

GOING OUT TO MEET THE OTHER

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This true story takes place in the dark ages of long ago, when from one perspective, our communications were simpler. There were no smartphones, no texts, emails or streaming services. Two friends, Kevin and Keith had an arrangement to meet for dinner and watch TV. Kevin was the host of the evening. The older of the two by a decade or so, he was somewhat taciturn, fond of his own company, self-reliant. He worked alone in a creative industry and was a man who had experienced disappointments in his life and was acquainted with pain.

Keith, a musician, had suffered bouts of depression and had, at times picked up other diagnosis as he travelled along life's highway. On the evening of the dinner arrangement, he found himself in a very bleak place; life seemed empty, valueless and devoid of meaning. That evening, he had in fact decided to end his life. He was in the process of sealing his kitchen, in order to gas himself.

However, he had completely forgotten about dinner at Kevin's place, and was reminded when Kevin knocked on the door. Kevin did not drive and so went to some trouble to cross several suburbs using public transport, in order to arrive at Keith's. When Keith opened the door, the scene was self-evident.

Kevin said nothing except – *I was expecting you at my place for dinner. Come on get your things.*

Keith would later describe himself as being in a near-catatonic state. He was not speaking. Lifeless. No words for what was going on. Nevertheless, the men took a long bus ride together back to Kevin's place – had dinner, watched the TV show as planned. At the end of the evening, Kevin said - *I'll see you here, tomorrow night for dinner.*

This ritual continued with Keith arriving at Kevin's house at the appointed time every night for three or four months. After that the two men continued to meet with their usual frequency.

Keith later said Kevin saved his life. He insisted never a word was said about the scene that Kevin interrupted that first night, although he was in no doubt that Kevin knew how dire his situation was. He said that he *didn't know what it was Kevin did that saved him.*

The question I would like to explore is could we, dare we, call what these two men shared, an *analytic* experience? Keith was not able to say what it was about the experience with his friend Kevin, that saved his life, but could we?

Neville was very taken with this vignette, considered it analytic, and had an immediate conviction about what saved Keith.

But before we go to Neville's response, I'd like to share some thoughts on what I think were the psychoanalytic elements that helped Keith heal and save his life. In doing this today at the *Neville Symington Memorial Conference*, I'm inspired by Neville's writing and thinking, particularly his capacity to write simply, avoiding analytic terminology, "in ordinary common language."

I have to start with what is meant when we speak about this thing called psychoanalysis, what makes an analytic encounter and what is it that transforms pain?

The obvious place to start might be that these two men somehow intuitively framed an analytic setting with predictable, regular set times, and it was this that fostered containment, transformation of something that otherwise, could not be lived with.

In Neville's paper, *The Essence of Psychoanalysis as Opposed to What Is Secondary* he refers to the setting as secondary, not primary, "*its outer clothes*" not the analysis itself. So while the nightly dinners between these two men were a feature of Keith's recovery, they were not the crucial transformative element. In the same way that 4 x 50-minute sessions per week, use of the couch and interpretation as the act of change is not the substance of an analysis.

In the same paper Neville has a definition of what psychoanalysis is:

*What makes an analysis is a relationship that fertilizes into understanding.
This is the analysis (pp 397)*

Relationship

"The human unit is a couple, it takes two human beings to make one" (Bion 1987)

I doubt anyone would argue with Neville that it is the relationship that carries the healing in psychoanalysis, or that it was the relationship with Kevin that helped Keith heal, but the word "relationship" is so commonly used, its meaning seems somewhat worn. Two people can be in a room together, in

contact, but not be in a relationship of the deep kind that is illustrated by this story.

Kevin makes considerable effort to take public transport across several suburbs in order to check up on a friend who has not shown up for dinner. Who does that when someone is late for dinner? What is that state of mind?

I think it is a state of mind of reverie. A reflective, receptive state of mind, from this state of mind, intuition and empathy can flow.

