

KNOWING,
NOT-KNOWING
AND SORT-OF-KNOWING
Psychoanalysis and the
Experience of Uncertainty

Editor

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For the American Psychological Association
Division of Psychoanalysis (39)

London
KARNAC
2010

CHAPTER TWO

*The nearness of you*¹: Navigating selfhood, otherness, and uncertainty²

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In deciding how to write this Keynote Address I was helped by the two memorable Keynotes delivered by Adrienne Harris and Irwin Hoffman at the 2007 Division 39 Spring meeting in Toronto. I noticed while listening to them that the speaker is allowed remarkable personal latitude to write in whatever form and about whatever topic he or she chooses as long as it is germane to the theme of the conference. Harris (21 April, 2007) wrote autobiographically—and did it as though she were born to it—even though, as I discovered on my own, it is harder than it looks. In Hoffman’s Keynote (22 April, 2007), I was equally struck by the speaker’s freedom to write a position paper on whatever aspect of the theme he holds to be of most personal significance. In my own Keynote I have appreciatively drawn upon what they each did with this gift of freedom, by developing a perspective on “Knowing, Not-Knowing, and Sort-of-Knowing”

¹ Song title by Carmichael and Washington (1937).

² An earlier version of this chapter was presented 11 April, 2008 as a Keynote Address at the Twenty-Eighth Annual Spring Meeting of the Division of Psychoanalysis of the American Psychological Association, New York City.

that I believe speaks to the future of psychoanalysis in its relevance as a therapeutic process and in its value to society. I am going to begin autobiographically, using my relationship to writing as the point of entry.

More than thirty years ago, while I was still a candidate at the White Institute, I published what was to be my first piece of analytic writing (Bromberg 1974). It wasn't actually a paper but rather a brief introduction to a 1972 symposium that I had organized and chaired as President of the Harry Stack Sullivan Society, the candidate organization. As my first official act, I decided it would be a really appealing idea to hold an "Inter-institute Candidate Symposium" where candidates from some of the major institutes in New York City would present short papers on what it was like to be in training, and then engage each other in discussion.

The word "appealing" didn't turn out to be the best way of characterizing it, but the experience definitely contributed to my later understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of dissociation. I had waded into a hidden swamp of psychoanalytic politics that I managed to feel had nothing to do with *me* because I just "knew" that my plan, including the name I chose for the symposium, could never stir up dozing alligators. I naively named it, if you can believe, "The Rational and Irrational in Psychoanalytic Training". Being me, I "knew" that once the leaders of each institute realized how valuable this meeting would be to candidates everywhere, they would all back it wholeheartedly. Amazingly, and despite some grouchy alligators, the meeting took place, with the participation of candidates from different institutes, including two that were affiliated with the American Psychoanalytic Association. That symposium marked the start of my psychoanalytic writing and with it the start of my reputation as someone who didn't seem to "get" the way things work.

The symposium got published, the gators seemed to go back to dozing, and there it was—in print—including my two-page Introduction which ended by my quoting Allan Wheelis's (1958: 154) famously challenging statement that "Without institutional protection, [although] the early discoveries of psychoanalysis might have been diluted or dispersed ... when the issue is an idea, the institution that protects the infant is likely to stunt the child".

I said that I learned a few things from the experience, but "getting" how things work didn't seem to be one of them. Happily unaware

that I might have been lucky, I continued going pretty much my own way, more and more enjoying writing, and always puzzled by why I seemed to be raising the eyebrows, and at times the hackles, of some important folks at my own Institute. But I was never blocked from publishing in *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* (the journal published by the White Institute). If anything, I was made welcome by its then Editor, Art Feiner, to whom I will be forever grateful.

I am still not paying a lot of attention to "the way things work", and those who have read my writing over the years might have noticed how often I draw on something that could be considered a bit "edgy" for a psychoanalytic article. Just a few examples are Carlos Castaneda's work (1968, 1971); a Robert Parker (1983) "Spencer" novel; Theodore Sturgeon's (1953) sci-fi classic, *More than Human*; Arthur Conan-Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (Baring-Gould 1967); Mary Shelley's (1818) *Frankenstein*; George MacDonald's (1858) *Phantastes*; and Thane Rosenbaum's (2002) *The Golems of Gotham*.

I've always done it without anxiety because I feel a total compatibility between these authors and certain psychoanalytic authors with whom they share a home in my mind. In "Playing With Boundaries" (Bromberg 1999), I offered the view that the mind's fundamental ability to shift between different self states without losing self-continuity makes it possible for someone to use an other's self states as part of their own. I suggested that this process of self-state borrowing manifests itself within and between a reader and an author, and is what makes certain authors not just an author but *your* author. He or she becomes yours when the otherness of their words do not *feel* other to you—when the affective interplay among their self states allows the affective interplay among your own self states to join theirs. He or she then becomes *your* author, and you become *his/her* reader. In the words of Carlos Zafon (2001: 4–5), "Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and dreamed with it".

