



International Connections

By Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar

She and the Sea

There it is, the sea, the most incomprehensible of non-human existences. And here is the woman, standing on the beach, the most incomprehensible of living beings. As the human being one day asked itself a question about itself, it became the most incomprehensible of living beings. She and the sea. Claris Lispector (1974,

I hate throwing up. Many people do, I know. I hate throwing up. This is an understatement. I recall a particular event, perhaps ten years ago. I was at Heathrow airport, waiting, hungry, for my night flight, and ate something really bad for me; I think it was a reheated pizza. As I was eating, I already knew it would wreak havoc on my digestive system. I began feeling nauseated before we took off and throughout the five hours flight. Not a wink of sleep. I fought against throwing up as if my life depended on me holding it in. I cannot remember anything from that flight except holding it in, breathing very slowly, avoiding listening to my body who wanted to rid itself from the nasty reheated dinner. As we landed, we had another hour drive to Jerusalem. During this drive I continued the efforts to hold it in. I

bravely managed. I felt green and nauseated and dead. The car stopped and I stepped out and immediately threw up on the pavement, and felt great the second I did.

I was twenty-two, studying massage with a gifted teacher. And one day, during a guided visualisation, I felt my stomach opening wide open. The sun burned a hole in my stomach. I was standing, looking at my own body, and there was a huge hole in my stomach. It was burning, red and hot. And it was okay. I looked around, standing around the pond, and could see strange images behind my fellow students. Each person had a few humanlike shadows behind her or him, in different colours, mostly orange or red or purple. These shadows supported my friends; they were there to help. I then realised I did

not breathe, and it too was okay. I tell a lie, it was more than okay, it was blissful. I was standing there, full of awe, and my body was laying there – in the class—and I was looking at it. The students and teacher were sitting around me, trying to wake me up, to call me back. The eyes of the person who was lying on the ground were closed. Looking down it was strange to note their worry, as I was not worried. One of them touched my feet, and I felt a pull back into the body that was lying there, on the ground, and was no longer watching myself. Then the shaking started, vigorous, uncontrollable shaking. Not cold, but hot shaking. For at least two hours I shook. My teeth chattered, my body shook, and I – for the first time – felt afraid. Am I going crazy?

Twenty years

have passed and in May I will be forty-two. An old woman, wrapped in a black cloak, has been solemnly walking through my bedroom the last few nights. Her presence is heavy on my breathing; it is as if she is mourning some kind of loss. As she measures her pace, busy with her own doings, she also tells me many stories, and I pay close attention to her, attempting to really listen, to try and understand. She has such important messages for me, but I



struggle to follow her words. How can I hear you? How can I let you in without masking your words with my interpretations? Without steering your vague utterance to the things I would most like to hear, or to the words of which I am scared?

Such are the whispers of spirit for me. In

rare moments, when I seem to forget to think myself into existence, I know that she is always present, always guiding, forever whispering to me; standing behind me, taking care of me. Mostly, though, I make an effort to listen to her and therefore miss her words, too busy searching for a wise or desperate understanding of her words. Yet she, she is incomprehensible, uninterpretable. She asks me to surrender to her.

Uri Lotan, a journalist who dedicated a

book to explore the roots of New Age (particularly guruism), wrote: "It's 1980. John Lennon was murdered. Reagan won the elections. Osho fled. We keep searching for the Truth" (2006, p.135). New-age spirituality has contributed to a wider unindoctrinated variety, which was not necessarily bound to religious practice or prescribed dogma. At the same time, to a great extent, it created a spiritual-pop-culture, magnifying the chasm between rigorous psychotherapeutic work and spiritual positioning. Indeed, many methods of psychotherapy have tried to deal with this – including psycho-synthesis, Jungian analysis, Core-energetics and more.

When, at twenty-two, I sought help

following this weird experience, my psychiatrist and psychotherapist dismissed my fear of going crazy. "It sounds like you had a profound spiritual experience", he said. "It may take you time to process it but don't medicate it." But as I enter the sea, being a woman bathing in this unfathomable ocean of

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connectivity or a man seeking to find newness or familiarity in that which was earlier not me, and now seems like something I am a part of . . . but as I enter the sea, a great big sadness accompanies my gratitude. It is the sadness of witnessing suffering – others' and my own. I now recognise that the temptation for disembodiment around spiritual experiences is forever about pain, at least for me.

Surrender is accompanied by noticing

suffering, by feeling it in my body. Suffering hurts like hell.

Disembodiment eases the pain, by dissociating from it.

Dissociation prevents me from being blessed by the surrender.

And then there is this pseudo-spiritual positioning, where I am not present; not to myself, not to anything. Where I can be a spiritual thought, but my body is absent.

