

Dan Stern's Voyage of Discovery in the Interpersonal World of Human Movement, and the Gifts He Brought to Us

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SYNOPSIS

Dr Daniel N. Stern worked for 50 years as psychiatrist, psychotherapist and child psychologist. His sensitive researches have transformed our conception of the infant Self, and how from birth we strive to grow our understanding and skills in intimate connection with the affective life of others, creating narratives of dynamic imagination in movement. His theory strengthens the relations between different traditions of therapeutic care, and scientific understanding of how self-confidence in learning grows in mutual awareness.

The news that the psychiatrist and developmental psychologist Dr Daniel N. Stern died in Geneva, on Monday 12 November last year, brought deep sadness, but his person and the spirit of his sharing and teaching are still with us and give us delight.

I know Dan Stern as a sensitive, generously attentive, playful and eloquent man whose medical studies had led him from psychopharmacology to psychoanalytic psychiatry, and then to the natural science and philosophy of infant communication. Unable to accept the method of a talking therapy that asked a patient to remember and name affective injuries in a dimly remembered or entirely imagined infancy, doubting the authenticity or benefit of what may be reported, he became committed to a study of how real infants communicate with their mothers and fathers, and how they change. He began a search for the creative principles of human vitality and the intuitive sharing of intentions and experiences with 'affective attunement' of movements of narration (Stern et al., 1985; Stern, 1999), upon which all development, cultural education and effective therapy must depend. Recovering memories of how, as a watchful youngster, he felt he could understand an infant's confusion and seeking for companionship better than adults seemed to do, he decided to investigate the beginnings of that companionship. He believed it must originate in the pulse and narrative of experience that needs no words,

but that grows by life-expectant changes in memory and imagination to appreciate the richer understanding that talk in intimacy with others can bring, as long as it remains sincere and accepts 'moments of meeting' as gifts of common feeling.

Dan and I met in the early 1970s, and became friends with common interest in this immediate communication of intentions, interests and feelings between a mother and baby, where two imaginative minds meet in instantaneous appreciation of the rhythm and grace of expressive movements and sounds. Dan said it all in the title of a paper published in 1974; 'Mother and infant at play: the dyadic interaction involving facial, vocal and gaze behaviors'. In the Preface to his book *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*, he describes how he shared the work with colleagues at Columbia University and Harvard, appreciating the importance of new work on infant awareness that led far from the vision of the inexperienced and autistic ego dependant only on maternal regulation of vital state. He writes, 'This book attempts to create a dialogue between the infant as revealed by the experimental approach and as clinically constructed, in the sense of resolving the contradiction between theory and reality' (Stern, 1985/2000: ix).

By the 'experimental approach' Dan means the findings of new research that allowed the infant to freely express awareness and discriminations by acting as the 'operator' in tests of perception, and above all, by what was revealed by microanalysis of natural engagements of expressions between infants and parents exploiting the technology of frame-by-frame measurement of movements in movies. His first paper (Stern, 1971) demonstrated the split-second timing of interactions of gaze between mother and three-and-a-half month old twins as they made up games together.

Wonderful things came to light in the late 1960s as Dan was completing his residency in psychiatry at Columbia. It was a moment of change, with daring theories of human imaginative embodied vitality – after the *Philosophy in a New Key* of Susan Langer, Jerome Bruner's 'new look' in understanding the creativity and values of what we perceive, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of child psychology and pedagogy, and Laban's principles of dance and movement notation. Detailed examination of films with sound by Birdwhistle and Condon of how adults in conversation express their eager messages full of feeling and at the margins of consciousness had shown the split-second precision of 'self-synchrony' between all

the gestures of a speaker's own body – head and eyes, hands, face and singing voice – and the equally precise 'inter-synchrony' as their bodies improvise engagement in chat.

Applying the same technology to decipher the innocent communication of infants, Dan and I had a small company of others – including the anthropologist and linguist Mary Catherine Bateson (1979), who discovered and named a mother's 'proto-conversation' with a 9-week-old with its 'exquisite ritual courtesy'; the startling report of William Condon and Lou Sander (1974), who proved that a newborn may naturally synchronise movements of the hands with the rhythm and intonation of adult speech; Hanus Papousek's demonstration that infants express emotions of pleased satisfaction or grumpy disapproval, as they succeed or fail in attempts to predict effects of their actions (Papousek, 1967); and Brazelton's demonstrations of the self-regulating awareness of the newborn as person-seeking contact (Brazelton, 1961, 1979) – all had discovered a richness of improvised understanding and emotional investment in the actions of infants, and an intersubjective synchrony of motive impulses that psychology and medical science appeared not only to have been ignorant of, but unwilling to accept. This surge of new evidence that started in the 1960s was recorded in two books at the end of the next decade: *Studies in Mother–Infant Interaction*, edited by Rudolph Schaffer, and *Before Speech: The Beginning of Human Communication*, edited by Margaret Bullowa (1979).

