

Nearby Strangers: The Concurrent Desire for Connection and the Dread of Realising Intimacy

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ABSTRACT *This paper deals with issues of closeness and connectedness among strangers. The author writes from the context of considering the impact of the Israeli political reality, within which he lives. He weaves together the story of joining a novel initiative of a bi-cultural Jewish–Arabic kindergarten together with a case study, where self-disclosure results in therapeutic transformation. The author raises questions and ponders about relationships in general, and particularly therapeutic relationships: What are the conditions that allow for closeness? Is proximity sufficient for the creation of closeness? Is there a generative quality to the willingness to move into unfamiliar places, transitional spaces in the therapeutic encounter? Can closeness between strangers take place without attending to the respective wounds of both parties? Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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Transitional states, the space where one form has already melted and the next has yet to come. Sometimes I am fortunate enough to notice these spaces, like the moment at the end of an exhale before a new inhale arrives; a field holding a certain innate paradox, connecting and differentiating at the same time. What are the conditions that allow for intimacy and connection between people? What are the conditions that allow for attachment? In this paper I shall relate to this essential subject in a specific way, while paying attention to the entry into transitional states during the formative moments of connection, and emphasising the importance of taking risks without certainty regarding the results of our efforts.

NEARBY STRANGERS

We live in Israel, in a town adjacent to three Arab villages. Our area is considered good, not too close to the border or to any central conflict zones. We are surrounded by green nature, and the sea

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can be viewed in the near horizon. For the outside visitor it may seem that we manage to live in harmonious coexistence: some neighbourhoods all but touch one another, businesses flourish – everybody buys at everybody's business. We greet each other in the street, we respect the other's holidays, and all looks pleasant enough. But come a little closer and you would discover two bodies living next to each other but not touching. These bodies live in certain synchronisation; it is as if they learned to live by the other, each in its own distinct role. These bodies tightly remain within their well-defined boundaries – some movements are allowed while others are clearly forbidden.

You will, of course, smile in the street to a passing stranger, you can buy your fruit and vegetables at the local Arab greengrocer, but you shall certainly not rent your flat in a Jewish neighbourhood to an Arab person. You might sit together in a café, talking about yesterday's football match, but you most certainly will not watch this game together at one of your respective homes.

Come closer still and you can find the Jewish neighbourhoods clean and tidy, and the Arab neighbourhoods much less so. You would see the cleaning ladies from the nearby Arab village arriving, early in the morning, to clean the houses in the Jewish neighbourhoods. You might see the Arab street sweepers and the loaded vans of Arab manual labourers coming to decorate and renovate. You would notice that business owners at the centre of town are always Jews, that the Jewish quarters are expanding, being granted state permissions to build, while Arab villages become dense and over-populated as they are frequently denied permission to expand. Moreover, the education system is completely separated: kindergartens and schools for Jews, kindergartens and schools for Arabs.

This distinction is clearly marking our two nations and coexistence is but a pleasant façade for both sides in the area where I live. It seems that both sets of inhabitants – Jews and Arabs alike – prefer to maintain this façade and avoid facing the complex reality. Why should we? Each side knows its place; there is an elusive comfort in accepting this façade.

For me, this is a tragic reality. Two nations, two bodies, share a limited and tight geographical space for decades and both are unwilling to touch each other, to truly get to know one another, to come close in contravention of those unspoken rules of society and implicit indoctrination of the state. Or perhaps we are parts of a whole that refuses to come together, insists on denying the simple fact that we do share the same body, the same piece of land, the same home.

THE BEGINNING – ETIQUETTE

I open the clinic door to welcome Miriam, who observes me with a critical eye. We exchange polite greetings and I invite her to enter and sit down, asking her if she would like a hot drink. "Not now," she responds, "maybe later." I sense the beginning: we are still strangers, only having met a few moments ago. Mutual examination and suspicion fill the space and I find myself in a familiar field of thoughts and sensations. My stomach contracts, my neck is tightly held; inside I am contracted, yet I know all too well how to camouflage this feeling. Almost regardless of the client, I tend to feel like this during first meetings. The closeness and intimacy forced upon us both by the situation are difficult for me and I keenly guard my differentness, my separateness. I do not know her yet, nor do I know if I wish to get to know her. Am I ready for her to know me? Where will this relationship take us? How much trust and genuine closeness will develop here? Does it have a benevolent potential? I smile, and Miriam smiles back. I ask Miriam what brought her to therapy.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO CROSS THE DIVIDE?

