

EMPATHIC SURRENDER:
The Intuitive Moment

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to expand our practical understanding of the parameters of the listener's empathic attunement, specifically as it relates to his or her own difficulty in opening to the experience. The dimension of surrender in empathic surrender speaks to the letting go of specific organizational boundaries which make sense of, but also limit our experience of that which is alien to us. Listeners who empathically surrender must work through layers of their own fear in order to allow self-organizations, which maintain a feeling of contained safety, to be momentarily relinquished. Letting go of this protective rigidity can allow for an empathic immersion which would otherwise be impossible. This is an intuitive moment. This deep, mutual immersion can be profoundly beneficial as well as extremely disruptive, to both parties and the relationship.

During moments of tension or conflict, listeners, experiencing fear, may withdraw from the intensity of the engagement due to a failure in differentiating what is helpful from self protective functions. Confusing fear with, for example, an intention to be more neutral has specific somatic sensorial correlates. This confusion can result in an unnecessary withdrawal of listeners' empathic engagement. As listeners are erecting self-protective boundaries to avoid anxiety, sometimes annihilation anxiety, clients are left feeling abandoned, shamed, and hopeless. In order to empathically surrender, listeners may be required to surrender not only their maladaptive, protective, compensatory organizations, but adaptive organizations which may not be experienced as protective in nature, yet nonetheless limit listeners' capacity for empathic attunement.

Listeners are challenged regarding the frequency with which we retreat into a theoretical and/or diagnostic stance as a way of avoiding the position of "not knowing" and the inherent intimacy and boundary issues which arise as a result of empathic surrender. This avoiding can be understood as that which precludes one's intuitive capacity. The information received during empathic surrender is not that which would be expected from a linear thinking process. It is what is commonly called intuitive.

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As a counselor, I was having experiences with a number of client's which I did not fully comprehend and could not fully articulate, but were reminiscent of surrender experiences discussed by Ghent (1990). These occurrences allowed for a unique and far reaching level of empathic immersion. Some colleagues indicated they also had what they hesitantly and with some embarrassment called a "mystical experience" with clients, but found it difficult to describe how it occurred, or what they or their clients did to promote it. Being fascinated with and wanting clarification regarding this phenomenon, I interviewed four senior practitioners, asking them to describe, in detail, what I termed an "empathic surrender" occurrence. By repeatedly going over the vignettes with each interviewee, and scrutinizing for elements which seemed inherent to empathic surrender, we began to map out this phenomenon. A group symposium was then convened to reflect on the findings and elaborate further the clinical manifestation and theoretical implications of empathic surrender.

This paper begins to articulate this discontinuous, transformational event. This event occurs when listeners relax self-boundaries and self-representations, allowing client material that was previously resisted by the listener due to a self-protective fear response, to permeate their self organization, drawing them into an empathic immersion which otherwise would not have occurred.

I will begin with a case vignette and then articulate the phenomenology of empathic surrender. This will be followed by a brief, non-exhaustive

discussion of the relevant literature. Finally, I will further elucidate specific elements of empathic surrender.

E. was an extremely depressed woman, suicidal and in her early forties. She had been in counseling with the author for one year. E. had been severely and sadistically abused as a child. Believing she was "absolutely worthless", E. would frequently spend long periods of time unable to speak. After greeting me during one session, she sat down, looked into her fidgeting fingers and after ten minutes whispered several times, that she did not want to live any longer and was going to kill herself. She made no eye contact with me. Any attempts to have her discuss her feelings or her increased desire to die were met with statements that I did not understand her, and that there was nothing to discuss because there was "nothing there." I was frightened. She was more resolute than ever before. I had images of her death with associated feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and fear that I'd be sued. My body was tense. My breathing constricted. I was quite uncomfortable. I tried to give her hope. "You don't understand," she said, "there is nothing to live for." Realizing my counter transference reactions were interfering, I settled down and began to empathize with the desire to die because of pain too unbearable to carry any further, with death being the only succor available. I allowed this sense of giving up out of exhaustion and despair to course through me until I could comprehend the desire for the quietude of death. Only then did I tell E. that I could feel her unending despair and how attractive the peace of death seemed. I recall the emotional state I was in, feeling tears just behind my eyes and heaviness in my body. I felt present and attentive.