We tend to think about capacities for reverie in “good enough ordinary” mothers who can empathically feel their way into their baby’s experience. Attachment researchers have shown that a mother’s capacity to freely reflect about her own past relationship experiences, positive and negative creates space to relate to her baby. Because of this her baby’s communications don’t flood her, and she can intuit what is meant by them. The baby knows this and in turn, it is able to attach.

In Neville’s book ‘The Growth of Mind’ he puts it even more succinctly:

*“Mother’s primary maternal preoccupation, or riveted attention is the state of mind we’re speaking about..... The other quality of the maternal mind is its liveliness and responsiveness, the quality of **going out to meet the other/baby**, not just contain it.....” (p 48)*

“Going out to meet the baby”!

“Going out to meet the baby!” Is there a better expression than this?

Going out to meet the other conveys an *active* mental attitude, far more than simply receptive. It involves an act both disciplined and spontaneous, a *contemplation* of the baby or the Other.

Neville expressed a preference for the terminology of “in-relation to” rather than “attached.” Being “in relation to” means there’s a kind of unity comprised of both mother and baby. A shared medium; an inter-subjective third within which mother and baby are joint actors.

This reflective capacity, this reverie then is a mental state that transmits to the baby. We can stretch this to include any one person *in relation* to another. Mother and baby, analyst and analysand, Kevin and Keith.

So we have Kevin in a state of mind of reverie, going out to meet the other, then, well, going out to meet the other!

When Kevin arrives at the house, he knocks on the door. Going out to meet the other is often painful. Most of us are afraid of touching too much pain, so we might keep our own and others pain at a distance. Kevin doesn’t push his way through Keith’s doors; he respects the pain. He knocks. Asking

permission to enter. He knocks and he waits. And because he knocks and waits Keith answers the door.

The scene is self-evident. Kevin says nothing other than *"I was expecting you for dinner, come on get your things"*. In doing so, somehow Kevin sensitively attends to the potential matter of shame - perhaps he intuits the links between suicide and shame. In *"The Growth of Mind"* Neville writes evocatively about shame consisting of both a knowledge of fragility in body or mind, and a shrinking away from that knowledge. Further on he writes of *".....the importance of recognizing that once a dysfunctional element has been seen, it tells us that a healthy operation is already becoming established....Clinically it is very important that this be focused upon, attended to, rather than the dysfunctional element which is now visible....."*

Both men are in no doubt that the fragility has been seen. Keith said all those years later that he was absolutely certain that Kevin knew what was going on. So Kevin taking Keith back to the ordinary-life plans: *"I was expecting you for dinner, come on get your things"* seems to me a beautiful illustration of both an unspoken recognition of what was going on, while simultaneously placing both of their attention on the part of Keith that had the capacity to keep going with ordinary life plans.

.....By the way, can you see these two men? Because I am from the NE of England, the first time I heard this story, they came to me in a flash, side-by-side on one of the noisy double-decker buses I rode in the 80s. No air con or heating. Keith in a black duffel coat with the toggles fastened haphazardly, long black hair all over his face and a lost expression. Kevin beside him, quiet, muscular, his straight back coated in rough Tweed.....

Let me take a slight detour into a bit of Neville theory. A preoccupation with suffering runs right through all of Neville's work, what is it? what can we do about it? In his paper, *Healing the Mind*, he takes us on a journey through the inner process of transforming pain and then looks at the outer conditions that foster this process.

Neville proposed within us all there is a creative energy, an *inner creator* responsible for the fashioning of external and internal experience into an inner representation. He describes two opposing functions in the mind, one striving for a way to think about pain – through creation of an inner representation – (painting a picture) - and another more primitive force, pushing for discharge - evacuation of pain. The inner representation a signal that pain is being embraced/thought about rather than evacuated. Our minds are created bit by

bit as we fashion these inner representations taking in our painful experiences, making meaning out of them, creating from an agglomeration of bits of ourselves and our experiences, a “*skillfully moulded unified pattern*”.