My life partner and I were both born into, and brought up within, a reality of separation between Jews and Arabs. We wanted to do something different and when our firstborn approached the age of two we decided to send him to nursery. We joined a new initiative of a mixed nursery – bilingual and bicultural, Jewish kids and Arab kids together, a teaching team of Jewish and Arab kindergarten teachers, Jewish parents and Arab parents. Two distinguishable bodies seeking to connect, to be together, to come closer and by doing so influence themselves and the the society in which they live. The following account is my experience of this time.

As my partner and I debated whether to join this shared body or remain separated, during the transitional stage of pondering and indecision, many fears, archaic apprehensions and questions arose in us both. We discovered just how difficult such a move was for us. Primitive fears about Arabs surfaced – we feared that our boy would be harmed in the nursery (which was based in one of the nearby Arab villages). We feared that the Arab children would be aggressive and violent. And what would we do if a war broke out? (This was not merely a speculative fear; we have known wars every few years.) We feared the atmosphere in the nursery. Would we feel safe leaving our dear boy in the nursery every morning? Could we really put our trust in them?

Alongside our practical questions we discovered our fixated, rigidified, and racist parts; parts we had brought with us from our family and the reality within which both of us grew up, a reality in which we never really had a dialogue with Arabs, where there was no place for closeness or intimacy with Arabs. We had never shared a space with Arab people before nor done anything with them. The message we had received from society and the state, both explicitly and implicitly, was a continuous message of distancing and victimhood. They are the enemy, they seek our destruction, they cannot really be trusted, they want us gone from here, they wish to obliterate us back into the sea, to vanish what a few bold Jewish people had managed to reclaim after two thousand years of persecution and one big holocaust. We had grown on myths of warriors saving our land with blood and tears. Our fathers fought wars against Arabs. We have known, personally and indirectly, people who died during these endless wars between Jews and Arabs.

Most of our friends and family were unable to digest our decision. Some completely ignored it, others dealt with it through cynical and wounding humour, some were shocked, and others were angry with us. It seemed that those reactions were akin to a body facing an unknown movement, first experiencing it as threat – threatening its separateness, its principles which define what is allowed and what is forbidden. We had awoken, both within us and around us, survival parts that perceived our desire to find connection as a threat on the existence of our separate body. We came to realise that sending our boy to a nursery where Jewish and Arab children play together, eat together, and sing together was an act which would require ongoing struggle. That it was not only a personal act but one that would affect all those who were close to us and the society we live in.

CLEARLY DEFINED POSITIONS

Months go by and I slowly got to know Miriam. Slowly she shared her story with me – her childhood in a remote district in the former Soviet Union, a harsh reality of survival and everyday difficulty both externally as a Jew in an anti-Semitic society and at home where she was violently treated, expected to serve her parents, to be a good, obedient and useful citizen, and later a woman who takes good care of her husband.

Miriam worked as a hospital nurse, her entire life dedicated to serving others. She had received long and rigorous training in self-deprecation, and she received her sense of worth and temporary calmness through meeting the needs of her surroundings. Yet Miriam paid a grave price for this; she knew scarcely anything about herself, about her own desires, wishes, and passions, or about a life which was not bounded in roles and service, where her own wishes might have meaning and value.

When I completely adapt myself to the other, without permission to express myself and my needs – these are very lonely times. When I cannot share my feelings, a sense of isolation and loneliness creeps in. When I cannot share myself and be validated, held or supported in my difficulty, a great big loneliness surfaces. Indeed Miriam was very lonely.

She sought therapy at around her fortieth birthday, wanting to make a change in her life. She described it as “something woke up in my belly”.

I knew Miriam more than she knew me; our therapist–client positions dictated clear roles. Each to their own device, each in his rightful place. I found myself thinking and sensing familiar thoughts – what am I really offering her? What is real in our relationship? Is it right and possible to challenge our roles? I am mostly quite comfortable in our unequal position, and Miriam is comfortable there too – this is what she is used to, a relationship that lacks genuine trust or capacity to lean against another, to connect, to be less alone.

