

HELP ME BECOME FREE OF YOU

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This is not a case study, at least not in the conventional sense. I will take the liberty to bypass background history, the 'client's presenting issues' as well as an account of the stops-and-starts of our attempts at establishing what is normally called a 'therapeutic relationship'. All the same, this *is* an account of a therapeutic relationship, even though it is open to question whether it is Mehran alone (the client, condemned in textbooks to be 'incongruent' or 'inauthentic') who gained from the encounter, or whether I too (the therapist, said to be anointed with congruence and authenticity) benefited from the encounter.

Well, yes, this is an account of a therapeutic relationship of sorts. It remains to be seen whether the relating in question is simply *relating*, that is, an indeterminate dance of togetherness, an attempt to communicate across the divide – of self and other, of me and you or, if you choose the sappier lingo in vogue, of I and Thou. Simply relating means that the *ship* of relationship – the vessel, the sturdy boat gliding soberly on uncharted rivers – the rivers of Mehran's experience and my own – is a more fluid proposition. In simple relating, the vessel ploughs a more erratic course, and even when assailed by storms it retains an unquenchable thirst to experience life in its fullness and boundlessness.

I remember being taken aback by Mehran's youthful fervour, his fierce intelligence, his confidence, by Mehran's presence and ease with the world. He had to learn the ways of the world early in life, for he lost both parents to cancer in brief succession, within months – first his mother, then his father. Attachment issues, some will say. Of course. Learning to trust a world that after that terrible loss could no longer be trusted. Then, unreliable foster care, exposure to meanness and neglect. But there is another side to the attachment system, overlooked in attachment theory, and I think Mehran's story proves it. It is called line of flight. It is called becoming-orphan, a state of isolation and abandonment cut away from supporting bonds. The jury is out as to whether this experience is limited to neglected children or

whether, as some research implies, children are inclined by evolution to hold universal fantasies of survival and abandonment. My contention is that that painful state of abandonment in a wilderness of uncertainty and loneliness is also an opportunity for creating anew a web of sustainability and love.

We have been meeting for nearly ten years, Mehran and I, on and off, with some interruptions, breaks, and unclear endings with the door left ajar. We met in my apartment first, then online when Covid took over the world, and finally in a rented room in a leafy part of town. Through the changes – of gear, tonalities, and priorities – Mehran and I also changed. And in that relating without a ship, without vessel, without the sanitized frame where all a therapist does is ticking boxes all the way to retirement, a fundamental change took place in him and in me – both changes unwarranted, unexpected and impossible to convey. Which is precisely why I want to try to convey them to you here.

There have been many versions of us in the process. There have been many shifting moments. But there is one that stands out. Mehran remarked on it months later. I am not talking about an epiphany or a numinous ‘depth’ in relating. There was no gnostic revelation or a felt sense authenticating the realness of the experience. The shift was ordinary. To be sure, there had been other signposts announcing a change of rhythm. I might tell you about them later. But the one I want to recount took place three years ago. It happened after a break of a couple of months in our meetings. The break itself had been the culmination of a rather long period during which Mehran had expressed dissatisfaction with what he called my relentless positivity, my obstinacy in wanting to look at the bright side of his experience, my persistent attitude of encouragement and appreciation. I had been inept at both naming and holding the unbearable grief simmering just under the surface of his speech. I had *believed* the myriad ways in which Mehran had so successfully coped with grief.

At a young age he had learned the ways of the world – how to be successful in any endeavour he would care to turn his attention to – studying literature at university, managing a pop band, making art, the latter an endeavour where he began to make a mark. I had believed his masks. That was because I’ve always understood the making of a mask as an artform, a way not merely to cope but to engage creatively with life’s challenges. I told him as much, putting my view on the table for discussion. I also owned my scepticism of the so-called ‘real self’ – be it

organismic, authentic and whatnot. Mehran broadly agreed with me but also wanted me to know of the jagged ways grief stole on him. I might be sitting at my desk, he'd say, having allocated that particular time for work, and all of a sudden I'd feel overwhelmed by anxiety be incapable of getting anything done. Diffuse at first – silent, uncanny – anxiety would slowly turn into a muted scream, Munch's scream echoing still one hundred and twenty-nine years later, a howling grief that visited me with a blind wish to dwell in my heart and soul forever.

