REPLY TO DANIEL STERN’S COMMENTARY ON:

SCENES THAT WRITE THEMSELVES:
IMPROVISINGIONAL MOMENTS
IN RELATIONAL PSYCHOANALYSIS

by

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“I think that I am angry with you over last week’s session,” my typically non-confrontational 45 year old Eastern European engineer patient “Sami” tells me. In his mannered style, compensating for his self-consciously thick accent he continues, “I think that I am angry that you were suggesting that I should have more feeling about my mother being hospitalized after her heart attack. I am wondering,” He continues, “Who do you think you are to tell me how I should feel? Or, that I should feel anything when I don’t!” “Who am I indeed?” I ponder aloud. Sami ignores my question and continues, “And, besides, what good is it for me to feel?! How is that supposed to solve my problems – the problem I came to you for, like my procrastination?” “I am not sure,” I venture, “but tell me more about my telling you how you should feel?” “It’s not very good psychoanalysis, you know. It’s not ‘exploring my core issues.’” “So, it looks like I am being more ‘Dr. Phil,’ than Dr. Phil.” “Or maybe it’s because I am not as important to you as some of your other patients.” “How come?” I inquire. “Because they are more successful than me, you care about them more. They are more important to you.” “You mean like my rich Hollywood celebrities?” “Yea, like ‘George’.” “You mean George Clooney?” I ask wryly. “No, more like George Hamilton. You would only see B-actors whose careers are mostly over.” We’re now smiling at one another as if engaged in a wicked game of ping pong. “Now is that because I practice in the Valley, instead of Beverly Hills?” “Maybe,” he retorts, “Just the ‘has-beens’ live in the Valley.” Then he stops abruptly and questions aloud, “Where is all of this coming from?!” as if he is

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1 So far as I recall I never told Sami anything about how he should feel. This raises an interesting question, one Steve Mitchell often introduced, which is what might I have been unwittingly revealing non-verbally about a range of feelings I was wondering that Sami might have, or could have, or might have difficulty experiencing, and how might that be insinuated in my facial expression as an implied directive?

2 “Dr. Phil” is a television celebrity psychotherapist who, after minimal exploration of his guest-patient’s issue de jour, instantaneously dispenses the pabulum of daily advice sandwiched between commercial breaks and the show’s end credits.
channeling a demon heretofore never given voice. “Let’s not worry about that now just keep going,” I encourage. Sami says, “Yea, so no truly successful actor would come to see you! Actually, they wouldn’t come to see anyone in L.A.” “How come?” I wonder. “It’s too nice here, the weather is too good, it’s too sunny. You’d have to go to New York for a good psychoanalysis, where it’s cold, and rainy, and dark, and gloomy, and depressing, where the analysts would all be depressed and understand you.” Then Sami’s expression shifts markedly to one of sadness. “I feel like crying. I won’t, not here, but for the first time, I feel like maybe I could, maybe someday, maybe here too.”

I am beginning my reply to Dan Stern’s thoughtful and lovely discussion of my article with a brief case illustration in response to his noting that it is in such material that the topic of improvisation acquires “…larger breathing space. And the possibilities and caveats of an improvisational approach start to take on flesh.” I couldn’t agree more, having started my first article on improvisation (2001a) in just such a manner, and having struggled with the decision not to do it this time. Ultimately, I decided to first situate my thoughts about improvisation in the larger relational canon. Relational psychoanalysis, presents an especially congenial analytic home to our understanding of the often ineluctable intermingling of both analyst’s and analysand’s psychologies. As Dan notes, my attempts, albeit in beginning stages, are “to begin a systematic structuring of an improvisational form of relational psychoanalysis.” I am glad that he finds it a good beginning.
Returning to Sami, what is the improvisational form of relational psychoanalysis in evidence? First, improvisation is more than just being spontaneous. It is ensemble work that plays off and with patterns emergent in the personalities of both parties. These patterns illuminate something about the unconscious’ of each, thus improvisational moments constitute configurations of a co-creative, relational unconscious, a kind of thirdness, in which both parties are distinctive authors, yet neither can lay exclusive claim to being the sole author of their improvised moment, a moment from which blossom things heretofore unimagined or unarticulated.

In our improvisational moment, here was Sami’s and my challenge, though one that was only knowable in retrospect. To access Sami’s complicated grief over a mother for whom he has had a very tormented and bitter relationship, a grief that remains unformulated and unarticulated – an unthought known - Sami and I had to first engage in a kind of sado-masochistic play, a kind of playing with his aggressive defensives against recognizing these obscure thoughts and feelings. To do so, we discovered ourselves engaging in an improvisational scene in which we both had to be able to encounter themes of our respective feelings of inadequacy. Sami had to be free to spontaneously enunciate his need to see me as profoundly lacking, and I had to be able to sincerely play along with his challenge. To do so we had to both accept the stereotypical charges of our respective second-class citizenships. He had to face feeling like an “eminently ignorable immigrant,” and I, a “comparatively inferior psychoanalyst”. And, for this play to be experienced as real there had to be some part of each of us that could feel our second-class status without it puncturing either of us. What enables the analyst and analysand to
engage in such a manner that inoculates their respective narcissistic injuries? I submit that it is the cultivation of a play space, similar to the one that children naturally convene, and that is one in which “bang, bang, you’re dead” can be taken deadly seriously without anyone really dying.

