The Analyst's Private Space: Spontaneity, Ritual, Psychotherapeutic Action, and Self-Care

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To cite this article: Ken Corbett Ph.D. (2014) The Analyst's Private Space: Spontaneity, Ritual, Psychotherapeutic Action, and Self-Care, Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 24:6, 637-647, DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2014.970964

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2014.970964

Published online: 12 Dec 2014.

Article views: 422

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The Analyst’s Private Space: Spontaneity, Ritual, Psychotherapeutic Action, and Self-Care

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The contemplation, containing, and linking that circulate within the analyst’s private space are positioned as key to states of psychic equivalence (the melding of psychic reality and material reality) and to sustained states of unknowing, which are held to be necessary for analytic work and fantastic spontaneity. These modes of practice are considered as they relate to rituals that promote the analyst’s self care. An account of a psychotherapy with a 5-year-old electively mute girl is offered to illustrate the work undertaken in the analyst’s private space, as he seeks to build and sustain potential space and the possibilities borne through play.

That which is private, that which belongs to one person, or the act of choosing not to share what is on one’s mind has been paid relatively little heed in our modern discourse on the psychoanalytic situation. This limited attention follows on the ways in which privacy has been soundly deconstructed. There is no private space outside the ever-present and pressing social order. There is no private body that is not exposed to social crafting and anxious normative regulation. There is no private mind that thinks alone, separate, or alongside the busy buzzing congress of human interchange. We are not even dreaming when we are dreaming; the ego and the social push their way into that permeable fantastic.

The proposition that there is never one person, never one mind, is in fact the leading edge of relational psychoanalytic theory. Experience-near collaboration is the ideal, not perpendicular symbolic abstraction that hails from a mind that is containing and considering another mind. Lives and lively minds are co-created and brought to life by the patient and analyst. Key to this life that affords more life is spontaneity, the inevitable tumble into enactments and relational knots that are then patiently unknotted so as to afford access to unformulated or unsymbolized aspects of experience that would otherwise be impossible to reach.

We are, none of us, ever one. Still, I believe there is room—room that has been neglected in recent discourse on psychotherapeutic action—to consider the analyst’s private space. This space is to be distinguished from the impossibility of the analyst’s private mind.

Our modern turn toward interaction and the intersubjective weave of the analytic situation has drawn focus from the consideration of what I broadly speak of as listening and contemplative practices. We have attended principally to the relational configuration of countertransference

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and how it ushers the analyst’s capacities for receptivity and listening. The divining rod of countertransference culls affects that serve to select what James Strachey as early as 1934, following on Melanie Klein, referenced as the “point of urgency“ (p. 141), which in turn stimulates the work of interpretation (p. 150).

But what about other analytic modes of being, as the analyst reflects on her countertransference or listens to the side of urgency’s grip in the progressive construction of the analysis? Even if we were to grant that analysts are irrevocably taken up into their own subjectivities and affect states and in so doing grant that we cannot and should not split reason and emotion, we might also grant that there are contemplative and containing modes of listening, reflecting, and speaking. These contemplative and containing processes do not necessarily dampen affect or result in withholding. For example, we might think of the role of containment as it holds and builds toward collaborative contemplation (Cooper, 2010; Slochower, 2004, 2006; Grossmark, 2012).

We now have abundant literature to support the ways in which collaboration and negotiation happen in active relation. To wit, our modern discourse on enactment. As well, this relational discourse almost always includes the analyst’s reflections on her listening and contemplative practices through the combustion of relationship. But what, I ask, about the collaboration that may happen in rest, or what I once termed “relational rest” (Corbett, 2001), or that toward which Donnel Stern (2013a) turns when he speaks about relaxing constrictions in the interpersonal field? Or what of the reverie that may follow on the combustion of enactments, as analysts push into the unknowing that so often characterizes analytic work?

Following on the ideas Winnicott (1958) set forth in his seminal essay, “The Capacity to be Alone,” I suggest that subjects and analyses come alive as much in the combustion of interaction, recognition, and negotiation as they do in the rest of reverie, reflection, and rambling. Granting the necessary structural and negotiated conditions of living-feeling-talking-relating that are vital to the analytic enterprise, I suggest that there is valuable psychic life to be found in more quiet and less active modes of being-contemplating-unknowing-reflecting. Private space, I argue, is requisite for this necessary quiet.

