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# *Learning to Swim in the Ever-changing Ocean of Experience*

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Silence and stillness are the basis of sound and movement, yet they are largely out of awareness as we focus on the more recognisable manifest modes of our experiences. When pre-occupation in, on and as movement becomes total there is an absence of space and relaxation — the absence of the facticity of being which is always already here. This experiential, though not actual, absence is the basis of all mental health problems. Mis-attuned environments, environments promoting abandonment and invasion lead to a falling away from the fullness of being, the simplicity of being present with whatever is occurring.

In order to integrate whatever occurs and to be able to truly respond to events as they are, we need to have space to receive what is occurring. When that space of welcome is already suffused with habitual thoughts, worries, intense feelings, sensations and so on then it is difficult for a fresh response to arise towards the new situation. This is particularly the case when our experience is largely mediated through language, for language, the semiotic web, is maintained through activation and exerts a demand for employment. As its hegemony increases each event is mediated through the interpretation generated by the kaleidoscopic turn of the semantic wheel. From within language it is almost impossible to recognise what language does in its moment by moment interweaving, for each formulation or interpretation calls forth another in the infinite conversation.

Conversation leaks out of us and echoes within us, often in habitual patterns which seek to assert their continuity through reiteration. This of course is a key factor in the formation of identity, the set of patterns whose 'repetition' makes us recognisable to ourselves and others.

Patterning is the basis for cognitive intelligence, for we need to be able to understand patterns in order to engage in play and in work and indeed in all forms of interaction with ourselves and with our environment. Patterns arise for us on the basis of our way of relating to and interpreting of the field of experience. We see shapes and colours and the seeming given-ness of their continuity is readily taken as a sign that both we and the world exists as real substantial entities.

Daniel Stern in *'The Interpersonal World of the Infant'* sets out a model of the development of the sense of self that is useful for reflecting on the nature of identity. He posits the gradual unfolding of four aspects of self-experience.

The first is the emergent self which is present from before birth. This self aspect is part of the flow of experience; streams of event moments are occurring with minimal differentiation of self and other. This is the domain of emergence where the integrated field of experience shows itself as the immediacy of its display. It can be described as integrated for it is not split into self and other, inside and outside and so on.

This integration manifests as fleeting forms, forms which show themselves without being ordered by any over-arching controller, plan or intention. It presents itself aesthetically, open to immediate appreciation, rather than as a series of situations which require interpretation in order to be meaningful. Here the meaning or value is directly present in the experience — what occurs does not need ‘to be made sense of’ since its sense is what is revealed through the senses. This is the domain of intrinsic meaning — a meaning which can, perhaps, be shown but which cannot be said.

The baby gradually formulates a differentiation of self and other and starts to experience itself as an ‘individual’, one who is separate from his or her environment. The baby checks itself out, feeling fingers and toes, generating pleasant and unpleasant sensations, and through that experiences a shift from a largely receptive participation to one marked by an ever-increasing sense of agency. Now there is a ‘core self’ demarcated by the skin as boundary. This opens the field of acting on the ‘other’ and being acted on by the ‘other’. The ever-increasing complexity of the forms of duality which are encountered brings about an increased sense of differentiation of the objects in the field. In particular, there is more sense of others as separate beings each with their own ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. As the infant relates to different people and experiences the others’ gestures and responses so they are called upon to engage ‘appropriately’ and this requires them to try to work out what is ‘fitting’ in each situation.

This marks the awakening of the interpersonal self with which the infant starts to encounter a basic tension in the human situation, that of the conflict between being true to oneself and paying the price of belonging. Through this they gradually extend their repertoire of interpersonal and intra-psychic positionings, their self states. These states can have greater or lesser flows of communication with other states and greater or lesser access to the actuality they inhabit according to the presence or absence of facilitation offered by the current environment. Intense mis-attunement from the outside tends to lead to dissociation, impulsivity, collapse and other unhelpful patterns.

