

Silence and Intimacy

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I believe the idea of intimacy is usually associated with a feeling of serenity, wellbeing and inner peace. Intimacy, thus, becomes a desirable good. But how can we describe and obtain this good?

To analyze one's intimacy, it is first necessary to understand the person him/herself. The first idea that arises is that a person's capacity for intimacy comes from the quality of their contact with their own inner world - their experience of intimacy with themselves. At peace. At peace with their memories and their feelings, with their certainties and doubts, with experiences they have already lived and the aspiration for what they have not yet achieved. At peace with the limits of what they know and with the desire to learn what they do not.

This is by no means an easy target. In order to understand it, it is important not to forget the enormous and constant challenge of the perception of the outside world and of a person's surroundings. In this space, other human beings occupy a significant position. I believe the capacity to be alone is at the foundation of the capacity to be happy and intimate with another. In addition, the capacity to be alone demands a certain way of living silence.

Everything begins with the relationship between mother and baby. This structures the baby's relationship with the world from the moment of immense sensory impact upon birth. This inaugural experience is harbored and mediated by the mother, who strives to understand and respond to it in a harmonious, opportune and sensitive manner. This situation is conventionally called the "hallucinatory satisfaction of the wish," and it initiates the construction of the person and the vast process of understanding the world.

For each one of the baby's sensory discomforts – like needs for food, for example – the mother, "feeling what it feels," provides a solution that allows the baby's return to a "good state." With a repetition of this encounter – an encounter of intimacy – we can imagine that the baby, when faced again with the same discomfort, wishes to re-encounter the satisfaction obtained in the "past," which the attentive mother brings into the "present." This whole process takes place through a tuning of the mother's voice and care to the baby's reactions and signals. Thus, the beginnings of our inner world lie in the experience of contact with someone else. Our story starts when the silence is broken by a voice speaking to us.

I base my ideas here on rich psychoanalytic theorizing regarding these fundamental processes of infant development. Among the many works I can cite, I emphasize the chapter *L'Originare dans la Psychanalyse* in André Green's *La Diacronie en psychanalyse*. According to Green, the initial experience is sensory, and then, little by little, it acquires a *mental* or psychological dimension from memories and from *imaginative elaboration* (Winnicott) of recalled experiences. It is in this process of registering *lived experience* and "thoughts" about it, that the toddler discovers the *other*, who serves as an intermediary between it and the world. Initially, the other is, for the child, the rest of the world.

Thus, the primitive individual experience starts to be organized under the form of a **relationship**, which is a form of contact specific to humans, and with characteristics very different from animal bonding. Later on, the child begins to develop its self-knowledge, which depends on the general adult reactions (above all the mother and father) towards it. But it depends especially on the affection

received by the child, the qualities recognized in it, the adults' perception of their development, and the specific future envisioned for the child.

The other is discovered as distinct and different, although similar, from the moment the child starts to realize that the adult has an *inner world* much like its own. That is to say, a world made up of feelings and desires, states of pleasure and suffering, providing the adult with an experience equivalent to that of the child. Significant contact is established with this other, a communication system is organized, starting from the exchange of affection and fantasies, later including verbal expression.

When contact becomes significant, a communication system emerges spontaneously, initially directed to provide wellbeing, satisfy wishes and avoid displeasure. Exchanging affection is a fundamental element of reaching pleasure in a human relationship. Each person has an idea of the type of affection they will offer to another as well the type of affection the other will offer them. The child thus forms an idea of the type of person they are themselves and the types of people others are. This happens through what they feel they are to the other and the other is to them.

Generally speaking, we can say that from birth we register various types of contact, constituting a storage of memories that leads to learning. We learn to know ourselves and the surrounding environment.

However, from everything that we learn in the world, the only truly useful lessons are those that, besides knowing, we are also able to feel. These become part of us and contribute to the formation of who we are, i.e. contribute to our personal experience. Things we know, but which remain distant from what we feel, represent knowledge. Yet, they can never become wisdom, because known things only gain meaning if they are felt. I am referring to their most profound human meaning.

Things "known" because they have been "felt" can be truly assimilated, and these allow us to learn – in the profound sense of the word – with experience. This knowledge becomes part of personal heritage that cannot be lost, even if external actions to which it is connected are abandoned. It is acquired personal wealth. It becomes a new capacity, open to new acquisitions.