Now, several points follow from all of this. First, improvisational moments arise when the “characters” in the moment draw from something real within themselves along with who they are inducing one another to become. This form of engagement quintessentially involves the instantiation of a temporal state of relational unconscious – a phenomena that intermingles the subjective unconscious of each participant. Accordingly, while there were likely many ways to illuminate Sami’s psychic reality, improvisational play facilitated its illumination in a very enlivened manner. And, it gave access not only to his unknown grief, but to a pattern of aggressive defenses that he might otherwise have had to disavow to avoid shameful self recrimination. Second, the cultivation of play in improvisation lends itself to putting to rest the myth of the perfectly analyzed analyst as not only impossibility but as being both unnecessary and undesirable – a point seminal to the entire relational canon. Something of the analyst’s own subjective issues necessarily becomes creative fodder for the analytic couples’ play. Becoming improvisational isn’t about perfecting performances on either side of the couch. It is about playing, though taking play deadly serious. Third, improvisation is a means for putting live flesh on the sterile bones of a host of theories now informing contemporary psychoanalytic perspective. As Dan noted:
“An improvisational view is a logical next step in the field. In the last decades we have seen the application of chaos and complexity theory, along with dynamic systems theory open up our clinical eyes to various features of the therapeutic situation, such as: the emphasis on process; the approximate equality of the contribution of patient and therapist, i.e. the notion of co-creativity; the unpredictability of what happens in a session from moment to moment, including the expectance of emergent properties; a focus on the present moment of interaction; and the need for spontaneity and authenticity in such a process.”

I could not agree with Dan, more, however, my problem with all of these theories is that none of them have been systematically applied in a “user-friendly” manner as Dan notes. In fact, simply noting that “everything effects everything” and that human behavior and by extension the clinical world are vastly more non-linearly dynamic, more chaotic and more fraught with emergent properties than we have typically been comfortable believing, tells us nothing about how to apply these powerful new ideas. For example, exciting ideas, such as “sensitive dependence on initial conditions”, from chaos theory, are repeatedly illustrated in psychoanalytic literature by the proverbial butterfly wing flap in Venezuela resulting in a hurricane in the Caribbean. This illustration that meteorologists love to intone (Gleick, 198) Still, it tells us nothing about how to reckon with initial conditions that set in motion the struggles that our patients daily suffer.

In fact, when applying ideas from all of the aforementioned theories what differentiates our consideration of human psychology from the rest of the biological and
earth sciences is that our psychic realities include personal histories that are memorialized daily in our personal myths, our narratives, our social constructions and even our self deceptions. It is all of this that distinguishes our humanity from the rest of the biological world. As Bonn (2006) notes:

“There are fundamental differences between the analytic dyad as a complex system and the sorts of complex systems (i.e. fluidic turbulence) described well by chaos theory, nonlinear equations and other forms of multivariate mathematical computation. Three of the differences… are: 1) The application of universal laws are not amenable to the field of psychoanalysis; 2) There is no absolute certainty about the psychological experience of meaning making and understanding whereas the current state of physical dynamic systems, although unpredictable, can be tracked and measured; 3) The history and memory of co-constructed meanings between the analyst and patient has a strong influence on the dynamics of the analytic dyad and is virtually absent in other complex systems.”

I believe that an improvisational sensibility in relational psychoanalysis is a major vehicle for directly instantiating and playing with new possibilities in the “history and memory of co-constructed meanings between the analyst and patient.” It is through the improvisational metaphors of scripts, assigned roles, dramatic arches, and sequences that the otherwise lifeless theories such as those of chaos, complexity and dynamic systems come alive and become meaningful. The very idea of scripts for example, embodies the
semi-fixed and illusory ways in which we imbue our own character, i.e. our own sense of self as well as how we expect (and direct) the other to be in each present moment drama of psychoanalysis. Such improvised relational sequences embody beginnings, middles, and ends that become mini-narratives and these narratives can serve thereafter as model scenes for further elaboration of the analysis. These live metaphors capture how an analytic process can proceed along an amazing sequence of improvised moments of co-creativity.

But Dan also notes that the greatest anxiety analysts have in incorporating an improvisational sensibility is that there is a special requirement for the analyst to be able to do this? Dan notes, improvisation

“is ideally created and sculpted for (Phil’s) personality, and why not, but it cannot be reproduced in the forms he illustrates. This is not a criticism, because he is inviting others to use those parts of themselves that are most compatible with an improvisational approach. His way of doing it is convincing, but I would like to see how a different therapist with different assets could do it.”