For the first time (about 30 minutes had passed in the session), she looked at me and then said, with only a slight veil of contempt, "You aren't listening to me. There is nothing to live for; there is no reason for me to exist. I am

nothing, just worthless emptiness. There is no me here, only empty nothing, just nothing." As I stared at her down-turned head, I felt angry. "Hadn't I done enough?" I thought. "After moving into this vulnerable state in order to understand her, she criticizes me? What does she want from me?" I could feel the urge to distance and thought, with only a slight veil of contempt, "she is being resistant and wants me to do all the work." At the same time I was curious. What was I missing? Then, instead of trying to lead her, I surrendered my intention and allowed her to lead me into her emptiness.

Whereas my earlier "empathizing" was self-generated (an active reaching out from me to E. so that she may experience an empathic bond), what happened next was not completely self-directed. The tension left my body. I felt open. I distinctly remember my pelvic floor relaxing, opening. I no longer felt in control, but rather felt as if she was inviting me to experience something completely new and foreign. Then, as I remained precariously open, it seemed something entered me. A new internal space in my body had opened, allowing me to receive unknown and foreign material. My body felt hollow, I felt no emotion, thought no thought, just endless emptiness. No sense of self. The "I" that I identified as me was vacant. Nothingness. No breath, no hope, no despair, no reason to live, no reason not to live, nothingness. Slowly one feeling emerged: awe. I was awestruck. The immensity of this emptiness was self obliterating. I had never experienced this level of arctic isolation. Slowly organizing this felt sense, I no longer had a desperate urge to help her. I was quiet inside. Moments passed and still in awe, I softly said, "Oh, I see, there is nothing here, just nothing." E. looked up and we held each other's eyes. She smiled with an expression which communicated relief and gratitude. Her smile continued and she simply said "yes." She no longer felt isolated or alienated; someone had finally

accepted her invitation. Within that vast emptiness, she had an ally. That first empathic surrender with E. became a foundational reference point for both of us. We would reflect back on it throughout our work together.

Retrospectively I realized I had moved through layers of fear which had precluded an empathic understanding and which gave rise to E's contempt. I resisted (with a bit of contempt thrown in for added protection) experiencing a state of isolated emptiness which was both foreign and threatening. E. would not comply with my pedestrian attempts at empathy and I assumed my inability was hers. When I surrendered that protection, I was able to understand E (and myself) more deeply. It was as if I could not sufficiently understand E.'s state because I did not have an internal space able to receive it. That is, up until this point, where she persisted, and I surrendered.

The Phenomenology of Empathic Surrender

Empathic surrender is a discontinuous transformational event (Peoples, 1994) which occurs when a listener who was knowingly or unknowingly identified with some form of fear, contraction, and/or withdrawal, perhaps in reaction to a client's material and/or presentation, surrenders various levels of self-organization, resulting in an increase in empathic immersion and resonance. This surrendering crosses professional and personal lines. Empathic surrender typically requires the listener to temporarily relinquish previously conceived professional theory and strategy, and the more consciously held aspects of role identity. It frequently requires that listeners surrender an identity generated by personal, unresolved personal issues, and/or relinquish deeply held, non-conflictual organizing principles, experienced as foundational to a sense of self.

This surrendering process exposes primary vulnerabilities for the listener. It invites listeners to move from the known and predictable to the unknown and unpredictable. Therefore, fear typically precedes empathic surrender due to the exposure of these primary or core vulnerabilities. The degree of fear and one's response to it varies with each individual and each situation.

