

In order to look after myself, I need to begin this essay with a declaration. Having experienced the writing of my previous essay as a trauma of the perfectionist kind, I am committed this time to a different essay-writing style and experience. I will not be editing, re-editing and agonising over each word, sentence and paragraph 1000 times before arriving at the elusive state of completion, beaten, exhausted and in need of several weeks on a tropical island! This essay is to be an experiment – an attempt to write spontaneously – in stream-of-consciousness style, and thus to depart from a rigid, inflexible and destructive behaviour that once kept me safe, but now keeps me shackled.

It is difficult to distil two years of experience down to several pages of writing. Every major awareness and shift has been composed of a million smaller fragments of time and experience that have ultimately culminated in the birth of a butterfly from her chrysalis. She's drying her wings in the sun now, and will fly any day. The last two years has been a journey out of darkness and isolation, and away from impulses towards self-destruction and death, the journey now being towards love, connectedness, belonging and self-acceptance. What I have discovered about myself is that my desire for intimate connection is more powerful than my fear of it. And it is worth fighting for. It makes life worth living. Having said that, my sense is that I'm rarely making full contact, and I interrupt myself at all stages of the experience cycle, so I look forward to gaining further clarity and awareness, by exploring in this paper what I have learned during the time of my training about my contact style and the ways I interrupt myself. I will do this by sharing in detail my two most figural creative adaptations, and discussing these in terms of the seven interruptions to contact and the experience cycle. I will also identify my growing edges along the way.

As I implied in my declaration, one thing I have discovered about myself, is that I am prone to perfectionism. In fact, during my training it has emerged as one of my main creative adaptations, and interruptions to vibrant, spontaneous and authentic connection with myself and others (contact). Joyce and Sills say '*how* we make contact needs to be modified according to the field conditions in each unique situation...problems arise when the habitual response is not updated for new or changed field conditions.'¹ This is definitely true for me. In my childhood, I was plagued by a sense of not being enough, of being bad or disgusting in some way. I felt that other people could see it when they looked at me, so mostly I wanted to disappear and to avoid being seen. Wheeler captures it so poignantly in saying 'Shame after all is that feeling that this is not my world, and there is no liveable place in it for me'.² For me, it is a deep and pervasive sense of not belonging. What I've realised is that I carried not only my own shame, but also that of generations of my family that had been denied voice or expression. From a wider field perspective, I also imagine that I carried the socio-cultural shame of femaleness. Robert Lee is very validating of this phenomenon – the way 'women build a sense of self from internalised cultural messages and experiences that devalue femaleness'.³ Certainly my female body was, and still is, my most projected site of shame. Please see Appendix 1 for a picture I drew of my prison of shame.

For me, the antidote to shame was perfection. The field conditions supported this way of being as well. My mum was always trying to be perfect too. There was a kind of fraught

tension and hysteria around it. I still don't know if it was hers or mine. Regardless, I still hold it in my body to this day. In varying degrees of intensity, it accompanies all my perfectionist behaviour. Violently raped at 15, she was always trying to appease her own shame (albeit unconsciously) and impose order on a chaotic world. This is my own fantasy and could well be a projection, but my sense is that that's exactly how it was. I learnt that she liked perfect things – so perfect was the best way to be to receive love and approval. When I look back I see how wise it was, given the field conditions, that I creatively adapted this way, and I feel a very loving sadness for myself – for the little girl that chose to survive that way. I also feel grief – for what my mum endured, and for the spontaneity and unselfconscious freedom that I missed out on as a child.

In recent years however, the field conditions have changed. I have sought out different conditions – ones that have supported the open exploration and expression of my feelings, including shame. To be received in my shame has worked to detoxify it a little. I'm not drowning in it anymore, and it is less of a prison. Not to diminish the role of shame in my contact processes. It plays a very important role in holding me back or allowing me to go forward, depending on the level of support there is in the field (Robert Lee). As Lee says – 'shame is a regulator of the boundary between self and the social field'.⁴ With regards to my perfectionism though, I have not updated this behaviour in response to the new field conditions. In fact, I have recently become aware that it is operating at addiction level in my life. I am rigidly locked into it, as in all fixed gestalts, and it interrupts my ability to make good contact with myself and others. I will explain how it does, but first it is important to note that my tendency to overwork operates in similar ways to what I will describe below.

