AFTERWORD

On “Holding Holy Converse” with the Stranger:
The Development of the Capacity for Dialogue

Buber teaches us that in the Hasidic apprehension of reality “a divine spark lives in every thing and being, but each such spark is enclosed by an isolating shell. Only man can liberate it and re-join it with the Origin: by holding holy converse with the thing and using it in a holy manner” (1970, 5-6). As I read back over Invisible Guests, now fourteen years since its initial publication, I can hear my own attempts to describe a manner of relating to the other that I could call “holy.” For in the end, the developmental path I prescribed aims at the allowing of the other to freely arise, to allow the other to exist autonomously from myself, to patiently wait for relation to occur in this open horizon, to move toward difference not with denial or rejection but with tolerance, curiosity, and a clear sense that it is in the encounter with otherness and multiplicity that deeper meanings can emerge. It is through this manner of dialogue with the stranger that liberation and re-joining can occur.

I came to this sensibility through a sustained gaze on the unfolding of imaginal relations, particularly what I would call dialogical ones. Now, fourteen years later, I want to underscore what is mainly implicit in this text. Namely, that this manner of holy converse describes equally as well our relations with others, as it does our relations with ourselves, imaginal others, the beings of nature and earth, and that which we take to be divine. Relationships with imaginal
others that are dialogical—in the ways defined here—are, in truth, a sub-text of “holy converse” more generally.

When we emphasize this frame there are a number of developmental theorists whose work bespeaks the interpenetration of these domains in terms of the development of dialogical capacity: for example, the peer therapy of Robert Selman; the work with adolescent girls of Carol Gilligan and her colleagues; the work with women’s ways of knowing of Mary Bolen and her colleagues; the large group dialogue work of David Bohm and Patrick de Mare; and, finally, the liberational pedagogy of Paulo Freire. I will turn to each of these as exemplars to help us see some of the developmental threads that cross anywhere between dialogical domains, and to establish signposts beyond this text for those who wish to pursue the cultivation of dialogue.

The Capacity to Play and the Capacity to be a Friend: Differentiating and Coordinating the Perspectives of Self and Other

Klein and Winnicott, among others, noted that some disturbed children have an incapacity to play, which psychotherapy must address. In Winnicott’s words: “...where playing is not possible then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play to a state of being able to play” (1971, 138). Selman and Schultz, working with the interpersonal relations of emotionally disturbed children, have noted that interactive fantasy play is markedly absent in the history of children whose interpersonal understanding is at primitive levels. These children do not understand that self and other can interpret the same event differently; i.e., the other is not understood to have an interiority different from my own. They are unable to differentiate between an unintentional act of another and an intentional one (the action is equated with the intent). Neither do they differentiate physical from psychological characteristics of the person (i.e., if the person is deemed pretty then she is a good person). In short, they are unable to “differentiate and integrate the self’s and the other’s points of view through an understanding of the relation between the thoughts, feelings, and wishes of each person” (1990, 6).

This capacity to differentiate and integrate the self’s and the other’s points of view is at the core of dialogical capacity. As Selman and

Schultz point out, a deficit in this ability shows both in problematic interpersonal relating and in an absence of the dialogues of pretend play. However, he also describes how the seeds for interpersonal dialogue can be planted in the dialogues of play. In his pair therapy with children who are isolated by their own patterns of withdrawal or aggression, he pairs a submissive, withdrawn child (self-transforming style) with a child who is overcontrolling, sometimes downright bullying (other-transforming style). Initially they each cling to his or her own style, making impossible a deepening of relationship. Selman and Schultz share an image from a session with two such boys where one traps the other in the up position on the seesaw. There is no movement! In pretend play these two boys initially replicate their roles on the seesaw:

Andy initiated a fantasy in which he was the television/comic book character “The Hulk,” a large, powerful, fearsome mutant who is good inside, but who cannot control his feelings to let the good direct him. Paul then took a part as “Mini-Man,” a being of his own creation who is smaller than anything else in the world and can hide in flowers... The play was a fantasy in which one boy had the power to control the thoughts and will of the other by virtue of a psychological “force-field.” (169-170).

With these roles personified, however, each boy is as though seduced into wanting to embody each of the available roles. Paul experiments with putting up his force-field and then with “zapping” his partner, just as Andy relaxes his grip on power and enjoys the submissive position of “Mini-Man.”

