

Cultural Daily

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Terms of Endearment: Rupture, Empathy, and Repair

Larry Brooks · Wednesday, September 7th, 2016

Dr. Larry Brooks was killed after being struck by a car on May 5, 2020, while walking near his home in Los Angeles's Arts District. Larry contributed several articles to Cultural Weekly describing his signature work in Social Dreaming. We are returning these articles to our home page each week to celebrate Larry and his vision. This article was first published on September 7, 2016.

On more than one occasion, I have left home after an early morning argument with my wife needing to clothe myself in the comfort of therapeutic garb and do for others what seems so difficult to do for myself: break the “doer/done to” cycle of he said/she said. So I prepared for my first client of the day who I had not seen in several weeks because of vacations. He is a thoughtful individual who has been struggling in a marriage characterized by years of chronic conflict. Prior to my vacation, he had reached a bleak point following a bad argument with his wife that led to a brief separation.

In the morning session, he described feeling much better, and felt that he had turned a corner. He described how he had gone to a bookstore and bought a copy of Thich Nhat Hahn's book, *Anger Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*. He told me that the turning point occurred when he was able to shift focus from how he was being hurt by his wife to how he was hurting her. This turn seemed so simply stated, yet significant. From this perspective he was able hear his wife's words not as criticisms but as statements about how she felt. In the past, he saw himself as a passive victim, a nice guy who always accommodated and tried to be helpful. In reactions to his wife's perceived “criticisms” he felt devalued, hurt, and victimized and would lash out.

As I listened to my client, I felt the unsettling recognition that he could be describing me. The thought occurred to me that perhaps I had something to learn not only from my client but also from my wife.

The shift from looking at how one is being treated to how one is treating another represents a radical change in perspective, a relic of ancient wisdom enabling one to move from a self-centered focus to an empathic one. Making this shift is a herculean task for the heroic ego that reacts to psychological injury with flight, fight or submission, each with its concomitant distorted view of reality. This shift involves moving outside the ego's comfort zone into a space influenced by the other. It challenges the ego's determination to be right and its need to feel safe. It opens the doors to mutuality.

“Wear the projection” is a supervisory suggestion made to psychotherapists in training. It is a way to teach empathy. It asks them to take in and absorb what the client says about them in order to understand their client's perspective. Wearing the projection is antidote to being trapped in an endless “doer-done to” cycle. It is a complex effort of self-reflection that involves vulnerability, openness to others, and the ability to step back from the emotional heat of a discussion.

Wearing the projection is a process that can be broken down for illustration into a set of steps that operationalizes empathy. First, empathy emerges out of a certain mindset that I am calling psychological mindedness. This mindset understands that reality is a blend of multiple perspectives and that one's thoughts and feelings reflect one's subjectivity and not reality. Second, it involves realizing when one is emotionally activated and its impact on experience. Emotional activation is typically a call to action, hardwired in our brains. Psychological mindedness recognizes activation as a signal to pause and think about what is happening. Why am I feeling so riled? Am I overreacting? Reflection is critical to empathy in that it leads to the understanding that one's emotional reactions might be influenced by past experiences that color present perception. Third, having done the difficult work of thinking about experience, one is ready to wear the projection. Wearing the perception can feel like putting a shoe on the wrong foot. This discomfit represents the experience of change that involves breaking down the attachment to old and faulty ideas and sorting through the debris to discover new ideas. And this discomfit needs to be tolerated in order to empathize with another and learn from experience.

Wearing the projections leads you into the realm of paradox and possibility. Making room for the other's perspective entails mental wizardry to create a space that didn't exist within the impasse of "doer-done-to." My wife and I are having a heated discussion. She says, "Stop yelling at me." I reply automatically, "I am not yelling." The conversation can devolve into a she said/I said impasse. What if we are both right? We are both activated. I am not yelling in my mind and I am yelling in her ears. If we both recognize this duality, then we can move forward. If neither of us recognizes this, then we are stuck. If only one of us recognizes this, then there is an asymmetry that most likely reflects a fault line in the relationship.

Christopher Bollas, a psychoanalyst, described in The Shadow of the Object the "self-analytic element" which is the capacity to receive "news from the self" in relationship to others. This idea of "news" represents the capacity to understand something new and different about oneself in relation to others. Relationships, especially close relationships, can be seen as x-rays of the psyche that provide valuable information about the self.