Steven Cooper (2010) aimed at the same territory when he asked about the one-person practices that are required to keep two-person analyses going. Alongside Cooper, I ask: What of our efforts to carve out the psychic space and time needed for listening? What of the analyst’s quest for the breather of mental freedom? What of the value of unknowing? What of the analyst’s need for and experience of being alone in the presence of another? As Cooper pointed out, “It is interesting and a bit paradoxical that in many ways most psychoanalytic models have more procedural transparency regarding maintaining the analyst’s privacy than is so for the relational model” (p. 40).

I suggest that the modes of being that populate the analyst’s private space afford the work of conscious contemplation and the work of unknowing, both of which are necessary for analytic work and fantastic spontaneity. I argue as well that these modes of private practice can be thought of as rituals that promote the analyst’s self-care.

I do not set out on this course to critique the utility and life of enactment, the rogue moment, intersubjective entanglements, or interpersonal influence. Enactment is constant. We are recruited and recruiting. And if we are not, we are missing something. I do mean, however, to question our tunneled focus on enacted spontaneity and how this focus risks distortion as well as the creation of yet another sacred cow. One used to put one’s analytic identity at peril by questioning free association. Today, one treads cautiously in criticizing the elasticity of enactment and the authenticity of interpersonal influence.
Let us begin then with spontaneity and ritual. In 1998, Irwin Hoffman set forth what was to become a shibboleth of relational theory: the dialectic of ritual and spontaneity. Yet in the 15 years that have followed on Hoffman’s influential contribution, and in fact for many years prior to Hoffman’s publication, psychoanalytic theorists in a variety of quarters have almost exclusively focused on spontaneity. Ritual has become less of an equal and opposing force, leaving us to question whether the dialectic is still in place, or if indeed it ever was.

Spontaneity is more visible, while ritual by habit fades into the background. Perhaps this fading helps us to understand how ritual has been overlooked and/or presumed. Consider, for example, how Hoffman (1998) interchanged “routine” for ritual in speaking about the relationship of enacted spontaneity to ritual: “It’s routine analytic work before that [enacted spontaneous] moment and routine analytic work afterward” (p. 914). Routines are by definition regular courses or procedures upon which presumption can easily rest. One might say they allow us not to think.

It is intriguing to note that psychoanalysts have in fact long been preoccupied with spontaneity as vital to psychotherapeutic action. As early as 1914, Freud, in discussing matters of technique, spoke of “the element of spontaneity which is so convincing” (p. 162). Note the way that Freud italicizes/emphasizes the link between spontaneity and impact. The spontaneity to which Freud referred was to be found in the unconscious communication between patient and analyst, and through the heft of transference interpretations that he argued could follow there upon.

The mode of spontaneity to which relational theorists refer encompasses the uncanny force of unconscious transfer but departs from the centrality of transference interpretations. Turning from the ultimate pivot of transference, relational clinicians have moved psychotherapeutic action to the more immediate realm of interpersonal influence and onto an expansive intersubjective field. Working in this relational field, the analyst seeks to examine and regulate affect states, to negotiate mutual recognition, to expand mental freedom, and to transform meaning through narrative transformations, which in turn help to build and traverse a relational matrix, up to and including the examination of transference and countertransference reclamations.

Moreover, spontaneity follows as the necessary and necessarily therapeutic response to the ways in which relational theorists are now reimagining the mind. Dissociation (as opposed to repression) is configured as the principal process by which unformulated minds are (un)made (Bromberg, 1998, 2006, 2011; Stern, 1997, 2010). The psychoanalytic endeavor is then critically linked with the emergence of the unformulated—the new—which is yet to be found. Key to such discovery is spontaneity.

