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Spirituality and Psychotherapy

The Matter of “Separation Anxiety” and Beyond

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Drawing from Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, Buddhism, and Yoga, this article looks at consciousness as infinitely divisible sentience congruent with relentless impermanence. It then examines infantile “separation anxiety” (and thus, all sorts of anxious psychopathologies) as, in part, an initiatory spiritual experience into the infinity of consciousness and its congruence with eternal time. Further, it explores “self-soothing,” while integrating existential, neuroendocrinal, and spiritual discourses on this phenomenon. Based upon these observations, it suggests refinements in the clinical mood of the “holding environment,” including “clinical admiration” and “clinical shy awe.”

IN 1841, Ludwig Feuerbach, arguably the first Western transpersonal psychologist, asserted that consciousness is itself the inner Infinity that various religious traditions ascribe to some external Deity.

Consciousness, in the strict or proper sense, is identical with consciousness of the infinite; a limited consciousness is no consciousness; consciousness is essentially infinite in its nature. The consciousness of the infinite is nothing else than the consciousness of the infinity of the consciousness; or, in the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature. (Feuerbach, 1841/1957 pp. 2-3)

From this fundamentally transpersonal viewpoint, each individual is ineluctably embedded in (or constituted as a subject by) his or her own personal infinity of consciousness. (That is, a conscious subject who declares to have found “a limit” within his or her own consciousness should not confuse us: His or her consciousness will necessarily be *there*, just as well; thus the use of the word “limit” will have been ill-placed.)

Likewise, this self-sense, with its bodily localized “experiences,” memories, and invoked vocabulary

(thoughts), qua *conscious* subject, is, too, shot through and through with this infinitely divisible “light” of consciousness. Thus, the merging of ground-consciousness with ego-figure, often also called (a bit confusingly) “ego transcendence,” could also be called “finding infinity of sentience wherever you look,” what J. D. Salinger (1953) called, “God pouring God into God.”

Yet, each of us also becomes variously perceiving of the many “other” or “finite” objects of consciousness at least from birth onward, and thereby variously distracted from, and then returning to, the more familiar shoals and the yet-to-be-fathomed depths of one’s own infinity of consciousness.¹ (Here linguistic thinking issues forth, reaching with its thousand-and-one names with evermore nuances and differentiations to, as Heidegger [Schürmann, 1987] termed it, “world” a world. Thus, as Wittgenstein [1968] mused, languages are “forms of life.”)

Let us wonder, then, if there might be *Something*² mysteriously profound going on at some subtle (physiospiritual) level (the “level” of embodied consciousness itself) when a mother-object (as object relations theorists call her) leaves

her baby, and the baby, now crying, struggles (as psychodynamic theories posit) to develop “self-soothing” coping skills to ameliorate “separation anxiety.”

What is this tearful “anxiety” that springs up so immediately when the mother-object departs from the infant’s field of perception? And what is it that “mounts” as the duration of separation goes on and on and on? From a Feuerbachian perspective, might not this infantile emotional outpouring be seen as the baby’s voicing of the first inklings of an endless congruence of intrinsically infinite consciousness with cosmically infinite time (in vivid contrast with the mundane time of mothers who come and go)?

And from Whence does this “self-soothing”—this “spiritual Mother’s Milk”—precipitate its comforting warmth into the baby’s highly stimulated inner sensorium? Is the endocrine system (endorphins, etc.) a visceral conduit or anatomical synonym for what Feuerbach called the “tears of God,” that is, God’s love precipitating physically into human bodies—to be reductively named in the (a-spiritual) theories of object relations as (mere) “self-soothing”? (See Rein & McCraty, 1994; McClelland & Kirshnit, 1987; Cantin & Genest, 1986.)

In Feuerbach’s “anthropological” translation of theological predicates into human attributes, we have a basis for a transpersonal (spiritual) developmental theory to assert that there “is” a *depth* of goodness that the psychodynamic term “self-soothing” points to, that opens the normative concept of “self” into the extraordinary. That is, the depth of the self from whence this soothing comes, a depth that goes on and on, deeper and deeper, further and further, however subtle (or “insubstantial”) this soothing quality might at first seem. Perhaps it never ends in time or in the limitless divisibility of sentience itself. Linguistically, “it” quivers in the word, “possibility”; biochemically, it (possibly) vibrates at some molecular level of secretional thresholds.

