

Chapter I

Vitalizing enactment

A relational exploration

Amy Schwartz Cooney

Introduction

Drawing on her years of experience as a child psychoanalyst, Alvarez (2012) theorized a form of intervention termed “vitalization” in which the analyst reaches out to “reclaim” severely disturbed patients, drawing them from states of near psychic death into live contact. For Alvarez, these active interventions are aimed at the introjection of a new good object and the development of a more enriched sense of self in children whose primary object has been disastrously deficient. I have found Alvarez’s ideas compelling and hopeful, offering a vision of the progressive action of psychoanalysis. I have also found her ideas applicable in a broader theoretical context and with a wider population, particularly in therapeutic impasses that feel inert and with adult patients who struggle to feel alive emotionally.

My project in this chapter is twofold. I consider Alvarez’s notion of vitalization through the lens of relational thought. From this perspective, I regard vitalizing interventions as enactments that can be enriching and transformative in their lived experience rather than in retrospective processing. I also advance a broadened conception of enactment as not only repetitive of old conflicts or expressive of dissociated affect but also opportunities for potentiating new experiences in the analytic dyad. I begin by briefly reviewing Alvarez’s ideas. I then introduce the concept of vitalizing enactment, contextualize this idea theoretically, and present a clinical vignette from my work with a withdrawn and despairing patient to illustrate this chapter’s themes.

meaningful and vitalizing for Alvarez as well. I understand the analyst's "countertransference urgency" as an expression of her subjectivity. Alvarez's response reflected the unique and inchoate ways that this relationship had touched her and created intrapsychic disruption within her. This Robbie was her Robbie. While doubtless other clinicians would have been moved differently, Alvarez's reactions emanated from her psyche and her connection to this boy and to some part of herself that was stirred by him. Robbie's responsiveness was also specific to this relationship and his dynamics as they emerged with this analyst.

Through my own relational lens I am conceptualizing this moment as an enactment in which patient and analyst met in a way that was progressive and alive. This encounter was an enactment in that it was an unconsciously driven, spontaneous, and seismic action. While clearly asymmetrical (Aron, 1996), this was a mutual exchange between two people, two minds meeting, touching, and transforming one another. The interaction between Alvarez and Robbie led to intrapsychic movement, which in turn altered the relational field for patient and analyst alike. While mindful of the unique characteristics and parameters of psychoanalytic work with children, I suggest that the analyst's enlivening use of herself in such moments of therapeutic crises can be usefully generalized to work with adults and considered as enactments.

Vitalizing enactment

I am proposing that *vitalizing enactments* are interactions in which the analyst reaches out to draw the patient from their most necrotic zones, enlivening the treatment and generating new experiences. These enactments are distinct in that they can potentiate underdeveloped affects and capacities for the patient and analyst alike. Vitalizing enactments represent efforts to progress consciously and unconsciously rather than to re-create old pathological patterns or manifest dissociated experience. In working with such enactments the emphasis is on creating novel feelings and ways of being rather than interpreting what Alvarez (2012) describes as the "why-because" or "whatness" of the experience. Narrativizing, reflecting on process, or linking old to new may follow as different "grammars" develop (Alvarez, 1997). In

vitalizing enactment the action is in seizing the moment and creating something new.

The concept of enactment has generally been understood as a repetition of aspects of the past. Jacobs (1986) first identified "enactment" as an unconscious countertransferential action that occurs in response to the patient's psyche and the pulls of the relationship. Since then and across theoretical orientations enactment has widely been regarded as ubiquitous and been seen as more or less problematic (see Aron, 2003, for discussion). It has alternately been conceptualized as an unconscious replaying of past trauma, troubled internal processes, or dissociated experience (Benjamin, 1990; Bromberg, 1998, 2006; Davies & Frawley, 1994). Enactments have come to be understood as high-risk encounters that hold the potential for great rewards if they can be survived and processed (Bass, 2003).

What I am suggesting here is a different take. Just as Alvarez (1997) posited that the container can be a medium for the transformation of a range of feelings, I am suggesting that in enactment a range of unconscious experiences can also emerge. I am building on the assumption that the unconscious is a repository for negative feelings and fantasies as well as positive and embryonic affects and that the analytic couple is in continuous unconscious dialogue (Ferenczi, [1932] 1988) in multiple ways from the start. It follows that patient and analyst can respond to each other from unconscious areas that contain nascent feelings of love, joy, and hope as well as conflict and painful dissociated affect. All of these interactions can be intense, spontaneous, and destabilizing; all of these meetings can be forms of enactment. From this perspective enactments need not inevitably be repetitive and problematic. Enactments can also be progressive and can lead to the creation of novel feelings and capacities in the here and now. Consistent with this view, enactments need not be seen as problems to which the solution is enriching. The enactment itself can be transformative for patient and analyst, bringing to life experiences that have been submerged or unborn.