Spontaneous open expression and interpersonal influence, humming through the life of elastic enactments and rouge interpretive moments, are routinely linked with that which is called authentic, specifically, “the analyst’s authentic personal availability” (Hoffman, 1998, p. 912). This spontaneous authenticity is depicted as necessary not only for the action in psychotherapeutic action but for growth as well (see, e.g., Bass, 1996, 2007; Bromberg, 2006, 2011; Ehrenberg, 1992; Hoffman, 2006, 2009). I venture we can agree, and have agreed from the very beginning of our contemplation of psychotherapeutic technique, that spontaneity, in one way or another, is an imperative lynchpin. I think we might agree as well that spontaneity is authentic, when authenticity is understood as that which is indicative of emotional significance and/or mental freedom.

I am troubled, however, by the assumption that spontaneity is authentic, when authenticity is understood to mean that which is genuine and possessed of an intimate singularity. I am troubled
by the assumed authenticity of spontaneous interpersonal influence as it may too quickly solve
the limits of knowing, or more precisely foreclose the necessity of unknowing that I believe to
be vital to analytic exchange. I am troubled by the ways in which the analyst’s employment of
projective identification qua empathy may easily morph from authenticity into authority.

I am troubled because I believe that in our modern theorizing of psychotherapeutic action
we run the risk of idealizing elasticity and privileging spontaneity, open expression, and inter-
personal influence while failing to recognize the necessity and pacing of the patient’s and the
analyst’s contemplation—contemplation that brackets spontaneity, precedes open expression,
unfolds through intersubjective entanglement, negotiation, and infuses interpersonal influence.

I am troubled because all of this relating is killing us, as it places an untenable demand on both
patient and analyst alike, and risks crowding out the dreamy leisure of reverie and the co-creation
of a fantastic life through which patient and analyst may come alive as otherwise.

I am troubled because our emphasis on enactment and exchange has eclipsed other modes of
analytic work and therapeutic address, modes and means of practice that are alive and ongoing,
not simply routines that bracket the spontaneous lynchpin or serve as handmaidens to negotiation
and the investigation of enactments.

In speaking of these other modes, I am speaking specifically about the following practices:
containing, waiting, associating, soliciting the patient’s associations, wandering into reverie,
wandering back out, dreaming, debating, practicing what one might say, silently interpreting,
consciously contemplating, bridging, linking, cataloging, pacing, being lost, tolerating being lost,
sequencing, listening, listening through hovering attention, listening more acutely, listening with
the ear of theory, inquiring, momentarily stepping out of the bond, taking a break, remaining
silent, debating silence, considering when and/or if to bring a feeling or a thought forward, at
what point in the hour, at what point in the week.

PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC ACTION

Polyphonic thick narration of clinical process including dense description of these interim-
plicated listening and contemplative private practices as they join forces to build and foster
psychotherapeutic action is not possible. There is simply too much at hand and too much that
is out of hand and mind. Arguably, that is the point of analytic process. To riff on Freud (1930),
therapeutic life, as we know it, is too hard for us. It is too much, and as such, it escapes narration.
Given the surfeit of the analytic situation, we tend to pull on one thread of the weave: interpersonal
influence, enactment, spontaneity, dreaming, symbolization, transference, counter-transference,
projection, containment, knowing, or dreaming, to name but a few.

Perhaps this tendency to privilege certain aspects of our engagement follows on what Thomas
Ogden (2012) means when he speaks of analytic “style” versus “technique.” Ogden’s bid for the
freedom that style affords is inviting, especially when it can be put on with the kind of polyglot
panache that Ogden can muster. I think of Ogden’s (2012) recent book, Creative Readings, where
he brings together Freud, Isaacs, Fairbairn, Winnicott, Bion, Loewald, and Searles, as the party
I want to attend. That said, I think there are important debates to be had, in particular about the
function of the analyst’s authority that Ogden stylishly skirts.

In a similar comparative exercise, Donnel Stern (2013b, 2013c) has begun to chart the episte-
mological frames that have developed the idea of the “analytic field”—an idea, following on field
theory that is currently enjoying the airing out of discourse. Field theory rests on the necessary consideration of coexisting facts. The state of any part of the field depends on every other part of the field.

