instinctual, emotional and intellectual needs, while possessing agency that disallow intentionally harmful acts.
REAL LIFE

I propose that the tension around agency plays out in our homes, on the streets, in corporate boardrooms and even local running clubs. We routinely face the challenge of maintaining personal power while the relief of resentment offers itself. We need not subscribe to Hegel’s dialectic within which only one person can maintain subjectivity. Nietzsche anticipated that our beliefs – those necessary and sometimes absolute fictions – would regularly surrender to new perspectives. I hope to demonstrate that we have, indeed, evolved beyond the master/slave duality to a dialectic tension between resentment and agency wherein if one feels robbed of personal power, it does not capture the totality of his experience.

Consider a person who has been beaten, raped, witnessed a parent being killed. Let us assume that the ‘victim’ of said traumatic experience has the option of obtaining help, and transforming his ‘identity’ from victim to survivor.

But he can also find sanctuary in resentment as partial guarantee against present and future vulnerability. Some of you may have had patients who were unable to move beyond an agonizing identification with what has been perpetrated upon them. Many things may be going on for that person, but surely one is the existential state of objectification and powerlessness. In such a situation, resentment offers an asylum. Rendering others ‘evil’ while detaching from involvement via resentment can provoke a sense of power and safety. It may be one’s only safe harbor. As a very primitive working hypothesis, we might also conceive of this posture as an illustration of Ghent’s submission.

RAPID CYCLING RESENTMENT

I hypothesize that many, if not most, people move from a position of agency to a felt sense of powerlessness without remaining tethered to either position. This involves the use of what I will call ‘agency in reserve’, the same source from which resentment grows. We continually engage in the dialectic tension of revaluing ourselves from victim as object to subject with agency; from the necessary hurt of skillful vulnerability, to recovery of equilibrium; from an attitude of
submission to the reclamation of surrender. I note that for continuity of language I write in
dualistic, subject/object terms but do not therein, imply that my examples are totalities.

A situation: the felt humiliation of a man learning that his wife has a lover may propel him
toward resentment as a tool for navigating his unraveled world. Given that resentment originates
from psychologic agency, which can give rise to freer agentic state, we can imagine how he
could reconstitute himself with only temporary reference to resentment or none at all. My idea is
that ‘agency in reserve’ facilitates this rebalancing from the felt sense of lack to the experience of
stabilizing subjectivity. Agency resides in the work of resentment and gives rise to movement of
the dialectic out of that same resentment.

This exemplifies Nietzsche’s formulation of Will to Power as agency (Solomon, 1990). In
resolving the dialect of resentment one advances the spiritualization or organization of drives,
works out new perspectives and moves on toward Nietzsche’s free spirit or Ubermench. Being
open to the human condition of compulsive contingency, one embraces vulnerability, calls on
resentment when necessary, and then utilizes the same agency to move beyond it. Thus one
surrenders to life’s vagaries and pursues the path of emotional evolution that Nietzsche
envisioned.

The slaves developed resentment in order to cope. But they went further – they expanded their
interior life creating an agentic experience. It was not resentment that reversed master/morality.
That just tilled the soil and planted the seed. It was the overcoming of resentment which
harvested personal agency.

MORE EXAMPLES

Jane meets with her boss and feels undervalued; Joe has his last analytic session and leaves
feeling abandoned and unsteady from the loss of the emotional bond with his analyst. Both Jane
and Joe reflected on the injury, resourced their ‘reserve agency’ and steadied themselves. Jane
needed just a few hours with no reference to resentment. Joe took twelve months and the
temporary use of bitterness for relief. Neither became wedged. Stability was within reach of
both. We might call this rapid cycling of the dialectic.
Susan feels neglected and unappreciated by her lover. If this contemporary feeling resurrects unresolved issues, Susan may need the assistance of resentment for stabilization. If she is not holding close a past betrayal, she can, after some reflection, regain her equilibrium as subject with only temporary use of resentment or none at all.

Jack feels upset about not being invited to a high level business meeting, but after some consideration realizes that the circumstances make sense. He has used the source of agency that inspired resentment in ancient slaves to move beyond it. He called upon his original agency to re-create a state of mind beyond bitterness.

These illustrations are of people who have, at times utilized the original font of resentment for navigation to a re-formulated mode of consciousness founded on reclaimed agency. They utilized the creative cradle of resentment - the one Nietzsche proposes as the original resource for slaves – to propel them back to a more skillfully vulnerable state. I do not present this as dualistic. There are many shades of, and timeframes for, the use of resentment. I am putting forward the idea that in the above scenarios, both people maintained or reclaimed subjectivity. They resourced animosity as a temporary haven, but reflected and burrowed below that ever ready resentment to the original creativity, and generated a more cohesive subjectivity.

