On Searching for – and Finding – Ourselves in the World

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Recently I've gone back to reading Winnicott. I first encountered his writing in the 1970's, when I was training to be a therapist. I liked very much his emphasis on the role of the environment in helping to sustain a healthy sense of self. It seemed to me to be a useful corrective to the exclusive emphasis which many psychoanalytically-oriented thinkers had placed on the internal dynamics of the person. Certainly it resonated with my experience of my own childhood – or at least the story I told myself about it – in which the lack of responsiveness of my family to my attempts to assert my impulses played a major role in my development. One of the ways in which I coped with that non-responsiveness in adult life was to search for a community that would welcome me, and that would also welcome others, in our attempts to be ourselves.

Another way was to turn to the arts. For me the arts represented a realm in which I could make something real out of my own subjective strivings and, most importantly, in which the thing made (poem, performance, etc.) could potentially be received by others. Creativity and community, then, became major themes in my search for myself. At the same time, these themes seemed to resonate with cultural and historical developments, in which many young people rejected the world that was offered to them, a world in which isolation and compliance were seen as the norms for adult living.

I think I've tried to be true to the ideals that I developed in response to my early life. But at a certain point, I recognized that I could only realize these ideals if I myself helped to bring them into being, as opposed to searching everywhere for the place where I could find myself. I went through many attempts to do this, ranging from political activism to avant-garde theatrical experimentation to building therapeutic communities. The culmination of these attempts came when I founded in 1991, along with others, the expressive arts therapy training program in Toronto that we called ISIS Canada.

"ISIS" stood for International Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies. The name was taken from a similar program, ISIS-Switzerland, in Zurich, founded by Paolo Knill, with whom I had studied expressive therapy at Lesley College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The ISIS programs were part of an international network of training institutes which met yearly in a European location for what was called the Easter Symposium, a five-day celebration of the arts and community. Paolo's emphasis on "community art" provided a basis for thinking of expressive therapy as embodying a whole world view, one in which the ideals of the 60's could find a home without the destructive and self-indulgent excesses which characterized that era, at least in part.

With Paolo Knill, Margo Fuchs, and others, including my wife and partner, Ellen Levine, I helped found the European Graduate School in 1996, a low-residency summer university in the Swiss Alps, in which students could receive masters and doctoral degrees in expressive arts therapy. I had taught at university since

1964, but in all of them I experienced the malaise familiar to most academics, in which the activities that were most rewarded were those that seemed to have the least to do with educating students or with building an environment in which they could flourish with all their capacities. EGS was different – although we emphasized the development of theoretical frameworks for our experience, we never neglected the experience itself. Art-making became the central activity by which we learned together. For me, EGS was and still is an example of the kind of holding environment necessary for the development of the self which Winnicott speaks about.

One of the themes in Winnicott's writing that seems to me to be particularly relevant to my experience at ISIS and EGS is that of "unintegration." Winnicott distinguishes this state from the "disintegration" that can happen on both a psychological and political level. For him, the ability to rest in an unintegrated state and to have that accepted by others is key to creative living. Without it, we are consumed by a restless striving that never finds its end.

It was clear to me that this state of unintegration or chaos was something I experienced as a poet and performer. Artistic creation is not possible unless we let go of pre-formed structures and venture forth into the unknown, playing with possibilities in order to let something new arrive. This letting-go is also the source of creative blocks and of performance anxiety, since we have to go out of the comfort zone in which we feel safe in order to find unexpected possibilities. Again, the ability to do this depends on there being an other or others who can "hold" us when we start to fall.

In our theoretical framework at EGS, we call the practice of unintegration, "decentering," our name for that phase of a therapy session in which we move away from cognitive control of our experience into a playful exploration with artistic materials, including our own bodies. The one who "holds" the process of letting-go is responsible for helping the client (or "student" in an educational context) find the outcome that is just right for them, that "felt sense" we call "aesthetic response" which is necessary for the process to work. The therapist or teacher, then, can be said to bear an "aesthetic responsibility" for the process which the client or student undergoes.

In this respect, we have moved away from the idea that "the process, not the product, matters" as it is often stated by arts therapists. The process can be deeply satisfying, of course, but it achieves its goal only in the product that affects the person experiencing it, that touches their "effective reality." This has led us to supplement the role of "play" in expressive arts therapy with a recognition of the importance of the "work." After all, the history of the arts is a history of works that are made. The artist longs for the work to emerge. Sometimes this is supremely difficult, at others it seems to come effortlessly; but in any case the work is the thing that is aimed for. In our framework, we call this a "work-oriented" expressive arts practice.

