Into Thin Air: The Co-Construction of Shame, Recognition, and Creativity in an Analytic Process

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In this paper, I explore ways in which shame, recognition, and creativity are co-constructed in an analytic process. Focusing on my work with an artist who is extraordinarily creative in her dreams, metaphors, and artistic vision, yet has spent much of her life struggling to make art, I consider factors that open or close down vitality and creativity in our work with patients. I explore how patients’ access to their imagination, dreams, and other unconscious realms may be intimately connected to the analyst’s variable and shifting receptivity to her own imagination and creativity and consider the ways in which creativity is both solitary and co-constructed. Furthermore, I consider the powerful impact of shame on the creative process, both intrapsychically, blocking access to memory, and leading to the negative, critical voices that block one’s capacity to create art; and intersubjectively, how “shame can travel insidiously across relational realms, passed back and forth, alternately projected and introjected, from analyst to patient” and back again (Levine, 2009b, p. 482), deadening spontaneity, imagination, and creativity.

The implicit pledge of (psychoanalysis) is that each life counts, each story needs to be found and re-told, and each telling matters infinitely. . . . Ultimately, psychoanalysis is a place of awakening and creativity, not only for the patient, but also for the analyst.

—Leanh Nguyen (in press)

““You seem so interested . . .” Julia marveled, surprised by my engagement in her creative process. She had been describing a painting she had made years ago, showing me with her hand how she had painted different parts of it, while I followed her hand with my eyes, moved by her allowing me access to her artistic process, totally “in” the process of her art-making.

An artist who is extraordinarily creative in her dreams, metaphors, and artistic vision, Julia spent much of her life struggling to make art. From early on in treatment, I was struck by this paradox, which felt poignant and deeply compelling to me. I wondered about the barriers, the emotional risks for Julia, of making the private public, of giving expression to her richly imaginative inner life through her artwork. As the youngest child in her large, San Francisco family,

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she felt invisible and unheard, as if she didn’t have a voice. Her parents divorced when she was quite young, and Julia felt lost in a sea of separation, remarriage, and the creation of new families. In her dynamic, intellectual family, she tended to withdraw, to opt out rather than try to compete with her siblings for their parents’ and stepparents’ attention. Her earliest memory is lying in her crib next to a window with the wind blowing the curtains, straining to decipher whispering voices she could not comprehend. Julia experienced her mother as mysterious and inaccessible. She did not feel mirrored or recognized by her mother, leaving Julia unsure about her own feelings or desires and how to translate those desires into action. Although Julia had loving relationships with her husband, children, and friends, on some level, she continued to feel alone in the world; self-doubts and persistent negative voices undermined her ability to be as open and emotionally present as she wanted to be. She’d had several initially stimulating yet ultimately unsatisfying careers, and yearned to find professional fulfillment and pleasure in her artwork.

In the session I was describing, Julia seemed to feel momentarily recognized by me as I tracked the motion of her hand, watching her re-create the painting before my eyes. It was an intimate moment, reminiscent of early mother–infant intersubjectivity (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Seligman, in press; Trevarthen, 1980), full of creative possibility. But a moment later, she became distrustful, convinced that this was just my therapeutic training and attentiveness, rather than any genuine engagement or interest on my part. It was the first of many times when I was to experience the shock of going from what felt like a moment of deep mutual resonance to feeling “dropped” by her as Julia disavowed her sense of connection with me.

This pattern of enlivening engagement followed by skepticism, disappointment, and disenagement was repeated over several years, and Julia and I tried to deconstruct it from multiple perspectives. We went through periods in the treatment in which there was a shared sense of vivacity, a creative sense of “flow” in sessions, in which she imagined and described art projects she wanted to create. We would both feel hopeful and optimistic about her capacity to make art. But inevitably, the aliveness would disappear, as if into thin air, and she would shift into a more discouraged state, in which her art felt far away and inaccessible. At such times, she would periodically consider stopping treatment.

The sense that the aliveness disappeared “as if into thin air” was quite disappointing and unsettling to both of us, and there was something uncanny about how it surprised us each time it happened. Over time, I became aware of how this moment of mutual dysregulation led to a whole sequence of intrapsychic responses on my part; in particular, a sense of loss on multiple levels. I felt disappointed for Julia each time, sensing that she had been on the verge of getting to a more sustained, creative place. I held the hope of her getting to that place even when she couldn’t, even when she felt hopeless and despairing. And yet, it still felt like a palpable loss to me. I missed the shared, mutual pleasure of vitality and creativity, and I was aware of feeling grateful to Julia for the opportunity to feel like my most creative self as an analyst, with greater access to my own imagination and affective states as they related to her experience. Could I hold onto my own liveliness and creativity in the absence of hers? Each time she considered ending therapy, Julia subtly or more directly devalued the treatment and the importance of our connection, and I was aware of feeling “dropped” in the face of the threat of the loss of our relationship. And yet . . . I fought for it. I believed in Julia, in the value of our work together—and in the possibility of her attaining a more sustained inspiration and creativity.