What I call, metaphorically, "playing with boundaries", overlaps dramatically at the neurobiological level with what Allan Schore (2003a: 96), writes about as a right-brain to right-brain channel of affective communication—a channel that he sees as "an organized dialogue", [that is, a dialogue that takes place through] "dynamically fluctuating moment-to-moment state-sharing". I believe it to be this process of state-sharing that not only allows an author to

become your author, but also, in what we call "a psychoanalytically good match", it is what allows an analyst to become *your* analyst. Although I feel less secure in proposing that the *absence* of state-sharing is the thing that most accounts for so-called bad matches between patient and analyst, it seems plausible to me that this plays a role of no small significance.

This affect-based, right-brain to right-brain dialogue between self and other—if it lacks a cognitive context for too long a time—leads to what we are calling "sort-of-knowing", its quality of *uncertainty* being basic to the experience. In clinical work, the lack of cognitive context is what organizes the relational phenomenon that we label "enactment".

Sort-of-knowing

The terms "knowing" and "not-knowing" are relatively easy to think about as the experiences to which they refer are explicit. "Sort-of-knowing", however, is different. In its essence, it refers to something that is always at least somewhat *dissociative*; that is, our awareness of it is always more implicit than explicit. What I'm going to write about next is the difference between "sort-of-knowing" as a normal mind/brain process that helps us get through each day with the least amount of stress, and "sort-of-knowing" as a means of protecting oneself from what may be too much for the mind to bear.

In its everyday use, sort-of-knowing is not a defensive operation but rather an adaptive process in its own right—a process that among its other uses allows self–other boundaries to become sufficiently permeable to facilitate transition to knowing.

What I mean is nicely captured in a clinical vignette I presented at a 2002 conference that Richard Chefetz and I did together, called "Talking with Me and Not-Me". The conference was published in its entirety in *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* (Chefetz and Bromberg 2004).

It is a story told to me by a patient about an incident that took place while he was driving his fiancée to pick up her wedding dress. He had entered an intersection just as the light was changing from amber to red, and a police officer pulled him over. He of course told the cop that the light wasn't red yet, and he also asked to be given a break because they were about to get married. His fiancée suddenly

took over and began chastising my patient at length, in front of the cop, about the light really being red and what a bad person he was to lie to a police officer. The cop listened quietly in amazement, and when he finally spoke he told my patient that he wasn't going to give him a ticket because if he was marrying *her* then he already had enough trouble. As they drove off, my patient said to her, furiously, "How could you have done that? How could you have been so mean to me?"

"You didn't get a ticket, did you?" she replied. He, in a state of total consternation, could barely get his words out: "You ... you ... you mean you did that on purpose?"

"Well ... I'm not sure—*sort of*", she mumbled.

"Sort of". If I had been a fly on the wall my guess is she would have been looking into space as she said "sort of". Eventually, when she was back to what she would call "herself", she acknowledged that she was terribly sorry and ashamed at what she had done, and that she hadn't done it on purpose. She also revealed that since a child she has always been terrified of police officers and "wasn't herself" whenever she was around one.

When she was with the cop, the self state that organized "me-ness" was dissociatively trying to control the affect that dysregulation caused by her hyperaroused fear, and in this sense it is accurate to say that her *brain* "did it on purpose" as an automatic survival response. The "purpose", however, has no cognitive representation in the *mind*. But later, when she responds to her irate boyfriend, "You didn't get a ticket, did you?", the hyperaroused fear of the cop had diminished enough for her to inhabit a self state that was *also* organized by attachment, making the *vituperousness* when the policeman was present, a "not me". At each point, what she did was "right", but in different ways.

To me, what is especially interesting is that in her effort to think about whether she "did it on purpose", her reply was not defined totally by *either* "knowing" or "not-knowing". Her ability to be confused and to *symbolize the confusion* by the term "sort of", speaks to a nascent capacity to experience intrapsychic conflict and hold it as a mental state long enough to reflect on what it is like—that is, to symbolize it cognitively. To avoid the mental confusion created by a question that required her to consider the possibility that *both* were "me", she was at least able to offer an "I'm not sure—*sort of*".