Preceding the surrender, fear and conflict are experienced while somatic tension and contraction are present. After the surrender a lack of tension and a greater physical openness ensue, which can be termed the "internal creative space" (Schwartz, 1994). As a consequence of the surrender, the listener receives information about the client that was previously inaccessible. Following surrender, a state of profound empathic attunement or "differentiated merger" (Kaplan, 1991) emerges and both listener and client experience a state of mutual intimacy and restoration. This is not to be confused with a symbiotic or trance state where the listener is not lucid, but a state where established, somatic, affective, and/or cognitive boundaries are made permeable so that the listener can empathically attune to that which he/she would previously ward off and protected him or herself against. Refusal to surrender can cloud and distort the depth of understanding available at a given moment.

The listener who has empathically surrendered is not using imagination, free association, or fantasy to understand the client but rather is penetrated by the client so that he/she is somatically, cognitively, and affectively sharing, in parallel fashion, the client's experience. It appears that this can take place because the listener momentarily relinquishes his or her role as the administrator of the relationship, and is more fully immersed in the mutuality of the relational field. In order to empathically surrender, the listener

does not prematurely reject or dis-identify from the client's material and at the same time does not over-identify with the client, his or her own organizing principles or the subsequent merger state. This balance seems to indicate that listeners' identity is strong yet flexible, solid yet permeable (Ogden, 1979). As such, empathic surrender is a unique and infrequently occurring moment in the listening process which can profoundly impact both the client and the listener and the relationship as a whole. Perhaps this is what we mean by intuition.

Empathic surrender presumes an intersubjective, position. Although one cannot will oneself to empathically surrender, one can maintain a state of readiness for the momentary event to occur.

Listeners, who resist surrendering and remain attached to theory, self-representations, expectations, etc., may attribute a counterproductive session to such issues as the client's resistance, acting out, manipulation or aggression rather than perceiving and allowing themselves to be aware of their own unconscious protective reactions and their own fear of the unknown (Bollas, 1987; Ogden, 1989; Ghent, 1990). Listeners may respond to this fear of the unknown with what Ogden called "substitute formations," which create the "illusion of knowing" (Ogden 1987, p. 195). In contrast, after empathically surrendering, listeners experience enhanced perception and an increase in understanding so that they feel they are experiencing within themselves the client's self-state. In addition, the relaxation of self-boundaries and shifts in organizing principles, which result from empathic surrender can stimulate insights and stretch the self-defining limits of the listener.

For example, one colleague reported that for several sessions he had been

actively (that is, too actively) supporting a client's efforts to complete a novel while the client continued to avoid completion and presented with despair and inadequacy. After an empathic surrender incident he realized he had been too invested in a client's completing a book because he had failed to finish his own book. The listener's inability to experience his own sense of failure compromised his ability to empathically attune to the depth of the client's fears of failure. This failure, therefore, kept the relationship in a problem solving format with the listener being the problem solver. The listener unknowingly believed that if the client completed the book as a result of the listener's interpretations, the listener would vicariously shore up his own avoidance and protect a false sense of omnipotence. The empathic surrender not only freed the client from a sense of shame regarding her fear, but helped the listener realize he was using the client as a way of avoiding his own sense of fear and failure.

The road from empathy to empathic surrender

Freud (1912) believed that empathy is the means by which listeners are able to understand experiences which are foreign to their egos. He suggested the most successful analysis occurs when the listener proceeds without preconfigured purpose, thereby allowing for surprise. Other theorists such as Adler, have pointed out that empathic attunement, at times, is dependent upon listeners relinquishing expectations and attachments to theory so that they can "see with the eyes of another, hear with the ears of another, and feel with the heart of another" (Barnett-Lennard, 1981, p. 91).

