

VITALIZATON

Perspectives on Being and Becoming

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For the MGM Study Group

CHAPTER THREE – Activating Lifeness In The Analytic Encounter – The Ground of Being

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Introduction

This chapter offers a spectrum of ideas about the bringing-to-life dimension of the therapeutic challenge.

The emphasis here is on activating, affective, *vitalizing presences* in the field of the therapeutic relationship – transformation in action – transformation in being, in we ‘use all there is to use’ to establish emotional contact.

James Wood – fiction opens up abysses, capturing the ‘details’ of a character – the magical fusion achieved by gathering the ‘bits of life’.

Details are not lifelike but irreducible things-in-themselves, what he would call *lifeness* itself – a ‘palpable present-intimate’.

We are speaking of the flesh of intimacy as a felt experience in the therapeutic setting. These experiences partake of ‘bodily reveries’ that drive our connections, those viscerally shared experiences in the field among other experiences. They contain emergent ‘whatness’, or ‘thingness’ or ‘with-ness’.

Each unique story holds within it the *life-ness* that is itself necessary in and for life. These fleeting moments of aliveness animate our souls. They make life worth living.

We attempt to approach vitalizing ‘contact-making’ at its core, which could be considered the domain of the soul.

Wood – *If the life of a story is in its excess, its surplus, in the riot of things beyond order and form, then it can also be said that the life-surplus of a story lies in its details, for details represent those moments in a story where form is outlived, cancelled, evaded. I think of details as nothing less than bits of life sticking out of the frieze of form, imploring us to touch them.*

Our clients implore us to touch them. My aim here is to close in on the register of life-surplus as it comes alive in the therapeutic encounter and consider how such life-ness serves in

establishing the ground of being in therapy. Only from this ground can we approach our clients' more treacherous death haunts.

- *What register are we in with our clients when a vitalizing exchange occurs? What are we presencing?*

After 35 years of working, Peltz is acutely aware of coming forward more. The worst thing that can happen is that she is wrong in what she has said or done. But she has moved into this *forward-coming stance* because she has decided it is more important that her presence is felt than that she is right. She hopes for forms of engagement that generate presences in the face of all of life's inevitable absences.

We are living in an era in which we are called upon to engage in the *life-affirming dimensions* of our lives, and that it is no accident that this shift is bubbling up in our theories now.

The tide has shifted from digging, which used to be the metaphor for what we did to achieve 'depth', to keenly *receiving, enhancing, amplifying, and actuating* what is happening.

Emergent Enabling Registers (of shared experience)

Many of us were trained to try to explain our patients and thus we focus on the casual dimensions of our work – the *whys*. Why is my patient so dysregulated, so self-critical, so resigned?

I think we are in the midst of a shift to attending much more closely to the lived experiences of being with our clients – day by day, session by session – cultivating an engaged and more *phenomenological* rather than *explanatory* approach.

Alvarez calls this the more descriptive and vitalizing dimensions of what's happening. Ogden called this 'the music of what happens in poetry' and psychotherapy. Stern refers to this as 'vitality forms'.

Rather than seeking explanations and trying to 'understand', from more distant and observing positions, this shifting tide in theory and clinical practice is allowing – perhaps is even demanding of us – to 'enter into' the field of the relationship, to move in close, keeping a second eye on what we have entered and what it stirs in us.

- *Sometimes we must insert ourselves in very real and embodied ways as vitalizing presences.*

This is often the only way to be with children. This is often the only way to be in 'contact-making' ways.

What is a vitalizing presence?

It is a presence that momentarily awakens the most rudimentary capacity in a person to feel alive as her/himself.

"In each baby", Winnicott says, "...is a vital spark and this urge towards life and growth and development is part of the baby, something the child is born with and which is carried forward in a way that we do not have to understand".

This is a type of *"personalization – one's own-most sense of oneself and in one's body in the world."*

At the heart of Winnicott's work lays an abiding concern for the *urge toward life* and with the deadness that results from failures to create and discover a world that can tolerate one's own aliveness.

When we all have had the occasion to meet a patient in the context of their trauma-filled, chaotic familial and social world, we immediately register the direness – the visceral necessity of establishing vital emotional contact.

At the same time, we know about the difficulty of doing exactly that.