These self-states are sub-systems niched within each ‘individual’ — just as each ‘individual’ is a sub-system niched within its relational community, which in turn is niched within the interactive system of the environment. All living systems have to remain open or communicative if they are to survive. The ‘skin’ of the system has to be permeable in order to allow the inward and outward pulsations of communication. A healthy flow helps to diminish the inherent tendency towards entropy, loss of patterning and collapse. The health of the sub-system’s skin depends on mutually life-affirming contact with other systems. Invasion and abandonment disrupt the flexibility of the skin and lead to a reactive fixity as hyper- or hypo-porosity with a consequent loss of attunement.

The fourth domain of self to arise or unfold is the verbal, in and through which the infant has access to a vast array of signifiers which permit of infinite permutations. The child is infected by language and undergoes an incredible transformation. They become addicted to words, babbling on, repeating endlessly, formulating questions, taking up positions, awakening to the wonder of lying. Lying and getting away with it marks a great freedom. Freedom not just from the eye of the all-knowing mother but freedom from the fixity of ‘reality’. To lie and to be lied to, to betray and to be betrayed points to the illusory nature of what we take to be actual, factual. Now the child starts to participate in a world of possibilities, of choices, choices whose outcome can often not be known in advance. Not knowing and uncertainty come to be familiar experiences with their double edge of excitement and dread. Most children are encouraged to enter worlds of make believe, of imagination, of ‘as if’. Stories of talking animals, of superheroes, of fairy tales and so on show directly that being taken in, as both hospitality and delusion, is a key mode of our participation in a world which reveals itself precisely through our participation. ‘Things’ become real as and when we believe in them. ‘Make believe’ makes the world — at least it makes the only world we have access to, which is the world of our experience. This is the domain of language, a domain of believing that particular sounds or patterns of letters not only carry specific meanings but are these meanings. We believe that the word ‘dog’ and what it refers to exist together in a directly meaningful and definitive way - even when we become familiar with other languages which lack the miraculous word ‘dog’.

Swimming in the ocean of language enriches the individual, giving them access to vast swathes of knowledge and narrative about events that they will never encounter directly. However, language also creates its own world, a world which hovers over and around that of sensory revelation yet is always apart from it since it cannot be a vehicle or medium for gaining direct access to it. Language operates in a

manner similar to cyberspace, creating a domain of simulacra, of avatars, of the imagined taken to be inherently true.

Within this field, which in its ceaseless operation is usually invisible to itself and is therefore taken for granted, there tends to be a deluding fusion. That which appears and how it is taken to be become fused as my sense of 'what is going on'. Language is massaged into, woven into, dissolved into, what is occurring. What we think and say about what is 'happening' is taken to be a veridical account of 'what is happening'. 'So you doubt my word?!' To not be believed is unsettling and potentially dangerous — not just in terms of the awkwardness of the specific incident but because it reveals the hidden truth that the whole semiotic web is held in place by belief. Belief in the specific rests on our capacity to believe that there are identifiable 'things' to believe in and this rests on our belief in the system of language per se. Once this is put into question the feverish activity of language shows itself to be an attempt to deal with a basic sense of lack, the ontological insecurity that is inseparable from our groundless thrown-ness, the multifactorial contingent happenstance of our existence.

When the fear aspect of this lack, the dread of non-existence, of a basic hollowness of our sense of self, is allowed to be present without confluence or resistance, it gradually dissolves like morning mist. This leaves a space, the space of presence, of simply being open. All the ingredients of self-identity are still there, but are seen to be transient, coming and going, interacting to form patterns, pictures, situations that endure but briefly. Presence is still, while identity is itself part of the emergent ever-changing patterning of interactive existence. The spaciousness of presence indicates that it is not an entity, not a thing that can be grasped or known as something truly existing.

Presence, the lively showing of being, is infinite and, when this is directly experienced, all that appears is self-evidently the radiance or clarity or play of presence. This integration of spaciousness or stillness and movement or appearance is not something achieved by effort but is the always already actuality revealed when anxious defensive activity subsides. In Stern's terms this involves our opening to the emergent and inhabiting the domain of that vital display which presents itself immediately, prior to any cognitive or conceptual elaboration. The very ungraspability of the emergent destabilises the putative centrality of our sense of ego agency — in other words we find we have no ground to stand on, no place apart from the integrated flow of experience. We are participants, nothing more, nothing less, participating from within the emergent field of experience which is itself luminous and ungraspable.