At the sensation phase, contact is interrupted because I'm so 'in my head' analysing, judging, assessing and commenting on what I'm doing. This behaviour has the hallmarks of egotism, but J. Berger captures it nicely in saying 'A woman's self is split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continuously accompanied by her own image of herself... From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.'⁵ Through this process, my sensitivity to the sensory information my body provides about emerging needs is dulled (desensitisation). Until I began therapy, I was totally out of contact with my body. My first real sensory experiences of it after I got clean were accompanied by terror. Now, I'm not totally out of contact, and I can go into my body, but perfectionism is definitely one of the ways I stay out of it and thus interrupt contact at a sensory level.

This of course has a flow on to the awareness phase of the cycle, with the natural flow from sensation to awareness being interrupted. Without the sensory information necessary, emerging needs are effectively strangled at the sensation phase, and awareness becomes very difficult. I have also had a tendency to deflect awareness of my own needs, especially those that compete with the needs of others or require something of the other. Needing things from others has brought with it great anxiety – the anxiety of experiencing myself as less than perfect. When I first began training I was barely aware at all of what my needs were. Now, what tends to happen is that I do end up noticing them, but often it's not until I'm starving for them to be met. So my growing edge in the

sensation/awareness part of the cycle is to support myself to make good contact with my body – breathing, meditation, exercise, bodywork and to notice and become aware of needs earlier – before they are at critical stage.

At the mobilisation stage of the cycle, I am interrupted by introjects. Perfectionism is full of shoulds and shouldn'ts. In fact it is the introjected material that gives it its power. So much of what I don't do in my life, comes from the shouldn't voice, or from the self-assessment that I won't be able to do something perfectly. I hold a belief that if I can't do it well, I shouldn't do it at all. My mum was ruled by shoulds and shouldn'ts, - she focussed a lot on what other people would think. I've swallowed those introjects and they stop me from mobilising energy to do certain things. Of course, I've started to chew through them during the time of my training – the most figural one being that you shouldn't get too emotional or expose your inner world. I'm in the process of spitting this one out completely! I still experience a lot of shame in showing my emotions, or even more so in experiencing them the way I do, but I'm working on it. My growing edge here is to keep uncovering the introjects that police in my life, and make choices around them, rather than be trapped in a world not of my making.

At the action stage of the cycle, a strong interplay of introjection and retroreflection often prevent me from taking action. Shoulds or shouldn'ts are very magnified at this point, and if the energy for action has been mobilised but there is a shouldn't in the way, my default behaviour is to drive it back inside, instead of sending it in the direction it needs to go. Part of my perfectionism has been to behave and act within strict parameters – usually within the shoulds and shouldn'ts, and so the amount of emotion I have driven inside in an attempt to do that has been hugely destructive. I have included a photograph of a painting I did around the time that I began training (Appendix 2). For me, that painting represents the extraordinary level of internal violence and pain I lived with for so long, as I drove everything inside that wasn't tolerated in my family of origin – especially my rage. For a long time I used drugs and alcohol and food to stuff my feelings down, so when I stopped, they all came rushing up with the force of a volcano. Still, I had unexplained physical pain in my body for years afterwards, which I believe was the pain of anger turned back on myself, driven in and held there for years and years. It is only in the past 6 months that the pain in my body has begun to diminish, and I believe that this is a direct result of starting to give it some expression. So my growing edge here is around giving voice to my authentic feelings – especially anger. It's some of the hardest work I'll ever do – particularly outside of the group where the field conditions are often not terribly supportive of authenticity. But I am committed. I'm no longer willing to stay quiet, and live in pain, so everyone else can be comfortable. If I was to repaint that woman now, her eyes would be wide open, she wouldn't be bleeding so much, and there would be a torrent of 'NO! and FUCK YOU! and I'M ANGRY! flying out of her mouth!