By my lights, that's pretty darned good. She didn't automatically switch self states dissociatively. She was able to *hold* both states (albeit with confusion) in a single moment of consciousness. Standing in the spaces between the states (Bromberg 1998) was not quite in place but she was able to hold both states long enough to experience their presence simultaneously. As a result, time, place, and motive became complex, and confusingly conflictual rather than dissociatively simplified. Because *resolution* of conflict was not yet possible for her, she used the term "sort of" in order to answer her boyfriend's question, a phrase that vividly captures the *uncertainty* that organized her unfamiliarly complex mental state and its immediate experience of unclarity.³

The reach of intersubjectivity

When you look at sort-of-knowing in its function as a normal brain process, it is not hard to see why the experience of uncertainty is so relevant as a conference theme. Mary Tennes (2007), in a paper titled "Beyond Intersubjectivity", linked the experience of uncertainty to what she called "a model of selfhood that resists the need for certainty" and, as have I, she proposes (p. 514) that "self and other, subject and object, both are and are not separate". Most centrally, Tennes argues that "as our clinical technique takes us further into intersubjective territory, we are encountering realities for which we have neither language nor context" and that "if we look more closely with less need to fit such experiences into our preexisting framework, we discover that they deconstruct in profound and perhaps destabilizing ways, our notions of self and other" (p. 508).

As with most radically new discoveries about the mind and its undiscovered realms, Freud had himself cast an eye in a similar direction, leaving its implications undeveloped. As far back as 1921 Freud offered the view that:

"it no longer seems possible to brush aside the study of ... things which seem to vouchsafe the real existence of psychic

³ Gratitude to Nina Thomas for recognizing that the presented version did not sufficiently develop this point, helping me to further clarify the relationship between dissociation and conflict.

forces other than the known forces of the human and animal psyche, or which reveal mental faculties in which, until now, we did not believe. *The appeal of this kind of inquiry seems irresistible.* (Freud 1921 in Devereux 1953: 56; my emphasis)

Freud, however, was overly optimistic in his prediction. It was quite resistible for the next seventy-five years, even among most Interpersonal and Relational analysts. Then, Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer (1996), in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, published a groundbreaking article about the limitation in psychoanalytic thinking with regard to what we call intersubjectivity and about our anxiety in straying beyond the narrow range of what we hold to be "legitimate" clinical facts. A full two-thirds of her paper was devoted to hard research on energy fields—human and nonhuman—and their relationship to so-called paranormal phenomena that are always being encountered by analysts in their day-to-day work with certain patients and subsumed under categories of experience such as intuition, empathic attunement, unconscious communication, and if those fail, then "coincidence". It is just such phenomena, Mayer argued, that most demonstrate "the enormous power of the human mind to affect—indeed to create ... what analysts have customarily called *external reality*" and that:

"If we ignore research that significantly recasts our most important concepts, we may find ourselves in a position not unlike the Sufi sage Nasrudin, who searched for his keys at night under a lighted lamp-post not because he'd lost them there, but because there was more light there than where he'd lost them.

We need to look wherever we're likely to find what we're actually looking for, whether or not it's bathed in the light of assumptions that are comfortably familiar". (Mayer 1996: 723–724)

Tennes (2007: 508) cites research by the biologist Rupert Sheldrake (1999, 2003) who developed, Tennes states, "a theory of the 'extended mind', which he links to already existing field theories in physics, mathematics, and biology. Our minds, he proposes, are not confined inside of our heads, but stretch out beyond them through morphic fields". Similarly, Neil Altman (2007: 529) in his

commentary on Tennes's paper, suggests that holistic field theory is a potentially promising context for comprehending this heretofore unimaginable reach of the mind, and that Mayer's breathtaking report on Princeton's Anomalies Research Studies has cleared a path toward full acceptance of what we already recognize implicitly—that "people are able to obtain information from remote sources without having any conventional form of contact with the source of information".

Writing about self/other communication that transcends so-called normal channels has until now been pretty much limited to those who wrote about it as fiction, and to the rare breed of non-fiction authors (including a handful of analysts) for whom such things never were fiction. Thus the powerful link I have long experienced between the science fiction of Theodore Sturgeon, the research on dream telepathy by Montague Ullman and his colleagues (1973) at Maimonides Medical Center, and Sandor Ferenczi's (1930: 122) then edgy assertion that under the influence of shock, a part of the personality "lives on, hidden, ceaselessly endeavoring to make itself felt", and that sometimes we "persuade it to engage in what I might almost call an infantile conversation".

The reach of healing

I'm now going to get even more personal. I recently became aware that some of the "edginess" that infiltrates my blending of psychoanalysis and literature has always involved something else—something that although I "sort-of-knew", I did not in fact "know". The way that sort-of-knowing became knowing was amazing, but it is also so illustrative that I am going to tell you the story.