Reik (1948) remarked that if we intend to comprehend another's unconscious, we must temporarily change into and become the other, because we can only

comprehend another's experience if we experience the same in ourselves (p. 361-62). Fliess (1942) proposed that empathy occurs when a listener's ego and superego regress, allowing the unconscious of the listener to resonate with the unconscious of the client. This resonance, he suggested, results in the listener having an experience of the client's intrapsychic state. Rogers (1951, 1959) proposed that the listener's goal is to set aside his or her own frame of reference and theoretical constructs and temporarily identify with the subjective frame of reference of the client. Are these esteemed writer's describing an intuitive process?

With the advent of Self Psychology, and subsequent relational approaches, the attention to empathy in psychoanalytic thought has proliferated. For Kohut (1959, 1977, 1984) the field of psychoanalysis is defined on the basis of what it can observe through empathy and introspection. Empathy, as the investigative tool (Wolf, 1988), informs interpretation and dictates the depth and progress of the work.

As we move from the perspective of listener as objective observer toward an interpenetrating collaboration between listener and client (Stolorow, 1980), the listener's capacity to be empathic to that which is alien and/or threatening becomes increasingly important.

Bion (1963), Searles (1979), and Ogden (1979), among others, advocate that a listener must actively participate in all of the relational dynamics, including those which arise within the listener, if essential understanding of the client is to be reached. A clients' split-off, that is not experienced, aspects of their self-organizational systems must be experienced by the listener and then given back to the client in digestible form. Rather than remaining distant by warding off that which the listener

finds threatening or disruptive, the suggestion of these theorists is to subjectively experience the phenomenological reality of the client. Thus, listeners are invited to allow themselves to be penetrated by a client's subjective reality so that they cognitively, somatically, and emotionally experience (not simply comprehend) the client's state. It is this level of empathic attunement that additionally permits the listener to become conscious of that which the clients themselves may not yet be able to put into language. This level of perception cannot be arrived at through theoretical understanding or logical induction but rather through the listener's own experience of the client's subjective state.

Bollas (1983), echoing this thought, suggested we become "situationally ill" with the client. Ogden (1989), coining the term "primitive empathy" posited that a mother immerses herself in the infant's world by "de-integrating into relative shapelessness" (p. 202). He was careful to point out that the mother does not disintegrate but rather relaxes self boundaries, which allows her to become more liquid and thereby increase the likelihood of gathering information regarding the child's internal state. Earlier Spitz (1965) described a type of communication where the infant and mother had a "quasitelepathic" link and information was not perceived as much as received. The last two decades have witnessed the theoretical limits of empathy being radically expanded as clinicians allow themselves to be immersed in and penetrated by the client's subjectivity. Empathic surrender is a further elaboration of this phenomenon.

Certain questions arise from these theoretical and technical innovations: How does a listener "receive" the subjectivity of another? How does this almost-merger state affect the listener's hold on

boundaries of the self and the relationship. Do listeners actually become "situationally ill" with a client or is that simply theoretical metaphor?

If listeners are going to allow another's state to enter them, they must at least be willing to surrender their attachments to theory and cognitive strategy. Even more threatening, however, is the need to temporarily surrender aspects of self-organization such as identity, role, and possibly other elements we believe maintain our sense of self-cohesion. Empathic surrender requires one to perceive and organize the client's material into a comprehensible form, without the limiting characteristics inherent in one's established "modes of representation" (Bruner, 1967). The surrender in empathic surrender speaks to the letting go of specific organizational boundaries which make sense of, but also limits our ability to experience alien phenomenon.

Surrender vs. Submission

It is important to note that surrender is distinct from submission. For example, an inexperienced or overwhelmed listener's submission to a client's intimidations, infantile demands, and castigations is not indicative of empathic surrender. Empathic surrender is also differentiated from the listener relinquishing an internal locus of control to comply with or to aggrandize a client during a conflict or during an difficult, unresolved, negative phase. These coerced attempts at compliance only stagnate progress, perpetuate forms of submission, and, if not remedied, harm and reinforce a dysfunctional system. This type of relational collapse is the perversion of empathic surrender. A mutual compliance of this type serves to reinforce the

engrained, protective and limiting habituated thoughts and behaviors of the client and listener. (Gordon, 1987; Ghent, 1990).

