'Thy Brother's Keeper': Witnessing as a Moral Presence in Group Analysis and Beyond. A Response to Farhad Dalal's Foulkes Lecture

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Response

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‘Thy Brother’s Keeper’: Witnessing as a Moral Presence in Group Analysis and Beyond. A Response to Farhad Dalal’s Foulkes Lecture

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This article argues that witnessing is a stance of ‘being there’ as a lived, mindful presence that defines one’s human capacity to create a bond of mutual concern with an ‘other’. It is a vital constituent in the process of therapy and beyond. Witnessing is a commitment to acknowledge ‘real reality’ as well as one’s subjectivity; it is an essential part of mutual recognition, since it involves one’s responsibility to tell the truth and a readiness to face it; as such, witnessing is inherently moral. This article emphasizes the idea that witnessing is a matter of personal choice. The decision to speak out and ‘tell it’ in the group arena has a redeeming quality; it can break up the deadening silence of isolation, loneliness and suffering caused by wounding relationships.

Key words: witnessing, concern, real, reality, truth, morality, recognition, trauma

Introduction

Dealing explicitly with matters of value in psychoanalysis is frequently avoided, if not entirely discredited, even in our more enlightened ‘intersubjective’ times. Dalal’s lucid, unpretentious and courageous

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voice strengthens the case 'to take the moral foundation of our therapeutic endeavour seriously'.

In this sense his article is a further development of the ideas he formulated in *Taking the Group Seriously* (1998) where he presented the contradictions between the radical perspective embedded in Foulkes' thinking and his orthodox ideas. Dalal's ideas add depth and richness to the relational turn in psychoanalysis in its struggle to humanize our clinical practices whether they pertain to individual or to group therapy.

One issue Dalal emphasizes is the critical importance of the therapist's presence as a responsive other. I would like to add some of my thoughts about the nature of this 'responsivity' and examine it through the notion of 'witnessing'.

The idea of witnessing as a valuable stance in the therapeutic process has been introduced into psychoanalysis mostly as part of a search for a meaningful way therapists (in individual and group settings alike) can respond adequately to the suffering of victims of trauma, and to understand their injuries and their needs. The issues encompassed by the term witnessing gathers momentum in our clinical explorations as the enormous dimensions of the disastrous consequences of man-made violence that the 20th-century has produced are unfolding daily. It seems that witnessing becomes most meaningful 'where denial reigns' as Ullman (2006) states with poignant clarity in an article that relates to witnessing as a moral stance in psychotherapy and beyond[1].

(For further information on some of the articles and books (both in psychoanalysis and in group analysis) that relate to social trauma, its impact on one's relationships with self and others, and to witnessing as part of the therapeutic process in the aftermath of trauma, see: Amery, 1980; Barwick, 2004; Berman and Berger, 2000; Urlic et al., 2010; Benjamin, 1998; Brown, 1998; Gerson, 2009; Grand, 2000; Herman, 1992; Hopper, 2002; Felman and Laub, 1992; Levi, 1988; Nitzgen, 2001; Nguyen, 2011; Poland, 2000; Ullman, 2006.)

Witnessing: Some General Characteristics

Witnessing is a complex concept. In the context of therapy it can be characterized by a presence that is mostly non-interpretative. It entails a readiness to 'be there' openly and attentively for/with an other; to accept ' . . . the experience without attempting to symbolize

it . . . without therapeutic ambition' (Reis, 2009) and without resorting to 'understandings' or clever formulations that may create estrangement rather than closeness.

Samuel Beckett depicts the nature of this quality poetically in *Waiting for Godot* (1973) when Estragon tells Vladimir: 'Don't touch me! Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!' (Beckett, 1973).

Witnessing, as Stern tells us means to exist in the other's mind; an other who cares about us: ' . . . we do need to believe that we are known by the other . . . Our witness is our partner in thought' (2012: 385).

The legal witness is the one we are more familiar with. He is bound by a solemn oath 'to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth'. It echoes an ancient commandment inscribed in the Decalogue, 'thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour'. Truth in the courtroom is perceived as the touchstone of our morals. It is considered a vital constituent in the process of distinguishing the innocent from the guilty, right from wrong, good from evil, victim from perpetrator. I would add, that the capacity to distinguish between these entities is also the touchstone of our reality testing; namely, our sanity entails a crucial necessity to have faith in an orderly meaningful human world governed by caring for each other. I shall elaborate some of these thoughts in the following paragraphs.