In the Fall 2007 issue of *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* there was a review of my book, *Awakening the Dreamer*, by Max Cavitch—a Professor of English at The University of Pennsylvania. The review was laudatory, but its biggest gift to me was something else. The review was titled "Dissociative Reading: Philip Bromberg and Emily Dickinson" (Cavitch 2007) and it was as illuminating about *me*, as it was about its formal topic, "dissociative processes and literature". The phenomenon of dissociation is an area of his special interest and a quite unusual one for a Professor of English. He is well read in the clinical literature although his special focus is

on dissociation as a cultural phenomenon. Unknown to me, Emily Dickinson's verse happened also to be an area of his expertise and interest, which in itself would not be unusual were it not for the fact that, as a scholar, he saw these two areas of interest as profoundly related, and that as reviewer of my book he experienced this interrelationship as significant not only in my writing, but in the writer—that is to say, in *me personally*. He noticed that in Chapter Eight I had excerpted several lines from one of Dickinson's poems (poem #670) for use as an epigraph—her poem that begins "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—" (Dickinson 1863/1960: 333). In my effort to make the relevance of her lines totally clear to *my* readers I had manifested an apparent lack of concern about the formal rules of literary scholarship by doing something that rendered them into (sort-of) prose so as to make my point clearer. In Cavitch's words:

"He wants us to get the gist of the poem without having to wrestle too much with her linguistic contortions. Yet this also has the perhaps unconsciously intended effect of evacuating her poem of its uncanny resemblance, in its seemingly unbridgeable gaps and cognitive dissonances, to the very dissociative processes Bromberg wants Dickinson to help him illustrate. He mutes, in other words, the audibility to reflective thought of those places in the poem where dissociative gaps are created. One can point, for example, to his omission of all but one of Dickinson's famous dashes—*her most consistent and visible affront to linear narrative*". (2007: 686; my emphasis)

In fact, it was mainly my elimination of *her* unorthodox use of dashes that was my most manifest affront to Dickinson. As a Professor of English, Cavitch easily could have been critical of me—but he was not. What he did have to say was both non-judgmental and perceptive. It also was astonishing, and led to my highly personal reply to his review that was published in the same issue which is why I am writing about it now. Cavitch did not experience my obliteration of Dickinson's signature-style of versification as "mere sloppiness" or "unmotivated error" because in Dickinson, as he puts it, "*there may be no other writer in the English language who engages readers so relentlessly and so powerfully in the intersubjective*

experience of dissociative states" (2007: 684; my emphasis). Cavitch continues:

"Anyone averse to such biographical speculation need only turn to the poems themselves to encounter an imagination stamped with the imprint of all manner of violence: eyes gauged out, lungs pierced, brains trepanned, bodies subjected to extremes of heat and cold, soldered lips, gushing wounds, dismemberment, rape, torture, hanging, drowning, death in every form". (p. 684)

And on page 686 (my emphasis): "*To rend, reduce, and suture such a poem, as Bromberg does without comment here, is to seem to participate with the poet in a dissociative enactment*"—"a transferential encounter, of Bromberg's dissociative immersion in the enactment of the poet's traumatized relation to a flooding of affect in the process of being symbolized".

Cavitch's perceptiveness reached back to a trauma in my own past about which he could not have known but which in the idiom of the conference, was always "sort-of-known" by me. I am referring to the residue of an event that goes back to my days as a doctoral student in English Literature many years ago—an experience that was etched into my psyche when, without warning, I was deliberately shamed in front of the class by a professor who announced that I didn't belong in the field. *Why* did I not belong? Because I had used the assignment of writing an essay about Shakespeare's play, Henry IV Part I, as an opportunity to discuss Prince Hal's *personality*.

But the professor's *words* were not the core of the trauma. It was in *how* he did it. Cradling under one arm the class's completed essays, in the hand of his other side he held between thumb and forefinger a single essay. Silently, he walked slowly among the seated students and stopped at my desk, letting the solitary assignment fall onto it from above. It was then that he spoke his only words: "WE DON'T DO THAT SORT OF THING HERE".

This experience, both in spite of and because of its traumatic impact, played an explicit role in my finding a path that led me into the field of psychoanalysis, a field that I experience as my natural home. For many years I continued to use literature as part of my psychoanalytic writing—which I took as evidence that the trauma had been processed.

(Enter Max Cavitch, Stage Left.) Because of *him* I was able to recognize that a dissociated piece of it indeed had remained. I already

knew that the trauma had allowed me to pleasurablely immerse myself in literature by using it psychoanalytically, but what I had not seen was the dissociated presence of my determination to *never submit* to the arbitrary imposition of using literature in some "right" way. Cavitch intuitively sensed this from my interaction with Dickinson. In Max's eyes, Dickinson and I were comrades in arms. We each refused to bend to orthodoxy. In my use of her lines as an epigraph, I did not *simply* reduce her poetry to quasi-prose. Dissociatively, I did to her poetry my own version of what she did in writing it. I challenged the system (which for me, now included *her*) by obliterating, without acknowledgement, an important piece of what had been her own challenge to the system: her signature use of dashes—*her* violation of orthodoxy—a violation that, ironically, "the system" ultimately accepted.