We acutely notice, sense, and accompany this person (and ourselves with him or her) speaking simply and directly. We might add that we keep our comments 'close to' our experiences together.

Then we might notice a sudden shift, which we are able to notice out loud. What was happening here? A place is being established – a place for being sense, steadied, and held – even enveloped – and firmly, in the manner our clients can tolerate.

This is a regular yet paradoxically hyper-acute state of mind – a 'pre-historic' time and place, it is the place of immediate and present cohabitation, of embodied and timeless presence, where everything is just what it is – a place before the capacity to inquire (and thus constitute one's presence as a person in time) is attained.

When we are with our patients, yes, we use our words, but fundamentally we are acutely and 'attentively' perceiving, sensing, receiving in the hope of establishing a place in time – a special time where, despite all that has or has not happened in their lives, a new *place* can be established – a place where the 'face' of our patient can show itself.

This state of acute sensitivity and perception we try to reach in ourselves is as desperate as it is ordinary. In the instances in which a child's life was dominated by the absence of a maternally pre-occupied presence, our primary task is to innocuously and unobtrusively establish such a presence in the space that we share with him or her.

One's experience of '*Je peux du monde*', one's 'ableness in the world', captures the spirit of such a vital personalization, a sense of one's capacity to be and live in the world.

A vitalizing presence is a presence that allows one to feel alive, in some instances to be 'born again'. How? By mattering! "*Hey – you matter!*"

Ogden makes the critical distinction between Winnicott's conception of holding and Bion's of containing – holding pertains to *being* and containing to *thinking* – and he describes the complex relationship between the two.

The active holding dimension has to do with the hyper-attentive, awakening dimension of environmental holding that sometimes translates into firm handling.

'Unsaturated interpretations' are interventions that are hearable and usable, that expand what can be felt and clearly don't persecute the person to whom they are addressed.

'Unsaturated interpretations' represent a move toward a more proactive vitalization in the field – they join people where they are in the language that they speak, including a language of the nonverbal, the rhythmic, gestural, and expressive.

We are then joining people in a *medium* that engages them, and we hope to discover the medium that best captures a person's imagination and embodied, vital sensibility in our work.

Without the music, words fall flat.

In response to the call to be seen as oneself by our clients, we are equally called to allow ourselves to come forth, as best we are able under the circumstances we find ourselves in.

We can privilege our own love of language in interpretations, and diminish other forms of expressive communication.

Grotstein – *Why is it then, that a truth exists that we believe we cannot tolerate, yet, when a therapist properly interprets this truth to us – employing the right timing and dosage – we experience relief? Perhaps the truth embedded in the interpretation is something about which we already had a premonition but were unable, on our own, to bear.*

But we could bear it when it came from someone with whom we have a unique relationship of dependency.... Our newfound ability to tolerate a truth after an interpretation suggests that there was more to the interpretation than just the cognitive or emotional message articulated within it.

I believe the missing element is the transference itself, but transference considered in a new way – transference as containment...I believe that the vouchsafing of the safety of an interpretation may constitute the ultimate meaning of containment.

It provides the felt sense of being considered.

This is no small task – *the vouchsafing of the safety of an interpretation. This may indeed capture the ground of being in depth work.*

We are generating new models that can restore the body and soul to the mind of our work, what Alvarez calls ‘the thinking heart’.

The capacity for *story making* in the first place, rests on internalizing and engaging story-holding presences.

(See *Partners in Thought*, Donnel Stern)

Epistemological Shift - A New Ground For Experiencing Meaning Making

Going beyond the dualism of mind and body, subject and object, internal (mental) and external (material).

- *We tend to privilege the contents of the mind over perception, making what is in the mind even more ‘real’ than the world as experience, or immediate relations with others.*
(Reis)

The perception of something is always in the middle of something else, it always forms a part of a ‘field’. Even our most rudimentary perceptions are part of complex relational events, always identified against a larger field.

We can extend the concept of dreaming from a private, intrapsychic event to one that included the body and to think how this sort of dreaming may *disclose* the world rather than *represent* it.

What is the difference between the two?

A dream that disclosed illuminates the unconscious dreamer in her world. It simultaneously spans inward and outward as the dream itself engages the dreamer in the world of the dream and the process of dreaming.

