

The Impassioned Body-Mind: Embracing Eros, Vitality and Healthy Disturbance

*Taken from the paper by Bill Cornell
'The Impassioned Body'*

This workshop reconsiders the place of passion and of the erotic within contemporary depth psychologies and body-centered processes. It seems that there has been a disappearance of sexuality from the heart of our emotional, relational and therapeutic processes.

How do we speak of and embrace more richly the erotic mind, and the enlivened, passionate body as practitioners?

We want to explore how we may begin to communicate about a sense of the *life force* in the body: the *force* of sexuality, the *force* of desire, one that ignites a heat of passion. Passion suggests a union of love and sexuality within a wish to create states of mutual ecstasy, with an intensity that can approach the edge of madness when we surrender into the arms of another.

“The erotic includes all sexual and sensual feelings or fantasies a person may have. It should not be identified solely with attraction or sexual arousal as it may also include anxiety or the excitement generated by the revolting. In my use of the term, it will imply an emphasis on fantasy rather than actual sexual activity; there is no sexual activity devoid of an underlying fantasy; on the other hand, fantasies do not always lead to activity.”

- David Mann

From a Reichian perspective, sexual fantasies were understood as serving defensive functions -- pulling out of the body into the head. That is certainly sometimes the case, but fantasy is not always defensive. It is often the realm of the erotic fantasies that can be shared in a therapeutic relationship that represents the initial and deeper explorations of desire, of emerging possibilities, which may be exciting and disturbing to the practitioner and client alike.

A Vanishing Landscape

Why do we enter into the work of psychotherapy or emotional/psychological processes these days? What are clients looking for when they seek out this type of depth work in their own process or therapy?

A review of the clinical literature of the past decade or two would suggest that therapists are responsible for providing--and clients are longing for--an experience of relatedness: a holding environment, a supportive and empathic transference relationship. Safety and

compassion seems to have the upper hand these days over conflict and passion within the healing dynamic.

We should ask: what is important? What has the greatest value? The price of life is attached to what all human beings share and are longing for: the need to love, to enjoy life, to be a part of a relationship in its fullest expression, etc. Again, here we are confronted with our ideology of what psychoanalysis is for. What is its aim? Overcoming our primitive anxieties, to repair our objects damaged by our sinful evil? To ensure the need for security? To pursue the norms of adaptation? Or to be able to feel alive and to cathect the many possibilities offered by the diversity of life, in spite of its inevitable disappointments, sources of unhappiness and loads of pains?

- Andre Green, French psychoanalyst

There is perhaps nothing more thrilling, unpredictable and revealing than the co-mingling of erotic feelings, wishes, thoughts and desires. The eros of our life force, whether directly linked to one's sexual expressions or not, is the most enduring and exciting force that can sustain people in the face of life's vicissitudes, its myriad disappointments and frustrations.

"The erotic is the very creative stuff of life and is inextricably linked to passion. It is a maverick, capable of the unexpected, and is the therapeutic momentum in analysis. The issue is one of passion, an intensity of feeling with no easy resolution; but out of the heat of passion old links are weakened and new links can be forged."

- David Mann

There is a tendency to sanitize life in process facilitation in particular, and therapeutic work in general. All too often, the role of the practitioner seems to be that of a service provider, one who buffers the client against the difficulties of psychic and relational life, rather than *entering into these experiences with the client*, as part of the healing effort.

The darker portrayals of relentless sexual desires captured by the American musicians Patti Smith and Emmy Lou Harris offer a stark contrast to an erotic vision of mutual pleasing and softer sensitivity.

*"There is no erotic interaction without the sense of self and other exerting power, affecting each other, and such affecting is immediately elaborated in the unconscious in the more violent terms of infantile sexuality. But **what makes sexuality erotic is the survival of the other throughout the exercise of power**....Eros unites us and in this sense overcomes the sense of otherness that afflicts the self in relation to the world and its own body. But this transcendence is possible only when one simultaneously*

recognizes the separateness of some outside body in all its particular sensuality, with all its particular differences.”