Often we are either too busy seeking approval or too defended to be open to receiving "news." Bollas suggests that in between projection, the casting out of pre-conceived notions of how things are and introjection, the taking in something you already know there is evocation, which involves the creation of a new mental experience. Vulnerability, empathy, and evocation provide the possibility for both personal transformation within a relationship and resolution of interpersonal conflict.

The Lithuanian philosopher Emanuel Levinas has articulated a radical relationship between individuality and empathy in his book *Alterity and Transcendence*. He states, "It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I'." This idea translates into a principal of "hospitality" where one puts aside one's assumptions, prejudices, beliefs, and convictions, and stretches to view oneself and others through the eyes of the Other.

How have I hurt my wife? What is valid in the "accusations" that she has communicated to me over the years: "you're don't realize how angry you are; you're too sensitive, you take everything I say as criticism?" If I were to think of her comments not as criticisms, but as statements having valuable information, what would I learn about myself? Is there something that I have not been able or ready to see? Am I that angry person who can only see how he has been hurt?

I ended my morning session and still couldn't shake the anger-hurt. My wife had said mean things. She needs to recognize how she hurt me and what her role is in our conflict. I could not see beyond my pain. Justifying my position, obsessing about the things she said fed the anger that kept the wound alive.

My schedule could not have been better planned. My next appointment was a couple that I had not

seen for a while. For years they had engaged in brutal verbal battles that had resisted the efforts of a battalion of well-intentioned therapists. The viciousness of their accusations and cross-accusations were painful to sit with. It seemed that they couldn't talk to each other even in a therapist's office without activating rage. They were bound to each other, both unwilling to end the relationship.

At my wits end, short of terminating what seemed like futile work, I set a limit on their abusive conversation in my office. At the end of a very disturbing session, I said that we needed to change how we worked. I forbade them to make comments about what their spouse was doing or not doing to them and insisted that they could only communicate how they were feeling, their emotional pain. I asked them to shift focus from what was being done to them to what in their nature was being activated in the relationship.

Deeply pained by the cruelty of their rage, I wanted to understand my anger. "Wear the projection of an angry, overly sensitive man," I said to myself. Yes my wife had said hurtful things, and yes there was validity to my anger. And yes the hurt was interwoven with past hurts that I had been carrying with me that were not always apparent.

So I tried on the projection. I went through a day remembering and forgetting to notice my reactions to people and things. I became increasingly aware over many days and many cycles of rupture and repair with my wife of two antithetical poles of my personality: One pole collected frustration, burdens, hurt, and disappointment. It operated quietly, secretively, and semi-autonomously. It felt anger, resentment and bitterness and acted accordingly. It generated self-justified explanations for its behavior. And it didn't communicate directly. The other pole was infinitely giving and forgiving, patient and willing to go the extra mile. However, this quality wasn't simply a virtue, but a duty that insistently tugged at me to do the right thing.

The two poles of my multi-sided-self neither knew each other nor realized that there was more to me than these two sides. This was news! The space of possibility had been sandwiched between accommodating and resenting. Seeing things exclusively from either side led to misperceptions of others and to a foreshortening of my self. Getting into this middle ground opened up the possibility of discovering "news" from myself and from others.

To my surprise the couple took my prescription to heart. In the next session, the wife was able to describe how at the core of her pain was the feeling of being overwhelmed, alone and abandoned. She had felt the burden of having to do it all by herself throughout her childhood. Feeling burdened in the marriage enraged her, and she would become volatile. Her husband stated how he hated unreliable and volatile women because of his childhood growing up with an alcoholic mother. Seeing signs of instability in his wife freaked him out, leading to rage.

Before this couple could recognize what they were doing to each other, they needed to feel their own pain and not simply as a reaction to their spouse. They also needed desperately to have their pain felt and understood by their spouse. When they were able to do this, they were able to see how their behavior not only contributed to their conflict, but also perpetuated their own suffering. Past hurt had been fused with the present in such a deep way that their partner had come to represent everything that was hurtful in their life.

The ability to transcend one's limitations and empathize with others bridges the gap that separates and alienates individuals, and feeds the conflicts that threaten our world. Empathy undoes the "doer-done-to" dynamic that perpetuates cycles of endless repetition. It addresses the Other and allows for the possibility of mutual recognition and connection.

Image: 'In the middle of it all' created by Andi Jetaime. Used under Creative Commons license.

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