

Transformative Moments: Short Stories from the Biodynamic Psychotherapy Room

Part Two



By Dr. Elya Steinberg

Touch and betrayal

From an object-subject relationship point of view, we should never underestimate how challenging it might be for a body-mind system that has been betrayed by humans to trust humans again—to trust the object 'human' and to authentically experience that this subject is safe.

It is especially important to explore the complexity of touch and the right touch for people who have undergone traumas of physical, sexual or emotional abuse in their family, when, in fact, inside the family somebody manipulates their most basic attachment needs, where love was demonstrated manipulatively in order to abuse the child as an object for the fulfillment of the perverse fantasies of the adult who was supposed to protect him.



These people, who were born into an evil cradle, are the most wounded people in our society. They have never experienced safe touch or have experienced it partially from a friend of the family who was, at the time, a bystander to the abuse, and there are mixed together the touch and the sense of betrayal that occur in the conspiracy of silence. These people especially need, as a part of the overall psychotherapeutic experience, a space in which they can experience safe touch here and now inside the therapeutic alliance with a secure and safe attachment figure. They need a space in which they can learn to develop themselves ways to cope with the complexity of touch for them. Many of them suffer from intensive somatic-sensory flashbacks that often emerge every second while attempting intimate touch. They learn in themselves the ability to enjoy the right touch here and now, to develop tools such as dual awareness during the somatic-sensory flashbacks in order to enable them to experience pleasure and joy. When their normal desire for another body, for skin-to-skin contact becomes a reality, instead of enjoying it they suffer from unexpected outbursts of somatic-sensory flashbacks that push them into responses of hyper-arousal, such as fight and flight or hypo-arousal such as freezing and dissociation, which do not enable the development of intimacy and deep interpersonal relations. As long as psychotherapists refrain from practical observation of the complexity of touch in the therapy room and continue to maintain the dissociative dualism of Descartes' split between body and mind, they are, in essence, collaborators in the conspiracy of silence, in which there is refraining from looking into the most painful and realistic places in the individual's life. It takes courage to look at the profound emotions and painful, hidden, complex landscapes of the human being that can emerge with physical touch. Working with touch enables fuller integration of those parts of a person that were discarded as part of the taboo and restoration of the capacity for pleasure, happiness and physiological and emotional well-being.

Another example of a therapeutic process – with Ronit

Ronit has permitted me to describe some of her story, using an assumed name. To conceal Ronit's identity I have changed details.

She came to me for treatment because she felt isolated, and her attempts to create new relationships with people failed. Somehow, each new relationship ended abruptly, and she couldn't understand why it was happening.

When I asked Ronit how she feels physically,

she says that frequently her legs hurt her for no apparent reason, and she has suffered from tonsillitis since childhood. After she left home, things improved, but she still suffers recurring tonsillitis the year-round. She is a light sleeper, frequently finds it hard to fall asleep, and is woken by any sound in the house.

Ronit's history

Ronit was an abused child. She was hit, cursed, shouted at, and humiliated on a daily basis throughout her childhood until she left home at 20. It seemed that everything could trigger off the slaps and shouts: a broken cup, a spilt drop of milk. Everything, she felt, would end by her being hit. As a little girl, Ronit didn't understand why she was getting slapped. Over time she learned that her father had principles. Whenever she complied with his principles - not sitting at the table with her feet on the chair, or not losing her key - she wasn't hit, and could look after herself.



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But her mother was unpredictable. She flew into unpredictable attacks of rage. She hit Ronit, shouted at and humiliated her. She said terrible things that Ronit can't remember. Any given moment was dangerous, and her mother even attacked her at night after Ronit had apparently gone to sleep. Once her mother stabbed Ronit's sister, who managed to jump aside at the last minute, avoiding injury to her spine. Sometimes

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the blows lasted a very long time, and were often so powerful that Ronit lost consciousness. Her plastic descriptions of regaining consciousness on the floor after one such attack filled the treatment room.

Ronit learned to live like a little hunted animal, always prepared for the next unexpected violent attack. When she grew up, she started to run out of the house until her mother cooled off. At night she made a point of falling asleep only after she heard the ordinary sounds of her parents sleeping. If there was a movement anywhere in the house, even the slightest one, she would wake up, open her eyes, ready to jump. From the outside, she appeared whole, but inside everything was shattered and broken from the blows and the verbal violence.

