



Failing to say hello

By Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar

Moshe Feldenkrais (1977), who developed the Feldenkrais method, considered walking as a series of controlled fallings. With each step we lose our balance and retrieve it. With each step we fall forward and block the fall with yet another step. Instead of perceiving falling as an undesired process, it becomes a prerequisite for moving forwards.

Movement necessitates falling.

Similarly, when Steven Mitchell (2000) compared this to the analytic relationship he wrote:

“The analytic relationship is no longer usefully understood as the sterile operation theatre Freud believed it could be. The analytic relationship is not as different from other human relationships as Freud wanted it to be. In fact, the intersubjective engagement between patient and analyst has become increasingly understood as the very fulcrum of and vehicle for the deep characterological change psychoanalysis facilitates” (p. 125).

These two statements by Feldenkrais and Mitchell offer a position that is representative of attachment theory and relational thinking. Such a position is both hopeful and heavy. It is hopeful because it expects nothing more of the psychotherapist than being human. It is heavy because it expects nothing less. Human relationships are a messy business; they are saturated with hopes and expectations, with falls and rebalancing, desires and shame, hurt, fears, and needs. The more mutually involved we become, the deeper the potential, and the risk of the therapeutic encounter.

Many therapeutic relationships end with the gratitude and transformation of both parties

involved; but since therapeutic relationships are not so different from other human relationships, many also end up painfully. As therapists, for most of the time we are left to carry that hurt on our own. At times, the pain and hurt can be processed in supervision and therapy, yet at others we carry it—secretly—for many years. Our vulnerability, which makes us suitable to practice, also makes us prone to take matters to heart, and it is not uncommon for us to bear the pain alone; secretly, shamefully.

Although failure, misattunement, and rupture are understood today as crucial to human development and inevitable or even necessary in the matrix of relating, as

psychotherapists we still strive for, and often expect ourselves to refrain from failing, from making mistakes. At least some of this difficulty in accepting failures, working with these, and allowing them results from the “success culture” we grow in, where psychotherapy and relationships have become commercialised goods. Psychotherapists in training and at the beginning of their career are seldom taught how inevitable, or indeed how crucial, failure is. We are taught about attachment, about rupture and repair, but not about the pain of failing to help a client, about interventions that end up badly, clients who leave angry, clients we were simply unable to understand. Nor are we told of just how many times the therapeutic contact had not even reached the first session. Psychotherapy and psychoanalysis potentiate deeply involved relationships, we matter, they matter, which is a fertile ground for growth, and for pain (Rolef Ben-Shahar and Shalit, 2016, pp. xxiii-xxiv).

About ten years ago I contacted some fifty psychotherapists, asking them to send me a vignette of a therapeutic failure. I wanted to collate a book about failures in psychotherapy. One that would neither over-analyse failure, nor illustrate how failure became a success story. It was important to me, because – at least in my clinic – there were many therapeutic failures; too many to count. Was I alone? Did most therapists simply move from one successful therapeutic relationship to another? From one well-thought intervention to the next? I received less than a handful of responses, and those who did respond declined my invitation. Most people did not respond at all.

It was a great delight that the second time I attempted this project it elicited different responses and was fully realised. We aimed much higher, too, and received enthusiastic responses. Rachel Shalit joined me on this editorial project and together we commissioned chapters from fifteen contributors.

We brought together acclaimed relational psychoanalysts and psychotherapists – Jessica Benjamin, Stuart and Barbara Pizer, Muriel Dimen, Doris Brothers, Joseph Schwartz, Sharon Ziv-Beiman and Offer Maurer. We also invited body psychotherapists to write for us: Elad Hadad, Matthias Wenke, Shai Epstein, Nancy Eichhorn, Julianne Appel-Opper. I also wrote a chapter.

It pleased us that this book was not published as a body psychotherapy book but instead as a relational psychotherapy book. It pleased us because we hoped to increase the attention and curiosity of psychotherapists from other modalities to our body of work.

Perhaps, for this column, I can share a failure that didn't make it to the book, one which I am

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still ashamed of, although it did not result in terminating therapy. It is my hope that by sharing this story, and other 'failure' stories I can become a better therapist, but even more so that I manage to cultivate a kinder, more human, attitude to my practice and myself.

I worked with Juliet for four intense years of twice-weekly sessions. After this incident, we worked for three more years, and she remains one of my most loved clients. I think of her often. Juliet was fifty, highly intelligent and creative, hugely successful and equally traumatised and depressed. The last year of our psychotherapeutic work was characterised by extensive regressive work. It was sometimes difficult to remember that Juliet was fifty, as she was so young in therapy, working through very disturbing and disorganised attachment patterns from her childhood.

It was February, and my home was eleven miles away from my clinic. It was cold. That day, the snow began to fall heavily, and most of my clients cancelled. I knew Juliet would come; and I also knew that I would have to walk back home. What I didn't know was how much of my anxiety and shame be seen that day.