Consider that these spiritual depths point toward “homeopathic levels” of (in)significance: the realms of “faith the size of a mustard seed” that legendary voices tell us can “move mountains.” Whose faith? That of the on-looking Mother (the linguistic forms of life and secretional thresholds she lives in) and, via her so faith-filled hugs and utterances, the infant’s own inwardly developing faith (biochemical responses).

And whose faith before that? The faith-guided perceptions of (Feuerbachian or Freudian or whomever) infant psychologists who authoritatively tell parents what “is going on” in their infants’ experiences, and those so-trained therapists who tell their adult clients (perhaps themselves now parents) the “archaic developmental meaning” of their current “anxious” feelings. Here we see the “worlding” of various infant-enculturating worlds (linguistic forms of life), woven through with linguistic-somatic threads of faith in some model of parenting practices to be passed on from one generation to the next by intonation of word and flickering qualities of tear and touch and look.

And before all of these people’s faith-namings, there is the possible mystery of subtler and subtler endogenous soothing-secretions, the “Divine tears of love” which soothe all those who grant their (nonomnipotent, but inexhaustible) vibrational/molecularly palpable existence. And in following the wave-releasing contours of these endorphin-like secretions, caregiver and infant feel them waveringly intensify. Thus, the alchemical impact (literally) of “rocking the baby,” akin, no doubt, to the adult Judaic faith-rocking of *davening*, that of Islamic *zikr*-rocking, yogic *kriya*-shivering, Pentecostal prayer quivering, Quaker and Shaker “quaking” and “shaking,” and so on, throughout the world’s many religious “traditions.”³ (Sovatsky, 1998, pp. 123, 153)

Imagine that when mother departs, the so-left infant’s inward focus of attention now more undistractedly feathers out into the limitlessness of consciousness. The infant feels a daunting awe and even terror—like some naïve astronaut terrifyingly dazzled by the boundlessness of outer space (or, possibly, like the person who experiences, on and on, consciousness well after her or his vital signs have ceased).

What if we are willing to believe that the baby cries out, “WaaaaWaaaa,” not merely in the agony of clinically significant anxiety or merely in the desperate longing for the return of the mother, but also as a profound response to being abruptly initiated a little further into the daunting infinity of the baby’s own conscious depths?⁴

If we are willing to so believe, then this crying is most certainly an infant’s version of what Kierkegaard originally meant by his nonclinical, theologically-rapt term, “angst”: A dreadful (yet potentially faith-provoking) uncertainty that we feel when merely touched by the next moment of

the Eternal-Infinite, when known (accepted) as such—a wavery profundity within the immediacy of time-flow that is diluted and disguised by our quotidian, linearly time-scheduled lives and our contemporary a-spiritual emotion psychologies and neuroendocrinology.⁵

Listen to a baby crying at such times and imagine as you give comfort, as I have many times, that there is something “profound” (not just “anguishing”) that is happening and see what you think. Try living in *that* form of life.

Consider, moreover (no scientific evidence prevents us from so doing), that the baby’s crying and crying might involve a complex reaching into a terrible and beautiful space akin to that which Rilke hauntingly described in his hours of grievous loss and spiritual longing:

*Who, if I cried, would hear me among the angelic
Orders? And even if one of them suddenly
Pressed me against his heart, I should fade in
the strength of his
Stronger existence. For Beauty’s nothing
But the beginning of Terror we’re still just able
to bear. (Rilke, 1939, p. 21)*

If the baby’s cries involve, to some degree, the ambiguity of a “spiritual terror” upon initiation into the immense and almost threatening beauty of infinite time, then the parental hug should be one admixed with protective comfort, awe, and an admiring pride. If the tearful voicings are deemed/named “separation anxiety,” then the hug is a comforting apology, a salve on a wound, the termination of a trauma. The difference between these two hugs—is it not all the difference in the world? Why? Because each hug takes place in a different universe: one where at least a hint of the shimmering Divine grandeur is granted, and one where it is not.