Cavitch observed that I may have been participating in a dissociative enactment with Dickinson that was being played out as a power struggle, but for *both* Dickinson and me its origin was unknown to him—with Dickinson it was kept guarded from the world, and with me no prior personal relationship had existed through which I might have made it known either explicitly or through things "about" me that he might have unconsciously experienced. In Dickinson's case, Cavitch wrote, "There is much speculation as to what sort of traumatic experiences Dickinson may have endured that would help explain her famously extreme shyness and virtual self-sequestration in her family's Amherst home" (p. 684). My trauma with the other English Professor was likewise "unknown" to him until I shared it as part of my published response to his review.

By his not shaming me about my unscholarly behaviour, and even more by his appreciating what that behaviour represented as a way of understanding a mental process (dissociation) of interest to both of us, he helped me not only professionally, but also personally.

This is why my reply to his review was not only a professional expression of gratitude, but was also very personal. In it I recounted to him my experience as a graduate student in English and let him know how much I was benefiting from sharing with him a relational experience that was so personally healing. It was healing because it activated the shadow of the trauma with the other professor, while holding it in a relational context where I was being cared about as a person. What I call a "safe surprise" (Bromberg 2006) was

created—and the creation of that safe surprise took place without any explicit interchange between us. *Uncannily*, without direct interchange, I was able to process a dissociated residue of past trauma—a residue about which I had “sort-of-known” because I knew *about* it, but of which I now *knew*, because I knew it personally. I knew it because I had *relived* the original traumatic scenario, but relived it in a manner that did not simply repeat the past. The reliving with Max allowed a new outcome to be part of the reality that defined me in relation to others.

Did trauma begin for me as a graduate student in English? Of course not! Like everyone else, I too had my share of developmental trauma. My history of not “getting” how things work predates that event and shaped my “naïveté” when, in organizing the Inter-institute Candidates Symposium, I believed that senior psychoanalysts could never allow the grinding of personal axes to infiltrate their devotion to fostering the autonomy of their “children”.

The fly truffle

In the remainder of this chapter I am once again going to draw on literature. When I made that decision, a part of me was saying “Maybe Cavitch let you off easy; maybe you shouldn’t push your luck”. However another part of me was arguing that I should go for it. That latter part prevailed, and so I’m now going to address the theme of “knowing, not-knowing, and sort-of-knowing” through sharing self states with the author of an extraordinary novel, *The Fly Truffle* (Sobin 1999), a piece of writing that I hope will enrich your clinical perspective as it enriched mine.

It is a book that pulls a reader into the chaos of love, loss, and madness. It allows the reader to feel not just the increasing presence of mental destabilization, but the simultaneous voice of a potential for relatedness that is always moving along with it.

Written by an expatriate American poet, Gustave Sobin, the story is set in the rural countryside of Provence where, until his death in 2005, Sobin resided for forty years. It is the story of a man in love, a man named Philippe Cabassac, whose mind, slowly but agonizingly, loses the boundary that separates loss of an other from the traumatic loss of self—and loses the boundary that separates creative dreaming from autistic thinking. His mind could not hold the

reality of the death of his beloved wife Julieta—a young student who disappears from his life as mysteriously as she entered it. To paraphrase Jennifer Reese’s (2000) *The New York Times* book review, Julieta, out of nowhere, suddenly appears in Cabassac’s classroom, taking voluminous notes. Cabassac is a professor of a dying language—Provençal linguistics—and she, an orphan who has been wandering aimlessly through the fading world of Provence has now, with Cabassac, found words that mystically connect her with her ancestral roots. Julieta moves into Cabassac’s farmhouse, conceives a child, marries him, and miscarries. Shortly thereafter she dies. Unable to bear the loss, Cabassac’s dreams become increasingly indistinguishable from waking reality.

Cabassac has hunted for truffles all his life by searching for the swarms of tiny flies that hover over the ground where the truffles are buried in order to lay their eggs in the aromatic earth beneath. Through this miracle of symbiosis, the truffles can then be found, and are indeed found by Cabassac, who fries them, sips herbal tea, and later, when he sleeps, has powerful dreams in which his wife returns to him.

