



International Connections

By Dr. Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar

The opposite of trauma

I rested in the arms of my arms

Dora Maar (1942-1943)

I rested in the arms of my arms
I no longer slept
It was night in the summer, winter in the day
An eternal shivering of thoughts
Fear love Fear love
Close the window open the window
You'll see you'll see
The hummingbird motionless as a star

I've been thinking about death lately.

I experience myself more fragile than before. The last year brought exciting transformation alongside with quite a lot of pain, and big life decisions, which will influence the rest of my life.

What I notice most, perhaps, is how frightened I am, and how much I have allowed this fear to shape and steer my direction. I remember Alex, a client of mine, telling me once, in one of our last sessions

how she realized that: "The opposite of love is not hate, it is fear; the opposite of sadness, happiness, joy and anger – fear is the opposite of all these emotions." I thought I understood her then; today I can say there is much more for me to learn about fear and love.

I can see now how fear has controlled me in numerous ways. Perhaps it has controlled many of us. Alex grew up in an abusive family; her parents were both poor

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had little education and no prospect of making money and supporting themselves or their families. This is not an excuse, of course, but it's a background against which Alex's life was set.

Poverty, class, war, racism, isolation, organised religion, crime, death, loss . . . even though the people who arrive at our clinic are mostly individuals, suffering is not an individual business. It takes place in political contexts, familial and societal ones, and these contexts call for our attention. Arguably, psychotherapy that doesn't take these factors into consideration is at risk of cooperating with the same isolating powers and global inducement of trauma. Reich understood these powers, particularly in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933), as well as other psychotherapists and analysts, like Julia Kristeva (1982), Nick Totton (1997; 2006) and Peter Shcmid (2012), who went as far as claiming that psychotherapy *has* to be political in order to be considered therapeutic.

As psychotherapists, we are accustomed to search deep into the person's biographical traumas, yet the traumas we hold, even those held in our bodies, are not ours alone.

For example, Adina was 58 when she came to therapy. Growing up with two holocaust survivors, the fear of poverty and catastrophe was deeply rooted in her body and psyche. Her cupboard was always full with food, canned food. Nobody should get too close. Can such trauma be healed? Can we convince the body that the war is over?

I don't know. Really, I once believed that if something is still alive it can be healed; today I am not too sure. So what is there to speak of? In the face of infectious trauma, what is there to be done? I want to write here about the opposite of trauma. For me, it is not safety, but love. Safety and security exist on the same dimension of trauma, they attempt to balance it, to repair those deep ruptures of our history. Love does something else; it reminds us that we are more than trauma. It reminds us of the reason we chose to embody.

I wish to speak with you briefly about love. In fact, I would like my heart to speak in my stead because it is asking to do so. My heart doesn't write academically, nor does it seek reason. When I remain soft, my heart exclaims, hurt goes more deeply inside but also doesn't leave as many marks. Alex told me how, when she learned to love, it did not change the fear—it was always still there, but it paved a new path into her life. *This is what I do*, the heart says, *I pave paths to newness, I pave paths to connection, and connection expands the container so that trauma no longer rests in the limited person, it rests in a wider context.* And pain, which is always created in a larger context, cannot be healed inside a person; it needs a community, even a community of two would do.

You were my first love, Alex told me, and then I learned to love my children and myself, and my friends.

Keeping the heart soft (not always open, but engaging) is a difficult practice. It leaves us vulnerable. And it is a disciplined practice, as Erich Fromm wisely noted (1957). I often wish it could be easier. Being angry, for example, comes more easily. Blaming myself and others is easier too. But it is not as gratifying.

I have often wondered, both in therapy and more widely, if healing trauma should focus more on love than on reparative practices of safety and security (which are, of course, also necessary). What if the main focus of psychotherapy with individuals, couples, families, societies, was to cultivate the capacity to love, to let our bodies soften even in the presence of fear? Is it possible that the journey to recovery need not always be linear, moving from terror through security into love? Can love remind us of its presence even when we are, allegedly, not ready for it? I hope so. Love can give me solace where security cannot, it enlivens me, thrills me, reminds me of all that I can become and retains my mystery – and that of the other.

“Farewell,” said the fox. “Here is my secret. It is very simple: It is with our heart alone that we see rightly. The essential is invisible to the eye.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince* (1943, p. 72)

I hope that we can share some interests and dialogue, and I welcome your feedback, comments, questions and challenges. You can email me at asaf@imt.co.il

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