Winnicott believed that in the gap of the crying baby’s “need” and the mother’s “failure to adapt to her baby’s needs” (in Winnicott, Shepard, & Davis, 1989, p. 156), the baby develops an ability to think which “becomes a substitute for maternal care and adaptation.” The mother can thereby “exploit the baby’s power to think” by continuing to fail to come to her crying baby. Thus, for Winnicott and his many followers, thinking becomes a “defence against archaic anxiety and against chaos and against disintegrative tendencies or memories of disintegrative breakdown related to deprivation” (p. 157).

The pathos of Winnicott’s depiction feels impenetrable and utterly persuasive. Yet, if we believe in a spiritual profusion, thinkable but also beyond thinking (e.g., the wordless knowing of meditation or homeopathic [“spiritual”] levels of soothing endorphins), this scene becomes more complex and we must find a way into this complexity. Otherwise, and in spite of the Winnicottian “good enough mother” (itself a sensing of the merciful, this time, an expert’s mercy for mothers everywhere), the spiritual-temporal poignancy of this gap where urgency reaches into the uncertain, into the endlessness of time, is missed.⁶

Should we care if something at so subtle a level is being missed in the (possible) over-pathogenizing of such cries? Faith, its possible growth, and the possibility that there is Something being missed asks us to care.

There can most certainly be the temporally mounting terrors of abandonment, or worse, much worse. For much worse happens for all sorts of faith- or hope-diminished reasons, negligences, or even “acts of nature.” Yet there is also the barely thinkable spiritual dimension into which, perhaps, only an ever-increasing sense of urgency is able to reach. Winnicott believed he heard “archaic anxiety,” “chaos,” and “disintegrative breakdowns” in the inarticulate cries of the left-infant. A Feuerbachian/Rilkean listener might believe he or she hears (has faith that it hears) something else, too, that humbles infant or adult thinking, yet permeates us with wisdom of the infinite and can mature us into its vast security.

So, of course the child should be hugged by a “good enough mother.” (We are beyond just “leaving the baby to cry”—as previous authorities sometimes recommended.) Yet it is a different child—frightened, vulnerable, yet also a noble and spiritually initiated child—who is hugged, and thus a far more admiring and honoring, not just soothing and protective hug that is received. And it is a mother who receives her infant’s blessing, not just his or her gaping need. And the possible cries of the child who is not then hugged call us even now; we cannot rest easy until he or she is embraced. Yet the hug that comes, as soon as possible, let it be such a soothing, loving, and honoring embrace. And then, let us see over the generations the difference that this and many, many other such subtle “spiritual” refinements might make in our

psychologies, in our neuroendocrinology, and in our world.

Then there is this mystery of *self-soothing*—which ranges from the baby's happy and immediate refocusing on some bauble or perhaps on a thumb, to the more profound depths of eternal awe that mystics call "God's Endless Love."⁷

Thus, the gradations of awe-of-the-eternal of those transfixed in mystic rapture or meditative stillness; or in privately anxious decisive moments (awaiting a birth, an execution, a sunset, a mother's return); or in chronically autistic or catatonic (confusingly called, "timeless" states, instead of "infinite time" states) self-absorption or in oscillating dissociations; or in the (seeming) interminability of suicidal depression; or in the mushroomings of psychotic terror and panic disorders, with their endlessly repetitive obsessive thoughts, memories, guilts, rages—as endless as the endless divisibility of consciousness itself, of time itself.

For the metaphoric sea that Stanislaw Grof (1989) quipped "drowns" the psychotic and in which the mystic "swims" is, from the Feuerbachian perspective, the unfathomable sea of infinitely divisible sentience conjoined with eternal time—with its somatic correlate, the neuroendocrine-hormonal sea.⁸

We could ask, is there a greater and under-explored depth of the "self" that has this (amazing) innate capacity we call "self-soothing" and even more profound powers "further down" such as an "undying awareness"—that is, an eternally-nourished "immortal soul?"⁹

And is it not in these same depths that enlightenment uroborically (self-soothingly) foment its blissful biochemistries, and in which the faith-begging hells of anxiety, depression, autism, dissociation, or psychosis brew their more morbid (internally secreted and reabsorbed) biochemistries? For, in these depths of infinite time and consciousness are bottomless and spiraling grounds for much confusion, especially for any faith-diminished developmental psychology.