Theoretical convergences and expansions

Aron and Atlas (2015) proposed a conception of enactment as generative: a way of practicing novel possibilities that can subsequently be

lived out in the evolving future for both partners in the analytic dyad. Building on Jung's notion of the prospective function, they suggested that through enactment we can anticipate, envision, and construct new possibilities, paving the way for their subsequent realization. My notion of vitalizing enactment shares with Aron and Atlas's work a view of enactment as potentially creative and forward moving. But our conceptualizations differ because in vitalizing enactment the action is in seizing the moment and creating something new rather than in rehearsing future outcomes.

Lisa Director's (2009, 2016) recent work is also relevant. Extending Alvarez's thought, Director has proposed that the relational analyst can function as an enlivening object, catalyzing intrapsychic change within the patient. Director (2009) is centrally concerned with intrapsychic development in patients whose "curtailed object relations confine them to primitive forms of engagement" (p. 120). I am interested in an expanded conceptualization of enactment as carrying the potential for vitalization and in exploring the interplay of intrapsychic and intersubjective processes in the analytic dyad that can potentiate such creative transformations.

Newirth's (2003) work on the "generative unconscious" also relates to the concept of vitalizing enactment. He has theorized that the unconscious can be a source of creativity and energy rather than only a site of pathological conflict. Stern (2003) proposed that, as dissociations are lifted unformulated experiences can emerge that not only are defensive but also can be creative and lead to joint discovery. Echoing both of these theorists, I'm suggesting that vitalizing enactments involve the creation and emergence of novel and enriching experiences through analytic interaction.

Stephen Mitchell has advanced a theoretical shift in psychoanalysis from a model of damage and cure to one of mutual growth and enhancement of subjective experience. His exploration of the creation of new meaning rather than reworking old tapestries is spelled out in his chapter "Penelope's loom" (1988) and in his explication of analytic intention (Mitchell, 2000). He emphasized the mutative potentials in the analytic relationship as a different form of interacting in the here and now. Similarly, in vitalizing enactment the focus is on the creation and enhancement of experiences for both partners in the analytic dyad.

Loewald's (1960) focus on growth, development, and the dimension of the future is germane, as is Cooper's (2000) work on the role of "futurity" in the analytic process. As with vitalizing enactment, these ideas go to the progressive potentials of the therapeutic relationship. Hoffman's (2009) advocacy of "passion in the countertransference" relates to vitalizing enactment in his notion of the analyst's active role as a new good object, particularly against the looming inevitabilities of loss and mortality. Vitalizing enactments, however, involve developing nascent capacities and new object experiences rather than confronting malevolent introjects in the manner Hoffman has advanced.

The idea of living through, rather than interpreting, vitalizing enactment jives with several strands of analytic thought. For example, in recent work Grossmark (2012) explored the value of *being in* rather than directly interpreting the "enactive flow" when working with patients who do not experience themselves as psychically alive. Similarly, Black (2003) has suggested that at certain moments it is the shared experience of the enactment rather than subsequently processing it that is transformative. Fiscalini's (1988) work on the transformational role of "living through" new experiences in the interpersonal matrix of the analytic dyad is also resonant. From an object relational perspective, Rosenfeld (1987) and Williams (2010) have each explored the importance of interpretive restraint, particularly when working with vulnerable patients who may find verbal interventions shaming or invasive. These are some of the formulations that animate my understanding. In the vignette that follows I illustrate and explore these ideas further.

Clinical vignette

Joel was a middle-aged man who came into analysis to treat chronic insomnia, anxiety, and depression, explaining that he was disaffected in every area of his life. Handsome, educated, bright, he had been unable to establish relationships or meaningful work. He felt lifeless and humiliated by his sense of inner lack. He spent his days at a job that was rote and his nights alone or scrolling through Internet dating sites in search of ever-elusive connections.