As I became aware of this pattern, I wondered with Julia about what triggered these shifts between vitality and flatness, creativity and despair, and talked with her about the importance of
understanding the dynamics underlying it. Over time, we began to see a connection between the dyadic engagement/disengagement and an opening or closing down of aliveness and access to her own creative process. We also came to understand the shifts from imagination and creativity to discouragement and hopelessness as intersubjective and co-created. Julia felt a deep longing for recognition, yet when she experienced that connection with me, it felt unfamiliar, difficult to trust.

There was a sense of feeling momentarily held and then dropped, leading to a sense of shame and a “crashing” of self, and despair. Immediately following those moments of connection, perhaps unconsciously I became her preoccupied, unavailable mother who could not be relied upon for affective recognition, and she reacted, understandably, with mistrust and anger. Although I had the vague sense that aspects of her relationship with her mother were being reenacted with me, I didn’t yet feel that I had a handle on this mother, which clearly mirrored Julia’s own experience. And I was not sure how my participation echoed her mother’s ways. I too felt a sense of shame for experiencing and trusting in the mutual connection and then having it denied by her. It felt as if she was pulling the rug out from under me, or perhaps out from under both of us! This too would be repeated over time in the treatment, before we could understand and deconstruct it in a meaningful way, and before we could recognize and name the critical role of shame in the dynamic.

In this paper, I raise questions about what opens or closes down vitality and creativity in our work with patients. I explore how patients’ access to their imagination, dreams, and other unconscious realms may be intimately connected to the analyst’s variable and shifting receptivity to her own imagination and creativity and consider the ways in which creativity is both solitary and co-constructed. Furthermore, I consider the powerful impact of shame on the creative process, both intrapsychically, blocking access to memory, and leading to the negative, critical voices that block one’s capacity to create art; and intersubjectively, how “shame can travel insidiously across relational realms, passed back and forth, alternately projected and introjected, from analyst to patient” and back again (Levine, 2009b, p. 482), deadening spontaneity, imagination, and creativity.

SHAME AND RECOGNITION

Alan Shore (2003) referred to shame as “the primary social emotion,” emerging at around 14 to 16 months in the context of the parent–infant relationship. He described how the toddler, with excitement and elation, looks to the caregiver to share and mirror her joy, and if this attunement does not occur, the toddler experiences a sense of shame: “The ensuing break in an anticipated visual-affective communication triggers a shock-induced deflation of positive affect . . . and shame represents this rapid state transition from a pre-existing positive state to a negative state” (p. 17). Shore elaborated further that this is emotionally dys-regulating for the child and experienced as a discontinuity in the child’s “going on being” (Winnicott, 1958/1965). What follows is that “elation, heightened arousal, and elevated activity level instantly evaporate . . . and (the toddler) becomes inhibited and strives to avoid attention in order to become ‘unseen.’” (p. 18)

Reading Shore’s description of the elated toddler who looks eagerly to the parent to share in her delight but is met instead with a lack of empathy or mirroring, one can imagine how Julia learned to be invisible and unheard, an adaptive defense against shame. One can also hear echoes, antecedents of the pattern that emerged between us in the treatment, the shifts between aliveness and deadness, creativity and despair, the shock and dys-regulation that followed the loss and disavowal of mutuality and connection.
Bromberg (1998) described the crucial role of enactments in working analytically with shame, asserting that for individuals experiencing intense shame, no words can capture the assaultive intensity of the experience. It is only through *re-living* the trauma through enactment with the analyst that its magnitude can be known by an “other,” hopefully this time an “other” who will have the courage to participate in the reliving while simultaneously holding the patient’s psychological safety as a matter of prime concern. (p. 296)

However, there’s psychological risk for analyst as well as patient as the “re-living” is enacted *between* them. The analyst must learn about the patient’s experiences with shame from the inside out, embodying the role of victim as well as perpetrator (Davies, 1999, 2004). In the moment when I feel dropped by Julia, I am the inattentive mother, and seconds later, the shamed child.

Winnicott believed that being *seen* by the mother is being “recognized for who one is” and that “not to be seen by the mother, at least at the moment of the spontaneous gesture, is not to exist” (Phillips, 1988, p. 130). Winnicott (1967) described how the mother’s responsiveness to the infant’s bids for attention and recognition lead to the development of her sense of self. When the mother or caregiver resonates and responds to the infant’s spontaneous gesture, what had been a random movement becomes endowed with meaning, a communication, a basic aspect of empathy and intersubjectivity. Winnicott (1967) also believed that the capacity for play and creativity develops within the context of the mother–infant relationship and is related to seeing and being seen. He stated that “being seen is at the basis of creative looking” (p. 114) and that when babies look into their mothers’ face and do not see themselves reflected back, “their own creative capacity begins to atrophy” (p. 112).