We met weekly and talked. I could understand the value of slowness, of gradually building a relationship, of protecting Miriam’s autonomy, of listening to her rhythm. The more I got to know her, the more I learnt to appreciate her willingness to assume a position of needing help, of sharing her life with me in a way she had not done before. Slowly and insistently she expanded and stood more proudly, taking space. Nevertheless, I was mindful of our strictly maintained differentness. I did not feel connected with her in our meetings; she kept me at arm’s length, protecting herself from closeness. And I listened, waiting.

At the beginning of every session Miriam asked how I was and my answer was always “OK” or another answer which revealed nothing about me, bringing the attention back to her. At first, I understood our custom as a ritual which allowed Miriam to enter the space, to organise herself, a ritual accompanied by a tacit agreement that I did not really answer her question. With time I felt how much this ritual clearly defined our relationship; who was at the centre, who was exposed, who was being listened to. I avoided (as much as this was really possible) bringing my own subjectivity. I maintained our distinct positions. I felt how important it was for me to allow Miriam to take centre stage, perhaps for the first time in her life. But sometimes I wondered if I did not miss her real desire to hear from me how I was, to allow for a more mutual movement and space in our relationship. Perhaps such a movement could be just as useful, maybe even more, than retaining our crystal-clear defined roles? I debated whether her question was an invitation which was not merely an expression of automatic politeness, or Miriam’s way of organising into our connection. Could it be a door I was apprehensive to open into transitional states, a transitional space en route to feeling less lonely?

IDEOLOGICAL PAIN

From the moment of first considering the idea of sending our son to a mixed nursery to when we reached our decision, my wife and I had some difficult and challenging weeks. We lived in a transitional space, full of movements oscillating between wanting to join and wanting to stay separate. Staying in this transitional space allowed the decision we eventually took – to join the mixed nursery – to be anchored within us, to feel more complete. We felt that we were not merely following a lefty “tree-

hugging” ideology, but were, regardless of politics, willing to meet our real enemies: the fears which prevented us from making real changes in the reality of our life, the racism tattooed into our collective psyche, the fear of the other, of that which is different to us. We decided to face our upbringing.

And so, while we did our best to hold hope alongside our fears and dread, we sent our boy to the nursery. I cannot begin to share how weird it was to bring him every morning to our neighbouring Arab village, to meet both Jewish and Arab parents by the entry gate, to hear the teacher greeting him in Arabic, speaking to him in Arabic. I felt that my immune system sent antibodies to scream that I was doing something awfully bad, that this was all wrong, that my boy would pay a heavy price for my stupid frivolous decisions. I feared that real connection would actually be formed, that relationships between us and Arab parents from the nursery would weave and develop. What would we do if such a situation occurred? How would we approach the decades of explosive baggage which we carried in our bodies and psyches? What was really happening as we shared a bigger body to which we connected (the nursery) and which we together formed? How could we truthfully approach the other when we came from such different realities – language, culture, customs, and history? I struggled to find places of connection beyond short, polite interactions. I hoped that time would make a difference, that gradually something else would happen simply as a result of this place where Jews and Arabs shared their existence.

Time passed and despite some efforts there was no change. I felt that we continued to foster the distinction under a façade of relatedness. Indeed, our bodies did meet, sharing time together, celebrating birthdays together in the nursery. Together we sat in parents’ evenings, speaking of our children, attempting to deal with bureaucratic problems together, yet nobody dared to touch the wound. There was no real space for the shadow. We continued to walk on eggshells, to maintain our separateness while there was no real counter-movement of coming together since the root of our conflict remained untouched. Once again my partner and I entered a transitional space as the conflict between staying or leaving became more prominent and our questions became more painful and burning. This time, in the space between staying or leaving, we noticed strong feelings of betrayal and failure on the one hand, and, on the other, relief at the thought that we would no longer have to take part, no longer have to attempt to hold this shared body with its complexities and the huge efforts and resources required to keep it alive.

The nursery itself, which was still struggling with its birthing pains, experienced on its flesh the painful gap between dream and reality, between the desire to cross the divide between two nations, to slowly and gradually allow for more points of connection, to feel less threatened by the other and more willing to connect and meet. Alongside that, there was a reality which we inevitably, almost unwillingly, brought into the nursery – shaped as we were by our own culture and education – each remains to their own, standing on their own side of the fence.