To Cabassac, who was an emotionally isolated man even before Julieta’s death, dreams become gradually more real than life itself. In them Julieta is about to tell him a profound secret—but he always awakens before it is revealed. He loses interest in his job as a professor of Provençal linguistics—a job that begins to die just as verbal language itself increasingly dies for him as a medium of communication. He becomes more and more isolated from human relationships and sinks gradually into a state of autistic madness, signing away piece after piece of his family home—the only thing that still connected him to the external world—until all that remained was to search out the flies that would lead him to the truffles and in turn to his lost beloved.

The Fly Truffle can be read from many different frames of reference, including as an allegorical portrayal of the Orpheus myth in which the doorway that leads to reunion with a lost beloved is beneath the ground—the doorway to Hell. But what I want to speak of is its ability to evoke the *affective* experience that makes us aware, sometimes disturbingly aware, of the link between trauma and dissociation and the potential *loss of self*.

Sobin’s book raises the issue of how to think about people like the protagonist, Cabassac, who was unable to restore himself as he

slid into madness, and how what we term "knowing" and "sort-of-knowing" might be viewed in the context of annihilation dread. Because "knowing" is dependent on thinking, and thinking is dependent on the degree to which one's capacity for mental representation has been compromised by trauma, it is worth reflecting on Laub and Auerhahn's famous observation that it is the primary nature of trauma to "elude our knowledge because of both *defense and deficit*" (1993: 288; my emphasis). The deficit is a dissociative gap, by virtue of which, "sort-of-knowing" is recruited from its everyday function into the service of the mind's evolutionary need to protect its stability (thus their term "*defense*").

Cabassac's connection to Julieta became tied more and more concretely to his being able to experience her as a person who continued to exist as alive; and this Julieta, as even Cabassac sensed, was connected to his dead mother in an ineffable way.

With regard to the subtitle of my chapter, "Navigating Selfhood, Otherness, and the Experience of Uncertainty", Sobin's work of fiction is simultaneously a work of non-fiction. Certain people for whom the early development of intersubjectivity has failed to take place or been severely compromised are, in times of crisis, especially vulnerable to "uncertainty" of the boundary between selfhood and otherness, and can become unable to navigate this boundary. They become unable to sustain the loss of a needed person as a separate "other". It is these people for whom the potential for *annihilation dread* is often greatest. For them, the experience of loss can become such a threat to the experience of self-continuity that it results in what we know as insanity.

Self-continuity of course feels threatened in a lesser way even without annihilation anxiety (which is what makes trauma, "traumatic", rather than just a form of anxiety). However, when the inability to separate self and other—total depersonalization—is a genuine possibility, the function of dissociation as a protection against out-of-control affect dysregulation becomes a last-ditch effort to survive as a self. It can no longer assure that one or more parts of the self will continue to engage with the world in a way that is functional though limited. Dissociation becomes, instead, the means through which the mind/brain tries to avoid self-annihilation by protecting the inner world from the existence of the outside—gradually eliminating it as a *personal* reality by living more and more completely in

a nonpermeable, self-contained "dream". One may still know *about* the outside world but is no longer "of" it.

When the original maternal object is insufficiently differentiated from the self to become a comforting internal "other" that can be remembered later in one's life, a person may appear in one's life—often after one's actual mother has died—a person who frequently embodies a likeness to the mother in some physically concrete way and who seems to be totally consumed by him. A passionate attachment to that person then develops a life of its own. In Cabassac's case, partly fueled by Julieta's death, this attachment became (borrowing the title of Jules Henry's 1965 classic) a "pathway to madness" that led to a final act done without self-reflection—the act of obliterating what remained of his outside world and his attachment to it. He sold, literally out from under himself, the land and home in which he and his family had lived for generations—a place that until then had been not just his, but *him*. As was made clear by the author, there was an eerie resonance between the increasing loss of personal meaning held by the outside world and a similar withdrawal into himself during his childhood.

What was the clincher for Cabassac? What pushed him over the edge? My answer would be that he had no one to talk to and no one to listen. Sobin portrays him as having been a loner all his life, and thus especially vulnerable to the horror of self-loss when Julieta disappeared from his external world as suddenly as she had once appeared in it. His struggle to "stand in the spaces" was unable to prevent his increasing isolation inside himself because he couldn't use the mind of an other to share what he felt. He not only was unable to use a real other, but was unable to use an imagined other as imagination requires the simultaneous existence of a separate self that is stable enough to remember a lost other without merging with that other.

Cabassac's external environment became more and more undifferentiated from his internal object-world, and could not be sustained as a reality that was *his*. The outside world became grimly limited in what it could offer as a potential anchor to sanity and literally had to be sold—to be rid of—because it was already starting to take on the presence of a now "malevolent other", threatening to disintegrate the boundary between self and object. *Sobin offers a portrayal, both inspiring and chilling, of what trauma can do when there is no*

one with whom to share it. And to anyone who might see this novel as representing the consequences of substance abuse (mushrooms and herbal tea), I can only say, "Sorry folks—I don't think so!"