All of this talk of inner creators might imply a conscious process, which this is not. The representation arises spontaneously, through an imaginative process similar to the way “my” Kevin and Keith appeared upon first hearing the story.

The healing power of a mind that is achieving this creative work and is to some extent, unified, is something Neville returns to again and again across many of his books and papers. He is fascinated by it and is continually seeking to explore what gives rise to it, how does this process work throughout his writings and thought. Starting in his book on narcissism, with an oft quoted piece from Graham Greene’s autobiography where Greene provides a sketch on his friend Herbert Read:

.....*you wouldn’t notice his coming – only you noticed that the whole atmosphere had quietly changed. **No-one any longer would be talking for effect**, and when you looked around for an explanation, there he was – complete honesty born of complete experience had entered the room and unobtrusively taken a chair.....”*

Just as the emotional power of a piece of art or music transmits something of the emotion of its maker, Neville expands this phenomenon to communications in ordinary and clinical contexts. The transformed emotional state of one has a generative effect on the other. It has the capacity to convey a deep understanding, non-verbally. This is the process that he called in many books and lectures *creative communication*. Neville had a strong contention about the elements in a therapeutic relationship that can either foster it or strangle it.

Neville’s paper, *Healing the Mind What is the Healers task?* identifies key aspects of a healer’s state of mind that are necessary for creative communication to occur. Freedom, the personal, compassion and scientific enquiry.

Freedom appears frequently in Neville’s work. A state of mind of reverie is mind free to observe, wander, to reflect, associate and to allow surprise. A mind untethered to theories or “*accepted canons of art or religion*” (Psychoanalysis Downunder 2013: *Surface Reverie and Deep Reverie*). It is difficult to imagine practicing reflection under any kind of coercion, as the essence of reflection is that it is a spontaneous process.

“The analyst does not seek reverie, any more than he seeks intuition. Reverie and intuition come, if they come at all, without effort, “unbidden” (Bion 1967b, p. 147) through the discipline of evenly suspended attention, no memory and desire.

Kevin knew about the danger inherent in the depths of despair in Keith’s mind. Yet in his identification with Keith’s pain, he did not rush in and rescue him. He didn’t interfere in any way with Keith’s freedom to protect him, insist he go to hospital, nor did he turn away, or collapse himself. He was able to identify, reflect, and de-identify with Keith’s pain.

Kevin had known his own pain, grappled with it and come to some kind of a resolution about it. We might call Kevin a person. In Neville language someone becomes a person when they are able to feel their own state of emotional being. We might suggest his internal communication was creative, he had been able to represent (think) about his own painful history, and this enabled significant emotional capacity and the ability to differentiate his pain from Keith’s pain. He did not discharge his anxiety into Keith and then try to rescue Keith-as-himself. When the TV and dinner evening was over, as the story goes, he totally respected Keith’s freedom to go home and make his own choices to return the following evening, or not. He could bear the uncertainty of not knowing whether Keith would in fact return.

Scientific enquiry

Neville saw psychoanalysis and those forms of therapy that have derived from it as a form of scientific enquiry. By this he meant a fundamental stance of broad curiosity about *our problem-studded world* as he said somewhere, and a deep commitment to keep looking, again and again at what is not understood. I think he also meant taking a broad approach to emotional understanding through many different lenses of art, literature, music, history, politics etc. Any discoveries always inconclusive, because when one thing becomes clear, it simply makes way for another. No one has the last word.

Neville thought there were dangers in our clinical practice when we too readily reach for explanations through diagnostic or technical theories, because the act of reaching for theory closes off possibility of true emotional contact.

Maybe without the hindrance of psychoanalytic theory, training and professional qualifications, Kevin’s mind was free to be in a patient state of scientific enquiry, drawing only on what he had derived through his own varied life experience.

The personal

Engaging with another on a personal basis I think means conveying to another that while we are each specific and unique there is also something universal about a human mind and pain. As far as we know of this vignette, Kevin didn't give interpretations, generalize, offer sympathy or psycho-education, or tell Keith how he should act. Perhaps he knew from his own experience that too many abstractions would have been of no help at all.