Joel was the only child of parents who had fled persecution in South America, to escape massive violence and avoid the fate of family and

JOEL
POINT



friends who had disappeared. Although he was told that family life had been happy and full, Joel had no memories of these early days.

Joel's family settled in this country when he was 2 years old, living a life of alienation and exile. The shades of their home were always drawn. Joel was a shy and lonely child. He described his father as gruff and authoritarian, largely absent. His mother had "a breakdown" soon after the family immigrated, which resulted in a psychiatric hospitalization. He described her as a quiet and frail presence, unflinchingly good and beloved. He valorized her suffering and her endurance. She was irreproachable as a person and unapproachable as a psychic object for our exploration. The only conflict Joel remembered with her was a struggle with language. She would speak to him in Spanish and he, desperately wanting to be "like the other kids," insisted on responding in English. This stubborn bilingual exchange persisted through his youth. As an adult looking back on these battles, he regretted the conflict, had given up the effort to "fit in," and existed in an alienated nether world, deeply entrenched in shame, self-loathing, and contempt.

I empathized with Joel's experience and attempted to explore his current life, considering his difficulties in the context of his past relationships: his mother's fragility, his father's absence. I tried to think with him about the ways he was emotionally replicating his parents' life of exile and holding their unmetabolized trauma (Faimberg, 2005; Gerson, 2009), but he could not consider any way in which his past had shaped or impacted his life today. He was fiercely protective of his parents and rejected any exploration that might remotely "implicate" them in his present struggles. He knew he was self-loathing and loathed himself for it. Most sessions ended with a scowl.

I tried in different ways to reach Joel. I attempted to connect with his little-boy experiences of alienation and exclusion. I attempted to interpret his resistance to exploring his internal world to his childhood conflicts with his mother, suggesting that we were reenacting his early refusal to "speak her language" and their inability to find a common tongue. I endeavored to explore the intersubjective field, focusing on what he felt in the room with me or imagined I experienced with him as we struggled to engage. Each effort was dismissed. A pattern developed between us: he would bring in experiences in which he felt disgusted

either with himself or with someone he encountered (a date that failed, an interaction that fizzled), and I would try to delve into what had occurred. I would point to the intensity of his self-criticism and sharp devaluation of others. I'd try to explore these feelings or consider them in relation to his inner world and his formative relationships. He would scoff at such linkings and retreat further, his self-blame and protectiveness toward his objects intensified. There seemed to be no way to open up reflective space or think about his life as other than fated and doomed.

Joel spoke of his difficulty finding anything to say in sessions because there was nothing to talk about, nothing inside him. He came dutifully, paid promptly, but seemed to get nothing out of our work. This was the environment in which we lived, immersed in a kind of dead zone. I fell into a shared "situational illness" (Bollas, 1983) as a sense of hopelessness pervaded our sessions. Whether I attempted to question, clarify, resonate with, or interpret what was going on in Joel's inner or outer world or in the room, Joel shut down. Throughout the treatment I had been holding and containing Joel's loneliness and despair. Under the ongoing weight of his refusal I found myself shutting down too. The "no-thing" within Joel was between us and within me as well.

I conjectured that Joel's mother might have initially been more emotionally alive but that he lost her during her hospitalization. When she returned she was a frail and ephemeral presence, unable to be present for Joel in a vitalizing way. Consistent with Green's (1986) ideas, I understood Joel to be yoked to a damaged object, identified with a sense of inner lifelessness (no-thingness), and fiercely loyal to this depriving connection (Fairbairn, 1952). While I found these ideas useful intellectually and turned to them in an effort to enliven myself in the increasingly stalled climate of our work, I was unable to reach Joel or help him consider, recognize, symbolize, mourn, or even be curious about anything.

I felt useless and helpless in the countertransference. I came to experience myself both as the "dead mother" analyst who could not breathe life into the treatment and the bereft child, locked into psychic deprivation. While I wanted very much to help Joel, I also felt angry with his internal objects and thwarted by their ghostly presence. The treatment felt deadened and stalled.

In one session Joel was telling me of his deepening sense of disconnection. He was floating, barely moored to anyone or anything. He seemed to be sinking deeper and deeper into withdrawal. As he spoke, my mind trolled back to “memories in feelings” (Klein, 1975). Images of the past and present fused. As I looked at Joel, my father, who had struggled with severe depressions during my childhood, took form. I returned to an image of him at night, alone in the quiet of our parlor floor, clutching himself and crying. He was inaccessible and unapproachable. I watched from my hidden perch on the stairway above until I silently turned away and retreated to my room. In this moment of reverie I connected with a longing to have been close to him. I wished there could have been more.