I suggest that dialectic tension is ever present, if out of awareness, in most people and requires periodic address. The dialectic is fluid, each time moving the person to a more integrated state of surrender, agency and skillful vulnerability. For someone with an ‘agency in reserve’ or readily accessible subjectivity, this movement may flow without resentment, with only an unconscious use of it, or with conscious temporary use of resentment. I submit that these scenarios reflect what Nietzsche longed for when he began his genealogic study.

SOLID STATE

The earlier referenced victim of rape may require more chronic use of resentment. In a situation of severe trauma, the victim lives on the slave side of the dialectic longer and perhaps with wider application. Maybe all men become evil. Perhaps all women are just after the money. The
greater length and depth of the state of powerlessness engenders recruitment of more consistent antipathy.

With sustained dependence on resentment, one relinquishes the full flow of engagement. A survivor of past torture may experience stimuli that rip open emotional scars, propelling her back into the primary experience of slavery. She may enlist antipathy for longer periods, perhaps forever, and embrace it as her shelter from disorganizing emotions. This may be her only refuge. Because Nietzsche’s aspiration for humanity was passionate entrenchment in life, he would have felt deep compassion (not pity) for this suffering person, while hoping for her future access to movement beyond resentment.

I have proposed that master/slave dialectic is never fully resolved. The tension is our frequent companion, and the enticement of resentment lives rent free at the edge of our consciousness. However, this inducement can also propel us toward ever increasing baselines of agency, surrender and skillful vulnerability. This, I think, is what Nietzsche imagined as the conduit to formation of the ‘free spirit’ and the Ubermensch.

In closing I submit that the human condition of living in an ineluctable flow carries with it an ongoing struggle for life on the subjective side of the dialectic. The enticement of resentment as an illusory safe-haven is ever-present. Our challenge is not succumbing to its lure as a safe-keeper. Nietzsche wrote in the service of such progression.

REFERENCES


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Crushing (Work in Progress.)
Judith E. Vida


Note to Reader: The following essay and its bibliographic materials, both in the body of the essay and in The List that follows, do not follow standard APA formatting. References pertaining to this essay are included as footnotes. The List could be considered to be an Appendix, or a separate entity altogether.

**Backstory.**

The death of my aged mother in February 2008 informed presentations to IFPE in both 2008 and 2009. The earlier one had begun as an essay for the catalog of an art exhibition that opened up a space around her passing like a freshly dug grave. During that fateful presidential campaign summer of 2008, I read Barack Obama’s memoir, which must have played a part in my being drawn to certain other books. Late one hot afternoon, I stumbled upon a fictional dialogue between the slave Sally Hemings and her niece and owner Martha Jefferson Randolph, which takes place shortly after the death of Thomas Jefferson, who was both Martha’s father and the father of Sally Hemings’s seven children (Chase-Riboud, 1979/2009). In that stinging interchange, I recognized that my relationship with my mother had been one of enslavement. A lifetime of bewildered, bewildering emotion and experience made disturbing new sense. Looking back over the books to which I was drawn in the year that followed my mother’s death, I could see that “the stumble” was no accident but uncannily, unconsciously, driven. That fateful fictional interchange impelled me to write “Didn’t You Ever Love Me?” and I presented it to IFPE a few months later.

**Introduction.**

The period that followed my presentation of “Didn’t You Ever Love Me?” to IFPE in 2009 was shock-like for me, eventually succeeded by what is best described as an *activation*.

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driven to go on reading, straining to unblock my ears and unhood my eyes, timidly risking engagement. (I have been like this for more than 8 years now.)

What was I doing? I had no words for this for a very long time, especially when asked, “What is this for?” Eventually, in self-defense and self-soothing, I said to myself, “Well, I can make a list.” To the core references from “Didn’t You Ever Love Me?” I added the books I had started to collect and read, which were now spilling from shelves freed up when my younger son’s books were moved to a different location. Later I thought about books from before the summer of 2008 that could be considered as anticipation or foreshadowing. I entered them separately, labeled as “before.”

At this moment the list reaches beyond 160 entries, still growing. This is a work in progress, although “process” is the better word. What makes it so hard to name is that from the beginning I saw no dimensions, no limits, no pre-conceived shape or content, no duration, and no destination. No definable purpose. I am driven to wander in a boundless territory that once did but no longer frightens me. That alone may propel the drive. The shocked awareness of my own emotional enslavement was the ticket of entry to this other level of apperception. Mere empathy seems too shallow a word. Perhaps rending the veil of otherness is closer to the mark, and locating otherness also in myself. The Veil of Color was W.E.B. Du Bois’ word for an unbridgeable chasm. This project is my personal effort to dismantle a socially and politically constructed invisibility of which I have been as unwitting a perpetrator as a bystander. One consequence of this pursuit is that I have begun to see the ghosts – the negated, the refused, the denied, the brutalized, the annihilated, the abused, the demonized and dehumanized – the tormented souls who cannot rest until they can be seen and named and mourned.