Thus, through various "prematurely" (before one has gained the embodied wisdom imparted by matured appreciation of infinite time) catalyzing-catastrophic events throughout our lifetime, heaven suddenly breaks through the quotidian with the daunt of the infinite.¹⁰ Yet, lacking any sort of (spiritualized) clinical language to differentiate the heavenly awe from the hellishness

of the mundane catastrophe, the divine biochemistries of endless awe commingle most unfortunately (and undeciphered) with the feelings of situational danger to brew dark endocrine concoctions. The *finite terror* (and its "post-traumatic" aftermath), not merely endless time itself, confusingly feels like *it* is what will last forever.

Without a proper name ("form of life") to tease out the spiritual component of the experience, one understands/lives one's traumatic experience in a purely mundane way and thus comes to feel "endlessly" (not merely sudden-catastrophically) doomed.¹¹ We might easily discern the spiritual from the mundane at, for example, a funeral where something "spiritual" or "profound" is differentiable from the sheer anguishing sorrow of grief; likewise, the "spiritual inspiration" at weddings can be discerned from the partying joys.

In the mere flow of perpetuity, conjoined with some all too finite "fear" or "concern," is what Kierkegaard (1946) called the "sickness unto death." In this purely psychological terror (the real danger being over), one longs for an end that does not come—only more of the eternal (time) comes, and with it more obsessive terror. At such times, can one find the slightest trickle of spiritual Mother's Milk? And from where? Perhaps from the pineal source of soothing endorphins and (scientifically verified) radiant, rejuvenating melatonin—the legendary "third eye," where *kundalini* yoga locates *shāmbhavī-mudrā*, "delight gesture of subtle envisioning of the Divine" and *amrita*, "eternal life nectar."

In other words, might babies, children, adults and the dying all be involved in constant maturations of faith (so-called "spiritual emergence") regarding some "edge" of their own (spiritual-temporal-sentient) depth to believe in, or barely believe in, or to disbelieve in, felt/named variously as nonspecific terror, anxiety, emptiness, the future, overwhelming awe, or eternal time?

And, is not this "edge" the perpetual edge of the (inexplicable) arising of the very next moment of eternity (the "right now" that is always "right now") and its passing away and the arising of the next and the next (what I will denote below with a series of t, t, t, t, t, t's) with its overlooked, perpetual mystery of the "never happened before"—forever forward? No wonder waking up to this sense of ever-fleeting time (*anicca*) is the

core of the difficult-to-attain enlightenment of Buddhism, and of the beatific or transfixed states of many other spiritual traditions: the Eternal Grace of Christian redemptive time, the ecstatic Eternal Dance of Shiva and the *ek-static* (“moving”) stream of Heraclitus—even now, t,t,t,t,t,t,t as you t,t age t,t,t and read t,t,t these very words t,t,t,t,t,t,t,t,t,t,t...

If there is such a depth (of consciousness, of self, of anxiety, of temporal impermanence, and of soothing), if we believe in it and believe what we say about it has substance, then a cornerstone of conventional developmental theory—“separation” and its “anxiety”—may need to be reassessed.¹²

Likewise, the mood of the therapeutic “holding environment” (a clinical analog to a mother’s soothing “holding” of her child and a fundamental concept and practice in Self Psychology) may also need to become more complex than that created by the step beyond psychoanalytic “neutrality” known as “empathy,” so hard-won by Self Psychologists. For there may be more going on than empathy can best respond to in the maturational anxieties of infants and adults, alike.

Future therapists using the soteriological (spirit-redeeming) psychology I now posit might someday express their “clinical admiration,” or “clinical shy awe” with clients whom they see as engaged in various spiritual struggles with faith (to sustain humbled confidence while under duress) or to find the way to forgiveness, given and received. (Did Self Psychologists *really think* they had coined the last word in clinical rapport, allowing us to close the book forever with “empathy?”)

Likewise, those aspects of psychotherapy where “separation anxiety” is the interpreted name for the client’s discomfort—therapy terminations or just the 49th minute of a 50-minute hour—might be viewable as possessing spiritual import: an awakening to endless temporal impermanence that is made vivid at endings of all sorts.