What is a dream doing? Where is it pointing? What is it saying?

A dream that represents explains. It explains what things stand for. It has an endpoint. It points to what things ‘mean’.

Thomas de Quincey: *“The mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind, and the most to be distrusted. And yet, the great majority of people trust nothing else.*

In asking what things mean, we limit our perspective to what we can see, sense, feel, intuit.

When we dream, whether asleep or awake, we are speaking to dreaming ‘in its own language’ – an act of critique that is at the same time a *re-voicing, and in that process, something new emerges.*

There is no place that meaning resides. Meaning is a constant process of being and transforming. The emergent properties in these truths and fantasies are the function of the enactive field – which is in constant flux. (Reis)

There is a difference between a poem (process) that discloses and a poem (process) that explains. We are cautioning here not to explain, to let the words speak for themselves, to take the other into the world of a poem rather than explain what it is after or about.

This takes us beyond subject and object, into the third, the ‘field’. (I am a person, and I am a field.)

Vitalizing Presences

Life surplus is something grounded in the ordinary details of life as we live it – ‘adventures in the ordinary.

Approaching our clients with engaged attentiveness allows the vitalizing yet ordinary details of life with them to emerge. This can feel scary, ponderous, thrilling.

James Wood:

What do writers do when they seriously notice the world? Perhaps they do nothing less than rescue the life of things from their death – the fading reality that besets details as they recede from us – the memories of childhood, the pungency of flavors, smells, textures: the slow death that we deal to the world by the sleep of our attention...

The writer’s talk is to rescue the adventure from this slow retreat: to bring meaning, color, and life back to the most ordinary things.

The Medium Is The Message

When talking alone is not going to be successful, and the essential *non-verbal* dimension of experience is not coming through.

This client was terribly frozen and humiliated in his attempts to be *in* therapy the way he thought he was supposed to.

His paintings came to function as dreams, but it took some time to discover this.

The spell of looming blankness was broken when it became evident that this client could come to life in his own way through the medium of painting.

A transference about how one is supposed to act and be in therapy can clue us into the ways people strain to speak our language, which can feel like a *living death* to them, one that they register as failure.

It is also true that the death register has no words most of the time.

Sometimes we have to lend ourselves to our patients in order to discover the medium, including the use of language, that best suits them. In that sense, *the medium is the message*.

Entering into the medium of another person is itself a shared experience – one that cannot be communicated *about* without also being there together.

A Client With Travel Anxiety

Sitting with this client, the therapist is reflected on her own experiences of feeling lost and disoriented to the point of feeling depersonalized. She offers, *“Everything that is familiar is gone when you travel.”*

This is different from an explanatory interpretation such as, *“Your mother left you when you were an infant.”* It is a more emergent/descriptive interpretation.

It is rather innocuous, even obvious, description that brings the client closer to naming something that feels real and terrifying – which is to feel alone and unable to locate oneself in the world or any other person, including himself.

This client could not forge a direct verbal communication of his emotional and psychic states. His experience of *“I can”* – his experience of ‘ableness in the world’ – could only begin by bringing paintings which both therapist and client could respond to – not by inquiring about their meanings, or the client’s intentions, but by ‘seriously noticing’ what the paintings brought to mind.

- *They entered the world of the paintings, like entering the world of a dream.*

Could the therapist help the client enter the deathly anxiety that overtakes him when 'everything familiar to him is gone' – an anxiety that can be surmised to speak to an acute and devastating separation, and the visceral effort to not know what has died as a consequence, both in his mother and in himself, and the frozen illusion of living life as though nothing had died?

There is a beauty in discovering that ignites another person. Bollas speaks of this as their idiom. Discovering the face of a person's idiom and allowing ourselves to join them there can be among the most exhilarating or frightening experiences.

*There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening,
that is translated through you into action,
and because there is only one of you in all of time,
this expression is unique.
And if you block it,
it will never exist through any other medium, and be lost.
The world will not have it.*

*It is not your business to determine how good it is,
nor how valuable,
nor how it compares with other expressions.*

*It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly,
to keep the channel open.
You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work.
You have to keep open and aware directly
to the urges that motivate you.*

Keep the channel open.

- *Martha Graham*