By emphasizing the work, we move away from all forms of psychological reductionism. We have come to realize that art is not self-expression. The work

always brings something new that was not present "inside" the person; it is not something squeezed out like toothpaste from a tube. If we think of genuine works, this becomes clear: Was *War and Peace* "inside" Tolstoy or any of his symphonies "inside" Beethoven? This does not mean that art has no psychological significance. On the contrary, the psychological impact of art comes from the works that are made. Who does not recall hearing music or reading a book that gave them the feeling that their lives were being changed? Art works, and that is why the work of art is essential.

When I think about the importance of the work, I start to move away from Winnicott's premises. For him, creativity in the therapeutic encounter is all about play. It is reverie or dream, and not something that has a material realization. Of course, Winnicott himself had a great appreciation for works of art. He played music and drew with facility. Yet I don't see in his writings a way to account for the forms that emerge from formlessness, the works that come from play.

Perhaps this has to do with his almost exclusive emphasis on the mother's role in the development of the child, in particular on her capacity to "hold" the infant. This is indeed crucial, and has its counterpart in the therapist's ability to "hold" the client, to provide a safe space for him or her just to be without having to live up to his expectations. But safety is only valuable insofar as it helps us to have the courage to take risks. Something more than maternal holding is necessary at this point. Traditionally this has been the role of the father, as he ushered the child (usually the boy) into the world. Of course I present these ideas in terms of traditional gender roles, as Winnicott did, but the important thing is the principles that these roles embody, the difference between "holding" and what I call "shaping."

The artist's work is to shape the materials. He or she needs to explore them and to let them find their form, but ultimately the artist has the responsibility for the aesthetic outcome. Anyone who has studied improvisation in theater knows this – we let go to improvise, and then at a certain point we have to guide the process toward a work. Sometimes we need to be ruthless to do this, eliminating our favorite parts for the sake of the total effect. We select, we shape, we revise, and we are not satisfied until it "works."

I suspect that the absence of the father (or what has traditionally been the father's role) in Winnicott's writing is the equivalent of the absence of the work. Personally, I have had to learn this at my own peril. I love to play, and sometimes I think I would be content just to fool around forever. But I think this predilection is in part a reluctance to take a chance and commit to the work. As long as I'm playing with possibilities, I'm safe. Once it's time for the work (and a deadline helps), I need to find the form, and that means giving something up.

Annie Dillard, in a book about writing, advised the budding author to be prepared to "kill your babies," that is, eliminate your finest passages, the sentences you love the most, in order to make the piece work the way it needs to. This seems different than the idea of maternal holding, and it brings in the whole question of authority and power that is so difficult for many of us to accept.

I still believe in the primacy of play. Unless we can let go into that primitive state of unintegration, nothing new can possibly emerge. But I see now, after many years of exploration, that the arrival matters as well. We need to make works, and we need to make a world. Otherwise we doom ourselves to being ineffective, and we let those stay in charge who have no care for the ones under their control.

As I write this, the Occupy Wall Street and other Occupy events are happening around the world, themselves a sequel to what has been called the Arab Spring. All of these events have that improvisatory and playful quality that characterizes the beginning of something new. The participants rightly reject the meaningfulness of the question posed by outsiders, "But what do they want?" What they want is plain enough: an end to the inequality that has grown to intolerable levels in our society.

But the concern that underlies the question, when it is not meant as an accusation is important: at some point any new social movement has to find its form. Perhaps this form will not be the same as the normal structure of representative democracy, which for the most part is far removed from the living experience of citizens; perhaps it will embody the playful, participatory quality which has characterized the movement so far. The alternative is not between rigid and lifeless forms of social life on the one hand and pure play and spontaneity on the other. Rather we must find playful forms of life, responsive institutions that can sustain us by honoring our fundamental impulses, political movements that have what I can only call "soul."

Whether in therapy, education, art or political action, we need to live in the paradoxes of work and play, of restful unintegration and effective action. Otherwise we split ourselves off from the world and find ourselves only in an imaginary and ineffective space.

I come back to the themes of creativity and community. Let's build a playful world together, one in which we can both rest and venture forth. I do not know what shape this world will have, but it will find its form or else vanish like a dream. And if it does become real, only then can we begin to take it apart all over again and build it anew.