In an act of noteworthy historical synthesis, Stern tracks the idea of the co-created field from Sullivan’s (1940, 1953) interpersonal field through Bion’s (1959, 1962), Ferro’s (1999, 2002, 2006), Ferro and Basiles (2008), and Baranger and Baranger’s (2008) bipersonal or intersubjective field, to the modern relational field as matrix, following largely on his own work (Stern, 1997, 2010), and on Benjamin (1997, 2004), Bromberg (1998, 2006, 2011), Hoffman (1998), and Mitchell (1988, 1995, 2003). Stern compares and contrasts the epistemologies that guide therapeutic action for Bion and his followers with ways of knowing that inform the practices that build relational technique. Stern, like Ogden, takes up analytic techniques as akin to styles, although Stern does not use that word. Unlike Ogden, and importantly, in my view, Stern speaks directly to the analyst’s authority. (Stern is perhaps the cousin at the table who is willing to speak to Uncle Antonio’s ethical, affective, and political dispositions. And yes, I want to be at that party as well.)

As Stern makes clear, the analyst’s authority rests on how she occupies the “here” in the “here-and-now” of the clinical situation. We come then to a significant distinction between Bion and his followers, especially Ferro and the Barangers, from relational theorists and clinicians. Ferro speaks symbolically, privileging unconscious phantasy and his goal to live each hour as a dream (following on Bion). Ferro’s efforts are aimed at speaking from inside the inner world of the patient to the internal objects that live therein. He posits a co-created field, yet not one that is equally co-created. He mostly speaks from his private-dreaming-containing position within the field. He hovers within the dream-hour made with his patient. And from his hovering-containing-perpendicular position, he speaks, speaks symbolically, and speaks as the one who knows.

As Stern points out, relational clinicians speak primarily in an interpersonal register: conscious person to conscious person. Relational clinicians court the border territory between inner and outer worlds as they come alive in inner/outer moments of co-created enactment and association. This stance reflects the belief that inner and outer cannot be distinguished, as well as the belief that the unformulated can only come alive in the formation of relational bonds. The authority upon which the relational analyst relies is found in person, not in symbol.

We might say that relational authority is sought in the relational here-and-now, whereas Bionian authority is sought in the dream here-and-now.

Reading along with Stern as I was undertaking my own rereading of Bion and Ferro and an introductory reading of the Baranagers, I found myself betwixt and between, somewhere between the relational position and the course charted by Bion’s followers. It is this betwixt position that has led me to try to resurrect the analyst’s private space within relational discourse. I believe my position follows on my training as a child analyst. I move forward to lean into that work to better elucidate my position, and in turn why that position leads me to advocate for the reinvigoration of the analyst’s private space with particular emphasis on the necessity of that space in building and sustaining potential space and the work of play.

**RITUAL AS SELF-CARE**

My interest in thinking about the analyst’s contemplation and listening practices follows on the fact that I am often confused, both unwittingly and with intent. Hour by hour, I feel myself to
be enveloped in a polyphonic field, and I struggle to get my mind into and around the excess. Adding to my confusion, I often court it, indulge it, and mine it to see where it may lead.

I experience this confusion with all of my patients, but it is given particular expression in my work with children, wherein I am often genuinely lost in the potential space of psychic equivalence. I find myself suspended as I am caught in the vista of a child’s vision and led toward a *life suspended playing in reality*, playing in a fantastic zone of psychic equivalence, moving as children are wont to move between material reality and psychic reality.

One of the pleasures of working with children is that one gets to work in the land of psychic-equivalence, a liminal space where being hangs suspended between the material and psychic. A spoon is a spoon is a shovel is an evil shovel-monster-man who speaks with an English accent and is set upon devouring the world. Symbols, objects, and characters meld in the alchemy of psychic equivalence. Play is spoken and played with symbols and objects. Characters manifestly take to the field. As the analyst, one speaks within the play sometimes as symbol, sometimes as object, sometimes as character; if you don’t speak thus, you are not playing.

When children show up at my office, they are rarely—almost never—looking for someone with a lot to say. They are looking for someone to be done to. One’s function as a doer is parsed to the millimeter. Children are looking for someone who can follow them and someone who they occasionally let speak from inside the game about the dynamics at hand. But, most often, my speeches are scripted. In other words, I am almost always told what to say. Too much talking is akin to wind drag. One runs the risk of being a gasbag. And one is promptly told to “Shut up.” Given the squeeze, I often think that my best interventions are monosyllabic: oh, ah, ou, ick, euw, oops, yes, no, wow, ouch.