But read on. It's not over yet. There is another message embedded in this novel that is just as important to the theme of the conference and perhaps even more so. In this remote, sequestered environment of Provence, humans and animals share a relationship that is almost as vital to the evolutionary survival of both species as it was during the Middle Ages; thus the title of the novel. The inescapable power of the interrelationship between animal and human in this story touches directly on the way in which we are starting to understand the dialectic between thought and affect, between left and right brain, and between self states of the patient and self states of the analyst. And it relates in an especially interesting way to the recent discovery of mirror neurons, the postulation of which, if you will recall, came about through a researcher's fortuitous relationship with a monkey—or more accurately, an ape (see Gallese and Goldman 1998).

The rapport between art and science is something I remain of several minds about, but as it applies to psychoanalysis it has never been captured better than by the brilliant and troubled Italian poet Alda Merini (2007: 15) in the aphorism:

Psychoanalysis
Always looks for the egg
In a basket
That has been lost.⁴

For over a hundred years, psychoanalysts were trained to talk to their patients about an *inferred* egg, through associations and interpretations, because the basket (an entity called the unconscious) was believed "lost" (inaccessible) to here-and-now existence. At this point in the evolution of psychoanalysis it is increasingly recognized that the "egg" can *manifestly* be brought into palpable existence by accepting that "the unconscious" (the basket) is not a mental entity but rather a *relational process* that is accessible through enactment.

⁴ I wish to thank Kristopher Spring for bringing Merini's aphorism to my attention.

The interdependence of mind/brain systems reflects the evolutionary status of the interdependence between what is most human and what remains most animal. A "truffler", as we know, is someone who devotes himself/herself to the solitary activity of hunting for truffles, but apart from certain environments—such as this area of Provence—it is an activity that has most famously been done with the aid of a pig. Pigs have been used because of both their great sensitivity in being able to sniff out where truffles are hiding beneath the ground, and their voracious craving for them which makes a pig fanatical in its search. The problem is that, if more civilized animals (such as us) are to get the prize, the truffler needs to be always on vigilant alert so that the pig does not scarf down the truffles before them. It is not hard to see why the flies in that respect were an improvement. It is clearly an easier, less fraught way to find truffles than by using a hyper-aroused pig.

In the passage with which I'm going to end, Sobin bridges the gap between the internal worlds of human life and "sort-of-human" life. The passage relates to the breeding of *silkworms*—an enterprise that for hundreds of years was done in this part of Provence by women, enabling them to survive economically. I quote:

[T]he silkworms, as if on some magical signal, rose into their brushwood uprights and began spinning their cocoons. Rotating their heads continuously so that a thin, spittle-like secretion would run free of a pair of matching glands located on either side of their thorax, these creatures would each spin over a kilometer of precious, opalescent fiber in less than three uninterrupted days of labor. Nothing stopped them either. Nothing aside from *unwanted noises*. A single thunderclap, for instance, could break the thread, bring their spinning to an end, destroy a whole season's harvest.

When a thunderstorm was seen approaching, the women—in preparation—would gather, begin ringing bells—goat bells, sheep bells—or beating, *gently at first*, against shovels, frying pans, cauldrons in an attempt to *prepare* their little nurslings for the far more invasive sounds of the thunderstorm itself. *They'd increase the volume of those cacophonous medleys with each passing minute. In response, the silkworms wove all the faster, and their thread,*

as a result, went unbroken throughout the ensuing thunderstorm.
(pp. 83–84; my emphasis)

When I first read this my mouth dropped open. *Silkworms? Really?* It seems that even invertebrates can get affectively destabilized—left unable to function—when they are subjected to shock—in this case, a sudden noise that is loud beyond their tolerance to bear. At that stage of their development, beyond infancy but still pretty vulnerable, it means they stop spinning silk. So the women do what a good therapist would do. To support the continuity of the silkworms' developmental maturation, they create conditions that they believe will raise their threshold for affect dysregulation. For a silkworm, developmental maturation at that phase means being able to spin thread, supporting a survival capacity (the creation of a cocoon) that is necessary to their existence. This survival capacity is helped along through a human/animal relationship that, at an affective level, is a plausible analogue of what Schore (2003b: 144) calls a conversation between limbic systems—even though, here, one party in the conversation might be seen as all limbic system. It matters not that the women, like therapists, also reap an economic benefit. A good therapist does what he does not just because of that benefit but with the benefit being always a *part* of it.