True, both brain scientists and physiologists, with paediatricians, had become interested in the arousal

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of levels of activity and awareness both before and after birth, in the co-operation between the infant and mother to support the energy of the infant's fragile and dependent life, and how an emotional attachment should be nurtured. But the imaginative participation in games for their own sake, as play with inventive states of moving within mutual awareness, before knowledge of the world of things could be shared – that was an uncharted mystery demanding an exploration. Dan became a leader of that adventure. He had a choreographer's sense of the range of energy and grace transmitted by artful body movement. With his colleagues in New York he took up the methods and approach of 'kinesics' – the new science of expressive movements and their natural life in conversations, how the non-verbal gestures and expressions gave interpersonal meaning beyond what understanding and reference the words can convey. He was dissatisfied with the verbal interrogation to recover repressed memories of infancy in psychoanalysis because he felt the natural vital intelligence and sociability of the real infant author was neither properly consulted, nor respected as still present in the adult who was struggling to bring past conflicts and deceptions to life by talking about them, unable to find intimate harmony of ideas with the therapist. He became committed to a psychotherapy of lived experience and 'moments of meeting', one that gained power of understanding from knowledge of the real, present mother–infant dialogues and games, their habits and recollections from the past, and the growth of their imagined futures.

In his 1985 book Dan had presented a theory of stages of development of the self that begin before words, and

that remain as the foundations of future 'life stories'. He was compelled by his theory of the dynamic interpersonal vitality of the first relationship to seek a form of therapy that values non-verbal intimacy of ideas and feeling-full stories, and moments of meeting where both self and other and the relationship can be guided to more hopeful and creative relation. In 1999 Dan took a leading part in the announcement of a group of psychotherapists who accepted that emotional foundations of self-awareness and self-confidence in relationships could be given new strength by open acceptance of momentary expressions of hope and conviction, and developed in shared dynamic emotional narratives (Stern et al., 1999). Dan conceived these 'moments of meeting' as critical for the making and remembering of 'emotional narrative envelopes' in dialogue. He has also assisted recognition and treatment of distressed mother–infant relationships, in recognition of the radically new approach to paediatrics developed by T. Berry Brazelton. With his wife Nadia Bruschweiler-Stern, a pediatrician and child psychiatrist in Geneva, Switzerland, Dan wrote a sequel to his *The Motherhood Constellation* (1995) to support a mother through her adventure – *The Birth of Mother: How the Motherhood Experience Changes You Forever* (Stern, Bruschweiler-Stern and Freeland, 1998).

The great gift Dan brings us is faith in the imaginative gift of expressive movement that opens the inner life of hopes and discoveries of the infant person to the attention and interest of other persons, the mother being the first 'other'. In the introduction to the 2000 edition of *The Interpersonal World* he says:

One consequence of the book's application of a narrative perspective to the non-verbal has been the discovery of a language useful to many psychotherapies that rely on the non verbal. I am thinking particularly of dance, music, body, and movement therapies, as well as existential psychotherapies. This observation came as a pleasant surprise to me since I did not originally have such therapists in mind; my thinking has been enriched by coming to know them better. (Stern, 2000: xv)

In his last book, *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology and the Arts* (Stern, 2010), Dan has made a bible for all humanistic and art therapies. He gives the essential rhythms of life a central role in consciousness and well-being of human bodies and minds, and in the flourishing of all our artful communities with their treasured rituals and stories, and the tragedies to be overcome. Dan was long associated with the New York City Ballet, and theatre artists, dancers and

choreographers were among his friends and admirers. They were enthralled by his microscopic investigations of how mothers and infants invent together in play.

Like Charles Darwin, Dan has described a new vision of human nature. His influence is alive and will grow for all who feel the need to understand the nature of a sympathetic awareness that enables us to be connected in all we know and do, and that makes it possible for us to tell stories that are true because we have invented them together. **S**



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