Over the years of presenting on this topic, this is the primary concern that I have heard over and over. That, “you can do it Phil, but can I?” I will borrow my answer from Henry Ford, “Think you can, think you can’t, either way you are right.” There is little in improvisation that explicitly tells one what to do or not do next, certainly not in the manner that can be inferred from the history of techniques derived from
traditional psychoanalytic theories. During my earliest training in the 1970’s there were many technical rules that I recall learning: “never ever self disclosure – unless you are certain of its purpose, and suspect that anyway”, “never answer direct questions”, “think four times before making an interpretation,” etc. And, as I have already noted, in the “game” of psychoanalysis each theory tends to have its own strong “forearm stroke” though this virtue is also a limitation, such as: “self psychologists frequently rely too much on empathy, Freudian’s and Kleinian’s too much on interpretation, interpersonalists too much on confrontation, and Jungians too much on the didactics of archetypes.”

Being improvisational is actually about trust. It is about recognizing that since there are two of you on the “stage,” neither of you have to carry the day alone. Nevertheless, there are also some cardinal rules of improvisation: 1) listen intently, not only for content but for what spontaneously emerges in you. 2) Don’t be afraid to introduce that emergence. 3) Especially, if you are also following the next cardinal rule which is never negating the other’s reality. 4) Instead, play off of it and with it. This is the yes/and technique described in greater detail by Nachmonich (2001) and myself (2001b), in which whatever the other says, you do not refute, rather you build upon it. This is evident in the brief improvisation with Sami, wherein each of our assertions lay the groundwork for the next, without either party knowing where this is coming from or where it is going. But as with “present moments” improvisational ones reflect beginnings, middles and ends. Ends that you know when you get there.
Dan’s commentary packed in many other thoughts and raised a number of questions. First, among them is his wish for me to have elaborated on my relational ethic, which restated is the question in this moment are we opening or closing, vitalizing or deadening, connecting or avoiding, focusing or confusing, liberating or constraining, playfully exploring or just fooling around, affirming or annihilating, recognizing or misconstruing, fencing or going for the jugular? Dan wished that I would have elaborated on these ideas more, to provide for example something of a “user’s manual” or “technical guideline.” As I noted in my article, the “answer to these questions is not meant to value any particular state of experiencing over others (e.g. vitalizing over deadening, connecting over avoiding, focusing over confusing and so forth) (Ehrenberg, 2005)”³, but to see how they are taking shape in the characters in the present moment scene such that the intersubjective space of thirdness opens versus closes.

But what exactly does opening versus closing thirdness mean and how is that illustrated improvisationally? Anyone familiar with improvisation would likely note that the ensemble work of the dyad will be furthered to the extent that what the participants are playing at lends itself to the development of heretofore unimaginable or unexpressed themes opening up between them. To the extent that this is happening, there will likely be an emerging sense of vitality and a deepened sense of connection between the partners. Their work will obtain a greater sense of focus, though not so much deliberately as that their relational unconscious will be working more in tandem. The work will further feel

³ Ehrenberg (2005) notes that it is crucial for the analyst not to value any particular state in a moment more than another, because each are part of process communicating something about what is moving the analysis along versus shutting it down.
liberating, playful, along with an emerging sense of mutual affirmation and recognition of what each is bringing to their co-authorship. And, to the extent themes of sexuality and aggression are in the mix, there will be more a spirit of sparring or fencing, without the intent or need to win or vanquish the other. By contrast, when the improvisation fails, it exhibits a kind of negative thirdness or one-ups-man-ship, the qualities of which reflect deadness, avoidance, confusion, constriction of play, and a misrecognition of one another that devolves into a mutual sense of defeat. All of this denotes the antithesis of the improvisational moment. Thus, as noted in the article, the *relational ethic* questions perform:

“the gyroscopic task of catching our imbalance throwing us then into its meaning, its relationship to the assemblage of a personal history of facts, a framework of future assumptions, and how all, within both of us, is conspiring to take us out of the play, out of the scene, out of our characters, out of our authentic engagement, out of our moment of truth, and into the spectrum of one-up, one-down, negative thirdness. Recognition of this then becomes a focal point of our analysis and the place to restore improvisational, imaginative play.”

Dan also rightfully questions whether the term *posi-traum* is apt, since the clinical sequellae of it is not as clearly established as it is in trauma theory. Without knowledge of my work on this idea, Stuart and Barbara Pizer (2004) coined a comparable idea that they called “positive traumas.” What the Pizers and I were independently getting at is that an event can occur, almost always in an unpremeditated fashion that has the effect of
dramatically altering an entrenched emotional conviction of a patient’s. I posited that this occurs when something positive happens that cannot be assimilated within the patient’s intransigently negative belief system, hence the positive event forced the accommodation of a new organizing principle, i.e. a new emotional conviction. While I am quite convinced that this is the case, I think that this phenomenon, while powerfully corresponding to a change in belief, does not necessarily entail as dramatic physiological reaction as in the nature of trauma. Thus, to the extent that trauma is considered in terms of its enduring impact both mentally and physiologically, the invocation of the word “trauma” is equivocal. I leave this question open for the time being.

In conclusion, it has been a delight to dialogue with Dan Stern about my ideas regarding improvisational moments. In his brief, but chockfull commentary, he underscored many of the important ideas that I am playing with, helped me focus all the more on them and gave me encouragement in their pursuit. He invoked readily the principles of yes/and in a wonderful improvisational spirit.