Most of the time, in ways that I can only call enigmatic, I think my child patients are right. The game thinks us in a way that echoes what Joyce Slochower (2006) spoke of when she referred to holding and containing as doubling as figure and ground. Although given the frequent fixity of play and the ways that fixity brings object relational figures and relationally inflected defenses onto the field, I am left with little room but to comment from a perpendicular position, coming at the play, or at the character, not from within the game but from on high. In a similar vein, because symbols and object relations bloom in psychic equivalence, I am also sometimes given the opportunity to speak in a more symbolic register. The spoon-shovel-monster-man speaks the Father’s No (capital F, capital N), and he can sometimes be named as such. These perpendicular modes of address generally follow on long contemplation and consideration. As well, they rest on containing a wide variety of affects and thoughts, both within any given hour and in my recollection and rumination that collects any treatment.

As I stumble across the potential spaces I build with children, I confusedly try to speak with the characters that pop up there. I attempt to follow their fantastic instructions and to respond in accord with the ways they live between psychic reality and material reality. I work to decipher the ways in which their internalized object worlds come alive through our fantastically inflected interpersonal experience. I struggle to not only sort out who they are but in what way they wish to be addressed. I look to greet these object/characters as having an identity of their own and as having the capacity for thinking and feeling that is as real within the liminal world of the game as those of any objects in the outer world (following here on Fairbairn, 1943, 1944, 1952; Isaacs, 1943, 1952; and Winnicott, 1971).

I enter the field expecting to act and to be acted upon. I expect to construct a network of fantasy and to be pulled into that construction by the patient’s internalized world. I try my best to wander. I try my best to be aware of what I have up my sleeve. But mostly, I fail.
Working with children has taught me to keep present with the other, where this keeping present has an unexpected relationship to the limits of knowing. I strive to stay one step behind and lean into what I think of as an instructive uncertainty, a mode of unknowing. I am not so much concerned with the content of what is being thought per se or the interpersonal conversation as pace. I am more concerned with ferreting shifts between affects and thoughts, as these shifts do or do not allow for constructing and sustaining potential space. The position of constructive uncertainty is not equivalent to negative withholding or holding back, as it has sometimes been construed; rather, it is an active, if not quite affirmative *something*: a containing-searching, a potential, and a mode of mutuality that may or may not be simultaneous.

I parse what Benjamin (2004) called the “confusing traffic of two-way streets,” and in keeping with her elucidation of intersubjective relatedness, I work to build and speak through various shared thirds (p. 5). I occasionally move toward direct “you-me-us” interpersonal exchange. But I am more likely to seek the congress of play, imagination, and reverie, and the you-me-us that unfurls therein. Here I draw a distinction between the potential space of play and the dream space that Ferro courts and the interpersonal field on which Sullivan lived. Play is neither a dream nor predominately interpersonal. It is potential, the liminal space created between the material and the psychic.

It is difficult to capture the temporal strangeness of play and the floating (real/unreal) peculiarity of psychic equivalence. It is similarly difficult to capture communication within a fantasmatic register. I am thus refracted and thus confused. In my confusion, I am always moving within the field toward my own private space in an effort to hold my confusion and the flood of feeling and information that compose the game.

I believe that our attempts to capture play and potential space offer us valuable insight into the synthesis of spontaneity and ritual and the grounding necessity of the analyst’s private space. Within that space, I have my habits. To the extent that habits are an attempt at order or the effort toward sequencing, they then are one form of ritual. To the extent that they are an effort to find a pace or refind a route, they are a form of ritual. Indeed, ritual derives from late seventeenth-century French for route or road. I move forward to illustrate my ritual ceremony of deconstructing children’s play scenarios and how I employ that task to fall into a blended mode of conscious contemplation and reverie.

Rituals not only order confusion. They contain it and sustain it. To the extent that rituals allow us to stay in a polyphonic register, to stay in a refracted and littered field/archive, and to stay within the uncertain zone of psychic equivalence, they are, in my view, a mode of self-care. When we think about self-care, we tend to think of practices or pleasures that happen outside the hour: yoga, walking, swimming, cashews, chocolate, coffee. While not diminishing these necessary tools, it is surprising to think of how little we think about self-care within the hour, or hour by hour.