Witnessing is not a given; the fact that it is included in the 10 Commandments places it among the most basic tenets of our ethical collective existence and defines its moral nature. Witnessing is thus a risky endeavour; it is a conscious choice that takes courage. Since the legal witness poses a threat to offenders, it is only understandable that the United States Department of Justice has administered a federal 'Witness Protection Programme' to ensure the safety of witnesses, before, during, and after a trial.

While thinking about this article, it occurred to me that this title can shed light on some aspects inherent in the therapeutic context as well, even though the norms that govern the courtroom are very different from the ones prevalent in our practices, and its aims are not necessarily curative in the clinical sense. Despite their many differences, I suggest that they both represent symbolic depictions of the ethical covenant that binds humans into a moral community[2].

So, what do these two disparate systems have in common?

In both, witnessing is an arduous process that attempts to figure out what happened, why, and how it affected one's life.

In both it is a process that aims at uncovering truth; it strives to reveal a factual reality that is mostly covered up, concealed avoided or denied.

In both, witnessing is a painful experience heavily imbued with emotional and ethical meanings socially and personally.

In both, it refers to a process of acknowledgement and recognition of disavowed injuries and evasions of personal responsibility. As such, it presents a paradox, as it causes a threat and a hope at the same time.

In both, it takes courage and determination to stand up and to speak up to protect valued beliefs.

In both it is an act of choice that has meaningful consequences for all involved parties. It makes a difference that can be crucial in one's life.

Hence witnessing involves moral considerations and raises ethical issues.

Without decreasing the value of witnessing as part of the treatment of trauma victims, I suggest that it is a meaningful aspect in any therapeutic relationship. It constitutes one's experience of being seen, heard and responded to by an other who cares; an other that is both utterly connected to, and utterly different from oneself. It is important to note that the responsive listener, the witness and the one who 'tells it' join each other to re-establish a base for a culture of caring; together they take part in a healing process of ruptured inner and outer worlds. Thus, witnessing, whether in the courtroom or in therapy is part of the moral foundation of our collective existence; it redefines both self and other as human beings capable of caring and committed to struggle for it. As such, witnessing is inherently connected to issues of truth, justice, recognition and mutual concern; these, to my mind are the threads with which Dalal weaves the tapestry of his arguments.

Group Analysis: An Arena for Mutual Witnessing

The need to take a stance, to be clear, to discriminate right from wrong, good from evil and to acknowledge 'real' reality for what it is goes against the grain of therapists' sensibility. Risking oversimplification, I think it is still true to say that our training prompts us to look inside rather than outside. We search for dialectical tensions, ambiguities and multiple meanings that lurk in the shadows of inner

worlds; we beware of being 'judgmental' or 'political'; relating to 'real' reality is still perceived as diverting the therapeutic endeavour from its major purpose.

However, it is mostly group analysis that brings relationships with real others, with the social, into the centre of therapeutic action. It strives to explore the dynamics of both inner and outer worlds as they are played out in the life of the group in real time.

The analytic group defines a symbolic social microcosm. It recreates within its boundaries the public sphere with its town squares and its courtrooms, with its victims, perpetrators, bystanders, judges, jury and witnesses. Each group member can slide unknowingly into any one of those roles interchangeably.

However, witnessing is not a given. It requires a conscious effort and is an outcome of a deliberate decision motivated by complex factors. It is an *active* stance one can choose to hold on to, or to refrain from.

I suggest that one's choice to speak up and give voice to inner feelings and thoughts, to verify acts in external reality (whether they are done by self or others) has therapeutic value; it makes a difference both for the individual member who decides to 'tell it' and to others who have to face the reality (inner and outer) that is revealed. On the other hand, silence, avoidance, dismissing, ignoring or any other way of 'non-being' marks an absence, a lack that denies one's personal experience, or even worth discredits it; it causes a rupture in the connective tissue that binds group members together; it injures relationships and recreates a void that traumatic experiences have produced in the first place. The popular saying 'what you don't know won't hurt you', which is sometimes meant to soothe one's suspicious fears, can thus acquire through this lack, a more sinister meaning allegedly captured by Baudelaire: 'It is the Devil's cleverest guile to convince us that he does not exist'.