Around the final contact stage of the cycle, confluence and projection are my most active interruptions. It's difficult to make full contact if the contact boundary is blurred beyond recognition, or if you don't know what's yours and what's the other person's. This area gets very complicated for me, so I am going to try and simplify it by referring to a

drawing I did in my personal therapy several months ago (Appendix 3). This drawing brought a lot of things into my awareness, that I had previously been blind to, including several very important projections. I will bullet point these to simplify it.

- Firstly, I project onto Lokere, my need to be perfect to gain my parents acceptance, and my intense yearning for that acceptance, experiencing this as ‘if only Lokere was more.... Or less..., then they’d accept him’.
- I also project my sense of not coping or being okay onto Lokere, taking it on as my responsibility to make him okay, just as I did with my Dad when he was ‘not okay’ in a very unhappy marriage with my mum.
- I have recreated my family system with great accuracy! As a child, I was in the middle between my parents – as the confidante – holding the family secrets and unexpressed resentments and yearnings of both parents, and taking the energetic force of the silent hostility between them. In the drawing, little Anna is in between my parents, and adult Anna is standing in between my family and Lokere. Again I am in the middle, and I have assumed the same role, attempting to absorb any conflict or hostility, in the hope that they’ll get along.
- My taking this role is possible because I’m operating with such a diffuse boundary. Diffuse means to become spread through something. As a child in the role of confidante I never had any clear sense of where I ended and my parents began. I experienced everything that they experienced as if it were happening to me. I was particularly confluent with my Dad, so it makes sense that I play out the same confluence now with Lokere.
- My level of confluence means I don’t often make it round to the satisfaction and withdrawal stages of the experience cycle, my confluence keeps me locked into the anxiety of whether my loved ones are okay.
- It also means that I really struggle to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries. I’m preoccupied with the peace and happiness of the other, so I feel guilty when I look after myself, abandon my own needs, and then become angry and resentful, and drive it back inside. I then resume my default regulating behaviour - perfectionism to regulate the anxiety created in this process.

This is the major dynamic I am working on now. It feels like enormous work – a long and delicate process of separating out, distancing, disentangling, owning what’s mine, establishing and maintaining a solid sense of self with healthy boundaries, acknowledging and tending to my own needs first, learning to feel worthwhile in difference and separateness. This is my major growing edge. Already, much is shifting in this area. Awareness gives me choices and I am choosing differently. Already I am making better contact with myself and others as a result of those choices, and I feel excited and hopeful about what lies ahead. Two years ago, I never would have imagined I would be where I am today, so I can only imagine what the next two years of training has in store! Lots of joy and anticipation bubbles up, and so much gratitude for the gift of therapy.

In *Risking Being Alive* Carlos Castaneda is quoted as saying that ‘once he began this ‘path with heart’ there was no turning back’.⁶ How true.

Bibliography

¹ Joyce, P., and Sills, C., (2002) 'Modifications to Contact', *Skills in Gestalt Counselling and Psychotherapy*, Sage Publications, London, 112.

² Lee, R., and Wheeler, G., (1996) 'A Woman and Her Body', *The Voice of Shame – Silence and Connection in Psychotherapy*, Gestalt Press, USA, 229.

³ Lee, R., and Wheeler, G., (1996) 'A Woman and Her Body', *The Voice of Shame – Silence and Connection in Psychotherapy*, Gestalt Press, USA, 230.

⁴ Lee, R., and Wheeler, G., (1996) 'A Woman and Her Body', *The Voice of Shame – Silence and Connection in Psychotherapy*, Gestalt Press, USA, 230.

⁵ Lee, R., and Wheeler, G., (1996) 'A Woman and Her Body', *The Voice of Shame – Silence and Connection in Psychotherapy*, Gestalt Press, USA, 229.

⁶ Oldham, J., Starak, Y., and Key, T., (2003) 'A Recapitulation', *Risking Being Alive*, Joshua Books, Australia, 164.