In a culture of mutual avoidance, a culture of denial of the price we all pay, a culture that is inherently uninterested in accepting and receiving the other, we struggled to keep our ideology alive. At the same time, our environment continued to pump its dissatisfaction with our decision. The bigger body did not look kindly on the attempts of its parts to change.

MOVING THROUGH TRANSITIONAL STATES – A NOVEL KIND OF CONNECTION

This time I decided to answer her question; I shared with Miriam how I was, how I arrived at our meeting. Miriam was surprised, embarrassed, she looked at me differently. I felt slightly relieved and

at the same time very tense. What will happen now? A pregnant silence surrounded us. After a few moments Miriam broke the silence, asking: “Why did you share with me? It is the first time you actually respond to my question and tell me about you?” I sensed myself organising a reflective question, bringing it back to her “and how do you feel about it?” yet I knew that this movement arose from my fear (possibly our fear) of changing our positioning, the fear of giving some space for my subjectivity too, although not at Miriam’s expense. This new position had less structure, it was more dangerous, but it held a chance for less loneliness and greater mutuality, where we might learn about a relationship within which we could coexist. “I wanted to share myself with you. I started to hear in your question at the beginning of our sessions also an invitation,” I replied.

Miriam smiled and I smiled back. Something was changing in the pulsation between us, a novel closeness. I felt less alone. What to do now? During the rest of the meeting we both stumbled our way around a foreign land but did so closer to one another. We explored the different meaning of our relationship, the novel connection which had arrived. A sense of partnership was beginning.

The “how are you” ritual at the beginning of every session changed its quality, becoming a rite of passage into our intersubjective space which we both created and sustained. In the next months we moved between this new level of closeness, developing between us and stronger affective and transference dynamics which surfaced with it. Miriam’s father was more powerfully present in our meetings and Miriam’s yearning, which was never uttered, that dad would be present for her, seeing her, allowing her space in his life without her needing to obliterate herself. All that was now alive between us in the room. I understood even more how meaningful it was for Miriam to hear how I really was.

WITHDRAWING

From the second year of our son being at the nursery the challenge became too difficult for me. I could not find sufficient wanting and energy to invest in coming closer. Remaining in this transitional state for so long was exhausting and unsettling so, after three years in the nursery, we decided to move our son to the separate schooling system closer to our home. During the years when we took part in this movement attempting to create a dialogue, actively investing in connection between hostile and separated bodies, I learned that unless we risk a genuine opening of our wounds through speaking of our conflicts, real connection and intimacy cannot be created. I learned that merely being two bodies together in the same space was not necessarily sufficient for the creation of a relationship and bringing about change in behavioural and cultural patterns. I understood that without true willingness to move through transition states, without the willingness of both sides to risk exposure and loss of some of our identity true intimacy could not be created.

The nursery provided an illusion – it was heart-warming to witness the deep attachment created between my son and his Arab teacher, to hear the children sing in Hebrew and Arabic, to feel that I was doing the right thing, the bold thing. But if I dared to look more honestly, we maintained our differentiation throughout – the parents did not discuss the reality within which the nursery existed. We avoided going there as nobody was interested in touching the wounds inflicted by the other over decades. It was enough that our children were together, we conveniently said, this will make a difference. And so, we also perpetuated on some level the very reality we wished to challenge. We arrived at the basin but did not know how to drink from it together. We took turns, remaining distant lest we accidentally touch one another, awakening a can of worms. We watched our children play together but we did not join in.

SUMMARY

Transitional states, the space where one form has already melted and the next has yet to come. Relational psychotherapy moves between individual and dyadic states of consciousness (Tronick et al., 1998), between self and mutual regulation (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2013, 2014). Agreeing to move between these strange and untrodden spaces is foreign, difficult and, at times, intolerable, yet moving into them and through them is a necessary condition if we truly wish to bring about change. I feel that it is insufficient to sit together, week after week, for months and years, holding together rigidified relationships. My clinical experience, which is exemplified here through my work with Miriam, and my experience as a parent in the Jewish–Arab nursery, confront me with this call that I can no longer look away from. I do not claim that this is “the truth”, but simply another truth which I am continuously encountering and with which I dialogue in my life. Relational psychoanalyst Philip Bromberg (1998) suggested that psychotherapy was an opportunity to do something dangerous without leaving the office.

The English Poet John Donne (1923) famously wrote:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.

I find his words an appropriate ending to this short paper.

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