In fact, a listener's submission to a client's castigating or complaining demands may be a function of the listener's attempt to maintaining his/her own compliant, false self organization, (i.e., warm, empathic healer, comforter). Additionally, listeners feeling the pressure to submit may rely on familiar postures (distancing, judging, pathologizing etc.) for self-protection (Ogden 1979). Listeners may fall prey to using their clients in order to resupply their own omnipotence. Or, they may collude with a client's submission for the purpose of internally validating their own position. For example, listeners may translate a client's compliance as justifying the correctness of a prior interpretation, rather than recognizing when compliance reflects the client's retreat from the pain and chaos of being misunderstood. A listener's sense of self must be flexible enough to permit, encourage, and contain the client's experience of chaos, terror, fragmentation, meaninglessness and despair. This open, receptive state can be very threatening to the listener, yet one must also recognize and tolerate these experiences of seemingly meaningless disintegration with the faith that positive benefits will ensue (Bion, 1970; Eigen, 1986).

Objectification as a Protection from Surrender

Searles, (1970), (writing about experiences with schizophrenic clients), uncompromisingly describes the difficulty listeners may have:

The psychiatrist's own relief is in taking refuge in relegating the client to a supposedly separate realm of existence, a qualitatively

not-quite-human realm, a realm beyond the psychiatrist's human empathy. I strongly surmise that, when the therapeutic interaction starts to evoke subjectively nonhuman aspects of these analysts' identities, they would turn relatively quickly to the latest information from such scientific fields as behavior genetics, biochemistry, psychopharmacology, epidemiology, and so on, to find reasoning evidence that the schizophrenic client is, after all, qualitatively different from truly human beings--so that it is pointless to risk one's own going insane by persisting in this disturbingly conflict-ridden effort to work psychoanalytically with him (p.367).

The point is cogent and clear: rather than experience a threat to one's sense of self, listeners may relegate the client to an objectified status. In the clinical example of E, I was heading in this direction when I thought with some disgust, "what does she want from me and what is she doing to me?" Keeping the client at this distance truncates progress but protects the listener. In particular, I wish to highlight and explore transitional moments in a relationship when the client relinquishes what Winnicott (1954) called the "caretaker self" and reveals the destabilizing intrapsychic state in a way that provokes fears of decompensation in the listener and can cause withdrawal of his or her empathic presence. During the important gestation phase of the relationship (Hager, 1992) when the client is moving toward surrender of false self systems, listeners may recoil at what is experienced as a destructive attack on the listener, but is better thought of as a recognizing and surrendering of their own compliant and/or contained sense of self. When such recoil occurs, listeners are typically and unproductively avoiding their own fear and anger thus rendering the relationship unsafe.

This objectification of the threatening other can be quite subtle, as when a client descends into this chaotic self-experience it can elicit controlling and directive reactions from the listener (Lawner, 1981). Personally, I know that moving into my role as organizer and holder of the counseling container can appear appropriate when in actuality I am trying to protect myself from a threatening, de-stabilizing experience.

Although occurring within a relational context, empathic surrender describes a process a listener goes through when confronted with his/her own limitations as manifested within the relationship. It should not be misconstrued as having its genesis in a client's projection. An all too easy diagnostic presumption which can perpetuate one's inability to take responsibility for one's own split-off material.

Unlike the psychoanalytic idea of projective identification, empathic surrender is not dependent upon the client projecting unconscious, unwanted aspects of self into the listener (Ogden, 1979). In fact, the client's contribution in empathic surrender can involve a wish for the listener to understand an intrapsychic state the client is both aware of and overwhelmed by. The client's wish (conscious or otherwise) may not be to deposit frightening aspects of self into the listener in the hope of future re-internalization, but rather for the listener to engage the material the client brings forth and hold it within an relational context. The client does not necessarily wish to expel a self-state, but to be more fully recognized and contained therein so as to break a cycle of chronic alienation.