The analytic group constitutes a space for each member to act as a witness for the other, to take upon himself the other's pain and to embody the other's hopes. 'Telling it' in the group positions the real other as crucial; as a subject whose emotional, active participation is vital to authenticate one's experience. It is as if the group becomes a symbolic 'ombudsman' that recreates and safeguards the norms and values, which regulate one's relationships with the collective community one belongs to.

The group analytical circle defined by Foulkes 'leaves no place to hide' (1975). It provides an arena in which, as Roiphe puts it, what '

. . . you have done will not be hidden . . . [*but will be there*] for the entire world to see' (2000[3]: 1011)

This process of speaking out, of 'telling it' to the 'whole world' encompassed in the analytic group, is part of the struggle to become more visible, more transparent, more fully present, more real[4].

'Telling it' to the 'whole world' represented in the group is a protest against silencing. It retrieves the wounded members from their isolation and loneliness. Being there for each other, 'staying with' can break through the dissociative barriers that traumatic experiences have erected. It enables group members '*to bear witness for the witness'*. In this sense, the group constitutes an answer for the desolation captured by Paul Celan's lines '*no one bears witness for the witness'* (2001: 126). In this context, I will quote in full Amery's closing words from the preface to the reissuing of his book of essays *At the Mind's Limits. Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (1980), since I feel they express cogently the passion and pain involved in witnessing:

> I had no clarity when I was writing this little book, I do not have it today, and I hope that I never will. Clarification would also amount to disposal, settlement of the case, which can then be placed in the files of history. My book is meant in preventing precisely this. For nothing is resolved, no conflict is settled, no remembering has become a mere memory. What happened happened. But that it happened cannot be so easily accepted. I rebel: against my past, against history, and against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way. Nothing has healed, and what perhaps was on the point of healing in 1964 is bursting open again as an infected wound. (Amery: 1980: xi)

Witnessing and Mutual Recognition

Witnessing is inherently connected to mutual recognition; it offsets the evils of non-recognition.

Lack of recognition is the ultimate injury; acts of ignoring, denying, discrediting or just passive standing by are destructive in many ways; they cause personal and social damage. They may even endanger lives.

Let me present briefly an example that can illuminate some of these thoughts. In 2008, I was part of a group of Israeli and Palestinian mental health workers, which was involved in a project of mutual recognition (initiated and directed by Jessica Benjamin). The idea was to create a basis for a humane dialogue through our mutual

commitment to a readiness to talk truthfully with each other, despite (or rather because of) the explosive violent realities we had been engaged in on both sides. A peaceful resolution on the political level was out of sight. Suicide bombers joined hands with the evils of the occupation, only to deepen a sense of helplessness, despair and rage that threatened to push us all into an abyss of destruction.

Some of the group meetings were structured; during those, we were asked to concentrate only on the 'telling' and to refrain from responses by way of protests, heated arguments, explanations or interpretations.

In one of those group meetings, we were invited to share with each other a piece of our personal history, which we felt could be relevant to the issues at hand. Palestinians described in detail their daily struggles to withstand the humiliations that the confinements of the occupation subjugated them to. Some of them expressed a wish to repossess their land and the hope to take back their homes. Israelis talked about their experiences of being those in power on the one hand, and of the threat they lived with as the daily terror attacks on buses, shopping centres and streets gathered strength. Some group participants on both sides lost close family members during violent actions that the situation produced.

Many of the Israelis in the group belonged to the second generation of holocaust survivors; they had very small families, as opposed to the tribal communities that Palestinians were part of.

Later on when we could share some feelings and thoughts that were evoked by this process, some of our Palestinian colleagues told us that they were quite surprised that many of us had never met a live grandparent, or that our extended families did not consist of 27 first cousins, numerous uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces. The aftermath of the Jewish genocide on the one side, and of the evils of the occupation with its daily assaults on human dignity on the other, became a personal reality we could all touch and grieve.