Theoretically speaking we believe that this switching of roles in play is a key therapeutic process, in effect a way to share experience. Andy was able to relax his defenses and express the message that part of him was happy to be or even needed to be controlled, taken care of, told what to do. He could abandon for the moment the tenderly held goals for which he generally fought so fiercely... And Paul, often too frightened to take the initiative in actual interactions, was able to take steps toward assuming the control that he felt was too risky in real life, despite its practical and emotional attractions... When it is just play, children can dress rehearse for changing roles on the stage of real-life interaction. (171)
Here we see the interrelation between the dialogues of play and those of social discourse. Now, rather than “inner speech” being the internalization of actual social discourse, as in Vygotsky’s theory, we see the dialogues of play as the seed that travels up into the soil of friendship and collaboration. Indeed, in Selman’s third year of work with these boys, we see them able to withstand the storm of each other’s emotions, to venture into different roles with one another, and to begin to share around the deepest area of each boy’s concern.

Sustaining One’s Voice Amongst Others

For authentic dialogue to occur it is not enough for one to be able to differentiate one’s perspective from the other and to allow the other a voice. One must also be able to maintain one’s own voice amidst the fray of relationship. In Chapter Eleven this was addressed in the domain of imaginal dialogues in the treatment of hallucinatory experience where, too often, the most disturbing aspect of hallucinatory experience is not a confusion of perception with image but a disavowal of the ego’s point of view as it is swamped by the voice(s) of the other. The other’s command becomes the self’s action.

Carol Gilligan and her colleagues, in turning their attention to normative development in preadolescent and adolescent American girls, unfortunately found that not all the changes they witnessed in girls were ideal. One the one hand, they found that:

As these girls grow older they become less dependent on external authorities, less egocentric or locked in their own experience or point of view, more differentiated from others in the sense of being able to distinguish their feelings and thoughts from those of other people, more autonomous in the sense of being able to rely on or take responsibility for themselves, more appreciative of the complex interplay of voices and perspectives in any relationship, more aware of the diversity of human experience and the differences between societal and cultural groups.

On the other hand they found:

that this developmental progress goes hand in hand with evidence of a loss of voice, a struggle to authorize or take seriously their own experience—to listen to their own voices in conversation and respond to their feelings and thoughts—increased confusion, sometimes defensiveness, as well as evidence for the replacement of real with inauthentic or idealized relationships. If we consider responding to oneself, knowing one’s feelings and thoughts, clarity, courage, openness, and free-flowing connections with others and the world as signs of psychological health, as we do, then these girls are in fact not developing, but are showing evidence of loss and struggle and signs of an impasse in their ability to act in the face of conflict. (Brown and Gilligan, 1992, 6)

In order to maintain the semblance of relationship these girls were struggling with “a series of disconnections that seem at once adaptive and psychologically wounding, between psyche and body, voice and desire, thoughts and feelings, self and relationship” (7). Too often girls were found stepping away from articulating their thoughts and feelings if these would bring them into conflict with others. What was initially conscious public disavowal of thoughts and feelings, over time became unconscious disclaiming. Girls then expressed that they felt confused about what they thought and felt, that they were unsure. Over time, many took themselves out of authentic relationship—with others and themselves. They became unable to identify relational violations, and thus were more susceptible to abuse. Brown and Gilligan began to wonder if they were “witnessing the beginning of psychological splits and relational struggles well documented in the psychology of women” (106).

To encourage girls’ resistance and resilience Gilligan and her colleagues realized that it was not enough to help girls put into words for others their thoughts and feelings. For many, the fear of how their thoughts and feelings would be received had already metamorphosed into the girls’ not listening to themselves. And so the women working with these girls tried to find ways to help the inner ear not go deaf and to revive a capacity to listen to one’s selves, while at the same time building a group where the girls could experience that others can survive their voice(s): that authentic dialogue is possible, not just false or idealized relations.

Akin to Selman’s move toward play, Gilligan’s team moved toward supporting the girls’ diary and journal writing, their dramatic and poetic writing, and their literally claiming their voices in their work.
Dialogue—in the ideal sense—necessitates both the capacity to deeply receive the other and the capacity to receive oneself; to allow the other a voice and to allow the self voice.

Being Silenced vs. Opportunities for Dialogue: Voice, Mind, Relationship, and Social Action

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), in Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind, vividly describe the interpenetration of dialogical domains addressed here as they study different ways of women’s knowing. In one group of women they studied women’s silence in adulthood was linked to family experiences of neglect and abuse. These women were passive, subdued, and subordinate in adulthood. “The ever-present fear of volcanic eruptions and catastrophic events leaves children speechless and numbed, unwilling to develop their capacities for hearing and knowing” (1986, 159). These women experienced themselves as mindless and voiceless. Their childhoods were not only lived in isolation from their family members and others outside the family, but most often were lived without play. The intersection of an absence of dialogue with an absence of play turned out to be particularly damaging for these children as they grew to womanhood.