Empathic surrender is a phenomenological event which may occur whether or not the client is attempting projective identification. Yet, if the client/projector wishes to control and possess the listener/object (Klein

1946, 1955), the listener's regulatory functions may indicate it is not wise to relax self-boundaries. This again would be where surrender is differentiated from submission.

Still speaking within a psychoanalytic frame; when empathic surrender occurs during a projective identification, the listener's role, in part, is to receive, digest and communicate this material. The empathic surrender moment would occur just preceding the reception stage, and involves the process a listener goes through in order to be inhabited by this alien material. The more complete the surrender, the more complete the reception, and hence the more transformative for both client and listener. The client raises the stakes in projective identification, but empathic surrender speaks to the listener's resistance to those stakes.

Faith

Balint, (1968) and Ogden(1989) address the way listeners attempt to protect themselves by their identification with being the knower (omnipotent internal object) within the relationship. This identification with omnipotence, they state, is a defense against the anxiety generated by not knowing. In fact, preliminary steps of empathic surrender are the acceptance of our "relative impotence" (Balint,1968) and faith in the "not knowing" position; what Keats(1958) termed "negative capability". That is, faith in the knowledge that remaining open, receptive and not prematurely reaching for explanations which may preclude a richer perception and deeper comprehension, allows the "truth" of the moment to reveal itself (Eigen,(1981). Faith in the experience that if we allow ourselves to momentarily get lost in the client's

subjective state (Bollas, (1987), to swim with them in the primordial, archetypal soup, (which by nature is beyond the limits of cognitive categorization), an ever deepening intersubjectivity will evolve.

I will now explore additional dimensions of surrender to further elucidate this subtle and complex event.

Listener's and client's role in empathic surrender

Without realizing it clients often request empathic surrender by being persistent, noncompliant, and demanding so that the listener empathize with a particular self-state. Perhaps by using criticism, the client is trying to teach the listener to relax constraints and expand empathic limits (Bromberg, 1994). It is my belief that we distance ourselves more often than is warranted; we misunderstand the client's frustration, criticism, persistence, and even attacks as symbolic indications of core fragility or distorted transference aggression when we may be protecting our own subjective organizations. We may interpret the client's aggression or complaints as resistance to progress or change when they are expressing injury and a plea for recognition of their pain and isolation. This is one caveat to interpretation when the listener is held as the authority. Interpretations, which even if partially accurate, can mask a deeper constriction within the listener who then unknowingly truncates the work.

Empathic surrender requires that the listener relinquish the safety and protection afforded by their role, and at the same time, maintains the boundaries and limits inherent in positive outcome. During the moments preceding empathic surrender, this vulnerability includes the temporary loss of the power differential as well as feelings of inflated superiority and all components of the role which create a protective distance between self and client. However, these aspects of identity may be more than the role we assume within our office; they may reflect core

organizing principles we rely upon to make sense of our self-experience.

As mentioned earlier, listeners may not only be required to surrender their maladaptive, compensatory organizations, i.e., negative reactions, but also, aspects of their adaptive self-schema which serve as the parameters of self and are not experienced as protective adaptations of earlier trauma. Listeners who relinquish organizing principles at this level are momentarily letting go of primitive attachments to primary self-organizations. For example, in the personal vignette, E. did not re-injure an unresolved personal issue within me, but rather challenged a fundamental boundary of my experiential universe. The session brought me to a felt sense of emptiness of which I had no prior knowledge, and which therefore had no place in the organization of myself. It was not past, unresolved issues which inhibited my empathic resonance with E, it was the limits of my previous self-experience.

