



International Connections

By Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar

A cup, grasping my fingers

A cup can be grasped only if our arm is long enough to reach it, and only if our fingers are strong enough to lift it.” Yann Coello and Yvonne Delevoye-Turrell (2007, p.667)

1. My Fingers, grasping a cup

My fingers are clicking on the keyboard. I particularly like the letters F and J, since they have a little bump on them to assist in blind-typing finger positioning. There are many ways to type, some better than others. I'm an okay typist, not great, but okay. We can talk of the many ways to type on a keyboard; there are plenty of disciplines and not one discipline fits all. A keyboard has no meaning without typing. It becomes a keyboard in our making it a keyboard—in my typing on it I help it become a keyboard.

Typing is like holding a cup. The grasping of the cup (the comprehending of its physical meaning) depends on the physical activity of reaching it and letting our fingers grasp it. The object Cup – the cup that is in front of me, in the here-and-now cannot be grasped by mere intellectual gymnastics, it will be the idea or concept of the cup (the ‘cupness’) that I will understand, not the cup itself.

Since we are embodied beings, since relationships are not merely soul-to-soul relationships but also body-to-body, we might argue that in order to grasp another human being we need to touch them, that to be a human being means to have a body, and bodies can only be realized in a relationship. We can understand the idea (concept) of someone else, but to grasp them, to truly know another, I will need to reach out and touch. Should you accept my reasoning, this may present a clear and compelling argument for the power of touch in body-psychotherapy.

I'd like to think about this for a moment with you in three stages: the first, we *become* in relationships (Buber, 1958); the second, our bodies *become* in relationships (Orbach, 2003); and the third, we need touch to be bodies and be known as embodied beings.

- (a) Martin Buber (1958) phrased this argument poetically: "The person becomes conscious of himself as sharing in being, as co-existing, and thus as being" (p.63). Buber, therefore conceptualized our being (or rather, our becoming) as dependent on the interrelationship with another – with the subjective thou. It is in the action of acknowledging the other that the other becomes thou (a subject).
- (b) Relational psychoanalyst Susie Orbach brought the body into this relational-Buberian equation. She wrote (2003): "to paraphrase Winnicott's famous and oft-repeated phrase, *there is no such thing as a baby*, there is also, I suggest, *no such thing as a body*, *there is only a body in relationship with another body*" (p.11). To reiterate her position, a body is not a thing (object), it is a person; therefore, our 'self' cannot be grasped outside an embodied relationship, and our bodies are dependent on other bodies interacting with them.
- (c) But how can bodies be grasped if not physically? Can true grasping (not theoretical understanding, but unmediated knowing) of another person take place without physical contact? Although this is not fashionable to say, particularly in our transference-laden era where we are continuously cautioned against touch in psychotherapy (even body-psychotherapists), I personally don't believe that we can. *I believe that in order to know another person I need to touch them.*

This, of course, is a relational argument. If the individual-separated 'self' is first and foremost for and by itself, then my argument is refuted altogether. But I understand the 'self' to be not only (albeit also) separated—a 'self' for itself but also dependent on relationship. I understand

the 'self' to be a dance between two (or more) part-selves that only become selves in their connection. I am both a separate body and a part-body that becomes in connection with another part-body. From this point of view, embodiment and relationality condition one another—we need other bodies and other people to become bodies and to become people. To grasp a cup, my hand needs to reach it. (See notation below)

Now comes the interesting bit because cups don't grasp the hands that grasp them.

2. Cups don't grasp me

Cups, unlike people, don't return the favour. Cups don't grasp the hands that grasp them – people do. We are not only affirming the other when we acknowledge them and touch them, it is not only thou that is created in the act of relating. We are also created in this dance, or in Buber's (1958) words: "I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou" (p.11).

The idea that our clients may hold the power to create us, to help us in

becoming (and so, on the soul level, that there is a true equality of relationship) is both exciting and scary for me, perhaps equally so. Consider the following example: An attending woman at a seminar told Carol Gilligan (2004) how she "was sitting in the living room one day when her four-year-old son came up to her and asked: 'Mommy, why are you sad?' Wanting to be a good mother, she thought she should not burden her son with her sadness. 'No, I'm not sad,' she said. 'Mommy,' he said, 'I know you. I was inside you'" (p.113).