In an intriguing paper called “The experience of time: Trauma, non-responsive parenting and the vacuity of the future,” Seligman (in press) captured this intricate dance of mother–infant interaction, describing how a mother’s attuned response to her infant’s spontaneous gesture “essentially transforms the movement over time and space” to create intersubjective communication and meaning. This gives the baby “compelling evidence of her effect on the world.” This sense of intentionality, of having an impact was something that Julia was searching for, as she grew up feeling invisible, “like a ghost.” She had a strong desire to “embody” herself more, to feel more enlivened and connected to her own feelings as well as closer to others. I come back to this issue later in the paper when I discuss what it meant to Julia to see that she could have a deep, emotional effect on me. According to Seligman, when a mother is not responsive to an infant’s gestures, “there is no sense of time moving forward,” only “the stasis of a present which never gives way to an emergent future.”

In exploring the intersubjective nature of mutual recognition, there is also the question of the parent’s subjectivity (Benjamin, 1990) and the power of mirroring the spontaneous gesture for the parent as well as the child. In the novel *What I Loved* by Siri Hustvedt, an 11-year-old child dies, and the father, deep in mourning, immerses himself in the artwork of his creative and talented son. The father, an art historian, begins to trace the lines of his son’s drawings and finds it enormously evocative, both comforting and heartbreaking. The father reflects, “I found the motion of his living hand that way, and once I had started it, I couldn’t stop” (p. 146).

This vignette brings to mind recent research on mirror neurons (Gallese, 2005, 2009), which suggests that we have empathic resonance to others at a deep, bodily level. It reflects the ways in which action itself becomes a way of knowing the other, experiencing the other on a visceral, embodied level. Gallese (2005) wrote,
The shared intersubjective space in which we live from birth continues long afterward to constitute a substantial part of our semantic space. When we observe other acting individuals, facing their full range of expressive power (the way they act, the emotions and feelings they display), a meaningful embodied inter-individual link is automatically established. ... Sensations and emotions displayed by others can also be empathized with, and therefore implicitly understood, through a neural matching mechanism. (p. 15)

Building on Winnicott’s and Bion’s notions of play and dreaming, Ogden (2009) suggested that when an analysis is a “going concern” (Winnicott, 1964), the patient and analyst are able to engage, both individually and with one another, in a process of dreaming. The area of “overlap” of the patient’s dreaming and the analyst’s dreaming is the place where analysis occurs (Winnicott, 1971, p. 38). (Ogden, 2009, p. 14)

In his book, Rediscovering Psychoanalysis: Thinking and Dreaming, Learning and Forgetting, Ogden (2009) is evoking a broader, poetic notion of “dreaming,” referring to a state of being, and a way of listening, that’s open and receptive to the unconscious of both patient and analyst. The essence of this analytic process is to help the patient become more fully alive to his experience, or as Ogden felicitously suggested, “dreaming himself more fully into existence” (p. 17).

**JULIA AND ME**

Throughout my work with Julia, her dreams have been a rich source of creativity and inspiration, giving us access to multiple layers of memory and desire. Early on, Julia had a dream that has evolved into a central metaphor in our work. In the dream, she is sitting outside a house on a porch. There are wild, lush, beautiful plants growing underneath the porch, peeking through the slats, but unable to grow or develop, to see the light of day. One of Julia’s primary reasons for seeking therapy was to feel more in touch with her affective, unconscious, and creative selves. Through this dream, we wonder about how she protected herself as a child by cutting off her feelings, shielding herself from pain.

Julia and I also begin to consider her creative blocks as a lack of access to the creativity within her as opposed to an absence of creativity, which feels like a relief and a revelation, though difficult to hold onto. The ongoing challenge then becomes opening access to her rich and lively imagination and fantasy life, and drawing from that reservoir in order to create art. We talk about reframing blocks to artistic creation as caused by anxiety rather than a lack of ideas, and discover, in the process, that the notion of “access” is a potentially powerful vehicle to tuning into, trusting and valuing one’s creative voice.

Frequently artists and writers get stuck in the act of creating out of a fear of lack of originality, the sense that everything they want to create has been said or done before. We each possess a unique and highly personal voice, so that our expression or rendering of a particular piece of art has the potential to offer a fresh perspective if one is open to one’s own authentic experience and courageous enough to allow one’s “little voices” to have a life of their own. Over the years, Julia and I have come back again and again to this metaphor of the lush growth under the porch. We’ve wondered how to understand and deconstruct this porch that provides a respite from the chaos inside the house but also blocks access to her creative source and renders her invisible and outside the flow of her family.
Months later, Julia has two more dreams that reflect a blockage or difficulty gaining access to her own creativity, yet they also reveal an increased comfort with intimacy. In the first dream, Julia is with her stepfather at a fancy dinner party in his house, the kind of family party where she always felt uncomfortable and invisible. Yet she’s aware of feeling an unusual ease talking with him. They go outside together and begin to dig up a huge football field where they find remarkable ancient artwork deep underground, including a huge sculpture with hieroglyphics. In the dream, Julia experiences a new sense of intimacy with her stepfather. This increased comfort with herself and with him leads to a creative, underground journey and access to an inner imaginative source. We talk about the transference aspects of the dream, the relationship between our increasing intimacy and her access to her internal world. In another dream, there’s a palpable desire for closeness and friendship with me, but a blocking of access here too. Julia and I are hanging out together in her kitchen talking; it feels good and close, until an older woman comes downstairs and shames her (perhaps both of us?) for the desire for a deeper connection, for the fantasy of a friendship beyond the boundaries of the analytic frame. We wonder about the identity of this older woman, issues of loyalty and competition, the various risks of our deepening intimacy. This dream feels significant as a conscious desire for closeness with me, which can now be talked about for the first time, but it’s still tinged with shame and followed by doubt, similar to the clinical vignette at the beginning of the paper.

