

A tale of faith and heresy¹

Dilemmas of embodiment and mourning in body-psychotherapy

Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar, PhD

A. introduction

The question of embodiment is central to the practice of the body-psychotherapist. How able is the therapeutic dyad to embody the unfolding biographical dramas. We assume that the capacity to tolerate affect contributes to better coping strategies and more proficient self-regulation, and so we gently encourage our clients not only to tell us their stories, but also to show us, to be in it, to inhabit themselves – their psyches and their somas in the process of telling.

But embodiment requires tolerance to charge, to painful material. Disembodiment is oftentimes a blessed defence against unbearable material. And when such material arrives at our clinic door, it is not only the client who is called to regulate, tolerate and ponder the value of embodiment, but also the therapist – and the therapeutic dyad.

The following case vignette portrays a struggle of faith, where both my client and myself were taking roles in regulating one another, attuning to a greater structure and thus holding faith.

B. Daniel, my brother

Daniel came to see me following his Heroin addiction (smoking, not injecting) , and a recommendation from his NA sponsor to seek therapy that incorporated his body. A single man in his early thirties, Daniel was a handsome and impressive man. He had a wide and muscular upper body, broad shoulders and strong neck, while his lower body seemed almost non-existent: thin long legs following straight from his back without visible buttocks.

Daniel came from a comfortable socio-economical background, the first-born child of wealthy, upper-class and highly influential parents in London; the single heir to a prosperous family business. Both parents held discipline and hard-work in the highest esteem, so it was only natural to send Daniel to a

¹ A translated excerpt from my book on body-psychotherapy, A therapeutic anatomy, will be published by Yeda Academic Publishing, Israel.

prestigious English boarding school at five. Daniel described his sadness upon leaving home: "I wasn't really sad to leave father, as I have barely ever seen him, but I really missed my mother and my nanny, who was fired on the very day I left to the boarding school." Daniel's parents never set him any meaningful boundaries, and Daniel started smoking cigarettes at nine, and drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana at eleven, "at the boarding school too but mainly at home. Friends will come over for the weekend and we'd party like hell". Rebellion and partying were both repeating themes in Daniel's narrative.

Daniel's drug use expanded as a part of his lifestyle, and when Daniel completed his A levels at this highly prestigious school, he was sent to study political sciences at Oxford, where he was first introduced to Heroin. From this point onwards, Daniel's story became a familiar path of drug addiction, moving through theft and beggary, being expelled from home, having unprotected and non-selective sex for money or a hit, and abandoning himself through-and-through. One day: "when I got up in the morning and saw myself from the outside, as low as I could get, begging for money, filthy and stinking, wondering who I can offer a blowjob to get money for a hit, I managed to persuade my parents to send me to rehab."

Daniel came to see me after being clean for a year: "I still want to smoke all the time, I miss the sense of the absolute calm and inner peace heroin gave me, every single day", he said, "and I know I shall never stop missing it, but I have a hole in my belly and I have always had a hole in my belly, and I need to understand it."

Daniel sustained a part-time job at his parents, and was further supported by his them, living small accommodation adjacent to theirs. Although he despised his lack of independence he knew (and I had to agree with him) that he needed support and gradual, gentle, and on-going rehabilitation.

C. Comfortably numb

Therapy with Daniel was exciting and frustrating at the same time, oscillating between minor authentic shifts and dramatic "deep insights and climaxes", which turned out to be short-lived and temporary. In my countertransference, I felt at times as an observer looking at a thrilling, yet highly dangerous adventure, sometimes being filled with envy and at other times grateful for my "boring" life. Daniel and I shared sufficient personal similarities to allow for our relationship to deepen, yet we were also very different, protecting us from being washed too deep into his life-threatening addictive enactment. Working

with Daniel felt like fighting for his life, a struggle that was anything but merely symbolic.

A month into therapy, when we've established the therapeutic framework and began to know one another, I invited Daniel to look into "the hole in your belly". He looked at me terrified, "are you sure it is a wise move?" he asked. His question filled me with dread and doubt, what if we awaken his now-dormant demons? What if attending the somatic-void will send him into the streets again? "I am anything but certain, Daniel," I replied, "I am not really sure about anything with you – it terrifies me to touch, and terrifies not to touch. But perhaps you are right; perhaps looking into the hole is too early. How about having a look around?" Daniel stretched his arms behind his neck: "the no-man's land around my belly-button," he laughed, "where I dump all my junk," he added and patted his belly.