In the ordinary course of development, the use of play metaphors gives way to language—a consensually validated symbol system—allowing for more precise communication of meanings between persons. Outer speech becomes increasingly internalized as it is transformed into inner speech. Impulsive behavior gives way to behavior that is guided by the actor’s own symbolic representations of hopes, plans, and meanings. Without playing, conversing, listening to others, and drawing out their own voice, people fail to develop a sense that they can talk and think things through. (1986, 33).

Moreover, the world becomes a place of simple dichotomies—good/bad, big/little, win/lose—obscuring all subtlety and texture.

Without play or dialogue the child is constrained within a narrow band of reality. Both play and dialogue allow the child to visit the perspectives of others, as well as to dream of that which has not yet come into reality. “What is” and “who one is” become radically widened as one de-centers from the ego’s perspective and the given. Through the metaphorizing of play one leaps past the given confines of “self” and “reality.” The dialogues of play and the dialogues of social interaction are both creative of the self and the liberating the self. Through each empathic leap, through each re-embodiment of ourselves in play, we pass beyond our usual borders and exceed what has been. What “is” is surpassed by what might be, and “who” I am is replaced by my transit beyond myself—either through projection of the self or through the reception of the other. Working an issue through play—expressing it, addressing it from several perspectives, taking the role of the others in play—is translated into the dialogues of thought and those of our everyday interactions. It should come as no surprise that the complexity and subtlety of a child’s play, her flexibility in moving between the dramatis personae, can be seen in her participation in dialogue and in her capacities for reflection.

Childhoods that do not give opportunity for pretend play, where families discourage dialogue and where schools limit the classroom experience to verbal exchanges that are unilateral and teacher-initiated, make it highly unlikely that children will learn the “give and take of dialogue” (Belenky et al., 1986, 34), giving them access to what lies beyond a narrow self which has been schooled for silence. For such children, and the adults that are generated from them, words have force only when uttered violently. Thus they “tend to be action-oriented, with little insight into their own behaviors or motivations. Since they do not expect to be heard they expect no response, the volume of their voices is more important than the content. They lack verbal negotiating skills and do not expect conflicts to be resolved through non-violent means” (1986, 160). Those who do not escape silence pass the legacy of their early homes onto their children:

Mothers who have so little sense of their own minds and voices are unable to imagine such capacities in their children. Not being fully aware of the power of words for communicating meaning, they expect their children to know what is on their minds without the benefit of words. These parents do not tell their children what they mean by “good”—much less why. Nor do they ask their children to explain themselves.

We observed these mothers “backhanding” their children whenever the child asked questions, even when the
questions stemmed from genuine curiosity and desire for knowledge. It was as if the questions themselves were another example of the child’s “talking back” and “disrespect.” Such a mother finds the curious, thinking child’s questions stressful, since she does not yet see herself as an authority who has anything to say or teach. (1986, 163-164)

These women were not aware of any experience within themselves of dialogue with a self or of having an inner voice; nor did their words express a familiarity with introspection or a sense of their own consciousness.

Those women in Belenky’s study who were able to emerge from silence into adulthood had the benefit of a school which encouraged the cultivation of mind and an interaction with the arts, had been able to forge significant relationships outside the home despite the prohibition not to do so, or had “created such relationships for themselves through the sheer power of their imaginations, by endowing their pets and imaginary playmates with those attributes that nourish the human potential” (1986, 163).

In the other ways of knowing that Belenky et al describe—received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing, and constructed knowing—intrapsychic and interpersonal dialogue are intimately related to each other, together forming a sense of flatness or complexity of reality. For instance in received knowing women experience others as the authority, silencing their own voices to be better able to imbibe the wisdom of others. It is not surprising that they seek to eliminate ambiguity from their worlds and can be described themselves as literal-minded. On the other hand, subjective knowers conceive of all truth arising internally, stilling their public voice, and often turning a “deaf ear to other voices.” Often distrusting words, they cover disagreement with conformity and live in the isolation of their own thoughts and inner voices.

In what is clearly their preferred developmental telos, Belenky and her colleagues describe those who experience constructed knowing. In this way of knowing, knowledge is contextual. There are multiple viewpoints to be had, but not all are equally adequate to revealing what one is trying to understand. These knowers are familiar with listening to the inner voice or voices. Yet they know that even an inner voice may be wrong at times, for it is but one part of a whole.