Despite the fact that this process was very different from the setting of a 'proper' analytical group we conduct in our clinics, it was a powerful encounter with the experience of 'telling it', of speaking up and being listened to attentively by others who made a commitment 'to be there', to stay with each other, despite the intense emotional upheaval these exchanges evoked on all sides. It had an impact on each of us. Thinking back, it was in a sense an experience of 'bearing witness in action'. The faceless anonymity that the so called 'political situation' engendered gave way to people with unique faces and

unique lives that strived to talk, and to make contact with each other instead of relating to each other as 'us versus them' (Berman and Berger, 2000). It planted a seed for some hope that a process of humanization may be possible even in the midst of animosities.

It is hoped that bearing witness as part of a process of mutual recognition can ' . . . humanize us deeply, cause us to question our place in the world, and . . . politicize our work so that we find ways to speak out about the terrible injustices that surround us' (O'Loughlin, 2007: 205).

Witnessing and Therapy

Witnessing in the therapeutic context is a two folded process:

It uncovers the truth about injuries that man suffered at the hands of others. It also uncovers the truth about injuries one caused to real others. (Even though he may have done it to protect himself from painful experiences).

Thus, the essence of witnessing in therapy lays in acknowledging 'real reality'; that is, relations with external others. To say it differently, witnessing denotes *The capacity to experience one's experience through the lived presence of someone else* (following Winnicott's renowned concept of the capacity to be alone in the presence of someone else).

Witnessing does not deal merely with internal worlds, but embodies the social (intersubjective) nature of human reality. It points to the fact that people are excruciatingly bound to real others whose goodness and evil affects them deeply. Every internal account has relational consequences. And vice versa.

This is by no means a claim against exploring one's inner world. I do not think that my emphasis on the 'real' detracts from the value of exploring one's personal psyche. Rather, it is a plea to hold in mind both inner and outer realities without resorting to polarized views, that usually end up discrediting each other. I think that such polarities evolve into dichotomies that distort our work and endanger its moral basis.

In this context I would like to quote Winnicott who states clearly and decisively his views about the relationship between fantasy and reality.

> One thing that follows the acceptance of external reality is the advantage to be gained from it. We often hear of the very real frustrations imposed by external

> reality, but less often hear of the relief and satisfaction it affords. Real milk is satisfying as compared with imaginary milk, but this is not the point. The point is that in fantasy things work by magic: there are no brakes on fantasy, and love and hate cause alarming effects. External reality has brakes on it, and can be studied and known, and, in fact, fantasy is only tolerable at full blast when objective reality is appreciated well. The subjective has tremendous value but is so alarming and magical that it cannot be enjoyed except as a parallel to the objective. (Winnicott, 1975: 153)

These thoughts, pronounced so cogently by Winnicott—a devout individualist who had little to do with groups—could have been written by Foulkes, as they express eloquently the group analytic spirit.

Acknowledging wrong doing attests that 'What happened—happened'; the lived experience of affirming one's reality, makes it possible to restore meaning into human collective existence. It opens a path for a hope that since real people are hurt by real others, they can also be healed by real others. It recovers the expectation that 'help is on the way'. Here again Amery's voice has a unique effect when he says that 'The expectation of help, the certainty of help, is indeed one of the fundamental experiences of human beings . . . it is as much a constitutional psychic element as is the struggle for existence' (1980: 28). This hope or 'expectation' is part of the 'trust in the world' that man cannot live without.

The encounter with the real in therapy and beyond constitutes an existential crisis. At the same time it is also transformative. One's unique self that is both distinctly separate yet deeply connected to others—is born out of this crisis. This process is akin to Winnicott's ideas about the development of 'the capacity for concern' and for 'objects use' (Winnicott, 1975). It marks an evolution from being an object into becoming a subject; one who is capable to be deeply himself while caring for others.

Witnessing then can be perceived as a major constituent in the process of turning the 'it' into a 'thou'; namely, of creating an individuated moral self, of becoming a subject in one's own right.