- Jessica Benjamin, psychoanalyst

We give the other, in our erotic bonds, the opportunity, the power to know us in the most essential ways, and in that knowing to unsettle, disappoint and sometimes hurt us. We struggle to come to know the other as different from us and in that differentness find an object of excitement.

Desire, vulnerability, aggression and conflict are continually intertwined.

The willingness and capacity for surrender to one's own body, to one's desires, in a passionate embrace of another (and the other's otherness) is at the heart of vital adult sexuality. This was the core of Reich's work.

Anxiety

Historically we have learned to understand the motivations of characterological and muscular armoring as the defensive effort to manage overwhelming childhood anxieties, and the life-long conflicts between anxiety and pleasure.

Miller offers a particularly compelling description of the defensive tapestry woven through the relationship of erotic passion and erotic anxieties:

“When passionate attraction or a sense of common purpose has dried up in a marriage, provoking one's anxiety can serve to keep two people thoroughly engrossed in each other. Thus the manipulation of anxiety replaces love as the chief means of social cohesion.”

“...I am convinced that the decline of so many modern relationships into enmity mostly has its roots in the anxieties that wind themselves around all love. ...Because anxiety drives people to attempt control of what cannot be controlled in the hope of making things more predictable, it creates stasis, sameness, and fixation that cause a relationship to become clogged and rapidly winded. Anxiety-ridden intimacy turns into stale intimacy, life shared in a closet, and no one can any longer grow from it.”

Reich wrote often of the continual interplay of anxiety and sexuality. Miller's words are a contemporary articulation of some of the most central and enduring concerns in Reich's work. While Miller focuses on the drying up of marriages, I see *the risk of similar dried-up outcomes in therapeutic relationships in which the practitioner and client bond around the management of anxiety and the healing of disappointment*, while holding at bay the darker and more passionate forces that threaten to emerge in the healing process.

I think the nature of these realms of anxiety are extended in *Donald Winnicott's* descriptions of the "*Fear of Breakdown*": the fears of madness, surrender, "*un-integration,*" and disorientation, that underlie a patient's defenses in process work.

In a similar fashion, these fears of breakdown, madness, surrender and disintegration can emerge in deeply erotic moments. These moments, even when they are not experienced in a sexual context, are simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating, taking one to an edge of "losing it" that can give birth to creativity and aliveness.

Emmanuel Ghent offers an especially compelling elaboration of *Winnicott's* ideas in his account of surrender, particularly erotic surrender, as allowing "*a quality of liberation and 'letting go,' ... 'a yearning to be known, recognized, 'penetrated,'*".

Breaking down and letting in, opening up and being penetrated, the ongoing interplay of vulnerability and aggression in adult sexuality, are rarely experienced without the accompaniment of anxiety and/or shame.

Massive Orienting Passions

More than two decades ago Dorothy Dinnerstein was challenging the impact of traditional gender arrangements in child care, which she argued was maiming the emotional health of our children and straining and often crippling our erotic capacities as adult lovers:

Our most fleeting and local sensations are shot through with thoughts and feelings in which a long past and a long future, and a deep wide now, are represented. ...But our sexuality [as humans] is also characterized by another peculiarity, one that is central for the project of changing our gender arrangements: *It resonates, more literally than any other part of our experience, with the massive orienting passions that first take shape in pre-verbal, pre-rational human infancy.*"

Dinnerstein continues:

"For this question, the crucial fact is that the feeling, the vital emotional intercourse, between infant and parent is carried by touch, by taste and smell, by facial expression and gesture, and by mutual accommodations of body position."