Julia and I also discuss the importance of valuing, honoring the experience of vitality and imagination in its own right, the intrinsic rewards of creativity. We talk about the possibility of appreciating her imagination and artistic capacity without judgment or criticism; not evaluating the art object per se, but opening access to her own creative source. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) wrote about the concept of “flow,” which he defined as an effortless yet highly focused consciousness in which one becomes so involved in an activity that it feels spontaneous, a process of discovery. Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues have interviewed artists and poets, rock climbers and skiers, scientists and philosophers across diverse cultures; all describing this sense of “flow” in a similar way, becoming one with the action one is performing, which is intrinsically rewarding, an end in itself. There is a lack of self-consciousness or fear of failure and a distorted sense of time, as one gets lost in the moment, fully present and alive.

Jackson Pollock, the abstract expressionist painter, articulated this sense of “flow” in describing the process of his art-making:

When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing. It is only after a sort-of “get acquainted” period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc, because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. (Anfam, 2002, p. 125)

This notion of flow embodied by Pollock is also central to Ghent’s (1990) conception of surrender, a striving toward self-expansion and creativity, “an experience of being ‘in the moment,’ totally in the present, where past and future, the two tenses that require ‘mind’ in the sense of secondary processes, have receded from consciousness” (p. 111).

When I mention the notion of “flow” to Julia, she has read about it, knows exactly what I am referring to. When I ask her if she has ever experienced that state of “flow,” she replies, “Last weekend, when I was making pig soup.” She describes how she became immersed in the act of making soup, trusting herself completely, as she added various ingredients: no onions, lots of pepper, without questioning herself, without all the negative voices interfering with the process.
of creating this delicious soup. Julia tells me that she experiences cooking, feeding her family and friends, as inventive and generative. It doesn’t have all the emotional baggage that art has for her. The myriad critical voices in her head are silent when she cooks.

Julia struggles with self-criticism that blocks her from translating her creative ideas into artwork. Slochower’s (1998) description of writer’s block seems relevant to Julia’s experience with her art:

When the subjective threat within the writing moment evokes overwhelming anxiety or despair about beginning at all, the transitional space necessary for the creative act is foreclosed. ... Self-state anxieties evoke a sense of overwhelming defeat, for a fear that one cannot find or sustain one’s own voice “makes the creative process feel unrealizable.” (p. 337)

This brings to mind Marion Milner’s (1957) book, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, in which Milner explored the mysteries and complexity of artistic freedom and impasse. Through her self-analysis and “free drawings,” Milner bridged the worlds of psychoanalysis and art, seeking to understand the artistic process and free herself of creative inhibitions. In the conclusion, Milner made a striking statement: “Observations of problems to do with painting had led up to the idea that awareness of the external world is itself a creative process, an immensely complex creative exchange between what comes from inside and what comes from outside” (p. 146). Writing in the 1950s, Milner did not have a language or relational framework in which to understand the radical implications of her experiential, creative journey for an intersubjective model of creativity and psychoanalysis, open to the interpenetrating subjectivities of patient and analyst.

At times, Julia begins an art project, only to abandon it early on when she feels dissatisfied with it in some way. We discuss the importance of making use of ruthlessness and destruction in the act of creating (Winnicott, 1969), the willingness to throw away work that is not authentic or true, and the difficulty of not being too attached to ideas that don’t flow, as they can stand in the way of taking creative leaps forward. We talk about the enormous difficulty of being ruthless with one’s work without being ruthless toward oneself! For Julia, the fear of making art that is “no good” stops her in her tracks, keeps her from even getting started. And when she does allow herself to create art, the challenge is finding a way to hold onto what’s good and true while discarding the bad.

But even with all this exploration, playfulness, dreaming, analyzing her defenses around making art, imagining art projects, and sharing ideas with me, Julia still wasn’t making art, or seeing it through to completion. Even though we seemed to be gaining insight into the dynamics underlying the shifts from aliveness and creativity to deadness and discouragement, she continued to get stuck in the act of making art. She struggled to authorize herself as an artist. And that was discouraging to her and continued to bring her down, triggering the more hopeless, depressed states in sessions.

Around this time, however, a couple of years into therapy, Julia got involved professionally in a new creative project that has taken off and grown in exciting directions under her leadership. While this was exhilarating and, at times, deeply satisfying to her, she was bothered by the fact that the project was not her original conception, her baby, and still yearned to make art of her own, to create something from the ground up. In addition to the creative aspects of the work itself, Julia also enjoyed the communal aspects of the project, working with imaginative, resourceful colleagues who engaged and inspired each other.
As she was feeling closer to me and beginning to gain more confidence in her creative self, Julia decided to show me some of her drawings which she had shown very few people. I felt keenly aware of the risks for Julia of making the private public, of bringing me into this vulnerable, creative space. I felt quite moved that she wanted to show me her artwork after all the time we’ve spent talking about her struggles in this area. She seemed genuinely engaged too, taking pleasure in my responses and appreciation of her work. I looked forward to processing this intimate, shared experience in our next meeting.

