Resonance – the gift of connection

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It was a warm bright day today, and when the sun shines and warms England, everything around feels much happier. As I am sitting here, I listen to Itzhak Perlman playing Mendelssohn's violin concerto, which moves me every single time.

A few years ago Perlman played in London and my wife and I went to see him. Perlman limped towards the stage, leaning on his cane and looking somewhat helpless as he stepped into the conductor stand. I must admit that I was slightly disappointed. But then Itzhak put down the cane and lifted his violin and his body changed at once, as if something in him awoke to greet a new sun; and everything around us seemed to cease from moving, both the audience and orchestra were almost unnaturally silent.

When Itzhak Perlman plays you forget his disability. If you wish to learn about trance, listen to Perlman playing. And I thought, back then during the concert, of Milton Erickson. Stephen Gilligan (my teacher and Erickson's student) tells how people were often disappointed upon their initial meeting with the great Milton – here he was, sitting in front of them in a chaotic house, an old, tired man in a wheelchair. That was until he looked at you directly and spoke to you, and then you forgot all judgements and disappointments and become entranced in an overwhelming feeling that this man knows you, that this man knows you intimately, and that he is really interested in your well-being. And you felt, in your very essence, that all will be well.

But it was not Milton Erickson that I wanted to write about, but Itzhak Perlman. And not about his violin playing but instead about his conducting skills. Perlman conducted at times with his eyes closed. The entire orchestra played for him, every musician was playing to honour him, and he felt them, each one of them. At times, from the audience, it seems that Itzhak Perlman can read minds, responding to a musician before he or she was even calling for a response, correcting errors before they were made, bridging rhythms before they lost harmony.

Both of my teachers, Stephen Gilligan and Silke Ziehl, have this quality. It seems that neither of them teaches hypnosis, bodywork or psychotherapy, but they are both wizards, mind readers, exercising

magic. How do you do it? I wanted to ask Itzhak Perlman who danced light legged in the river of conduction, how do you feel your orchestra and respond to every musician so accurately? How do you do it, I asked Silke and Steve on more than one occasion, and the answer was always the same.

We are not thinking, but instead surrender to the therapeutic relationship; we sharpen our intention to our own bodies – to our sensations, our thoughts, to the images that appear in our mind's eyes.

And indeed, I think that Perlman has done something similar, surrendering to his orchestra, daring to allow each and every one of his musicians to touch him, to be close to them and intimate with them. And when we surrender to the other, when we take that huge risk (to get hurt, to look stupid, to admit our need for connection, to make a mistake) and are with another person, present and open to connection, something special begins to take place.

Somehow, from a relational stance we are more able to 'sense' the other through our own bodies. Our nonverbal communication becomes richer; our thoughts – as social animals – are interconnected with the other. From within this connection we open to a 'relational field' that includes you and me. You can understand the spirit of this if you imagine an intimate dinner with a loved one, accompanied by a feeling that the other 'gets' you intuitively, that something special happens between the two of you.

This sensation, which is at the base of every societal organisation (not only human organisation, other mammals share this too), is sometimes called in the psychotherapeutic field resonance (or, in more psychodynamic fields, transference). Empathy (the capacity to feel what the other does) is one type of resonance, and gifted therapist – like Milton Erickson, Stephen Gilligan and Silke Ziehl practice and continuously fine-tune their resonating skills.

On the train journeys to London (I live outside London and commute to London regularly) I sometimes practice resonance skills. Sitting comfortably, I centre myself – mindfully becoming conscious of my thoughts and sensations, images and internal dialogues, feelings and memories. I try to artificially separate myself as much as possible from my surroundings. And then I return. I choose someone sitting next to me and allow myself to be in relationship with him or her – neither saying anything nor staring, but simply directing my attention and intention to this person. Once more, I return to attend my own sensations and thoughts – have they changed? I assume (as system theorist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson taught Erickson) that 'new' thoughts may indicate relational changes. That once in a relationship I can respond – and indeed experience - something that may happen to the 'other', who is a stranger to me, who is sitting by me in the train. Sometimes I look at the woman who sits besides me and my nose itches – a second later she sneezes. I may be suddenly

enveloped by great sadness, and the eyes of the man over there moisten.

The use of resonance – or of body-countertransference - is also a central therapeutic practice for me. I open into the relationship and sense what takes place in me. When a strong feeling appears – I check it with the client. The sensations are always real and valid, are always relevant. The interpretations that I give them are not always correct – and calibrating the capacity to resonate is a skill that requires commitment and practice. But with time, my resonance skills get stronger. I learn to recognise 'colours and tastes' of feelings and thoughts. I learn to trust the information my bodymind is giving me, and doubt the interpretations – it is always worthwhile to check with the other.

This is how, for example, I frequently recognise bulimic clients. They enter my consulting room and sit down, and I feel fat and ugly and sometimes can taste puke. This is not a god given gift, not mind-reading, this isn't wizardry – this is a skill; a skill that can be (and should be) developed and cultivated. This is a skill that can deepen the level of communication for any person who works with others.

In order to learn to resonate we should first attend our own bodies, our own breath. The capacity to 'come home' to ourselves is central to noticing others. Before Perlman looks at the orchestra he closes his eyes, and I can swear that he enters a trance. We should be willing to connect to another – allowing whatever they sensations, thought and feelings to touch us (even if these are unpleasant); and to do so – we need to be willing to surrender, to be human, to connect.

Animals resonate easily. They do not speak (well, not like us they don't), and their ability to promptly and accurately respond to external events may determine if the animal will live or die. Even pets resonate accurately and naturally: however much we can fool our partner, our dog can tell when we're under the weather. Animals that are often exposed to danger are experts in resonating. It is enough for one gazelle to sense a leopard in motion for a huge wave of hypervigilance and alertness to wash over the entire herd. I believe that the ability to resonate, the wisdom of the gazelles, is one of the most significant and most influential aspects in interpersonal relationships.

The focus on thinking in psychotherapy has sadly driven us away from this organic relational tool, and as relational psychotherapy becomes more central – we may notice that resonance skills will assume a pivotal space in training.

I am planning to bring a workshop about resonance to the UK in 2008. I call the workshop 'deciphering the wisdom of the gazelles'. Having an experiential engagement with resonance, the importance of this skill becomes evident, and it is easy to appreciate and be intrigued by our own innate resonance skills. Good resonance skills

are crucial for communicational excellence. Itzhak Perlman could not have conducted as he does without resonance, Milton Erickson would not have become such a brilliant therapist without it. Bill Clinton would not have become a president without his amazing capacity to respond and 'feel' where his companion was in relation to him. Good salespeople, advertisers and politicians all need good resonance skills. And it is important to remember that resonance is not simply a technique, but a skill – a skill that requires time, and effort – cultivated effort.

I remember a story about the young Itzhak Perlman, who was wondering, lost in the streets of New-York on a way to a concert. 'Excuse me sir,' he urgently asked an old man sitting on a bench 'how do I get to Carnegie Hall?' The old man looked at him and smiled, 'very simple my young man: practice, practice, and practice.'

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