"Until the sexual impulse that emerges at puberty throws us once more into acute, physiologically urgent need for contact with the body of another person, life offers us no comparable avenue for direct expression of those feelings which are continuous with the feelings of infancy, feelings for which we then had no words, no language-dominated thoughts, and which cannot be rediscovered in their original fullness

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The "massive orienting passions" that underlie our love and gender arrangements, our sensual and sexual experiences. A DEEP WIDE NOW. Massive orienting passions. That interplay of passionate sensation and memory, of resonance and longing is exquisitely captured in Sharon Olds' poem, "My Father's Breasts":

*“Their soft surface, the polished silk of the hair
running down them delicately like
water. I placed my cheek—once,
perhaps—upon their firm shape,
my ear pressed against the black
charge of the heart within. At most
once—yet when I think of my father
I think of his breasts, my head resting
on his fragrant chest, as if I had spent
hours, years, in that smell of black pepper and
turned earth.”*

The force of human sexuality. A DEEP WIDE NOW: drenched, submerged in infantile fantasies, enthralled in the moment, flung back into past, only to be thrust forward into future, wrenched with hope, desire, vulnerability. Essential to both the disturbance and the excitement of our erotic desires is the simultaneous evocation of the infantile underpinnings of our somatic/emotional experiences as well as the force and complexity of adult love and passion. This single poem of Olds could be the subject of an essay in its own right. She reminds us, in the midst of the mother/infant metaphors and models permeating the current therapeutic literature, that the father in his presence and absence is an inevitable force in psychic development.

Dinnerstein's writing offers a startling and enlivening contrast to de-eroticized and sanitized language. She captures the heat and the anxiety, as well as the warmth and caring, in the passions of our infantile attachments and longings, in our massive orienting passions.

Muriel Dimen, when referencing and addressing sexuality in process work, "*What happened to the heat?*" There is eros and heat in adult passions. These are not quiet waters.

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Joyce McDougall's writing often enters the unquiet waters of adult sexuality, infused with ageless desires and conflicts. She writes, "I learned that the terrors of dissolving, of losing one's bodily limits or sense of self, of exploding into another or being invaded and imploded by another, were both frequent and revealing of the buried links to archaic sexual and love feelings originating in earliest infancy."

These impassioned desires and fears, infused with the force of adult body, emerge and re-emerge with relentless (ruthless, as Winnicott would say) vitality in our adult erotic relations and in the transference-countertransference dynamics of in-depth psychotherapy. To enter the realms of the erotic within the therapeutic relationship, to enter fully into adult sexual relations, one invites the full force of life's vicissitudes, replete with fantasy, idealization, disappointment, frustration, aggression, excitement, and unpredictability. I will explore here the interplay of anxiety, pleasure, contagion, differentiation and loss, all of which are essential to the development of mature sexuality. This is complex and disturbing territory -- territory I would suggest that client and therapist often collude to avoid.

Pleasure and Undoing

We can see in Reich's writings, especially those on the somatic relationship between mother and baby (Reich, 1983), that he sensed the crucial importance of the experience of pleasure for the mother with her infant's body and of an erotic aliveness in the mother/infant couple.

We now see in the infant research that the experience of pleasure is absolutely central in the baby's organization of a vital sense of self, not only in relation to the parent, but also in relation to its own body. Schore synthesizes the implications of contemporary mother/infant research this way:

“These data underscore an essential principle overlooked by many emotion theorists – affect regulation is not just the reduction of affective intensity, the dampening of negative emotion. *It also involves an amplification, an intensification of positive emotion, a condition necessary for more complex self-organization.* Attachment is not just the reestablishment of security after a dys-regulating experience and a stressful negative state, it is also about the interactive amplification of positive affects, as in play states.”

So the therapeutic relationship provides a means of creating and strengthening the capacity for positive (and aggressive) affects, as well as the mitigation of distress and negative affect.

In language bordering on the poetic, Bollas offers this description:

“Essential to generative mothering is her erotic love of her infant, conveyed most particularly in the eroticism of breast-feeding, which is a form of sexuality unto itself. With breast full, she often aches for the passionate attack of her hungry infant, whose sucking inspires a radiant pleasure that courses through her body.”