When this is not awakened to, when being is forgotten in the intoxication of the addictive task of trying to forge a stable identity out of transient patterns, then there is an over-investment in the narrative organisation of events, thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, plans and so on. These narrative tropes become the guarantors of identity, validity and purpose.

In Stern's terms there is not only a forgetfulness of spacious presence, but of the emergent, the core and even the interpersonal aspects of self. The task of stabilisation of the ego and its world falls to the manipulation of language, the directing of the flow of the dialogic into repetitive sequences, reliance on which generates the illusion that we know who we are and what we are doing and why.

The desire to maintain ones own 'repeated' patterns as if they indicated a stable structure, a stable basis for identity, leads to an insistence on their value and validity. The infant manifesting as pliable potentiality encounters rigidity of pattern in the adult — and in order to maintain and develop relationship with that adult on whom they are dependent there is almost inevitably an adaptation to the patterns engaged with. The infant is having to balance the advantage of alignment, of fitting in, with the value of self-expression which may well manifest as resistance to the indicated adaptive position.

Gradually a small repertoire of complementary roles or positions is developed within the family. The child learns what it can manifest with whom and this attention to the specificity of particular 'others' brings about a parallel increase in the complexity of the self. If the environment is reasonably containing and there are no intense acute or chronic experiences of invasion or abandonment, then these self-positions can collaborate with each other and this clarity promotes a unified attention to

the environment permitting the selection of the self-aspect most fitting to interact with current circumstances. However, undue pressure created by intrusion or absence leads to the experience of overwhelm resulting in a collapse of intra-psycho communication as the sympathetic nervous system

overrides more attuned possibilities. This results in the manifesting of reactions which arise from the internal logic of the individual rather than from a mutually communicative interface with the environment. And of course such reactions are likely to be interpreted as provocations by the non-attuning other leading to an escalation of invasion or abandonment.

Whether calm and communicative or disturbed and mis-attuning the dialogic development of identity (including monologic modes) is dynamic. That is to say it 'exists' through movement — its 'persistence' is movement. If the movement stops, if the flow of self-reflexive and perhaps also self-reflective messaging ceases through the falling away of thought, feeling, sensations, memory, planning etc, then identity also vanishes. Since this must be resisted at all costs, in order to keep the show on the road intra-psychic activity is likely to increase when external stimuli are diminished. Internal and external conversation of a repetitive nature blocks silence and stillness, condemning the individual to the normalisation of distraction and disturbance.

Not only is this experience of excessive, over-stimulating activity normalised but with it comes the sense that thoughts and feelings can only be calmed by more thoughts and feelings — and so worry and pre-occupation are installed as a false antidote, one which only makes the problem worse!

Everything is changing yet this fact does not quite register for those who are busy making things happen. This occurs due to our ordinary activity being organised within interpretations of the phenomena of the world, including ourselves, which insist on there being truly existing entities which can be known, directed and controlled. The narrow focus of this point of view means that the environment is engaged with primarily as a means to an end and therefore the field is edited to highlight the few particular features which embody ones own projections of value and self-interest. The richness of the experiential field is largely ignored and the self-matrix is too busy and too preoccupied to be aware of the nature of its own existence. This is the structure which resists fundamental change, radical change.

Change on the level of altering patterns is rarely effective and rarely enduring. So much ongoing effort is exerted for so little gain. This is due to a misapprehension of the key impediment: the forgetfulness of being due to intoxication with the fantasy of individual agency. This structure condemns us to experience relating in terms of it-it or I-it but only rarely as I-Thou. The objectification of self, of other, or both is the screen, the veil, the sclerosis which denies the vitality of ceaseless dynamic emergence. For change to be fundamental it has to address the foundation, the ground, the basis, the source. For it to be radical it has to identify the radix, the root. Only when the root of experience is firmly planted in the ground of spacious presence can healthy growth occur — the growth which is revealed both in the co-emergence of all the field factors and in the non-duality of the ground and that which manifests from it.

If psychotherapy is to enable this to occur there has to be a return to that which is always already available. The talking cure takes us only so far — the key journey is that of opening to, listening to and becoming silence, stillness, peace.