Now here was Joel before me threatening to float away, sitting alone in his darkness. Here was Joel, the child he had been: alienated and bound to a mother who could barely survive. Here was Joel, the adult he had become: encased and rejecting. Here we were now in shifting relational configurations: mother/son; father/daughter; analyst/patient; siblings living with our shadows. To echo Alvarez, I was stirred then by my own “countertransference urgency.” I leaned forward, facing him, calling out his name, “Joel, you are not alone, I am here. You matter to me and our relationship matters.” He looked at me then, and I said, “I want to be important to you and I don’t want you to drift away.” There was silence, and I was unsure if I had alienated him further or drawn him near, perhaps neither, perhaps both. The session ended.

This heightened response was a marked departure from my usual style with Joel and certainly a wake-up from the torpor that had set in between and within each of us. I now see this intense moment as the beginning of a vitalizing enactment. In retrospect, I believe my “countertransference urgency” expressed my wish to stir Joel and his deadened internal objects to life and to reach and vitalize my retreating father and the parts of myself that were identified with him. My reverie had connected me in a visceral way to buried wishes and longings and brought me into a different relationship to Joel, as a complementary and concordant figure (Racker, 1957). Moved by these identifications and Joel’s deepening retreat, I reached out to Joel, insisting on meaning and connection.

In our next meeting, Joel came in hesitantly, sat down. We looked at each other. He began, “Sometimes I think I keep coming in here

because you’re the only person in the world that knows that I’m alive as I wander around out there. This is—you are—important to me.” I was touched by this admission and said, “Thank you for telling me that.” There was a long silence. Something was stirring. I sensed that asking how this felt or what it was like to talk this way would be derailing.

He said then, quite unexpectedly, “Are you a sports fan?” In our time together he had rarely asked me anything about myself or expressed curiosity about me. I said in a playful way, “I remember a few years back when I saw newspaper headlines about the ‘subway series’ and thought it was an exposé on mass transit.” He smiled a little and I continued, “So no, not much of a sports fan, how about you?” He replied, “I don’t think I ever told you but I love basketball, always have. When I was a kid I always wanted to watch games, go to the Garden. My mother would say, ‘I don’t understand, it’s just a game ...’ and I couldn’t explain.”

I felt the presence of the “bad” and beloved object, the dead mother. Part of me wanted to “go after her” and point out her failings. But I held back, sensing that to do so would return us to a deadlock in which I criticize his objects and he defensively withdraws. This was one of the rare occasions in which he considered a lack in his mother. I felt that to amplify it would interfere with his nascent capacity to view her in a more nuanced way and would polarize us.

So instead I said, “Tell me more about the game.” He explained to me that it was the NBA Championship and the New York Knicks were playing. Last night had been a major victory for New York—a team that rarely wins, hadn’t even been in the finals for years. They had done well in the first game, then fell apart and kind of gave up in the second. But last night they were on fire. There was a player who had never been special, usually just sat it out on the bench, but last night he was amazing. He made one basket after the other and led his team to victory! While the championship was not over, this was an extraordinary win.

I was taken with this story of redemption and hope—succeeding against all odds and coming to life when least expected. Although I had many clever connections to make, I said only, “How amazing, how great!” He was checking in to see if I was really enjoying this, and I was. He was alive. We were alive. We were relating as two people in the room. At the same time he was a little boy sharing his excitement

with a mother who meets him there. He was a father enjoying his child.

He was a man on a date, and I was with him in each of these pairings.

He continued, "So I was watching at home. I know it's pathetic I can't even go to a sports bar and sit around with other people, but I huddle in my apartment." He looked at me for the challenge of his self-rebuke, but I was not going there.

Instead I said, "Tell me about last night. Was it fun?"

"It was. And you know what else?"

There is such delight in sharing secrets. "No, what?"

"I have some pot that I got when I had that knee operation, so I smoked some and I got this nice buzz, not the nervous kind, but just mellow and I was watching the game, and this guy was winning and I felt ..."

The air was ripe with possibility and he continued in hushed tones: "I felt manly, watching the game, watching my team win."

I was so thrilled with him and the memory of this feeling—the image of him stoned, flexing his muscles, cheering his team on to victory.

Then he paused and said, "Can I ask you something?"