Physical therapy, and the links between Ronit's current condition and her history

Each treatment session included a biodynamic massage, usually the same method on the whole of Ronit's body. During the treatment, we learned that her leg muscles hurt because, as a child, she always had to be ready to run and escape her parents, who often launched their angry attacks and hit her for no clear reason. To evade, then she was always ready to run. When she was older she jumped out of the living-room window of their ground-floor flat, or run to the toilet or to the little shed attached to the kitchen. Then she locked herself in and waited until their fury calmed down and it was safe to come out. Danger lurked at every given moment. She was always ready to jump, even at night and now, after so many years of being ready to run, just in case, she's exhausted. She wants to rest, and her legs hurt. Perhaps she can rest now?

Ronit has built a safe life for herself. For several years she has been in a relationship with a stable, sensitive partner who has never hit her. But inwardly she can't free herself from the habits that saved her life and sanity. She always has an escape-plan; she's always ready to run. Examining her past also explained her sleeping problems. For years she lived like a hunted animal, around the clock. But maybe now there is no 'lion' pursuing her? Even though consciously Ronit knows there isn't any lion, and it's probably not going to happen today, her

body still doesn't know it. The tension, the readiness for 'flight and fly' was in her implicit procedural memory for years. It's an unconscious procedure over which she lacks conscious control.

I invited Ronit to check some other possibilities, by means of touch. Possibilities in which we can at least put the tension on a shelf, close at hand, an arm's length away. And only if she has to run in the future, if a lion really does turn up, she can take the anxiety back and run far away with it, like she did as a child.

This defense mechanism saved her life. I didn't want to take away those lifesaving defense mechanisms from Ronit, like her readiness to run because every time her legs became less and less tense, she suffered appalling anxiety attacks. And then we had to negotiate, while still respecting her defense mechanism, following the biodynamic principle of 'making friends with the resistance'.

Meanwhile, for just least a few minutes, maybe she can rest because there's no lion in the room now. As an adult, she has been able to create a safe atmosphere for herself, has found safe people who will never hit her like people used to.

Now she can rest and relax.

This process required considerable non-verbal negotiations.

The client is active, not passive

We must remember that biodynamic massage is in no way a situation in which the client is passive and receives a massage, and the therapist is the active one. To an outside observer of a therapy session, it may seem like that, but it's incorrect. Just because a person isn't physically moving, it doesn't mean that he is inactive. For someone who experienced what Ronit did, the ostensibly simple state of lying on a treatment table without moving and relearning how to relax and rest - such a basic action, which people who didn't have traumas like hers don't think about twice - is for Ronit, a novel idea.

For Ronit to let herself rest, even for just a single wonderful moment, she has to work

intensively within herself. To learn to differentiate between past and present, between the present and the future.

This work took Ronit years of weekly therapy, sometimes even twice-weekly.

When she began the process, she didn't understand what was happening to her; all she knew was that she had difficulties in interpersonal relations. But it's clear that because she was constantly ready to run, she couldn't really be available in the 'here and now' for a relation with the person she's with.

Time

It took time for Ronit's unconscious memories to become conscious ones. It took time to position all those dramatic events on a chronological timeline. Ronit had to physically change structures in her brain, like the hippocampus. The hippocampus does not develop appropriately in multiple situations of stress like those that she experienced, and without proper development, there is significantly less ability to place historical events along a chronological timeline. And then, in a roundtable discussion – between the brain that sees that the existing reality, the 'here and now', is safe, and parts that are afraid to rest – Ronit's legs, can 'sit' at the round table, talk and negotiate, and let Ronit rest – and for more than just a few minutes.

Initially, each minute depended on discussing and negotiating until – through new neuropathways that most probably started to emerge, new possibilities were laid down in Ronit's brain. Their inherent option was that it had become possible to rest, before the next race begins. Each minute was a major achievement. Secretly, at home, behind a locked door, Ronit started to occasionally rest for longer periods. Resting when someone else was present required a very long drawn-out process, which she sometimes thought was impossible. However, she learned it from her direct experience. And now if she stays in one place long enough, she may be able to successfully build relations with other people.

Ronit cries

Ronit would at first cry in absolute silence, without making a sound. Tears trickled and flowed down her cheeks. Her nose dripped and even when she blew her nose, she did it with impressive silence. Not the smallest sound. Sometimes the pain in the room, in that space between us, was so immense that my eyes would also silently weep.

