

'Lambent' insights on a sunny April day amidst a pandemic, 2020

As practitioners we give importance to observing a client -from the time they enter our consulting area, their use of the chair or the couch and their body language. From the moment we meet, the work of observation begins. Some would say that nonverbal language tells more than half the human story. The first to give weight to these observances was none other than Charles Darwin in his book "The Expression of Emotions of Man and Animals" (1872) where he traced the roots of facial expressions in the nervous system. Sigmund Freud was strongly influenced by Darwin (p.51, Symington, 1986), linking us up with substantial professional ancestry from pre nineteenth century.

Our observations can be mundane to profound, such as how a client may use the space in the chair or couch to how this resounds within us. Client may sit forward, either when there is much to convey or they feel less connected and as the work settles, they may sit back, relax, hunch up, look away. We make mental notes, carefully attune ourselves and interpret. We, both client and therapist, take comfort from that unique human connectedness which comes from submitting to the therapeutic process, whatever the outcome, bringing our whole selves to it. It sets a map for the relationship - professional and intimate, all at once. In his book (1872) Darwin shares what he calls a 'trivial' observation,

"An old lady with a comfortable but absorbed expression sat nearly opposite to me in a railway carriage. Whilst I was looking at her, I saw that her depressors anguli oris became very slightly yet decidedly contracted... but as her countenance remained as placid as ever, I reflected how meaningless was this....and how easily one might be deceived. The thought had hardly occurred to me when I saw that her eyes became suffused with tears...some painful recollection.." (p.72).

He concludes that

"as soon as some melancholy thought passes through the brain....a thrill of nerve force is transmitted through habitual channels..... The above actions may be considered rudimental vestiges of the screaming fits which are so frequent and prolonged during infancy." (p.73).

With such ancestral Darwinian emphasis on non verbal language, can one continue to observe even in these pandemic times though it deprives one of the physicality of the work, the comfort of the human body in the room-the breathing and living human- is now a face in a computer or a voice in your ear, still living and breathing but not quite like being in the room together. In fact, precisely that, if through a screen.

Change of setting post Covid

Post Covid and new restrictions on personal meetings, we are online now. Fluctuating images and stuttering broadband can interrupt the most profound moments of the work. Add to this the potential flouting of sacred rules of confidentiality and space-the manning of doors and the control of external disturbances which we have cultivated carefully in the 'hothouse' of our consultancies. We frown when we hear a bell ring, we dismiss errant calls, we forbid the phone.

Now it is left to the clients/patients to man that door, to dismiss errant callers and perhaps speak to us on the phone ! Besides, our clients may not have a dedicated room for their therapy. Surely, it is one of the reasons why they come to us- for that precious physical space and protected time and the underlying sense of meaningfulness we give to non verbal communication and verbal thoughts and feelings.

Some may have domestic issues, makeshift arrangements - box rooms, sharing exclusive time with other family members in an 'official' room in the home, or small offices where chairs are upright so that computers are on desks and the supervisee or client may be looking down into their computers at you.

Darwinian trail

After a reluctant start, having overcome the contraction of my depressors anguli oris, I began to note my behaviour, in the footsteps of the great Darwin. Examining my own defences to the work, common, conscious and justified, dare I say, as some of them were, I set the professional self in motion. Firstly, I noted that I tried to get closer to the screen, then became uneasy and panicked when my supervisees came online and stared disconcertingly at me. My disconcertion, really. For the next time, I moved my usual chair from in front of the other chair to in front of the screen. Less disconcerting.

I noted that some clients moved closer, some sat back. It told its own story, unique to their work. The parallel of the mother and baby-their nonverbal language -comes to mind. Baby sitting on mother's lap or being close to mother's face and confiding or relating. At times, struggling to come closer and at other times, moving back, withdrawing. I sense their nervous energy ('the thrill of the nerve force flowing through habitual channels'-yes, Darwin) such as the client moving their legs under the desk excitedly, something they 'habitually' controlled in a more formal consultancy setting. Strain towards the screen while enthusing about something (perhaps to regulate the surge of emotions?) but so close to it that I can see the minute detail of facial skin and hair.

Others balance their laptops on their laps, putting one unwittingly close to their nether region!

Darwin (1872, p.5) relates how he jumped back from a puff adder who lunged at him, his 'reflex' action, though he was safe behind a thick glass plate in the Zoological Gardens. Among the obvious merits of a consulting room is the demerit that the client is in my room after all, an observed object who cannot be as natural perhaps as they might be in their own homes. As practitioners, we extol the merits of the therapeutic space we create but we physically don't exist substantially in the client's extraordinary day to day life (the very idea!) except as a point of orientation, which can lose its meaning during mutual crises-therapist and client in a pandemic.

From Darwin to the Winnicott Khan trail

Operating now from a place within my clients' homes, their computers, I find that the more unobtrusive I become in their space, the better- an observer. If they wriggle their feet excitedly below the desk during intense moments, what of it? If I find myself looking up at them from a laptop placed in a provocative south-of-the-body position, let it go. After all, the lack of physical proximity gives me a natural boundary so I am better able to observe rather than be too conscious of the 'habitual nerve-thrill-flow' of my body.

Sitting by my window, with natural light streaming in on a sunny April day, having overcome reflexive actions and settling to reflect, I found/find myself observing my client's hair or/and facial detail with possibly the same indolent attitude a mother might have whilst looking at her child's face, skin and other detail while they wrestle with some issue-things one didn't always observe before in the rush and tumble of life. A certain indolence creeps through me, abetted by the sun, like that of animals lazing in the sunlight trying to 'still' their restless young and tolerate their antics. While I look up at their anxious faces from lower regions (desk, laps) or sit back when they come forward in excitement, I am reminded of some lions I saw some time ago in their natural habitat, in repose, lying in the sun while their young frolicked around them, playfully biting, being shooed away and returning, the primitive interaction providing spontaneous energy, that 'thrill of nerve flow through habitual channels' from the first moment of life-for dogs, cats, lions, monkeys...all of us and we do it with our young, if we have the time, perhaps on a Sunday afternoon.

In his introduction (pg.xii) to Winnicott's book 'From Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis' Masud Khan writes,

"As I look back over some 20 years of working with Winnicott, what stands out vividly is his relaxed physicality and a lambent concentration in his person. Winnicott listened with the whole of his body and had keen unintrusive eyes that gazed at one with a mixture of unbelief and utter acceptance. A childlike spontaneity imbued his movements. Yet he could be so still, so very inheld and still."

I watch the childlike movements of my client while she adjusts me/laptop on her desk, the sunny April day streaming through the window, as she looks at me and smiles. The lambent light Khan is talking about is being felt on both sides of the computer, adding a little something to the terrifying bond of human relationships during an unprecedented crises. In Darwinian terms, it sent 'a nerve force through those rudimentary vestiges of bondings made during early infancy,' perhaps linking back to our earliest ancestors, animals.

References:

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