"HEY, WAIT A MINUTE, WHERE ARE WE?"

Five year-old electively mute Laura sets about to make an elaborate design out of LEGOos on the floor of my office. I watch and admire the formal clarity of her design, the tonality, the sequence, and the balance. (I think the LEGO color palette must offend her. She would prefer a subtler range.) At first I think the design might be a maze, but it is not a puzzle. The pathways, if they
can be called that, are clear. Then I think perhaps it is a mandala, a meditative form. Laura takes the stalwart black and white cow and begins walking the perimeter. I take up the golden retriever and follow. We walk in circles for a while.

Then before I know what I am doing/have done, I stand up and open the window. It is the dead of winter. The radiator is turned off. The office is not overheated. As I sit back down, I say, “I can’t breathe.” As the retriever, I ask the cow if she can breathe. She falls down. I follow suit. We lay there for a while.

Eventually, I get up. I say, “We must go on.” The cow pulls herself up and walks into the design, careful not to disturb the order. The retriever follows. He stumbles. A block falls. Laura quickly sets it right. The retriever says, “Oops!” The cow does not respond. She makes her way to the center, where she stops.

The retriever freezes, he says, “Hey, wait a minute, where are we?” The cow stands her ground. After a while, the retriever says, “Hey, Cow, my ears are buzzing.” The cow stands her ground. After another while, the retriever tries again, “Cow, the quiet is loud. And it is cold. Cold loud.” The cow stands her ground. I laugh and say, “Silly words.” The retriever says, “Cow, I am freezing. Are we being punished?” The cow stands her ground.

At that, I get up and close the window. Suddenly, or so it seems, we slip into “the thickness you can’t get past called waiting,” as Jorie Graham (1991) would have it (p. 66). After six silent minutes, the hour ends.

I walk Laura to the waiting room, I say good-bye to her and her mother. I walk back to my office. The cow stands her ground, and there I am in the freezing, buzzing, aftereffects.

I do not ask children to pick up the toys they use or the materials they make. One of my habits is the deconstruction of the scene coupled with the ruminative recollection of the hour. I often wish I had a similar material task/ritual to undertake after every hour with an adult patient.

I began by picking up the LEGOs, again marveling at the beauty of their arrangement even in its careful rigidity. I thought about mandalas, the ways they are employed as an aid in meditation and trance induction. I pondered the trance of mutism and thought about how Laura’s mutism tranced our relationship, stuck in the muted fortress of the mandala: “Hey, wait a minute, where are we?”

Various animals had been considered prior to the cow. I put them away and thought about how the cow is the most stolid of the animals. The elephant and the dinosaurs suggest more menace and might, but the cow is stubborn and constant. I put the retriever away and thought back to Laura handing him to me. I was always the retriever, no matter the game. I was not much smarter than the cow but capable of speech, and the rogue moment. I thought about how the retriever knocked a LEGO over and how quickly Laura corrected his lapse.

I thought about how the cow stopped after the block fell. Mistake, error, loss stopped the game. Or was the cow already headed toward the muted fortress? I recollected, as I had many times, that Laura’s mother gave birth to a “stillborn” child. Laura fell mute soon thereafter. I was always struck by the resonance of “stillborn,” not only with Laura’s silence but also with the ways in which her silence hindered our capacity to join her growth, her mind, and her affects as they were borne.

I wondered if there was a presentiment to the block-falling moment, when the cow fell in response to my comment that I could not breathe. Fallen, were we stillborn? Were we suffocated? Or were we exhausted with going on being? I recall practicing how I might formulate a comment about death within the game. But it was a theme, or what I took to be a theme, that had just
recently appeared in our work, and I thought it best to let Laura elaborate. At this point I was cataloging and trying to stay close to the immediate exchange.