Is it a stretch to see the *initial* part of the relationship between the women and the silkworms as similar to an early maternal phase of human infancy? Consider this description by Sobin that begins with their caring for the eggs—the eggs which the women poured into little sachets that they'd sewn for the very occasion:

Wearing those sachets underneath the warm folds of their skirts or snug between their corseted breasts, they'd incubate those nascent silkworms on nothing more nor less than the heat of their own bodies.

For ten days running, then, women actually served as agents of gestation for these silkworms-to-be ... [T]he women would then deposit the freshly hatched larvae in nurseries—kindergartens of sorts—that they'd have meticulously prepared in advance. Temperate, airy, well-lit, these cocooneries became the silkworms' abode, now, as they passed through four successive moltings in as many weeks. Growing from delicate little caterpillars no more than a millimeter long to pale voracious

creatures a full sixty times that length, the silkworms required continuous nursing. And nursing they received. (pp. 81–82; my emphasis)

It was *after* infancy that the silkworms-to-be, now silkworms-that-are, became part of an *interactive* process. In June "began the moment in which ... the women responded to a need to protect them from thunderstorms" (p. 83). I am offering the view that like the natural presence of thunderstorms in the relationship between a silkworm and its caretaker, the relationship between a patient and a psychoanalyst has its own natural disruptions. But unlike thunderstorms created by the external environment, their psychoanalytic counterparts are not *exterior* events that intrude into an otherwise "safe" treatment frame. Because our therapeutic work always involves reliving areas of experience where developmental trauma has left its residue to one degree or another, the analytic relationship is a process of collision and negotiation. It is *both* the source of potential destabilization and the source of its healing. What patient and analyst do together will always include collisions between subjectivities, some of which will *inevitably* feel too "loud" to the patient, and it is part of the analyst's job to be alert to signs of this and to address it with genuine personal involvement. Threatening "noise" is inherent to the analytic relationship itself—a part of the optimal therapeutic context that I call "safe but not too safe". The therapist's commitment to helping a patient distinguish what is "disruptive but negotiable" from the dissociated "truth" that all ruptures in attachment are "relationally irreparable" is an essential part of the work. The therapist cannot prevent interpersonal "noise" from becoming too loud no matter how *non-intrusive* he or she tries to be. Letting a patient know in an ongoing way that his or her internal experience is being held in your mind *while* you are doing "your job" is what provides the safety—even though you are not doing it perfectly.

In humans, the ability to strengthen one's readiness to face potential trauma without transforming life itself into an act of interminable vigilance, depends on a relationship with an important other who relates to your subjective states as important to him or her—and to whose mental states you can reciprocally relate. Cabassac's capacity to feel that he existed in the mind of an other was so tenuous that the death of his beloved became a loss of selfhood. There was

no longer a bridge that could link a stable mental representation of her to a self sturdy enough to maintain self-continuity without her concrete existence being part of that self. And he had no one with whom to talk.

The conference brochure asked: "How do we come to tolerate the ambiguity inherent in not-knowing or, more confusing still, sort-of-knowing?" I guess I would say it has to do, SORT-OF, with the wiring of the brain; SORT-OF with how much our caretakers were able to affirm the rights of all parts of us to exist; and SORT-OF being lucky to have someone to talk to at the right times—including someone who can think about you as a silkworm when you most need it.

I'll close by finally making reference to the title of my chapter, which I've not mentioned explicitly even though it is probably clear by now why I chose it. The link between the legendary 1937 song *The Nearness of You*, and what some of us now call implicit relational knowing, needs few words to explain it. And even though I love Allan Schore's concept of conversations between limbic systems, Hoagy Carmichael and Ned Washington when they wrote *The Nearness of You* already knew that "It's not your sweet conversation/That brings this sensation, oh no/It's just the nearness of you".

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CHAPTER THREE

The unconscious as a knowledge processing centre

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The theme of this meeting, "knowing and not knowing", challenged us to reconsider a fundamental aspect of human nature, the relationship between our unconscious and our conscious mind. Psychoanalysis from its inception has focused on the connections between unconscious knowledge and conscious awareness. We can approach a definition of unconscious knowledge by asking the following questions: how can we know something without being aware of it? And how can we be aware of something that we don't know? In either case let us assume that the unconscious mind knows—that the unconscious retains in memory a lifetime of emotionally significant experiences and emotionally salient fantasies. This would include the memory of those experiences with one's caretakers that occurred prior to the age of two or three, prior to the age of retrievable memories. We may be unable to recall such memories because prior to that age the hippocampus, that structure in the brain that is necessary for the recall of a memory, has not yet matured. These memories remain as unthought knowns (Bollas 2007). Such memories have also been referred to as somatic memories, indicating that our body remembers even if we can't remember. All of this is to indicate that the unconscious is a source of knowledge, but as