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They are also adept at patient listening to the voices of others. They have a high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity.

Just as the child breaks the confines of the given through the dialogue of play, so too may the adult who can move between perspectives and systems of knowing. Liberated from subservience to external authority, to any one system of thought, and from slavish devotion to their internal voices, these knowers have the dialogical tools to break the oppressive aspects of “reality.” Their nurture, care, and engagement with their own voices, the voices of others, and ideas broaden out to their nurture and care of aspects of the world.

*From Cultures of Silence to Liberatory Dialogue: The Work of Paulo Freire*

This connection between coming to see the context one is in, gaining voice in relation to this context, and being able to creatively engage in efforts to effect culture is beautifully articulated in the work of Paulo Freire. Here silence and lack of dialogical capacity is understood to arise through oppression, which purposely creates voicelessness and obscures context in order to maintain power. Freire, the founder of the literacy movement in Brazil and radical pedagogist, argues that for the disenfranchised, learning to read should involve a process of becoming able to decode the cultural and socioeconomic circumstances that shape your life and your thinking. Once able to decode these conditions one is then able to participate in the shaping of those circumstances. He called the first step in this empowering process “conscientization,” a group process which allows one to actively engage with the structures one has previously identified with and been blind to.

In Freire’s model an “animator” helps group participants to question their day to day experience, their concerns and suffering, exploring the relation between daily life and the cultural dictates that suffuse it. Here words, much like play for the child, begin to open up the realm of the possible, liberating “reality” from the bonds of the given. Efforts at change are directed not foremost to the individual level, but to wider cultural change that will, in the end, effect the participants. This change becomes possible through the second step of Freire’s method, “annunciation.” Once a group knows how to decode the
dominant paradigm and its effects—through having spoken together—then they can begin to conceive of social arrangements which are more just through the process of dialogue.

Why is this process necessary? Freire says that the dominant class attempts “by means of the power of its ideology, to make everyone believe that its ideas are the ideas of the nation” (Freire and Faundez, 1989, 74). A dominant paradigm operates by way of the monologue, not dialogue. It requires voicelessness on the part of the other to sustain itself. “The power of an ideology to rule,” says Freire, “lies basically in the fact that it is embedded in the activities of the everyday life” (Ibid., 26-27).

It is through dialogue that one breaks out of the “bureaucratization” of mind, where there can be a rupture from previously established patterns. “In fact, there is no creativity without ruptura, without a break from the old, without conflict in which you have to make a decision” (Freire, in Horton and Freire, 1990, 38). For Freire true education is not the accumulation of information placed in the student by the teacher. True education must encourage this rupture through dialogue. Teacher and student must each be able to effect, to communicate with, and to challenge each other, rather than perpetuate domination through monological teaching methods that further disempower.

Freire connects dialogue with love:

Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of profound love for the world and for [women and] men. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. It is thus necessarily the task of responsible subjects and cannot exist in a relation of domination. Domination reveals the pathology of love: sadism in the dominator and masochism in the dominated. Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to [others]. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical… (Freire, 1970, 77-78)
Coda

In the end, the direction of this book is not inward... only. It cannot be, because imaginal dialogues do not exist separate from the other domains of our lives. The hierarchies of our culture, schools, family—and thus of mind—do not deeply invite dialogue. Neither does the voicelessness directly resulting from such hierarchies of power. Here I am trying to underscore the interpenetration of dialogues with imaginal others, with dialogues with oneself, one's neighbors, within one's community, between communities, and with the earth and its creatures. The effort to section off the imaginal from this larger fabric is at best defensive and at worst wasteful of the energies needed to work at much-needed reconciliations. Depth psychology—if it is not to become a Euro-American relic from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—must use its energy to penetrate the depths of difference. Dialogue is the method for this hosting, penetration, and holding of difference.

For the sake of dialogue—of love—this book points us toward the creation of childcare contexts where the dramatic fray of play can be delighted in, to elementary schools where the leap between self and others in a small group can be practiced, to spiritual education and practice where the voices within silence can be discerned and addressed. It points us toward high schools and colleges where previously marginalized voices can be admitted to the mosaic, changing the underlying structure of education from the conveyance of dominant paradigms to one of dialogue across difference. It turns us toward the processes of non-violent communication and reconciliation that are needed to nurture the neighborhoods and communities—and ultimately nations—in which we are homed. And finally, it attempts to turn us toward the dialogue beyond words required between nature and humans if our actions are to finally preserve the earth.

REFERENCES


