

A Present Void, Full of Absence

Prof. Dr. phil. Yolanda Gampel

Coronavirus is nothing but a void: no smell, no color, no sound. I once described, when speaking about sociopolitical violence, Shoah, wars, tortures, cruelty (Gampel, 2005). using the metaphor of 'radioactive transmission' to describe those impacts of the external world that penetrate our psychic apparatus without us having any control of their entry, implantation and effects. Odorless and colorless, they present to us as a corporal illness, an emotional turbulence, a triggered drive, the difficulty to control a world that seems uncontrollable. But to use psychoanalytic interventions applied in situations of sociopolitical violence and to apply them to the changes that unexpectedly unfold because of the pandemic, is not correct: they are two completely different dimensions of life, with different times and spaces.

Since the late nineties some researchers of the socio-political-economic have spoken about the VUCA reality – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. We are now facing an event that contains the whole acronym, which has rendered manifest and notorious what we did not want to see.

To wander around the world requires a unique ability to begin doing what is necessary to respond to VUCA. Thinking about the ecological crisis and now the pandemic as an event is to reveal the limits of the scientific, theoretical and practical approaches as well as the psychoanalytic, which all believe they can respond to everything exclusively by means of reason.

If the pandemic is an event, then it must be thought as the advent of what is subtracted from all experience: un-founded and discontinuous, and open to infinite possibilities: one of them is to break with dogmatism (Badiou, 1980).

In the social context, the epidemic requires a new form of solidarity: organizing the family in the domestic space, with different time schedules, with previously unknown intimacy and continuity in terms of production and careers. It requires a 'lockdown' and splits the body from the social in small units. But it also leads to the new frequently-visited rooms of social media, jokes shared via WhatsApp, classes and conferences via Zoom.

Corona forced us to change the conditions of clinical work to virtual clinical technology: we have discovered a hidden potential in all this.

What will be the principal task of psychoanalysis and what is/will be the essence of being an analyst in these times?

I think that being an analyst lies in an ethos, an immanent and at the same time transcendental presence, in a space and a body that breathes, to learn to think, and allows the other to learn to think. The capacity to think one's own thoughts emanates from a stratum in the personality structure that is more profound than the area from which the choice emanates.

In our body of work with the psyche, we speak of the relationship between two or many, with internal objects, of therapeutic relationship. Do we speak of encounter? Probably in the first encounter of

consultation; then the relationship is of transference and countertransference, defenses and resistances, and by now we know everything of one another with no surprises.

Our lives are made of encounters. Look at the great encounter with the virtual; the surprise and the anguish provoked in many among us; both psychoanalysts and patients.

What would happen if we thought of every session as a new encounter and a discovery of the other, which is made possible through proximity or a little gap, without the one being overwhelmed by the other, with her various impositions.

Meeting is like an earthquake, with the danger of being discovered in what each one of us contains. How to overcome that earthquake, as well as the tension caused by our confinement, and our very existence, going outside in the presence of the other, getting outside of oneself to find the other, who is different from oneself – both of us getting outside our comfort zone and our confinement? In these times of corona, we exit our comfort zone, and we meet with our patient through the screen: a face-to-face that makes us discover what we did not see in the other, and I myself am the other, the one that my patient will discover in me – for example, all my wrinkles – and I see the other while I see myself. The other emerges in his otherness but I do, too. How much we learn.

And if only that could be each time – to see and listen to the patient like an other, without putting him in a category, without assimilating him, without expropriating him from what he has, but instead discovering him.

Meeting in each session with and in that breach, that gap, taking place in an ongoing relationship, would let something new emerge, the existence of which cannot be pinned down or described.

The question of analysis from the Bionian paradigm is the growth and use of the creative capacities. Not only rendering the unconscious conscious, or rearranging to a good end the different positions throughout life, or rethinking at every moment the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. For the subject who comes to us – individual, family or couple – growth and maturity would be facilitated, separating everything that obstructs their development, and joining the process without abandoning it. What matters is the efficacy of the immanency, that of adapting to the processes, as opposed to transcending them to impose an objective. By not paying attention to any rule, as Confucius asserted, the wise are always perfectly available to the demands of every situation.

There are sonorities, colors, odors, emotions that have not been totally actualized, in this abrupt change of the therapeutic context, which allows for the appearance of an inexplicableness of an emotional experience – an experience that is not expressed and that remains contained. I observe that the new frame created by the circumstances has created an emergence of emotions that has not been totally actualized. I would add that the sustained bond with its capacity for 'love' and the totally implausible situation, sanitizes the impressions. I think it is like poetry, which aims to capture the invisible within the visible, and evoke the void through images. In the therapeutic encounter, all this is reproduced without rhetoric, with the simplicity of expression.

We see in ourselves and in our patients' silent transformations, stemming from an imposed change in the way of being together and separate, a subtle change, almost imperceptible, from which those transformations result. A visible emergence is produced from a long invisible process.

We live in the society of contingency, in which we are always expecting the new; whatever breaks the

routine. It is the reality-show of the mass media, fashion, tourism – in which we are always expecting the unusual. This new situation made us return to the ordinary, think with our own thoughts, seek to face the favorable or unfavorable conditions that are the danger and the opportunity that we must know how to guide.

A clinical encounter

The family returned from another country during corona and had to isolate for two weeks. The parents request a consultation to help them with an anxious state of the boy, manifest in crazy ways of acting, reading, speaking. I had had a psychotherapeutic consultation of five sessions with this boy one year ago. M, 8 years, is restless, privileged and a know-it-all.

As if no separation had taken place, he starts talking a thousand miles per hour, without breathing; the breath that consists of exhaling and inhaling is cancelled by his anxiety, all his scientific knowledge about the pandemic.

I ask him if he could give me a minute, like a referee in a soccer play; he looks at me, gives me permission.

‘You started sharing everything you already learned about the virus, I am getting bored, and I propose a game. PLAY, yes, like we did during our encounters before your trip.’

‘But it is just a proposal,’ he tells me, ‘and if I get bored, we try something else.’

I propose that we both imagine that we have a rose in one hand and a cup in the other, and that we smell and inhale the rose’s perfume. He interrupts me: he has never smelled the perfume of a rose. In response, I tell him that when I was a girl, the roses had perfume, and now they do not because of pollution (to say something scientific).

‘I see,’ he says, ‘it’s true.’

‘Then you imagine it, and I will remember it.’

We inhale the rose and exhale the perfume into the cup. A breathing space is created, a breach, he loves it and we go on for a little while. He is sorry when we come to an end, and in the last moment he tells me:

‘Next time you explain to me the theory on which you rely.’

The uncontrollable void generated by corona anguishes, has no theory, and that is terrible for this child, who fills every space of frustration and pain with knowledge.

References

Badiou, A. (1980). *L'Etre et L'évènement*. Paris : Éditions Seuil.

Gampel, Y. (2005). *Ces Parents qui Vivent a Travers Moi: Les Infantes de Guerres*. Paris : Fayard.

[1] Badiou, A. (1980). *L'Etre et L'évènement*. Paris : Éditions Seuil.

Translation: Andrea Recarter