Notes

1. The postmodern concern with *difference* takes its ontological hold here—that which is other *from* the pre-differentiated, the One. Further, there are the problems of “what” constitutes a *difference*, and by whose authority is this standard to be chosen and applied, and who is to

abide by that authority, in infinite regress, perhaps all the way back to the One—yet by whose authority shall we choose to “believe” that there is a One that can be regressed *to*? And if this One is to have any attributes (benignity, for example), who defines them and what verifies their ontic existence, beyond the mere positivism of logical, persuasive utterance? Via the sensual or aesthetic descriptor, “union” or “unitive experience,” the semantic-interrogatory stance becomes more emotional, more infused by endocrine chemistries. The grammatics and semantics of serious interrogation give way to sheer (almost wordless, perhaps) wonderment and awe. This youthful or matured wonder-awe might (be said to) “begin” where the limits of ponderous postmodern discourse (limits which Sokal and Bricmont [1998] revealed to us with no little humor) “end.”

2. I have italicized and capitalized the S of “Something” to indicate an ambiguity that, *perhaps*, this Something deserves to be capitalized.

3. See McNeill (1995) on social rhythmic practices as a basis for human and cultural evolution.

4. Even Jesus is said to have cried out when being crucified as he began to feel the greater magnitude into which he was ostensibly dying.

We also face the question of how much spiritual significance can credibly be granted to babies. See R. D. Laing (1982).

5. Thus, mystics resort to both geographical deserts and meditative emptiness “deserts” to dwell undistractedly in their own Infinity. Thus, too, the tantric view of emotional fluctuation, the theory of *rasa*, and alchemical emotion transmutations. See D. G. White (1996).

6. Wilber (1980), Washburn (1994), and others speak of the experience of pre-egoic unitive states of consciousness and that of post-egoic states. I am focusing on how this so-called ego can quake even in the most matured of saints, given a deep enough (or sudden enough) look into the shimmering abyss of infinitely divisible consciousness and its congruence with relentless time-passage. I believe I am also granting more (unverifiable?) intelligent sentience to infants, more spiritual import to the “ego-shattered” (“psychotic,” “borderline,” etc., persons), and more vulnerability to the saintly-enlightened (particularly as they become more socially influential) than many other transpersonal writers.

7. The *Jnaneshvar Gita* states that kundalini (“coiled” Mother-Energy) causes yogis (by uncoiling) to “move their bodies as children do.” The self-soothing baby’s pulling on his or her own limbs is, again, more spiritual “Mother’s Milk.”

8. Thus, I have distinguished the “present” of conventional therapies—being present with the client—from this “deep present.” Thus, too, we find the basis for the modern exogenous alchemy of psychopharmacology.

In my continuation of Lee Sannella's work since 1981 on what he called "the transcendence or psychosis" question, I have found that (I grant that), *in vivo*, there is much fluctuation between the overwhelmingly transcendental and the floridly psychotic. Further complicating the situation is the (nonomnipotent, but significant) effect of the therapist's (helpful person's) confidence and verbal competence in talking with such people about the spirituality of their experience. "You mean I'm not crazy?" can be a most salutary client response to a therapist's "spiritual explanation" for (at least part of) what this client is experiencing.

9. In the yogic physio-spiritual anatomy, *amrita* (hormone of immortality), akin no doubt to purportedly age-reversing melatonin, is the most potent distillate of the Mother Kundalini's glandular alchemy.

10. Thus, various cultures expose their youth to a trying rite of passage into adulthood to temper their bodies with the endochemistries of the eternal. In yoga, the internal alchemy of *urdhva-reta* (refinement of the seed juices) saturates the transmuting yogi in the bodily precipitates of the eternal. Similarly, sexual orgasm (with its rush of endochemistries) is said to offer a glimpse of the eternal. Certainly childbirth and parenting bestow their own wisdom of potentially eternal perpetuation and personal maturation.

11. Here, what Wittgenstein (1968) called "language games," the consensual vocabulary of a discipline, become "forms of life," literally dictating what experiences an individual can and cannot be having. Likewise, we find the dangers of "shadow-work" psychotherapy, where positive emotions (including forgiveness) are not uncommonly held as suspect, and whose proponents claim that there "is always more work" that "can be done."

12. Indeed, we will have taken a firm step into a far more spiritually charged human existence.

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