

In the land of no mirrors

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How can we tell our existence without being witnessed by another?

How can we tell our reality without seeing ourselves reflecting in another's eyes?

How can we know our goodness without being blessed by another?

Lily is a truly amazing client, who in her late fifties made the transition from childhood to adulthood through surrendering to the grieving process and - in the therapeutic space - developing a secure attachment. She calls me DA - Daddy Asaf.

The following piece is not strictly a case study, although it is as close to it as one can get. In my work with Lily, we have often used metaphors and story; when regressive transference journeys were in place, stories seemed to be the easiest, most powerful way in. And when she asked me one day to make a story up just for her, I did. And this is her story, Lily's story. I hope you can enjoy it, but even more so - that you can connect with it, and let it touch you.

In the land of no mirrors a brother and sister grew up in a

big house, which was surrounded by a big garden, which was surrounded by a big wall. There were no mirrors in that land, no reflecting surfaces of any kind whatsoever, and the brother and sister had to tell each other about one another, so they would know what they were like.

Just consider this for a moment, never having a loving voice to echo your lovability, a kind look to reflect your worth, a gentle touch to resonate your existence.

Outside the wall was a whole big world, and the girl and boy were only little, and so the big world outside was scary. And the mother told the girl: what a little girl you are, really! And the girl lowered her eyes, as if kowtowing. And in the rare times when her father was around he told the girl: but, what a little girl you are. And

the girl lowered her look. Even the gardener told her so, and she lowered her eyes before him and went to play with her brother.

She and her brother loved playing in the garden. They played with and among the trees, and the bushes, but more than everything they loved the flower garden. What a beautiful garden it was! There were flowers of all kinds there, tulips and daffodils, poppies and gerberas, alliums and curcumas, birds of paradise and many others. And the brother and sister loved playing with the flowers, and they would tell them how special and beautiful and precious they were.

The gardener was proud of the garden, as were the mother and father, but the girl and boy cherished it, and more than all flowers, they cherished and loved the peony flowers, which decorated the garden like a promise for infinity. Their petals seemed to have no end, as if there was always one more layer hidden beyond the one you have just found, encouraging you to look even more deeply inside, finding those secrets in a language which is sometimes clear and at others yet unknown to you.

Within the flowerbeds, unseen by their parents or the garden, the brother and sister would look at each other's eyes to see their own reflection, and rejoiced in learning how good, how interesting and playful, how lovely they both were.

In the land of no mirrors it was difficult to remember who you

were, and the girl was often confused by the contradictory messages she received – her parents and the gardener saying one thing, her brother and the flowers saying another. What a difficult task to find out who you are! But she liked the tiny voices of the peonies, and she liked the smiling eyes of her brother and so she mostly chose to believe them.

And then, one day, her brother died. He fell off a tree while they were playing and died. And with him, the garden started dying as well, and the girl's grief was doubled. She missed her brother terribly, and there was nobody to tell her she was good or just how kind or interesting or lovely she was. As far as she knew, she was just silly and little now.

So the voices of the mother and the father and the gardener changed pitches and volumes and textures, and at times the girl found herself telling herself the very same thing: I'm just a lost little girl. Had her brother been there, had the flowers been there, they would have told her otherwise; but they were not. And the inner voice and outer voice become merged, and the truth obscured by the foggy absence of mirrors. Who shall reflect you? Who shall commit to really see you when you need to be blessed?

The garden was dying and no matter how hard the gardener tried, the flowers still refused to show up with their colourful outfits and the trees refused to share their delightful fruits. One day, the girl saw that her

beloved peonies were dying, and she knew that the big house and the big garden and the big wall were no longer home, and that she had to leave.

At night, she dug a small piece of earth around her favourite peony, and carried it with her as she opened the heavy gate and left the house. And for a long, long time she walked. She saw many sunrises and many sunsets and her legs grew weary; and then, when it was away enough from the big house and the big garden and the big wall, the girl made a good home for her peony, and told it how beautiful and precious it was and fell asleep by the peony, to guard it from bad dreams. And her dreams were silent, for there was nobody there to tell her who she was.

But when the girl woke up – she couldn't believe her eyes! The wall was once more surrounding her, as well as the garden and the house. 'How did it follow me so far?' she wondered. Her mother and father and the gardener were not fazed by her departure, and they, once again, told her how silly and little she was. Her brother was not there to tell her differently, and the flowers were dying too. The girl watched the garden dying, bleak and empty and a sudden understanding hit her – when the peony will die, so would she.

The girl had no choice; her heart started believing all these words, and her kowtowing gave her a backache. And so, resolved to save herself, she

sneaked to the gardens in the middle of the night, dug out her peony and, for the second time, left the house and the garden and the wall. She walked for many weeks, keeping the peony alive and as safe as she could, and when she thought she was far enough, she dug a home for the peony and watched it carefully. Once more the house and the garden and the wall followed her, bleak and empty. The same voices, the same walls, the same lingering despair.

How many times can she uproot the peony without killing it? But the garden was dying, and she was tired, just so tired. She had no other choice really, and so one night she took her peony again, and left the house. And once more, as soon as she put the flower in the ground the wall followed her and the dying garden and house were there too. But the girl was anxious to keep the peony alive, because she didn't want to die just yet.

And how moving it is to see the forces in us that insist on integrity, that cling to hope and to life. These are not the only forces – there are also those forces in us trying to create chaos and destruction, to be seduced into death and only seeing darkness. But there is also that relentless inner knowing that your life is sacred; that you are responsible to honour this sacredness and find out – what is it that life wants of you? And some times, there is only so much you can do.

And so, when she came to take the peony out for the sixth, or

maybe the seventh time, the girl noticed that it was dying. And she gave up. She gave up, and just sighed lying besides the peony. And in that last night of this girl's life she dreamt she was a peony – growing from a seed and sending a shoot out into the world. It was a long journey from the depth of the ground outside to the open space, and she had to make her way through stones and stubborn earth and earthworms. She dreamt of how she spread her stem and grew leaves and infinite numbers of petals, so that even the most secret of secrets could have a safe place; so that even the most peculiar thought could have a safe place. And the flower she was blossomed with all its glory. And then she died, but just before she died – the wind blew the seeds from her dying body into the air and in her last breath, she could sense new life; once more a seed.

In the morning the peony died, and the girl was sad, but also excited as she picked a tiny seed and held it in her hand like a promise of love. The garden was foggy and dew covered what was left of the leaves and it made the cobwebs glimmer mysteriously and the girl knew something new.

The gardener came to the garden in one of his early

morning tasks, trying to bring life to the dying garden. 'You slept outside again, you silly little girl', he said. And the girl walked towards the gardener and stood so close that she could really see him. He was old, she realised for the first time, and bent. She looked at him, and his eyes grew bigger and she could see herself reflecting in them. She was lovely. 'I am not silly, and I am definitely not a girl', she said when she looked at him – and this was true. She was a woman. And the garden woke up with her speaking her truth with a sense of relief. After all, the woman held a seed in her palm.

And the girl went to the house, and searched for her mother, who was an old woman. She had never noticed that before, how odd. 'What are you doing here, bringing all this mud into the house, you silly little girl?' And the woman looked at her mother, who was small and frail and approached her until they could see each other closely. 'I am not silly, mother', she replied, 'and I am definitely not a girl. I am a woman now.'

A woman. And she held the peony seed close to her heart and saw herself as clear as a mirror can be. 'I am a woman now', she thought, and the land of no mirrors finally had one.

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