“When you call yourself an Indian or a Muslim or a Christian or a European, or anything else, you are being violent,” wrote Krishnamurti (1969). “Do you see why it is violent? Because you are separating yourself from the rest of mankind. When you separate yourself by belief, by nationality, by tradition, it breeds violence. So a man who is seeking to understand violence does not belong to any country, to any religion, to any political party or partial system; he is concerned with the total understanding of mankind” (pp.51-52).

But this beautiful phrase does not speak of the pain that accompanies the act of connection, of not separating oneself from the rest of mankind. The first noble truth in

Buddhism, suffering exists, is not an intellectual one. Suffering is a felt truth, and there is also logic in blocking ourselves from feeling it before we can properly contain it without falling apart. It makes me think of the insanity in practicing psychotherapy. We open our hearts to be wounded. We open our bodies to absorb the pain of the other, to seek aliveness and in its midst to bathe in an ocean of suffering. The fire of spirit cannot but burn us, and somehow this is not a problem to be solved but a paradox to hold. Or, in the words of T.S Eliot (1944):

*And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one*

Can the tap be selectively opened? An old

woman, wrapped in a black cloak, has been solemnly walking through my bedroom in the last few nights. She indicates me to surrender, she can hold me with my pleasure and pain, with my fears and hopes. In my attempts to hold it on my own I fail, get swamped by the pain and suffering and shut down. When I remember to let her hold me it is, really, okay. Why do I struggle with this surrender? How come I keep forgetting? I am no longer the terrified five-year-old whose parents scold for noticing ghosts and spirits or the twenty-two-year old, whose connection to his body is but coincidental. I have made a journey. People have touched my soul, and I have theirs. I have known much suffering and great joy and connection. I know the benefits of surrender, yet I fight against it each and every time, only to take a deep breath of

relief when, finally, I let go. It makes me think of the fight against throwing up. Is it necessary? For me, at least, it seems to be so. There is something about surrender into spirit that involves death – the death of my (imaginary?) individuality, into taking part within a larger system, a larger body. And my organism seems unable to surrender without a struggle. But this is not always the case.

Claris Lispector, the Portuguese author who I have quoted at the beginning of this paper, describes the woman who enters the sea. She gulps sea water; she lets the ocean into her body. As I read her, I become envious of this feminine way of surrender, allowing yourself to be penetrated, to let the world inside of you. I wish I could do this without throwing a fight first. I wish I could embrace the old woman's calling without attempting to understand her or to extend effort. Will I ever?

Body and spirit are so intertwined, but, for me, they are also opposites. I wish it weren't so. I wish these were only a singular entity to accept and surrender into. My body aches as I write this. And you – are you lucky enough to have a body, mind and spirit who can surrender to one another without a struggle? Can you open yourself into the ocean without the gagging reflex from the salty waters of the sea? Are there others for whom surrender is only a pleasurable activity? Would I believe you if you said you are one of those people? Is there any hope for me, for us who seem to be unable to live without this struggle?

Oh. But I forgot, how could I have forgotten? There you are. Here are your eyes, your soft body, your welcoming voice. You invite me to enter you, to join in with you. "Come to me," you say, and it makes me want to cry. And as I join you, as I enter you the world disappears and nothing exists but

this connection of ours. I know not where I am, know not who I am, or how long it has been. A minute? An hour? An eternity? It feels so okay to be lost, to be powerful and aggressive and frightened and lost, oh so very lost. Here you are; here are your eyes, your soft body holding me and being held by me. And here, in this connection, there is no struggle. Here, with you, I seem to be able to surrender without struggle – as if I need you to connect. Why would I ever give up this connection? And yet I do.

As if, the old woman nods as I write this, I cannot surrender to spirit without surrendering to a person. In order to succeed in letting go I need another person – I need you to let go with. It makes me feel dependent on human connection, and more so, on your willingness to receive me. This is both humbling and exciting, and at the same time potentially humiliating.

There you are. The most incomprehensible of living existences. And in you, and with you, my own incomprehensibility feels bearable. With you I can breathe, and connect, and tolerate the suffering for the joy of being alive, of being connected, of being here.

I hope that we can share some interests and dialogue, and I welcome your feedback, comments, questions and challenges. You can email me at asaf@imt.co.il

Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar PhD, has been a psychotherapist, writer, and trainer for since 1997. As a psychotherapist, his work is relational body-psychotherapy, integrating trancework and Reichian body-psychotherapy within a relational framework. He enjoys writing and has written dozens of professional papers on psychotherapy, body-psychotherapy, hypnosis, and their integration. He is an international board member for *Body-Psychotherapy Publications* and an associate editor for *Body, Dance and Movement in Psychotherapy*. His book, *Touching the Relational Edge: Body Psychotherapy*, was published by Karnac in 2014. His PhD dissertation (*Surrender to Flow*), focused on the moments of surrender in three different fields: relational psychoanalysis, body-psychotherapy and hypnosis, and these three form the axes of his theoretical and clinical curiosity.

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