"Allow yourself to be that no-man's land, inside the body, to feel yourself from the inside. What's happening there?" Daniel looked at me as if I was an alien; "it sounds very interesting, but I have no clue how to do this." I suggested that he could place a hand on the bodily area surrounding the "hole in his belly." Daniel put his hand there, and breathed. I felt restless. "I really feel like smoking," Daniel reported, "can I smoke in here?" "No. you cannot." I replied.

For many hours we sat together, one session after another, he body awakened and screamed. Daniel processed his grief and his body told the story of his loss. Cigarettes soothed his pain only marginally, alcohol slightly more, but Daniel craved for ultimate calmness. "Being in my body hurts," he told me a month later, "it always has been. When I was a kid at boarding school I used to go outside when it was freezing cold, minimally dressed, until my feet would stop feeling, and then I would scratch myself with sticks and stones and take delight in not feeling pain."

A week later I placed my own hand on Daniel's lower back, "can you breathe into here?" I asked. Daniel breathed, and I contracted with pain. Daniel recalled being hit at school, "every morning in the 'let's hit Daniel' ceremony. In the first month it really hurt, then I started laughing – nothing touched me." Yet I contracted in pain; and so has Daniel, "all of a sudden the little boy's back hurts me, there is so much pain in me."

Daniel arrived to therapy with an almost religious dedication. He was never late; week after week he discovered his body and I became full of doubt. What was so good about being in your body when there was so much pain? Why not help him disconnect in less-harmful ways? Who am I to decide that "being in your body and with your feelings is good, being dissociated from your body is bad"? Time and again, "comfortably numb" would play in my ears when I

was with Daniel (originally Pink Floyd's but I much prefer the sublime version of the Scissor Sisters).

Into my supervision I brought my concrete difficulties, my technical and psychodynamic questions, yet kept my inner heresy to myself, concealing it with shame.

D. A Narrow door

"The meeting with oneself," wrote Carl Jung {Jung, 1980 #995}, "is, at first, meeting with one's own shadow. The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful construction no one is spared who goes down to the deep well... For what comes after the door is, surprisingly enough, a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty, with apparently no inside and no outside, no above and no below, no here and no there, no mine and no thine, no good and no bad. It is a world of water, where all life floats in suspension; where the realm of the sympathetic system, the soul of everything living, begins; where I am inadvisable this and that; where I experience the other in myself and the other-than-myself experiences me" (p.21-22).

One day Daniel arrived to therapy in a storm. He knocked on my door twenty minutes before his session – I was still with a different client. During the last minutes of our session I was preoccupied with Daniel, my client was insulted with my lack of attention, she was right of course. "Yesterday I had sex for the first time in my life," Daniel barged in. I looked at him confused, "what?" "Yesterday, for the first time in my life, I was in the sex," he replied, "I didn't smoke weed before or drink alcohol. We were simply there together." Daniel looked really stirred up, and I began to get excited with him and for him, "so how was it?" I asked. "To be honest," Daniel replied, "quiet shitty. I was so excited, I couldn't really get an erection and then I came within less than a minute. But we were together, and we talked, and I could feel myself and her and we still have a future, we can grow together."

I shared my heretic ponderings with Daniel and he laughed, "this pressure valve isn't really selective, Asaf. I shut my pain away and pleasure, and joy, and connection, and God are all kept out, you see?" I nodded. It seemed that the roles were momentarily reversed. Daniel continued: "I feel that for the first time since I was five or six I am occupying my life, not just seeking to live alongside my life but actually inside them. And my life is not always fun but it is mine, and I can do things in my life. I've got me."

During the following few years in therapy Daniel approached the hole in his belly, in gentle spirals, tentatively touching it. With every step of the way he

showed courage to deal with pain, allowing himself yet another dimension of existence. His presence and being were strengthened and our relationship strengthened as well. The move from heresy to faith accompanied us throughout our work together and we occasionally swapped roles: sometimes it was my turn to hold faith and hope, and at other times Daniel held it for us; at times I was the heretic, questioning the need for mourning, at others Daniel. And throughout this process, Daniel entered a relationship and left his parents' home, and went to study gardening, which he dearly enjoyed.