Kevin took Keith's pain into himself. He took it in. This is a significant capacity to take in the pain of another. And he can only do it by being open to touch a similar pain within himself. How did Kevin take Keith's pain into himself? Through going out to meet him; knocking gently on his door, waiting. He took it in through his reverie his receptivity, by being in contact with an emotionally comparable experience in himself.

Compassion

Compassion comes from the Latin com-with pati-to suffer, meaning to suffer with. Be with. How better can we illustrate this in this vignette than by thinking about the action of Kevin taking the suffering Keith back to his home with all of the attendant and varied manifestations of anxiety that would have involved? There seems to me to be no better *metaphorical* comparison than the compassionate action of truly taking in the pain of another, than bringing it right home to live within us. This is what to "suffer-with" means.

Neville speaks of compassion as embedded in a model of mind that recognizes that a state of mind of turmoil and distress, a mind that cannot suffer pain, is the flow on effect of a disaster. *"The person is not suffering from unnamed instincts but rather the radiation still being emitted in the personality from an atom bomb...."*

It is in the holding environment we might think was created for that three month dinner and TV period. Kevin meets with Keith's suffering in freedom, in a personal way and with compassion.

I dispensed with the outer clothes of the relationship between these two men in the first part of the paper, but I'd like to return to one aspect of the experience.

The men sitting together watching TV eating a dinner one has cooked for them both, evokes images of a boy and his father or mother. It represents the

something in what heals in analysis that comes from ordinary devoted care and kindness. The analyst's kindness is cited by so many when asked to identify what helped them heal. On Pepweb, there are only 80+ references to analytic kindness, 2,500 mentions of kindness and there are 22 thousand mentions of aggression. What are we giving our attention to as we try to understand this thing called psychoanalysis?

Ogden (2005) writing of psychoanalytic values ("*...those ways of being and ways of seeing that characterize the distinctive manner in which each of us practices psychoanalysis....*") speaks of the value of being humane.

Kindness is perhaps what makes the analytic food we offer digestible. Conversations about TV art or sport or other aspects of a person's life with no interpretation of the content or commentary about the unfolding relationship occur within a kind analytic relationship. "*The human place where the patient is becoming whole....*" (Ogden 2005). These analytic conversations comprise a kind of profound human interaction through their very ordinariness.

The artist musician, Nick Cave who has lost two sons in the past five years, says the following about what heals:

"...feelings of meaning, relational and connective, are almost always located within kindness.... kindness is the force that draws us together....small seemingly inconsequential acts of kindness that Soviet writer, Vasily Grossman calls, "petty thoughtless kindness" or "unwitnessed kindness"....." (Red Hand Files Issue # 204)

Courage

When Neville was told the story of Kevin and Keith he was very taken with it. He had one word to explain what had healed, saying simply, "It was Kevin's courage."

I think he meant the courage to love, in the face of the potential for heartbreaking loss.

Kevin would have been as afraid of his friend's despair as any of us would have, he would have known the danger in the situation and yet he was willing to bear the risks of his actions, because he was able to act according to his convictions, from the heart. He was able to connect with both his own pain and destructive elements, and the loving, life giving aspect of himself in order to offer this same possibility to Keith.

Courage requires humility, a deep acceptance that he can neither control nor predict whether Keith will show up the next evening or not. A mind of courage registers the fear, holds still, and continues to love.

Conclusion

Neville's contention is that psychoanalysis is a relationship that fertilizes into understanding through a process he called creative communication. We don't know what understandings Keith came to as he spent those long evenings with Kevin. All we know is that, after time, he was able to find a way through from a tragic connection with a destructive aspect of himself to a connection with a life-giving aspect. This connection was found and grown through encountering in his friend Kevin, a *person*, someone with a mind capable of reverie, intuition, empathy and love.

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