It would seem that the more deeply an individual identifies with a particular organizing principle that is being challenged by a client's process, or the more threatened the listener's basic self organization is, the more anxiety and difficulty the listener may experience prior to empathic surrender. This may lead to blaming and acting out against the client. Intersubjective theorists have specifically addressed this, noting that, listeners who feel the mainstay of their sense of reality threatened may be compelled to erect a defensive wall between reality and their clients, dismissing the latter as madness, projective identification, or transference distortion. Listeners may defend in an effort to fortify their own "endangered psychological world" (Stolorow, 1987, p. 136).

Simply put, the extent to which we are unwilling (knowingly and unknowingly) to be challenged in our most vulnerable aspects of identity and

self-organization determines the parameters of our capacity to empathically resonate with our clients.

Fear, particularly just before a limiting self-boundary is about to expand, is a central element preceding empathic surrender. A colleague reported that her fear was so great that she experienced "annihilation anxiety" and thought she was "losing self-cohesion". Yet, during the actual experience of surrender, fear evaporates and heightened experiences of trust and faith prevail. This same colleague was amazed at the immediacy of relief at the point of surrender, stating that "the fear vanished." This results in a mutual experience of serenity and intimacy both affectively and somatically. It is during this interpenetrating moment in time that empathic immersion is at its peak. This does not mean, however, that listeners should ignore fear responses which act as regulatory functions, but rather need to differentiate what the fear is serving, i.e., self-protective functions meant to maintain the status quo, or an indicator monitoring ambiguous and dangerous complexities within the interaction.

Anticipatory anxiety precedes empathic surrender

Empathic surrender is the process by which a listener moves past the resistance which arises during a specific client interaction. Yet, as Bromberg (1995) posits, resistance should not be reduced to mean an "avoidance of insight or fear of change, but as dialectic between preservation and change--a *basic need to preserve the continuity of self-experience . . .*" (p. 174, italics added). The relaxing of self-boundaries or the momentary experience of the loss

of self-agency which may briefly occur during empathic surrender can certainly be perceived as a threat to self-preservation. Listeners consistently report a fear of being traumatized preceding empathic surrender. If we allow ourselves to relinquish the resistances which are a necessary prelude to empathic surrender, we will change self-organizing principles and as a result, will be more "usable" objects for our clients (Bromberg, 1995).

Body as Barometer

The body may communicate its dread to receiving and experiencing threatening material with constricted breathing, muscle contraction in the chest, shoulders, or pelvis, weakness and tingling in the limbs, etc.. One colleague confided that he felt tension in his pelvis as "all my sphincters locked up as if I was resisting being penetrated." This can be thought of as a reduction of the internal creative space. If internal creative space is shut down, the listener is actively attempting to keep the client's subjective experience out of his or her body. The listener's body can now be viewed as a container within the relational container; the container in which intuition is possible. Empathic surrender presumes a working through of somatic apprehension and a subsequent opening to the client's subjective state. This relaxing of the fear response indicates the listener's faith in the client's primary intention to communicate (Spezzano, 1994) whatever has been incommunicable in the past, perhaps incommunicable even within the speaker. Empathic surrender presumes a faith grounded in both the client's determination for growth and in the resiliency of the

human spirit.

Empathic Surrender Recontextualizes Perception

At the point of surrender, the entire explanatory context or frame of reference in which the listener organizes his or her experience of the client is dramatically changed, along with the perceptions that come out of that new frame. Following this shift, the relationship; how one sits in the room with a client, one's beliefs about the client, and correlate affects must be reassessed by the listener with respect to this new context. The pervasive fear which is felt leading up to the moments of empathic surrender are instantaneously recontextualized within the new intersubjective relationship.

After empathic surrender, the client and listener are left with a profound shared intimacy which can be disruptive as well as restorative to the relationship. Listeners may be seduced by their own hopes and expectations that the surrender event has catapulted the client forward and expect that the client is not as identified with archaic, self-object needs (Kohut, 1977), and that the relationship will have a more mature orientation. In fact, the opposite may occur, whereby the client's earlier, derailed longings are no longer disavowed but remobilized with increased force, stimulating fragmentation anxiety. Listeners must be prepared for this possibility and not be lulled by the intimacy and relief at the new-found depth of understanding that empathic surrender affords. This all-too-tempting, self-seduction can lead to distortion of the emotional reality of the client, including losing sight of the complexity of the client's primitive longings and fear about those longings.