The encounter felt packed with possibility. There was a back and forth we simply had never had in a session before. I paused and said, "Yes, what is it?"

He said, "Do you ever smoke pot?"

I thought for a moment about the question and his taking a chance by asking me something intimate and slightly subversive. I thought about the courage this suggested. I wondered what he wanted to know about who I was and what we might do together. There was an erotic charge, a vitality and uncertainty in the air.

Would a personal revelation be seductive? Would a direct response be taken as a promise to maintain this level of intensity and disclosure? Would refraining from a response be felt as a rejection or a refusal to speak this new language? I was concerned with safeguarding the boundaries of our relationship and keeping it analytic and also wanted to stay with and in this expansive moment. I struggled with how to reply and what to explore. Should we think about the meaning or timing of the question? Should we talk about "what's going on here" now and why this is occurring in relation to my strong reaction to him in our last session and our exchange today? Should I answer or reflect or deflect?

I recalled Davies's (1994) work with a withdrawn, despairing man in "Love in the afternoon" in which she disclosed that she had fantasies about him in an enactment that ultimately enabled the patient to claim dissociated aspects of himself and his traumatic past. Balancing concerns about self-disclosure with an appreciation for this novel experience, I plowed ahead and replied, "I smoked once in a while in college, but it made me nervous, then silly, then I got the munchies." We laughed together.

After a few moments Joel's laughter faded and he said, "When I was at school everyone else used to get stoned and silly and I never could." I felt him heading down a rabbit hole into his feelings of disgust for the boy he had been, and I said, "You wanted so much to be hanging out with the group, to be a part of things and feel connected." He said sadly but without self-contempt, "I did, but I never knew how to join in and somehow people always figured that out and lost interest." His words, laced with hurt and regret, were reminiscent of older reflections but also new in that Joel was rueful rather than ashamed. He continued, "I wish I could have been like everyone else. I wish I could be silly." This brought tears to my eyes as I felt the pain of his sense of exclusion and lack. I also felt a stirring of something else: the possibility of having more. I said, "Yes, of course you do. It is wonderful to be silly sometimes." We looked at each other, and we both smiled a little. There was no scowling as the session ended. He walked out and I was left bemused, confused, energized.

Our interaction felt different, uncertain and new. There had been risk taken, questions asked and responded to. We kept the old objects backgrounded while creating novel experience together in the here and now of our relationship. He approached but we did not pursue the feelings of being pathetic, being a loser. We stayed close to what Joel longed for rather than what he criticized in himself for never having. We touched on feelings about the past without foreclosure or contempt. There was a whisper of hope.

I felt myself teetering back and forth: in the moment and involved, and also making choices to go with what felt most alive (Ogden, 1995). I was aware of the pull of the black hole (his and my own) and the tug away from it toward something vibrant, chancy, and even sexy. In this enactment aliveness was not related to the content of the material or the valence of the emotions expressed. Aliveness was in

the way Joel and I related to each other and to the experiences we were exploring. Aliveness was in the spontaneity, freedom, and vibrancy of the emotions we discovered and shared.

During this session I felt a strong urge to tell Joel what I knew through and with him: how utterly painful it is to be tethered to and haunted by a desolate object. How confusing it is to want more when the other can barely sustain themselves. I did not say these words to him. But I believe this knowledge informed and altered our work in unspoken ways. My thoughts here are in line with Bass's (2015) elaboration of Ferenczi's "dialogue of unconscious" in which he articulated the ways in which the analyst's capacity to use her own subjectivity and reach blind spots within herself can lead to new openings and mutual growth.

Something had changed in my relationship to my own internal world and to Joel's. I felt more empathy for and recognition of his attachment to his mother. I felt less of a need to wrest him away from her as I drew nearer to my retreating father and the wish to reach him. As my internal relationship to these split-off introjects (his and mine) softened, Joel became freer to respond in different ways (similar to Cooper, 2014; Davies, 2004; also Coltart, 1986; Symington, 1983). Somehow through an uncanny process of wordless transmission (Ferenczi, [1932] 1988) Joel seemed to grasp these shifts and respond in kind. He was able to resist being drawn back into his depressed internal states and allegiances. He began to experiment with new ways of relating to me and to his own experience. Space opened up within him and in our relationship for emotions that were new: for feeling potent and hopeful, for sharing secret longings and sad regrets, for wanting and asking for more. These were the nascent experiences that emerged through this vitalizing enactment that enlivened both of us and the treatment.

