

Parallel Play in Relationships

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There is apparently a geographical term called "parallel of latitude". One of the meanings that Webster's Dictionary gives for latitude is "the possibility of acting as one pleases, especially, the permitted extent of departure from some line of conduct or set of conventions". I find the definitions of parallel and latitude very instructive when put together and applied to the communication between two people. It seems the symbolic geography that takes place between two people across from each other in a room holds many creative possibilities "for the departure of some line of conduct or set of conventions".

I remember so clearly in my body when my daughter was an adolescent there were so few times that both our "lines" would curve to meet each other. Often the bending of this line and its dialogue escaped both of us, and even though I believe we both wanted some connection it very often eluded us. Of course the departure of some line of conduct was the ongoing process of separation but if we stayed in our old ways of relating then disconnection would occur, not healthy separation.

First, the geographical terrain had to change always, as our home was not the place for us to connect in those days. Surprisingly, changing the geographical terrain always created a miraculous change in me, whether it was a mall, a restaurant, a beach or just a street. Seeing my daughter outside would always allow me to see her vulnerability, which would automatically make mine come out of hiding. It was like having a symbolic landscape of soft green moss under our bare feet. Once that new parallel latitude was established we could leave long spaces of silence between us. A silence not filled with uncomfortable fear but rather a soft silence that brought back the feeling sense of snow quietly landing on the ground. From that gentle place my daughter would start speaking and I knew instinctively that I could not jar her in any way out of that sacred space between us, not even with one word. At that moment I had to withhold all opinions, bons mots, etc., and I had to truly struggle to actively listen to the best of my abilities. If I were to compare this to the geography of a house, it would be like coming in quietly through the back door.

This experience with my daughter makes sense to me now as I recall the body feeling of silence that often occurred when I played with my sister, a silence that was interspersed with short spurts of dialogue. While sitting on the "harvest yellow" carpet and playing with plastic miniature women, men, cars and buses, a lot took place in those spaces of silence between connective dialogue. My inner world was silently present to me. I would fall quietly, almost meditatively into my own world, and I found great comfort in it. It was grounding for me precisely because it was away from the outside world, which for me at the time seemed to be filled with problems. I could

find myself, be myself for awhile and then look up first at my sister's play and then into her eyes and tell her that my little people were "going to market" and can I have the car? We were living in our separate individual worlds with our separate play and the only connection was the space that we shared, and often that was enough.

The lessons that I learned in early play with my sister, which were revisited with my daughter come back to me in the therapeutic room.

I would say that when most clients enter into therapy, the silence in the room can be scary. As Mary Poncet ponders in *Green Dark* (in Rogers, 1996, p.309):

Reading the bones, wetting a fingertip

To trace archaic characters, I feel

A breeze of silence flow up past my wrists,

Icy. Can I speak here?

What do we do with silence in this therapeutic relationship? Since silence challenges all conventions and lines of conduct in our society, it is often challenging in each individual therapeutic relationship for both parties and for different reasons. That silence for me is often the "geographic back door" where the "unspeakable" can begin to crawl in gently, peek its head, look around, retreat and come back again. Sometimes it's that exact same grounding and comfortable silence that took place in parallel play that nudges thoughts out of hiding. Sometimes withholding opinions, theory, *bons mots*, etc., makes inner secrets come out.

The silence in the therapeutic room, like the interplay that took place between my daughter and myself has to be active, alive, conscious for a rehearsal or "mime dialogue" to occur. A lot goes unsaid before it is said. I do believe that an active silence, is a dialogue where people do communicate deeply. In active silence I have been on the same wavelength as my client or them with me even when we have not started with a point of reference. We know that we are connected in the inter "play" of selves, the space in the room between the two of us is alive in which both our intuitions can play with one another. "This is the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable" (Winnicott, 1971, p.47). The moment when silence and the playing of our intuitions is alive in the therapeutic room is exactly when we are "departing from some line of conduct or set of convention".

References

Poncet, Mary (1996) "Green Dark" in the Epilogue of *A Shining Affliction* by Annie Rogers PhD. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc.

Winnicott, D. W. (1971) *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock Publications Ltd.