“It is not only through the breast-feed that the mother conveys her eroticism. She bathes the infant in seductive sonic imagery, oooing, cooing, and aahing, luring the infant’s being from autistic enclave into desire for the voice. ...Maternal speech links language to desire long before words-in-themselves are used by the child to express desire. In "voicing over" the infant’s body, the mother touches her infant through acoustic fingers, precursive to all conversions from word to body, and likewise accomplishing its reversal, as the body is now put into words.”

“Every day, for years, she finds her child’s sexual and aggressive bodily expression delightful in countless ways, linking the drives and transferring the very body she had aroused into language.”

Returning again to the poetry of Sharon Olds, we find an eloquent evocation of Bollas’ meaning:

*Coming home from the woman-only bar,
I go into my son’s room.
He sleeps—fine, freckled face
thrown back, the scarlet lining of his mouth
shadowy and fragrant, his small teeth
glowing dull and milky in the dark,
opal eyelids quivering
like insect wings, his hands closed
in the middle of the night.*

*Let there be enough
room for this life: the head, lips,
throat, wrists, hips, cock,
knees, feet. Let no part go
unpraised. Into any new world we enter, let us
take this man.
(1984, p. 68)*

Poet Gary Snyder exquisitely captures what Bollas seeks to convey, extending the maternal dyad into an erotic triad of mother, father and infant:

*The hidden place of seed
The veins net flow across the ribs, that gathers
milk and peaks up in a nipple – fits
our mouth –
The sucking milk from this body sends through
jolts of light; the son, the father,
sharing mother's joy
That brings a softness to the flower of the awesome
open curling lotus gate I cup and kiss
As Kai laughs at his mother's breast he is now weaned
from, we
wash each other,
this our body
....
These boys who love their mother
who loves men, who passes on
her sons to other women*

The eroticism conveyed in the words of Bollas, Olds, and Snyder propels the child forward into their bodies and into a future of the body. These are the early, shared experiences of eros that carry the child beyond the cocoon of infant/parent comfort and nurturance, to lay the foundation for all of the intensities of adult relations.

The pleasure and eroticism Bollas and Snyder convey are not the experiences that bring most of us into psychotherapy, especially not to body-centered psychotherapy.

Clients often enter psychotherapy seeking compensation for their childhood and relational wounds, wishing for an idealized, healing relationship provided by an understanding and near-perfect parent substitute.

There can be a place for such an arrangement, but I would argue that sweetness and idealization in a therapeutic relationship are not sufficient if one seeks the capacity for passionate attachments.

Mature adult relations are not safe and predictable. Mann observes, "it is not in the nature of the erotic to be cozy." Bataille elaborates:

“The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives. Stripping naked is the decisive action.

Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self.

Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality.”

The erotic is invasive, naked, contagious with the desire to be taken over. One wonders with the other, who is doing what to whom? Lucinda Williams (2000), in her song "Essence," portrays this desire in straightforward language:

*Baby, sweet baby, kiss me
hard
Make me wonder who's in charge*

*Baby, sweet baby, can't get enough
Please come find me and help me get fucked up*

The erotic is often messy. A mature therapeutic relationship must also have the capacity to be messy.

In an essay on lust, Dimen exults in the "messiness" of intimacy both in the psychoanalytic process and in sex, ... "intimacy, relatedness, and warmth as well as complexity, confusion, and the half-lights of bodies and minds growing into and out of each other—a viny, complicated mess...." (1999, p.430). Dimen continues:

Way down deep, *Lust* means not the conclusion of discharge but the penultimate moment of peak excitement when being excited is both enough and not enough, when each rise in excitement is, paradoxically, satisfying. Orgiastic. I would not want to do without orgasm—catharsis—myself. But isn't the pleasure of *Lust* equally central? A need calling for satisfaction, a satisfaction becoming a thrilling need? An excitement whose gratification is simultaneously exciting? (1999, p.431)

In a similarly evocative essay on eroticism, Ruth Stein (1998) writes that "eroticism in its vehemence and irrationality may seem monstrous, or at least unintelligible" (p.257), describing eroticism as a means "for carrying us beyond the toll of our separate individuality: it 'undoes' us" (p.255), and which "responds to and expresses the need for magic, for overstepping one's boundaries, for endowing one's sensuality and profound corporeality with meaning, a meaning that is both clarifying and mystifying..." (p.266).