Lived and reflected experiences constitute a person's originality. They are essential in retaining the fruits of lived time, thus allowing life to be a coherent process. Shared memory becomes a heritage of emotion and wisdom that a person seeks to save and pass on. It is a process lived as a story that can be told and from which lessons can be learned.

Even supposedly objective knowledge is influenced by the subject's inner experience of it. The subject narrates and thinks, owns this continuous inner experience that provides the emotional background onto which this act of knowledge is applied, and where it acquires its true personal and communicable dimension. When shared, supposedly objective knowledge acquires a new objectivity, which emerges from the belief that our interlocutor has a degree of proximity to the issue. Throughout this process, the feeling that this experience is communicable – sharable within an intimate relationship – is once again more clearly outlined.

This brief presentation of what can be called "a story of the inner world" was necessary to be able to discuss the idea of intimacy with someone else, i.e. someone else's inner world. In an experience of intimacy, the other is felt as different, yet, at the same time, alike. In speaking to the other, it is not a matter of giving information, but rather communicating and sharing an inner experience. So, I return to the idea that to be alone is a premise for the construction of intimacy with someone else.

Nevertheless, it is important to notice that a person is never lonely, even when alone. Even then, they are accompanied by their own inner world, populated by a complex set of feelings, memories and experiences. All these feelings, memories and experiences are organized in a coherent whole by the person's sense of identity and personal narrative.

This is Sophia de Mello Breyner's understanding of Búzio, a lonely fisherman on a beach, standing still, with a blank stare: "At the top of the dune, Búzio was with the afternoon." Hence, he is not alone.

Two people can only build a true feeling of proximity based on the richness of the inner experience of each, and on the clarity of feeling and identity. The sensation experienced from this reciprocal clarity allows for calm knowledge and effective communication, with no confusion of the two different individuals. This builds a relationship of intimacy.

It is at this point that the wish for communicating with the other becomes actual. It is a wish to speak and listen that leads to the experience of proximity, resemblance and harmony- as if the two people were together listening to the same inner music, which is the affective resonance of lived experience. It is living difference at peace and with pleasure, based on the awareness of resemblance.

This experience of communication within intimacy can be desired and lived intensely. Mystics speak of it in a passionate way, considering it the encounter with your single object of desire. We can see this in Saint Augustine's famous quote, in which he affirms that God is the most intimate element to his own intimacy ("more inward than my innermost").

In order to be truly satisfactory, the encounter of intimacy with the other supposes availability for discoveries and capacity for listening. Such capacity, in turn, comes from the appeasing experience of encountering a good object of satisfaction internally, creating serenity and joy.

Intimacy demands knowing how to listen and be listened to. It demands a positive perception of the other's inner world, which happens in silence. Silence is the language of intimacy. This does not mean emptiness, but a living silence, in which both individuals are aware of each other's feelings and thoughts and share a space free of unnecessary words. This is in contrast to the uncomfortable silence of two people lacking real intimacy. It is in this meaningful silence that we listen to the voices of the past. And the quality of these voices determines the quality of the intimacy that will be established as a continuity of previous experience.

What is the relation between intimacy and love? The answer to this question is not simple. This complex theme cannot be properly analyzed in this text, but I will include a few short notes.

First of all, it is important to say that intimacy includes a dimension of affection that enriches proximity and gives a personal quality to lived experience. Love, too, aspires to that proximity. I have no doubt that a good relationship of love requires intimacy. However, a good relationship of this kind - one that lasts and grows - is not the most common relationship, I am afraid.

Love is a very complex dimension of human relations, despite certainly being the most desired one. Works of literature across the world are full of love stories, many of which are perilous and difficult. This happens because almost always love includes a demanding (and some times egocentric) wish for possession that complicates the relationship.

Second, it is important to distinguish “being in love,” or being infatuated, from love. Being in love is structured as a strong idealization of the other, who appears very vividly as being everything one has always wished for and who brings with them all that happiness can provide. The sensation of having obtained a good that will last forever and that cannot be taken from us is intense, yet not always true. In Vinicius de Moraes’ ironic but very real words: “Love is eternal for as long as it lasts.” The exhilarating sensation of intimacy that accompanies being in love can also end abruptly.

When the exhilaration of being in love is over, love can still remain if each person’s reality allows the other to keep a certain shared idealization. This consists of two main elements: first, affectionately appreciating the real qualities of the loved person, and second, an awareness of the value of their relationship and a desire to maintain it.

Other people could certainly speak about intimacy in different ways. This is how I would like to speak about intimacy here.

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References

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