Discussion

Vitalizing enactment: formulating the process

I am conceptualizing this interaction as a vitalizing enactment that drew the patient and the treatment out of impasse into dialogue. This enactment involved a shared movement from dissociation to

connection to the creation of novel experience. It was spurred by internal shifts that ricocheted between us and resonated intersubjectively. I believe that we had reached a "tipping point" when this enactment began. A number of different forces coalesced in Joel and in me that were specific to our relationship and this moment in time that propelled us forward.

In entering treatment Joel had found a partner with whom he could powerfully re-create the emotional environment of his youth and his inner world. For a very long time we had lived in that eerily familiar place, playing out mirroring internal relational dynamics. My efforts to reach Joel interpretively were experienced as reproaches that led to despair and impasse as the treatment fell into deadlock. I had to fully enter Joel's subjective world and find myself there. Through my reverie I connected with the most deadened parts of myself, my own "bad" objects that had been backgrounded and dissociated through much of our earlier work. In so doing I could better know, accept, and converse with Joel from the inside out.

This knowledge, Joel's increased withdrawal, and my own sense of urgency led me to reach out to him so intensely. In responding to my entreaty Joel was signaling that the shifts within me were reverberating in him as well. We had dwelled together in the still life of the interior past and could begin to inhabit the unpredictable world of the here and now. Feelings of potency, excitement, curiosity, and surprise began to take shape as we interacted in new ways. Longings for contact and closeness emerged, as did embryonic feelings of hope and the possibility of accepting loss without shame. This enactment vitalized both of us and enlivened the treatment. It drew us out of impasse into dialogue that potentiated these new experiences for us as an analytic couple and as individuals.

"Going first," self-disclosure, and vulnerability

In this enactment with Joel, I had to "go first" (Burton, 2012), disclosing my own vulnerability and need by letting him know "I want to be important to you and I don't want you to drift away." Joel replied with a disclosure that expressed his recognition and appreciation of me for holding him in mind and not giving up on him. "Sometimes

I think ... you're the only person ... that knows that I am alive ... out there. [You] are important to me." His words were a gift that I accepted with gratitude.

I am not suggesting that the analyst should always make personal disclosures of this nature when faced with such inertia or that she work so directly from her own vulnerability (see Levine, 2016) in vitalizing enactments. There was a synergy in this moment that is difficult to pinpoint and impossible to prescribe. With another patient or at a different time, this kind of disclosure might have been experienced as intrusive or misattuned. It might have represented a manic flight from depression or a demand for affirmation. These are the risks that the analyst grapples with in using herself in such an active and enlivening way, that warrant ongoing consideration and reflection. Notwithstanding these concerns I believe that what occurred emerged uniquely from our relational matrix and was mutually transformative. As a couple we had reached our limit of containment. I could no longer hold the deadness and Joel, I believe, was ready at last to emerge.

Mutative action: intersubjective and intrapsychic transformations and growth

In terms of my understanding of the mutative action, a confluence of intrapsychic and intersubjective processes within and between us entwined to generate change. My direct plea to Joel to stay with me and the treatment, my assertion of his importance, and my wish to be important too represented different ways of relating in the real world. In this sense the interpersonal experience was transformative. The relationship between us as two adults responding to one another in vibrant new ways was progressive and growth promoting.

I also believe my words articulated buried unconscious wishes and had transference analogues that spoke to Joel's object world (and mirrored unarticulated longings of my own). I voiced what Joel in that quiet house of his youth had never been able to say. He wanted to be important. He wanted his love to be valued and returned. Speaking from the position of his object I was able to offer myself to Joel as "live company" (Alvarez, 1992), providing a kind of connection he had scarcely known. In responding with appreciation and animation

Joel was forging novel experiences. The affective mutuality and internal symmetry contributed to the power of this vitalizing enactment.

In sharing his sports story Joel found a partner who was eager and enthusiastic, who could enjoy and celebrate with him. The story of the basketball game was full of meaning and hope for victorious participation, for winning and coming through. During our interaction Joel repeatedly checked in with me. I believe he was checking to see if I could be a partner who would hold him in mind both as the person he was (Fonagy & Target, 1997) and the person he might become (Cooper, 2000; Loewald, 1960). He needed to know that I could recognize the boy who had spent his life sidelined and ashamed and the man who might someday join the game. These were new ways of being seen and known.