Erotic Contagion: Transference and Countertransference

The experience of erotic transference and countertransference is an undoing, the force and forms of adult desires emerging from the shadow of disowned, disavowed and disorganizing longings.

When we enter the realms of the erotic with our clients, do we court disaster or invite possibility? Do we dance on a knife blade edge between the two? Do we allow the forces of erotic desire and fantasy to push against the familiar, established order of therapeutic limits? What is the nature of erotic transference? What is there to be gained for the client? The erotic is inherently contagious. It creates the confusions of desire: "Whose feelings are these? Who started it? Who are you to me? Who am I to you? Where are the boundaries between desire and action?" The erotic moves not only the client but also the therapist into realms of ambiguity, ambivalence, excitement, anxiety and disgust. How can this be good for anyone? **How do I contain and use my erotic countertransference as a source of information rather than a means of contagion?**

Davies observes that "psychoanalysts have contorted themselves, their patients, and their understanding of the psychoanalytic process in an attempt to minimize, disavow, project and pathologize the sexual feelings that emerge between the analytic couple in the course of their emotionally powerful and most intimate encounter with each other" (1998, p.747). She sees this anxiety as rooted in the fears and prohibitions of sexual acting out between therapist and client and as fostered by the lack of any intelligently articulated theory of the "nature of normal adult sexuality and its manifestations in clinical practice" (p.751). She argues that a sexual (I would say erotic) aliveness is inherent and healthy in the later stages of an in-depth therapy. She argues that these concomitant feelings of aliveness and attraction are not to be avoided, lived in silence, or eliminated through clinical consultation but are to be welcomed and examined.

Mann, too, defines psychotherapy as an erotic relationship, in which the force of the erotic is a primary means for growth and change:

...it is my proposition that **the emergence of the erotic transference signifies the patient's deepest wish for growth.** ...Through the erotic, light is shone on the deepest recesses of the psyche. ...The development of the erotic transference is a major transitional stage in which the repetitive and transformational desire of the patient's unconscious meet at a passionate junction. The heart of the unconscious is visible in all its 'elemental passion', and in so opening allows for the prospect of transformation and psychic growth. (1997, pp.9-10)

Differentiation and Maturation

Mann observes that the erotic pulls us toward "greater differentiation and individuation, ...to greater complexity and more diverse and complex structures" (1997, p.9). Here we

have the distinction of the erotic pull into adult life and intimacy from that of the erotic being seen as the regressive pull of infantile longings and fusion fantasies.

Otherness and Loss

I return to Green's words as he addresses the tendency to defend against yet another aspect of adult sexuality and genitality:

...it is most of the time because he has some unconscious awareness that giving sexuality and genitality their full importance would lead him to greater danger himself, such as the impossibility of accepting the slightest frustration, the torments of disappointment, the tortures of jealousy, the storms of having to admit that the object is different from the image projected by him, the disorganization of limitless destruction either of the object or the self in case of conflict, etc. And it is in order to avoid all these threats of breakdown that the patient will disengage himself from a full and total relationship, leaving the field to other regressions which happily enough for him do not involve the existence of another object and the dissatisfactions that he, or she, may cause. (1996, p.874)

Breakdown. Frustration. Disappointment. Loss. Each and all are elements of a full and total intimate relationship, coming to truly know and love another, who will inevitably prove to be different from what we have imagined. We cannot avoid the possibility of loss in our passionate attachments.

And Rich:

An honorable human relationship -- that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word "love" -- is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other.

It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation.

It is important to do this because in so doing we do justice to our own complexity.

It is important to do this because we can count on so few to go that hard way with us. (1979, p.188)