The clinic was empty, neither the receptionist nor the other practitioners showed up. Days like that tend to feel special, as if something extraordinary might happen, as liminal spaces open up. Indeed, our session was special. Juliet

managed to express and work with deep longing and pain, and we managed to work with touch without her dissociating. She left to the train station in a fragile, albeit optimistic and open state. My work was done, and I was already beginning to plan my walk back home, which would take me a few hours. I bundled up and started walking home briskly. My steps were quick, and I was watching my feet, as the snow began to pile up. Walking was challenging. It was there that I saw Juliet, walking on the pavement ahead of me. She seemed small and fragile in her fluffy black coat. Juliet walked slowly in what I imagined to be a pensive mood. It seemed that her pace and my stride came from two different universes. I didn't know what to do. I saw her fragility and her tenderness and didn't know what to do. I wanted home. I wish I could say that my action was a result of deep thinking, of processed clinical decision. But it was not. I was debating whether to stop and say hello, and smile or walk quickly without saying hello. I chose the latter.

I ignored Juliet. I walked ever so quickly, accelerating my pace as I passed by Juliet and carried on my journey home. Walking home in the snow was quite an adventure and soon I had forgotten all about Juliet and the "to say or not to say hello" saga.

She had not forgotten it. Juliet arrived upset and in an exceptionally fragile state to the following



session. She found it hard to speak and was shaking for the best part of the session. "Am I not a human being to you?" was the first sentence she was able to utter. "Why didn't you say hello to me when you saw me last week on the way to the train station?"

I blushed. I remember feeling crimson red and deeply ashamed of myself. Instead of taking responsibility, I deepened the shame by lying: "I didn't see you," I meekly said.

Juliet looked at me. "This is rubbish," she said. "I know it and you know it. So stop lying."

I was completely shocked with what was happening. Juliet had never before spoken to me like that. I felt like the worst person in the whole world, not the least the worst therapist. After a few moments of silence, I managed to speak. "I am sorry. You are right. I don't know what to say except I am sorry."

This is not the first time that I ignore someone. It happens to me often in foreign countries. I know a couple of sentences in that language, and when speaking to someone who cannot speak English, I often forget how to say the basic words: "Thank you, sorry, I don't know, I don't speak the language." Dumbstruck, I feel frozen and leave. This is an unpleasant feeling, and one that I try to quickly forget.

This short vignette with Juliet does not end here of course. Juliet and I were able to recover from this painful incident. It had taken her time to

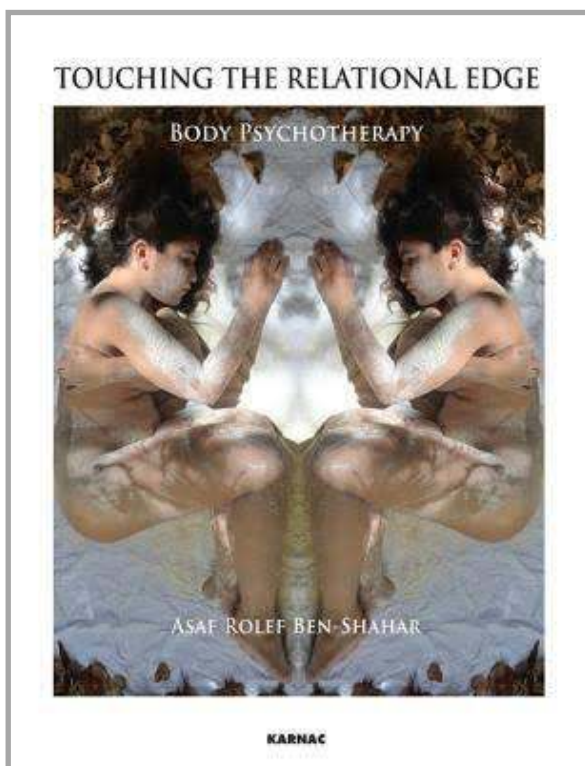
forgive me; it took me far longer time to forgive myself. But I want to leave it here; rather than understand my failure, or conceptualize or reframe it. I want to remain with this unpleasant feeling, with my exposed imperfection and regret. And I wonder: Can you see yourself in my shoes? Is this a possible scenario for you? Could you have found yourself in a similar situation?

As Feldenkrais noted, walking is a series of falls. May there be someone there to catch us when we fall hard.

Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar, PhD, is an Israeli psychotherapist, teacher, and writer. He founded two relational body psychotherapy programmes, in Israel (Psychosoma) and the UK, and is regularly teaching worldwide. Asaf's books include *A Therapeutic Anatomy*, (Pardes, 2013); *Touching the Relational Edge*, (Karnac, 2014), *When Hurt Remains—Relational Perspectives on Therapeutic Failure* (co-edited with Rachel Shalit, Karnac, 2016) and *Speaking of Bodies* (co-edited with Liron Lipkies and Noa Oster, Karnac, 2016). He is Editor-in-Chief of the *International Body Psychotherapy Journal* and is on the editorial board of *Self & Society*, *Body Dance and Movement in Psychotherapy* and *Psychotherapy and Politics international*. Asaf is a father to two girls, a novice DJ, bird watcher, and loves dancing and hiking.

Mitchell, S. A. (2000). *Relationality: From attachment to intersubjectivity*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.

Also by Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar



Nine souls

I am all but shadow

In your shadow I can rest

I am all death

In your death I might live

Eternally tied amongst your shadow, between my deaths

Stopping for a brief moment at your feet

Then I shall know comfort, in your need for me to relieve your loneliness

With your blessing

Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar

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Touching the Relational Edge