This is real enough, I said. And there are other ways, he went on. Tears come out of the blue, provoked by trivial disappointments; or disproportionate tears of disenchantment for a lover withdrawing their love without warning, the realization that in matters of the heart there is no room for stipulation, only mercy. True, neither of us paid heed to the notion that the overwhelmed self, the vessel battered by life's storms, the grieving howling desperate self is the 'real' self. No. That's just another aspect, another artful mask through which the living organism does its wondrous thing, through which the living body sings its song.

It was at this point of our conversation that I felt the urge to spell out something which strangely only became clear to me as I started saying it. You know Mehran, I said, my intention here is that you become free of me. Also, I have no investment –emotional or otherwise – in your going this way or that. Later on, he remarked that my statement stopped him in his tracks. To come back to me and say 'help me become free of you' meant that he could trust the work and the direction of our conversations.

That night I dreamt that Mehran and I were walking through the streets and alleys of a ghost town. He tells me about gigs he went to – one in particular he had been too the previous day. 'It's ages since I've been to a gig' I say. There is warmth and affection between us, and in the dream the asymmetrical boundaries between client and therapist have dissolved. He asks me, Why did you ring me? Did you call me as a friend? I try to answer but I can't speak.

Two and a half years ago after a break of a few months we resumed our weekly meeting. This time we could meet in person. Covid had begun to be managed somewhat and after months of near solitary confinement it was exhilarating. I was so happy to resume face-to-face work. Leaving my rented flat at 7.10 in the morning, walking some 40 minutes from Hampstead to Primrose Hill, allowing impressions, thoughts and feelings traversing me freely in the

luminous cool late-summer air. Mehran told me he had wanted to start again because so many things had changed. A new, painful relationship with someone he looked up to, someone who withheld her love exposing his real fear of abandonment. He also said that the impetus for wanting to resume was remembering that statement of mine, 'I want you to become free of me'. It untied a knot, he said, a transferential entanglement. By the way, he added, do you know why Socrates ended up in trouble and was sentenced to death by the Athenian tribunal? It was because he did not understand transference. He grinned; after a pause we both laughed.

Now, years later, that pithy remark about Socrates makes me shudder, for I know in obscure ways that what exacerbated my health crisis to come was a conflict that emerged from a fatal misreading of transference. Weeks went by, then months. In April I was rushed to hospital with what the doctor called 'acute kidney injury'. Doctors don't call it kidney failure anymore, which was the old name for it, but injury. Later someone asked, Did you *fall* on your kidneys that they got injured? Failure is taboo, and thinking that to fail is integral to human experience ('fail again, fail better' and so forth) incomprehensible to our world of ever-expansive growth – be it the growth of the economy, of broccoli, or of the eerily named post-traumatic growth. The urgency of the situation didn't allow me to send individual messages to clients or supervisees to explain to each of them that I'd be out of action for a while. I notified my executor instead who sent a brief collective email to them. Long story short. During my week in hospital, they found cancer and after the shock and grief and sadness and bewilderment and after hours spent after hospital supper looking at the beautiful sky at dusk from the bed and asking pointless questions to the heavens and hearing common-sense answers ('Why me, God?' – 'Why not, Manu!'), I eventually resumed some clinical work after a few weeks. Incidentally, when I notified a professional body I belong to of my situation I was told that in order to protect the public I should think twice before seeing clients while on cancer medication.

When I meet Mehran again, he tells me how anxious he has been for me; he tells me through the tears how lost he felt. And how much love he feels for me. He asks me details about the illness. I tell him. He lost mother and father at a tender age. His father died not long after his mother had passed away. He was given a death sentence and died shortly after his diagnosis.

He died of the very same illness that befell me. That day Mehran and I cried together. Tears of sorrow. Tears of joy. For Spinoza (and I am thinking of my dear Argentinian friend Claudio Rud as I say this, for he passed on to me his love Spinoza of this great philosopher), every emotion and feeling, if allowed to travel, to do its thing, if allowed to move us and move through us, will lead us to joy. Our tears were tears of joy. They made us free for that brief moment.