In questioning me about my own secret delinquencies Joel was probing (Ghent, 1990), experimenting with the limits between us. He was feeling out who I was as a new object and a person and what our connection could be. Without inhaling, we were getting high in the giddy back and forth of our generative exchange. All at once we were two college kids in a quad passing a joint; we were the children of our youths retranscribing the past; we were two adults in the here and now enjoying one another. We were patient and analyst in a vitalizing enactment creating, discovering, and progressing together.

Alvarez (2012) has cited Trevarthen's (1993) work on the importance of a child's experience of delighting the other. This occurred as Joel seemed to radiate in the glow of our encounter. It was also a joy for me to delight in him. The room filled with a shared pleasure and sense of mutual recognition (Benjamin, 1990) that was transformative. In voicing his regret for what had not been and the wish "to be silly," there was no defensiveness or self-reproach. There was poignancy and hope. This moment was very alive as we found a new way to relate to the old and intractable. We did not dislodge old objects. We accepted their presence and began to create novel ways of relating to self and other in the present moment.

Enactment as a progressive lived experience

Although I have thought often about those sessions, we have not analyzed what occurred. As the enactment was under way, reflections

KEY POINT

Key points
 on the process would have taken us out of the moment. We were traversing unknown territory rather than pausing to map out where we had been or where we might go from there. In vitalizing enactment the action is in the lived experience, rather than the verbal understanding of what has unfolded or the linking of old to new. Attempts to symbolize the interaction might have been clunky or intellectual, pulling us away from the vibrancy of the moment.

I muse that when enactments involve pathological repetitions of dissociated or traumatic experience analytic progress may require surviving, unpacking, and verbally making meaning of what has transpired. But when enactments are vitalizing, the lived process is itself transformative. I do not see vitalizing enactments as techniques but as relational events that can be uniquely generative and can move the analytic dyad through deadened impasses into novel areas of creation.

Ongoing process

My work with Joel continued and is midsentence as I write this. We have never again fallen into such deadened impasse nor been propelled through the kind of vitalizing enactment that I have explored in this chapter. We are closer and our dialogue is more fluent. There have been no dramatic shifts in Joel's representations of his objects. But there is more wiggle room, and we are more adept at sidestepping our old rabbit holes. I believe that through the treatment Joel is taking in good object experiences. He has also begun to try out new ways of relating in and out of the consulting room, contributing to greater relational freedom (Stern, 2015) and intersubjective growth.

I have found that keeping my finger on the pulse of what is generative—the desire to connect, the wish to be silly, the longing for more—tends to be facilitative. Interpreting the pull of the old readily becomes an enactment of the old. I work delicately and with greater compassion around Joel's introjects, remembering how dearly he holds these troubling and beloved figures. I imagine that in the future we might converse with Joel's past and inner world in different ways. For now I stay as near as I can to how things feel and the parts of Joel that are emerging.

In a recent session, Joel came in to tell me about something "interesting" that had happened (his "interest" in himself is a new and

exciting phenomenon!). He was on a date with a woman who asked him about his past relationships. This was usually a dreaded question to be avoided at all costs. This time he ventured, "I'm kind of a loner and never really had a long-term relationship. It's been hard for me to get close to people." While he girded himself for the inevitable rejection and humiliation, he was surprised that his date murmured some kind of assent and ordered a drink.

In exploring his feelings Joel said, "I figured as soon as she got a sense of who I am, what a freak I am, she would have just walked away, even been mad at me for wasting her time."

Shaking my head, I said, "But that didn't happen. She didn't think you were as bad as you fear."

"It's always been my story, since I was a kid," he said.

"It's always felt like the only story you could tell. I wonder though about other stories..."

Joel looked at me—with skepticism, with curiosity?

I continued, "What was it like, to just say something simple and true about yourself?"

Our eyes met. Even before he responded there was a subtle easing in the room, like a sigh. He leaned back. "It was a relief and it felt good. I don't even remember what we talked about after that because it was all such a surprise to me."

We laughed and shared in the wonder of surprise.