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And, just as I discovered at age 50 that my personal “received history” was a lie, I
now see that a history omitting a single unquestioned subjectivity is also deceitful, whether
personal narrative or the grand narrative governing the national mythology. The United
States of America is a nation of immigrants. There are no happy immigration stories;
homelands are not left because life there is good. This holds as much for those who choose
to leave as for those who are kidnapped [“kidnapped” being another obscure point of
reference to my personal story]. And for those usurped by another entity’s triumphal,
conquering, colonizing narrative, it is devastating. On a larger stage that mirrors the personal
microcosm, too many in this country ignore or actively refuse tickets of entry into their own
scarred and traumatizing, fractured and fracturing, drowned and drowning accumulating
actuality. The tickets remain in Will Call. What will it take to pull down the barricades of
unseeing, unknowing, unfeeling historical precedent?

In the fall of 2015, I was preparing to conduct for candidates at the Institute of
Contemporary Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles a new session of the seminar inspired by The
Autobiographical Dialogue, that itself has emerged from many years of collaboration
between Gersh Molad and myself. A paragraph in the foundational paper we wrote about
this process\(^3\) caught my eye. This paragraph, first written 13 years ago, turns out to be a
message sent to myself in an unforeseeable future:


\[^{3}\text{“The Autobiographical Dialogue in the Dialogue Between Analysts: Introductory Notes on the Use of}
Relational and Intersubjective Perspectives in Conference Space,” by Gershon J. Molad and Judith E. Vida. In
Footnotes inadvertently omitted in publication. Original 2002 version with footnotes available by request from the authors.}

\[^{4}\text{Kundera quotes this quatrain by Jan Skacel: “Poets don’t invent poems/The poem is somewhere behind/It’s}
been there a long, long time/The poet merely discovers it (p. 115).” In Kundera, M. (1988) *The Art of the Novel*,
always there’ hides (Bauman, 2000, p. 79).”\textsuperscript{5} “Crushing” is very much like what “traveling” is in postmodern language: a complex meeting of the known and unknown. It is a de-centering of oneself, going away not only from home places but also from identity-bound self-integrations and self-disarrays. It is to be away from actual home and longed for shelter, being in perpetual exile. It is having many homelands and language-universals, \textit{refusing integration}, and at the same time and to a certain extent, being in and on one’s own (self, room, place), exercising responsibility and hospitality for self, and others. Crushing as a creative act of understanding echoes simultaneously hope and dread. There is a great hope of finding something and of reconstituting oneself, and a great fear of not only not finding but also losing oneself on the way.

“Crushing.” That’s it. That’s what “this” is.

Someone from Michigan said recently, on the phone, “A new book has just come out about Detroit. Here I am, 68 years old, and I know nothing about Detroit. It is just shocking how unaware we can be of what is around us.”

“Yes,” I said, thinking also of this.

\textbf{Afterword.}

During the lunch break on the day of presentation, I walked 0.2 mi from the hotel to the corner of Front and Market Streets, which a historical placard identifies as the original location of the London Coffee House, wherein the human cargo of slaving ships docked at

Penn’s Landing nearby was evaluated for sale. Five of us did so, to discover, to paraphrase Sally Mann (2015, p. 410), whether we strangers, coming upon it, centuries later, can sense the sad, lost, horrific echo of the place. It is there.

Acknowledgments.


The List so far, updated to August 31, 2016.

**Boldface** indicates original bibliography of “’Didn’t You Ever Love Me?’”

*indicates read, beyond browsing.

**Books.**


Lindqvist, Sven (2014). *The Dead Do Not Die: “Exterminate All the Brutes” and Terra Nullius.*


Other Media.


*Davis, Kenturah (2015). Double Self-Portrait (Sonder…).


*Gaines, Charles (2015). Librettos: Manuel de Falla/Stokely Carmichael/Printed ink stained paper and lightjet print on acrylic. 12 Diptychs, each 36" H x 27" W x 3" D (91.44 cm H x 68.58 cm W x 7.62 cm D) each; 36" H x 56" W x 3" D (91.44 cm H x 142.24 cm W x 7.62 cm D) overall.


*Johnson, Patrick Henry (2010?). (painting).

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**Before (collected earlier).**


Books.

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