A further caveat is that the temporary dissolution of some of the

boundaries which impede empathic understanding must not be confused with the boundaries which create a safe and professional environment which allows for the client's expression of dependency. The profound intimacy must not move into sexual contact, although sexual feelings may arise. As one participant put it, "let's face it, if I go through an experience like this with my husband, where we have moved through this wall of resistance and have opened to each other, we are going to make love." The basic human-to-human mutuality afforded by empathic surrender may intoxicate a listener into losing sight of the overarching structure of the relationship. An ethical bedrock must be maintained.

What is surrendered during empathic surrender?

Elements that are surrendered during empathic surrender and have already been mentioned include: role, (listener as healer, organizer, etc.), cognitive assessment and strategy, power differential, boundaries which afford professional and personal protection, fear of the unknown, and, possibly self-cohesion. The threat to self-cohesion seems to be activated along two lines. One is when the listener receives the client's fragmentation fears which can be experienced as destabilizing the listener's own self-cohesion. The other is that, just preceding the surrender event, as the listener is beginning to relax attachments to certain self-organizing principles, panic and annihilation anxieties can arise in response to the perceived threat to self-preservation. As one colleague put it, "there is a desperate crazy edge to it" (Sands, 1994). The fear is that the momentary dissolution of boundaries between self and other will lead to the destruction of the self. This terror of some level of self-destruction is what initiated the listener's resistance (as defined

by Bromberg) in the first place. Yet what are destroyed are the limiting confines of self-experience particularly as they relate to empathic capacity.

Just as empathic surrender presumes a temporary letting go of certain organizing principles which define self, it also challenges organizing principles which coalesce one's sense of ownership of one's body. In feeling the client's pain in one's body, one is surrendering the ownership of the presumed and felt somatic boundaries which allows for a temporary merger state where the listener somatically and affectively experiences, to a greater degree, the client's state. The listener is not inferring, fantasizing, or using imagination, but more directly experiencing the client's material. This is a refined point where surrendering ownership of one's somatic boundaries does not mean that the listener is an empty vessel possessed by the client and void of self-monitoring and differentiation. The listener is not taken over by the client but does share a subjective state. This profound immersion presumes somatic correlates, and represents a more complete intersubjective experience and therefore a more thorough empathic comprehension.

Conclusion

An important distinction between empathy and empathic surrender is that although one can will oneself to be empathic, one cannot will oneself to empathically surrender. An empathic stance is an orientation from which one chooses to act. Empathic surrender happens as a result of an "involuntary willingness" to let go of specific resistances. It is not under the direct control of the listener (Bromberg, 1994).

Empathic surrender is a discontinuous, transformational event with a "before" and "after" component. It is not a sustained stance of inquiry (Stolorow, 1987) as empathy is, but a leap of empathic immersion which otherwise could not have occurred.

As mentioned earlier, primary vulnerabilities are exposed just before empathic surrender. Hence, there are elements of fear and anxiety preceding empathic surrender that are not necessarily present in an empathic position. The sudden relinquishment of the fear and the protective structures has a corresponding physiologic release of tension which allows for the client's material to be received somatically by the listener. Similarly, this surrender allows for the listener's own, until then, unexperienced material to arise to awareness. Additionally it allows the listener to experience what otherwise was beyond the scope of possibility.

Kohut (1959) wrote that psychoanalysis proceeds from the basis of what it can observe via introspection and empathy. One might add that a listener's ability to empathize is determined by their willingness to confront conflictual and non-conflictual, adaptive and maladaptive self organizations, embrace the "not knowing" position, and acknowledge, make more flexible, and expand limiting self-organizations.

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