Here, very gently, we were considering the way his inner life and past experiences had shaped his perceptions and could compel and constrain him. Without directly implicating his objects or delving deeply into history, we focused on the present and what it feels like to accept oneself and try out different ways of being. We were working intrapsychically and engaged intersubjectively, relating to one another with a deepening sense of freedom and possibility. Potential space opened in a way that felt almost tangible. In this and subsequent sessions we began questioning fate and the malleability of destiny. *Did Joel have to forever be the child of his youth?*

Conclusion

This chapter was inspired by Alvarez's notion of vitalization and relationality. Alvarez's ideas go to the generative potentials of the analytic

relationship. Taking creative license with her formulations, I have reconceptualized a construct that originated in work with children and applied it to adult psychoanalysis, proposing the notion of *vitalizing enactment*. Echoing Alvarez's (1997) expanded interpretation of Bion's container/contained, I have suggested that enactment can represent the potentiation of a range of novel and positive experiences and capacities in the here-and-now moment of the analytic encounter. I have suggested that in deadened impasse the analyst, moved by her own internal exigencies and working from within the relational matrix, may reach out to her patient and initiate a vitalizing enactment that can enliven the pair and bring new experiences to life.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Noah Glassman for his thoughtful feedback on an early version of this paper. I'm also grateful to Rachel Sopher for our ongoing dialogue on vitalization in psychoanalysis.

References

- Alvarez, A. (1992). *Live company: Psychoanalytic psychotherapy with autistic, borderline, deprived and abused children*. London: Tavistock/Routledge.
- Alvarez, A. (1997). Projective identification as a communication: Its grammar in borderline psychotic children. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 7, 753–768. doi:10.1080/10481889709539218
- Alvarez, A. (2012). *The thinking heart: Three levels of psychoanalytic therapy with disturbed children*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Aron, L. (1996). *A meeting of minds: Mutuality in psychoanalysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Aron, L. (2003). The paradoxical place of enactment in psychoanalysis. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 13, 623–631. doi:10.1080/10481881309348760
- Aron, L., & Atlas, G. (2015). Generative enactment: Memories from the future. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 25, 309–324. doi:10.1080/10481885.2015.1034554
- Bass, A. (2003). "E" enactments in psychoanalysis: Another medium, another message. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 13, 657–675. doi:10.1080/10481881309348762
- Bass, A. (2015). The dialogue of unconscious, mutual analysis and the uses of the self in contemporary relational psychoanalysis. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 25, 2–17. doi:10.1080/10481885.2015.991235
- Benjamin, J. (1990). Recognition and destruction: An outline of intersubjectivity. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 7, 33–47. doi:10.1037/h0085258
- Bion, W.R. (1963). *Elements of psycho-analysis*. London, UK: Heinemann.
- Black, M. (2003). Enactment: Analytic musings on energy, language, and personal growth. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 13, 633–655. doi:10.1080/10481881309348761
- Bollas, C. (1983). Expressive uses of the countertransference: Notes to the patient from oneself. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 19, 1–34. doi:10.1080/00107530.1983.10746587
- Bromberg, P. (1998). *Standing in the spaces: Essays on clinical process, trauma, and dissociation*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Bromberg, P. (2006). *Awakening the dreamer: Clinical journeys*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Burton, N. (2012). Getting personal: Thoughts on therapeutic action through the interplay of intimacy, affect, and consciousness. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 22, 662–678. doi:10.1080/10481885.2012.735588
- Coltart, N. (1986). "Slouching towards Bethlehem" ... or thinking the unthinkable in psychoanalysis. In G. Kohon (Ed.), *The British school of psychoanalysis: The independent tradition* (pp. 185–199). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Cooper, S. (2000). *Objects of hope: Exploring possibility and limit in psychoanalysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press.
- Cooper, S. (2014). The things we carry: Finding/creating the object and the analysts' self-reflective participation. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 24, 621–636. doi:10.1080/10481885.2014.970963
- Davies, J.M. (1994). Love in the afternoon: A relational reconsideration of desire and dread in the countertransference. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 4, 153–170. doi:10.1080/10481889409539011
- Davies, J.M. (2004). Whose bad objects are we anyway? Repetition and our elusive love affair with evil. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 14, 711–732. doi:10.1080/10481881409348802
- Davies, J.M., & Frawley, M.G. (1994). *Treating the adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Director, L. (2009). The enlivening object. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 45, 120–141. doi:10.1080/00107530.2009.10745990
- Director, L. (2016). The analyst as catalyst: Cultivating mind in the shadow of neglect. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 26, 685–697. doi:10.1080/10481885.2016.1235444
- Faimberg, H. (2005). *The telescoping of generations: Listening to the narcissistic links between generations*. London: Routledge.