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Once I asked her how she learned to cry silently. As a child, she told me, when her mother hit her, if she made a noise and cried or screamed with pain, her mother completely lost it; she would hit even more violently, and shout at her to stop making a noise. Because according to her mum,

Ronit was to blame for everything, she didn't even have the right to make sounds of pain. And that's how she learned to cry soundlessly.

I asked if there was anything soft in her mother, that might help her grasp the pain she had caused her daughter. Dry-eyed and with a bitter voice, Ronit replied that her mother's only soft place was her pillow. After her mother would hit Ronit, sometimes she ran to her mother's bed, and scream and shout into the pillow. Often she cried like that for a long time, but her mother never came.

I worked with Ronit in many sessions, using different kinds of biodynamic massage to help develop her throat, and allow her to emit sounds, slowly, through prolonged negotiations with all parts of the body. It was a process that sometimes both of us felt would be endless. And only after I promised her that my room is soundproofed and the neighbors wouldn't come and hit her, she allowed her voice and weeping to emerge from her vocal chords. At first they were choking sounds, but gradually she let out the screams of anguish that her body had held in for so long.



The gates broke open

She was left without pain in her chest, and without an inflamed throat.

And for years afterwards, Ronit never suffered from a sore throat.

Perfect rest

I worked with Ronit for many years, and each session included biodynamic massage. And she became able, sometimes, to rest completely. Genuine rest. An island of calm within her. A place where Ronit could stop running.

At night she still sometimes wakes up if there are sounds in the house. But now she soothes that little girl in her, the little hunted animal inside her, and goes back to sleep.

Now she can stay in one place, form relationships with people, and can talk and express herself fully.

Healing

So who healed Ronit of her painful legs, her recurring tonsillitis?

It wasn't me, the therapist – it was Ronit herself.

It was Ronit who made the appointments.

Ronit who came to every appointment.

It was Ronit who walked cautiously along on the slippery wooden path in my garden, as she approached my clinic.

She paid for our sessions.

I only did the work when she came for the psychotherapy session.

But it was Ronit who took the scalpel and opened the wounds of the past, let the pus flow out until, one after the other, her scars became clean and dry.

She drinks to the full the few tiny drops of love she received as child, drinks thirstily and constantly.

Fences off every moment of insanity.

Every injury.

Every knife and scissors that stabbed her or her sister.

Fences off

Arranges them in rows that are too many to count, like rows of tombstones

Feels, senses, observes, processes, and - since she could never make sense of the moments of her mother's rages -

She fences off whatever she could
 To detach herself and remind herself that it's all
 in the past
 She survived the worst of all,
 None of this will happen again.
 Now her world is formed the way she chooses.
 And me?
 I only helped
 I only supported with equanimity
 In every part of her
 In every part
 In all the particles
 In all the shattered fragments
 I supported them all equally
 Because they are all my clients
 Until gradually, ultimately they were integrated
 into a single whole
 I only did the best I could, without neglecting
 any part of the body and mind
 To support the change
 Because change is the only constant, as I wrote
 before
 Psychotherapy is a healing profession, and the
 healer is the client
 And the therapist's position which I followed
 here is known in Biodynamic Psychotherapy as
 the 'midwife position'

A note on the duration of therapy

Occasionally people ask me how long
 biodynamic therapy takes, and I always reply,
 according to the client's need.

I'd like to enlarge on this point.

People like Ronit who underwent innumerable
 traumatic and adverse events know there's no
 magic wand. No shortcuts. The client must work
 over a long period to develop his or her full inner
 human potential - only self-work in a prolonged,
 fundamental process that can enable the
 changes that human biology and physiology
 require to experience the world from a different
 point of view.

A fundamental process takes time. Sometimes
 more years than the number during which the
 damage occurred; it may take years of renewed
 growth. During that process, not only are
 forgotten pains reopened, but also the options
 for experiencing inner happiness and
 satisfaction. Nurturing the ability for self-
 management, for designing your life with your

own hands. I cannot state categorically if the
 decision to embark on therapy is worthwhile for
 a specific person, nor how long it will take. It's a
 personal decision. What I can say, is that for me
 personally the investment was worthwhile,
 because I feel that I succeeded in fulfilling
 myself and my life. Going to therapy is a
 courageous personal decision that can yield a
 host of benefits for someone choosing that
 course. The time that's needed is dictated by the
 personal process of each and every individual.
 My role is to support that person, to listen to his
 or her self and out of that direct experience to
 identify the appropriate period of time, but not
 to work out of blind belief in me, or an
 intellectual decision, or external conceptual
 understanding about therapy's duration.

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