Mehran had moved way past being dependent on me (if he had ever been) and on therapy. My own tears of joy liberated me from the constriction of wearing a garment. It did not make my garment invisible *à la* Carl Rogers. It made it non-existent. At that time – mid-May this year – I was still in the dark about my prognosis. This meant I felt all the more vulnerable hence more open. Which meant also that Sorrow was in the room. And Fear. And Tenderness. Then Joy moved in, a bridge between two islands, two monads stuck in their boundaried positions. Please do not misunderstand me. Boundaries are vital. But what are they *for*? There is a world of difference between fashioning a container for (allowing, inviting, hosting emergent phenomena), and a container of (limiting and incarcerating life through an ideology, be it psychoanalytic or person-centred). Mehran's autonomy and my own vulnerability made possible this important shift.

'We suffer not only from the living, but from the dead' Karl Marx wrote in the 1867 Preface to *Das Kapital* adding, in French: *le mort saisit le vif!*, the dead seize the living. This is open to many interpretations. There is the historical burden of colonialism, racism and class hatred. More generally, the phrase suggests that we are affected by the real and tangible presence of the dead – those who came before us, our loved ones who died, our friends and colleagues who are no longer with us. I am thinking of two original contributors to the PCA, Peter Schmid who passed away in September 2020 and Pete Sanders who died in February this year. In Mehran's case, it refers to the very real presence in his body/mind of his father and mother – present, alive, affecting and moving within him and to whom he dedicated is remarkable artwork. There is an affective side to historicity, understood with Auguste Comte as the presence of the dead through artefacts, be they the streets we walk, the buildings we dwell in, the books and works we read and absorb. There would be no tradition without the work of many practitioners who came before us.

One could detect another meaning in Marx's phrase, one that comes from contemporary biology, in particular *La Sculpture du Vivant* by Jean-Claude Ameisen. Simply put: the living organism relies on the presence of *nonlife*. Nonlife is the very condition of life. Ameisen writes:

From the first days that follow our conception ... cellular suicide plays an essential role in our body in the course of construction, sculpting successive metamorphoses of our form in becoming. In the dialogues that are established between different families of cells in the course of being born, language determines life or death. In the sketches of our brain and our immune system – the organ that will protect us from microbes – cellular death is the integrative part of a strange process of apprenticeship and auto-organisation whose accomplishment is not the sculpture of a form but that of our memory and our identity

Nonlife within a living organism becomes a deposit or storage for vital individuation. The life of the organism is, in a sense, a form of inhibited death (*mort empêchée*). This has wide-ranging implications for organismic psychology. It has been argued that the way in which an actualizing organism tends to be portrayed in person-centred and humanistic literature is as ever expanding, flourishing, and forever progressing, even when it may be a light-seeking potato in a cellar sprouting towards the faint light of the distant heavens. It has been rightly argued that little attention was paid to the unsexy ailing organism or to entropy. What I tentatively suggest here, inspired by my modest understanding of contemporary biology, is a dialectical synthesis that takes on board and sublates expansion and entropy. We know from philosophy that the synthesis of the static notions of *being* and *nothingness* is *becoming*, the latter providing a more accurate description of the flow of lifedeath. Something is + something is not = something becomes. Similarly, the synthesis of expansion and entropy brings about an understanding of life as depending on nonlife. We are seized by, and in debt to, the dead and their legacies. The living organism, the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz remarked, relies on a kind of memory, "an inherence of the past in the present". Understood in this way, the living organism is not a stable phenomenon, one at rest or equilibrium, but *metastable*, constantly taking form. In the Japanese avant-garde dance/theatre practice of *butoh*, the dancer takes on different forms; that is, different forms, organic and nonorganic may inhabit the dancer at any given time. A dead father, an oak tree, a scorpion, a caterpillar and a butterfly may move through the dancer.

Mehran made a beautiful work of art dedicated to his parents. And he did much more than that. His parents move within him, traversed his bodymind and spoke through him. For my part, his tears of sorrow and joy in learning of my own mortality greatly enlivened and enriched my own experience. Our work took flight. And for that I am grateful.

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