But why did I press on, doing some bad Beckett imitation? I laughed at myself when I recognized that I had been rereading Beckett and made the link with Laura. I was also rereading John Ashbery, and I can see now that I was looking for the tone, and the language game that matched Laura’s play. I press us to “go on,” but in hindsight I could see that I anxiously got us up and moving when the dead object joined the game. Simultaneously flatfooted and fleetfooted, I allowed the dead little heed and pressed on. I linked my push with the ways in which many people, including Laura’s parents, anxiously responded to the dead and to the death in her world. I understood through this accumulating faltering that I must work to find a way to name not only the death but also the fear that was silencing death.

I paused over how I voiced what would become the game’s end: “Hey, wait a minute, where are we?” I believe it was my way of noting a shift in our states, a shift from the activity of “Oops!” to the privation of dissociation. But it seems likely that my comment may have been only in keeping with my own state. This thought led me to once again consider how I had been hypo-maniacally pushing the hour. I don’t believe my question about our location met Laura. She was already there, dissociation having already set in.

The retriever, though, persisted in reinstating the game, no matter that the cow refused to throw the ball. This dynamic and state were by now familiar in my work with Laura. Perhaps in light of its familiarity, I could pause long enough to say as much, speaking my “silly” futility and naming the stopping silence. But in so doing, I could also see that I was punishing. I wanted to play, not be shut out. So, I turned the table and froze us: You want silence. I will give you ice. I will give you the cold anger that greets death.

Grasping my intent, I named the punishment. But by that time, one wonders if the counter-ice of Laura’s response had already won out. Should I have found a way to say something more about the freezing silence, especially in the final six minutes? Yes. Should I have found a way to greet death, give it a name? Yes. But I wish I could say that it felt communicable. Instead, I felt like a cow. Slow. Heavy. Tranced. I venture we both dissociated part of that time. We must have. But those minutes also had, at least for me, the feeling of containment, and the necessity of unknowing. If only hazily, I could feel something about rage that I had yet to glimpse. And on yet another register, I was pondering the hour, the course of my work with Laura, and beginning to think about the role of death, even as it left us deadened.

I also wish I could say that I moved into a mode of productive reverie within the silence. But I did not. As I put the boxes on the shelves, I thought again about the moment the LEGO fell: one small spontaneous silent plunk. And how it set in play a surfeit of affects that Laura had to fend off with all of her beautiful and stolid might. And how I was left, the scrambling retriever. The foolish optimist with little to say other than, “Oops!” But then again, I thought it might have been the best intervention of the hour, even as it muted us and left us with the still unsaid and unformulated, the unheard and repressed. “Oops!” voiced the fall, the gap, the impossibility of speech, the unknowing.

When I began to recognize the retriever in the mother’s hypo-manic greeting (blond, sunny, prompt, anxious), I worked my way back to the punishing enigmatic transfer (the injunction to recognize the loss of the stillborn child—though not fully—and to only feel so much about the loss, lest one feel too much). I also began to track the trapped rage, the punishing silence and guilt, lest speech and feeling erupt. I slowly found my way to speaking the dead baby no one
could name as dead. I worked toward speaking about the fear that too much feeling was at hand, the melancholic too-much-ness, and how we took to the shadow/fortress to hide.

About five months following the session I recount here, when a child took a toy from Laura at her preschool, she said, “No. Mine.” And so it was with protest and possession that Laura began once again to speak—first at school, then at home, and finally in therapy. When she began speaking with me, she told me therapy was a place where she could “quiet be.” I nodded and said, “Yes, sometimes we need be quiet in order to figure things out. But sometimes we can also talk and figure things out. Right?” She looked at me with a wry smile as if to say that she knew a recruiter/retriever when she saw one.

Laura and I finished up at the end of the school year, about a year from when we had started our work. I thought the ending was premature, but the family was going to be away for six months, and it seemed best to find a way to end. Laura was regularly talking at this point. Remaining quiet, she nevertheless readily answered questions, could say the things she could not say before; and with speech, came more animation.

At our final meeting, Laura brought me a gift, a refrigerator magnet in the shape and image of the ruby slippers from The Wizard of Oz. At first, I was charmed that a young girl would buy me something that had caught her eye. I liked the nod to play, even camp. But the association that stayed with me was the fact that Dorothy possessed the ruby slippers because she took them from a dead witch. Dorothy’s magic shoes came from the dead. They would carry her back to the present, and out of the fantastic world where she had been living for a while.

REFERENCES


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