If we consider this when talking about touch, then, when we touch a person (and in this context, a client), they get to know us too, and deeply so. True, this knowing is also tainted by transference dynamics, by cultural conditioning and positioning, and so forth. But also, and at the same time, we serve ourselves to be known by the other, to be created by the other as a subjectivity, and in return, they allow us to create them and know them.

Just like the boy who knows his mother from inside, when we touch we allow our clients to feel us from inside and know us whether we want it or not

imperfect as we are, sexual and vulnerable, power-seeking and faulty, shamed and scared, loving and hating, lusty and joyous, bored and jealous. I deeply believe that all touching therefore involve a relational event and ignoring the relational aspect of it is a counter-therapeutic (and naïve) act. That for true knowledge of a fellow human being, which would allow him or her to become, we need to touch, and when we touch, we grant the other a similar opportunity (even if they lack the conceptual tools we might have) to know us, to facilitate us in our becoming.

If what I propose rings true to you, then it makes the practice of touch in psychotherapy a stance rather than a technique—a declaration of connection. It is not just something we do, it is a way for us to become. I would like to demonstrate my meaning with a short clinical vignette:

Eliot* sits with me shrunk and contracted. He is a young-looking twenty-year-old, who sought therapy because his amorphous gender identity (and gender-amorphous appearance) has attracted much violence since his childhood.

It is our fourth session, and Eliot is unable to make eye contact.

"Your room is far too scary and too bright," he says in an almost whisper. "Please don't come near me, and don't look at me."

I reach out and extend my hand to him. "You are welcome to take my hand or refrain from taking it. If you take my hand you can stay for a moment or for a long while, and you can refuse my hand altogether. I'm here.

Continued on page 42



*Thank you to Will Davis for the invigorating dialogue regarding the nature of self, which inspired me to write this piece in general, and this conceptualizing of self in particular.

*Eliot is an amalgamation of clients, and personal details have been changed. A previous version of this vignette was published in Hebrew in my book, *A Therapeutic Anatomy* (2013).

Despite his lack of eye contact, I notice Eliot is rolling his eyeballs. "You must be joking. You'll hurt me, and once you feel me you'll be disgusted by me. Touch is always painful."

In my countertransference, I feel so old; tired, weary and old. "I'm closing my eyes now, Eliot, and want to invite you to imagine that you reach out to touch my hand and that you can feel it." I close my eyes, and think, what a relief, then imagine the way Eliot is testing me now to see if I'm cheating. To my surprise, I feel his hand, tender and tentative as a wild animal approaching the hand of a man, touching me.

"Hello hand," I say.

Eliot replies with utter seriousness. "Hello."

I offer Eliot the possibility to withdraw his touch and come back as many times as he likes and to choose whether he prefers to continue with or without touch.

Many minutes pass in silence during which Eliot comes and goes – touching and leaving. I delight in getting to know him and also in the times I get to be on my own; there is a gentle satisfaction noting the developing trust between us and Eliot's pro-activity in securing such trust. After a few moments his hand finally lands inside my own hand. "You can open your eyes now; I don't think I am afraid of you anymore." We look at each other and burst out laughing.

"How did you reach this diagnosis?" I ask.

"Dunno. You feel safe," he replies.

I have to admit that I hate being known by my clients almost as much as I crave it. When training to become a therapist, I was comfortable being out of the central

stage, having the attention directed to my clients. I believe this feeling is shared by many people who choose to give their lives to others. With time, I realized that I also deeply wanted, more so – I needed, to be acknowledged as a person, not just an extension of the client or a function in their development (part object or object), but also as me. The tension between those needs (to serve as an object for the other, and to be a subjectivity for them) is, I believe, at the heart of our profession. Furthermore, it became clearer to me that in order to help another become a subject and appreciate themselves as a subject, I needed to do the same, that while many aspects of psychotherapy may remain asymmetrical, the human acknowledgement of another is not one of these.

Liking myself doesn't come easy. And I have learnt from Eliot, later in therapy, that through our touch he noticed many aspects of me that I was trying to conceal: some aspects of myself that I am not proud of, and others that I was trying to protect him from. This visibility is at times intolerable, but it is also a de-shaming act as Eliot must have decided that I was still a decent enough human being to trust and so he allowed me to make him safe. And in that act he did much more: he made me (although he wasn't the first, I was also made by others) a decent enough man, a trustworthy human being. He was a cup that reached out to hold the fingers that grasped it.

I hope that we can share some interests and dialogue, and I welcome your feedback, comments, questions and challenges. You can



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