But... in the following session, Julia had a completely different perception and memory of our interaction. She was furious with me, devaluing of my artistic aesthetic, once again distrustful of my genuine interest and appreciation of her art. She disavowed the mutual connection I had felt so palpably, asserting that I told her only what I believed she needed to hear, just doing my therapeutic duty. I felt shocked, abandoned, confused... and affectively destabilized by having an experience seemingly shared with her, so flatly denied by her. It was an even more amplified example of what Shore described as feeling unrecognized and dropped, an experience leading to shame. In fact, I felt unrecognized on two profound levels: both in my own affective perceptions and in the mutual and disavowed connection with her. Although we struggled to process and deconstruct this enactment over several weeks, it still felt like something was missing, unsettled, like we weren’t getting to the heart of the matter.

In retrospect, I think there was something important in how we both held our ground, maintaining our different versions of what had happened, as we tried to build a tenuous bridge between us. While I did not submit to her disavowal of the intimacy and mutual connection, I tried to stay open and curious about her response to sharing her artwork with me. I wondered aloud about the ways in which she may have felt exposed or intruded upon by my appreciative responses to her artwork. We also talked about the “dark side of the frame” (Hoffman, 1998), the ways in which the constraints around our professional relationship, especially those involving time and money, contributed to her doubt about the authenticity of my feelings for her. In retrospect, perhaps she had every reason to feel, at least unconsciously, like she wasn’t dropping me any more than I was dropping her at the end of each session, confirming her expectations of self-in-relation throughout her life. Most importantly, I survived her aggression and devaluation of me and our work together (Ghent, 1992; Winnicott, 1969). But, all the while, I struggled to process my own feelings of abandonment and disappointment, feeling once again unrecognized and dropped by Julia.

Even though I did not yet understand why we continued to reenact this dynamic, I knew intuitively that it was meaningful and needed to be deconstructed, creating potential space for each of our subjectivities. Aron (2003) suggested that “enactments may well be a central means by which patients and analysts enter into each other’s inner world and discover themselves as participants within each other’s psychic life, mutually constructing the relational matrix that constitutes the medium of psychoanalysis” (p. 629).

In a session soon afterward, when Julia has been talking about how she had recently tried to engage her father in a conversation about her life and creative work and he seemed disinterested and critical, she identifies her emotional response as one of shame. Julia articulates how she made herself vulnerable by sharing a creative part of herself, only to have this spontaneous gesture go unrecognized by her father—yet again—and how that triggered a sense of shame in her. As I listen closely, I gradually become aware that shame is exactly what I had felt with her, when she disavowed the powerful, intersubjective connection between us, both in the session when she
created the painting before my eyes and in the session after she showed me her drawings. Should I share this awareness of my own countertransference with her? Will it open potential space or feel intrusive, too much of my own subjectivity, derail the treatment? This feels akin to what Stern et al. (1998) described as a “now moment,” a unique moment of opportunity where analyst and patient “are meeting as persons relatively hidden by their usual therapeutic roles” and their actions “cannot be routine, habitual, or technical” (p. 912).

I take a risk; decide to share my feelings with her. I tell her that, as she was describing feeling unrecognized and shamed by her father, I realized that shame is exactly what I had felt when she disavowed the shared intimacy and connection between us as she showed me her drawings. Julia is taken aback, and begins to cry, so rare for her. . . . At first, she feels concerned about hurting me, about evoking in me, an affect that is deeply familiar to her over a lifetime, the shame that she dreads. Then, as we explore her responses, she speaks of feeling grateful that I would share my own vulnerability with her, moved that she could have such an impact on me and that I trusted her enough to tell her.

This session felt transformative for both of us, a pivotal point in the treatment. There was something about my taking an emotional risk, a leap of faith perhaps, by being open and vulnerable with Julia about her impact on me that allowed Julia to let her guard down as well (Ehrenberg, 1992, 1996).

Julia had taken a risk with her father too, by talking with him from a more authentic, creative self, and had been shamed in the process by his lack of attunement. It was not, however, until the moment when she identified her response to her father as one of shame, that I became aware of my own shame in response to her disavowal of our mutual connection. Her defensive identification with her father which led to her shaming me clearly constituted an enactment in the form of a projective identification.

I am taking a relational view of projective identification as an unconscious, powerful communication of a split-off, intolerable affective experience that needs to be deeply experienced by another, so that it can be put into words and worked through (Aron, 2006; Benjamin, 2004, 2009, 2010; Bromberg, 2006; Cooper, 2000, 2004; Davies, 2004; Ehrenberg, 1992, 1996; Hoffman, 1998). This is a further elaboration of the Kleinian conception of disavowed, dreaded affects evacuated by the patient into the analyst that need to be contained and metabolized privately by the analyst. However, although there was a shift within post-Kleinian theory from projective identification as a defense to projective identification as a communication (Rosenfeld, 1987), it is still currently a given within the Kleinian tradition that the analyst never discloses her subjective experience of the projective identification, as this would constitute “an act of merger and fails to honor the separateness of patient and analyst” (Cooper, 2004, p. 544). Relational and interpersonal analysts have expanded the notion of projective identification, which Mitchell (1995) refers to as “the interpersonalization of projective identification” (p. 79).

By making the clinical choice to share my countertransference with Julia, I was building on a relational model of projective identification in which analysts may choose to disclose aspects of their subjective experience in order to create potential space to reflect on the co-creation of an enactment with the patient. As Benjamin (2010) suggested, “By expanding her sense of the frame, the analyst can recover from disintegration well enough to contain and use enactment. The degree to which this is possible . . . depends on the gradual creation of the intersubjective space for reflection, mutual regulation, recognition of vulnerability, and humor. Thus contained, enactment can afford analysts an opportunity to engage in joint reflection with patients, to share
the revelation of process in thinking about them or feeling with them. In addition, it may afford the patient an opportunity to be effective so that not only the patient but also the analyst changes (Slavin and Kriegman, 1998)” (p. 116–117).

I believe Julia was communicating something critical through this enactment about her own unmetabolized, painful relational experience that she needed me to understand from the inside out (Bass, 2003, 2009; Levine, 2009). However, it took many repetitions of this enactment between us, some quite subtle, others more charged, before Julia could get through to me, before I could begin to understand this dynamic as a projective identification. As Bromberg (2006) suggested, dissociated “not-me” self-states continue to get enacted in the treatment until they are experienced in the countertransference and gradually understood by analyst and patient. For Julia, who had grown up feeling invisible and unheard, feeling that she could have an impact on me, that I could survive her aggression and not retaliate, and even more than that, be changed by her, was a revelation, and an opportunity for reparation.

Stern et al. (1998) suggested that the “open space” following a “now moment” between mothers and infants or analysts and patients holds the potential for creativity. Now moments “leave in their wake an ‘open space’ in which a shift in the intersubjective environment creates a new equilibrium . . . Creativity becomes possible as the patient’s ‘implicit relational knowing’ has been freed of constraints imposed by the habitual” (p. 914). Recognizing that she can have an emotional impact on me seems to shift something significant in the treatment, creating intersubjective space and opening the possibility for a deeper intimacy between us (Ehrenberg, 1992, 1996; Seligman, 2009).

Julia and I now begin to explore more deeply the powerful impact of shame on her memory and sense of self, how the lack of mirroring and recognition she received led her to disavow psychic pain and minimize her impact on others, as well as blocking access to her creative potential. Julia came into therapy convinced that she had a terrible memory and concerned that, as she aged, she was losing whatever memory she did have, like her mother, who is in her 90s. For a long time, Julia had trouble accessing childhood memories, particularly of one-on-one time with her mother. The recollections she did have were mostly alone or with her siblings, or with her parents present but emotionally inaccessible.

But, as we begin to access and deconstruct the degree of shame that she internalized at an early age, more specific memories of her mother and their time together become available to her. Julia and I begin to weave together a shared narrative history about her early life, especially with her mother: her mother’s cool detachment, her unpredictable anger, Julia’s anxious sense of never knowing which mom she would find. Julia remembers her efforts to get her mother’s attention: performing for her and her friends at cocktail hour, waking up from scary dreams and sleeping in a ball outside her parent’s bedroom door, yearning to be comforted but afraid of her mother’s anger at being awakened in the middle of the night.

As Julia is able to gain access to memories, her perceptions of her mother are changing as well. Other narratives are emerging. Julia visits her mom, who, suffering from Alzheimer’s, literally does not recognize her. But to Julia’s surprise, there is a peacefulness as they listen to Ella Fitzgerald together while her mother lies in bed. Julia tells me, it’s almost like they are mother and baby, but with the roles reversed. These benign, quiet moments of joining, the experience of being alone in the presence of another (Winnicott, 1958/1965), are reminiscent of her most intimate childhood memory with her mother: reading silently together, each with her own book, in their living room, not talking or interacting, just being together.
Julia and I can now begin to understand the roots of the transference-countertransference dynamic in the treatment of feeling alternately held and dropped in her early relationship with her mother. We talk about the ways in which shame led her to internalize the negative critical voices of both her parents in order to protect her idealized images of them, leading to her negative expectations and difficulty trusting in relationships as well as her creative blocks and inhibitions.

Coming to terms with the “lack” in parenting and the pain it caused, the difficulty in finding a true self, is allowing Julia to mourn the mother she didn’t have, the idealized mother. She is beginning to forgive her mother and make peace with her limitations, to recognize what is possible to share in their remaining time together (Harris, 2009; Loewald, 1979). As Harris (2009) suggested, “Return and repetition are always elements of change. . . . There is melancholy, a sense of loss and sadness that weaves through change” (p. 4).

Soon afterward, Julia is again feeling discouraged about her difficulties creating art, even though she has a clear vision of two new sculptures she wants to make and has begun them both before getting stuck once again. We talk about familiar issues of obstacles to making art, critical voices in her head, the fear of throwing herself into the act of creating and discovering she can’t do it, feeling like a fraud. We discuss the risks of allowing herself to become enlivened in a sustained way, open to her own creativity and desires; the risks of being intimate with others, with me. How allowing herself to experience hope and desire is inherently risky (Mitchell, 1993), filled with the possibility, the inevitability of loss (Harris, 2009).

Julia then speaks of shame, and its connection to not being “recognized” as a child, which we’ve been exploring. Sadly, she begins to talk about not feeling recognized by any of the adults in her family, and recalls her earliest memory of being in a crib all alone, hearing the whispering unintelligible voices from the wind blowing the curtains. I feel immersed in her sadness, resonate with her grief. Then, there is a noticeable shift in her self-state as Julia, deflated and dispirited, questions the accuracy of her memory, the reality of her childhood pain. How bad was it really? Having been down this road together many times before, this time it feels like familiar territory, and I pick up on her shift in self-states and ask her about it. She says, “I suddenly felt silly making such a big deal out of this. It’s not like my childhood was so awful.” I respond, “You were just talking about how lonely you felt as a child, how no one recognized the degree of pain you were in. You seemed so sad.” This childhood narrative where Julia can allow herself to experience and acknowledge to me the depths of her pain and loneliness is new and fragile, vulnerable to being closed down and disparaged by the shame it evokes in the recalling and retelling. As we deconstruct what happened between us, we can both see how my resonating with her pain led her to doubt her own experience, to distrust the accuracy of her memory.

It is almost the end of the session, and Julia mentions to me that she has spoken to her teenage daughter who is struggling with anxiety. Julia had asked me for a referral for her several months ago, and the therapy seemed to be going well. Julia tells me that her daughter is considering increasing her sessions from once to twice a week.

Julia says, “I told her to let herself go where she needs to go, and just be in the experience, to get the help she needs.”

“You were so recognizing of her experience,” I reply. “You’re giving her what you didn’t get as a kid.”

Julia (tentatively): “Yeah, I guess I was. . . . I’m not always so attuned though. . . . I guess it feels good to do that for her now. I can see that it’s helping.” As she got ready to leave, she added, “And you’re helping me. . . .”
In the next session, Julia tells me that she's still feeling down, discouraged. She looks sadder than I've ever seen her, and I comment on her sadness. She begins to cry, and after a few moments, says that she thinks she's sad about her mother, who really never got what she wanted—to feel a connection with other people—and now she has lost her chance. This is a striking moment to me, since when I've asked Julia in the past about her feelings about her mother's loss of memory and her literal inability to recognize Julia in the last few years, Julia has expressed some sadness about her mother's deterioration, but it has felt distant and muted. Generally, she has been matter-of-fact, glad to be able to care for her mother in whatever ways she can. Now, in her sadness, Julia acknowledges that she's afraid of becoming her mother, and then relates an amazing dream from the night before:

She finds a little, round plant on the ground and breaks it open, and inside she finds what appears to be a burr, but turns out to be a baby owl. She picks up the owl and it begins to grow as she holds it close against her body, until it's the size of a human baby. Then she finds herself at the Stone Club, an exclusive country club that her family belonged to as a child. Still holding the owl, she's approached by a WASPY blond woman who offers her a job there, which she declines. She has no interest in being part of this club, this world. Then the woman walks up to a little girl who looks very sad and neglected. The woman surprises Julia by being warm and nurturing to the little girl.

This dream seems to hold worlds of meaning that I imagine we will continue to process for a long time. Julia says she thinks that both the WASPY woman and the little girl are parts of herself. The fact that she so clearly recognizes the sad, lonely little girl as a part of herself feels like a milestone, an embracing of her childhood pain that she has disavowed for so long. She worries about whether she's cold like her mother, yet the woman surprises her with her empathy and tenderness. The woman also offers her a job, which Julia declines, having "no interest" in being part of this club that is "made of stone." We wonder about the woman surprising Julia with her warmth as reflective of Julia's evolving perspective on her mother, opening up memories of what her mother could and did give to her emotionally as well as what was missing.

There is a mutuality in the nurturing of the owl, a maternal protectiveness that fills Julia with love and warmth, a feeling that stays with her all day after she awakens from the dream. Julia feels the baby owl represents both her children whom she has loved and nurtured and her art, for which she continues to try to create transitional space. We play with notions of who I am in the dream—the cold woman who can surprise her with my empathy and affection? The mother who embraces the baby owl who grows as she's held? But, can I be trusted? Or, perhaps, the mutuality in the nurturing of the owl represents the vitality and creativity we experience together when the treatment feels alive and inspired, or the wisdom that grows out of our shared exploration. And what about the sad, neglected little girl?

Julia associates to an old dream, which we've talked about before, about a 3-year-old girl lying dead in a pond. But this time, for the first time, Julia begins to cry with real anguish. She feels despairing, and I resonate, deeply, with her grief. I experience her sense of drowning in the sadness, how agonizing it feels to be in this emotional place. I tell her that it's taken us so long to get to this old and deep pain, to allow herself to own it and not discount it; that it feels important to honor it, make space for it. She doesn't disagree. We talk about how there had been no room for her pain growing up, no recognition of her loneliness, her sense of invisibility.

Julia shares with me that she's aware of "a split reaction." "Part of me knows that what you're saying feels true and right," she says. "Another part is saying, 'Oh, that's just
therapy-speak—don’t listen to that.” It feels significant that at this point, Julia can tell me, reflect on these two self-states, one old, one new and vulnerable. Instead of being only in the cynical, distrustful self-state and responding from that place, which would have re-enacted our old familiar dance, she is beginning to “stand in the spaces,” as Bromberg (1998) describes, to build bridges between self-states. A moment later, Julia looks me in the eye and tells me she is starting to trust me, to believe what I’m saying, to take in my faith in her. A powerful, shared moment. As she’s getting up to leave, Julia finds a small, blank, white sticker on her lap. “A price tag . . . but it has no price on it,” she notes with curiosity. [PAUSE] “Priceless,” she says with a smile. She walks over to me, gently sticks it on my forehead, and heads out the door.

I am enormously touched by this gesture, which feels simultaneously intimate, playful, and mischievous. Julia takes a risk by spontaneously reaching out, physically and emotionally, irreverently crossing boundaries, trusting that I’ll receive this gift in the generous spirit in which it was offered. This spontaneous gesture was a wonderful example of Julia’s capacity to surprise and delight me, illustrating the ways in which she often took the lead to enliven and “cultivate the improvisational” in the treatment (Ringstrom, 2001). Hoffman (2006) asserts that we need to pay more attention to patients’ agency and responsibility in co-creating the analytic relationship, suggesting that “perhaps we take for granted the patient’s ongoing intuitive sense of some of the ingredients that the relationship requires” (p. 57). There are poetic echoes of Julia’s earlier associations to the notion of “flow,” when, immersed in the act of making “pig soup,” she knew intuitively which ingredients would make a hearty, delicious soup for her family.

Thinking about my session with Julia later, I reflect on how the edge of growth is always vulnerable (F. Stern, personal communication, June, 2010). I have an association to a conversation with an artist friend (G. F excelente, personal communication, May, 2009) about meristemsthe tip of a plant that is the most tender and vulnerable, yet has the fastest growing cells and leads to new growth, which is necessary for the plant’s survival. If you remove or damage the meristem, you truncate the plant’s growth. This feels connected to many conversations Julia and I have had about the complexity of going to deep, painful places, which triggers shame and anguish, yet simultaneously recognizing that this is also the source of her creative process.

When I ask Julia’s permission to write about our work together, tell her that I am writing a paper about creativity, she is thrilled. She says, in reflecting on our work together, “I had the thought that a river runs through it.” Julia is quiet for a few moments. Then I have an association which I share with her about a recent New York Times article about kayaking and the removal of hundreds of dams built in the 1950s and 60s because they are getting too old and outliving their usefulness. The kayakers are thrilled about new white water adventures and the excitement of uncharted territory, of not knowing what the removal of the dams will bring.

As Julia walks into a recent session, I notice a lightness and ease in the way she carries herself, a playfulness and warmth in her eyes. She is excited about a recent article in the newspaper in which she has been interviewed about the artistic project that she has led and nurtured at work. The project has continued to grow in innovative ways, and she now feels a stronger sense of ownership and pride in this endeavor. The article feels like a momentous affirmation of her achievement and hard work in a creative realm. We talk about how she is beginning to develop a new relationship to creative obstacles. In the past, obstacles derailed her, stopping her in her tracks. Recently, she has begun to see them as problems to be solved rather than mountains that can’t be moved.
Julia then tells me she has begun taking pottery classes, and that after a great first class, she had two disappointing classes in which the clay kept falling off the wheel. Rather than getting discouraged and giving up, Julia practiced in the studio for two hours before her next class. She describes listening to the experienced potters discussing technique, aware of feeling surprisingly comfortable and un-self-conscious instead of intimidated and self-critical. Julia then shows me with her hands how her teacher covered Julia’s hands with her own so she could feel the correct way to sculpt the clay on the wheel. She tells me she loved the visceral feeling of her hands on the clay, the teacher’s hands on hers; that this embodied experience stayed with her all that day.

Julia says, “The barrier between me and other people is dissolving.” We reflect on how much more comfortable she feels asking for and receiving help, allowing herself to touch and be touched. This is leading to a more sustained, less ephemeral sense of emotional freedom, spontaneity, and engagement in her relationships with family and friends, as well as greater access to herself and her creative voice. She is still working on authorizing herself as an artist, but for now seems much more sanguine about making art of her own, as her work has become a vehicle to express her creative vision. The treatment is still a work in progress, though in Julia’s own words, “I feel like now I have a sense of how to make something happen, how to bring a project to fruition.”

REFERENCES


CONTRIBUTOR

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