Witnessing and Mourning

Witnessing strengthens human connectedness and interdependence. At the same time it is also an encounter with one's essential separateness, and aloneness. It demarcates one's personal boundaries and makes him keenly aware of the irreducible differences between self and other. Witnessing entails a respect for both realities: that of

togetherness and that of separateness. It entails coming to terms with the painful realization about the limits of reparation. Martin Amis's blunt words capture this truth: 'The truth . . . is that nobody ever gets over anything' (2005: 235). It is a sobering re-awakening to the finality of time and to irrevocable loss.

Thus, witnessing in the group is an essential part of mourning. It enables the process of mourning to take its course without resorting into false idealization of merging and union. The encounter with loss while painful can also be freeing. It facilitates a process of letting go; it is part of the release from the grip of fantasized magical omnipotent solutions. Bearing witness in the group is a process that 'paradoxically induces hope and despair simultaneously' (O'Loughlin, 2007: 205).

Becoming deeply in touch with this paradox can enable each group member to use more fully inner and outer resources in real time, with real people, that are there to be lived with and used creatively. It can deepen their ability to love and to care for others.

Thy Brother's Keeper: Cain and Abel

I would like to relate briefly to the biblical tale of Cain and Abel as I believe it constitutes a symbolic depiction of some of the thoughts that I have presented here. It is a formative myth about man's struggles with moral values[5].

The Bible places the drama of Cain and Abel right at the very beginning of human history: Cain kills his brother Abel, because God did not acknowledge his offering ('*had not respect for*').

> And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said: I know not: *Am I my brother's keeper?* And he said, what hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And Cain said: *My punishment is greater than I can bear*. (*Genesis*, 4:1–16)

God witnessed Cain's deed and thereby assured that anarchy would not prevail.

His 'seeing' and speaking up enables Cain to 'see' himself as culpable. From now on, he 'knows' in the biblical sense that he has killed his own brother; he 'knows' that he has sinned against a basic tenet of human ties. In this sense the act of witnessing can be perceived as expressing the human capacity 'to have a god' in our hearts[6].

Cain's readiness to acknowledge his horrible deed defines his identity as a subject; one who discriminates wrong from right and good

from evil. Hence, he can no longer exempt himself from answering God's question, becomes accountable for his deeds, and takes upon himself personal responsibility for his crime. It is the recognition of his guilt that enables him to ask for an asylum. The sign God sets on his forehead marks his inclusion in the commitments that bind humans together and safeguards his life as a repentant sinner; it symbolizes an acknowledgment of a moral covenant that connects people to each other. This sign is a key prop to collective existence. It formulates the foundations for a society in which each person is his brother's keeper.

It seems meaningful to note that Cain grows in stature and is credited as a founder of civilization, as the builder of the first city and the inventor of agriculture. I see it as symbolic depiction of the personal flourishing and social strength that can grow out of one's recognition of his culpability.

Cain's dramatic move from denying responsibility to owning it—becomes constitutive: it represents a passage from a culture of indifference of 'every man for himself', to a culture of concern, of being 'thy brother's keeper'. This transformation is not to be taken for granted. It is as dramatic now as it was at the threshold of creating a human society. It marks a moral crossroad man has to struggle with daily personally and collectively.

End Note

In the introduction to her book about the psychoanalysis of evil, Sue Grand says she has found that

> . . . mental health is not simply about the capacity to love and work. It is the struggle to behave with ethical strength on behalf of the other, and for oneself. Repudiating moralism, but unabashedly embracing morality . . . freed me to articulate my own clinical and moral perspective on issues . . . (Concerning values in treatment). (2000: xi)

Her voice joins Farhad's and others who believe that psychotherapy cannot exempt itself from taking a stand in questions of good and evil. It is an endeavour that is deeply engaged in a struggle to uphold a culture of mutual concern and a hope for human decency.

Notes

1. A most pertinent colloquium about witnessing was conducted by the International Association of Relational Psychoanalysis recently (June 2012); it was a three week Internet discussion that involved a large number

of psychotherapists from all over the world; they responded to Gerson's article about witnessing (2009) and developed the idea of witnessing into unprecedented levels of richness and depth. It became a meaningful group experience for all involved parties, despite the virtual nature that any emotional Internet exchange inherently carries.

2. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the legal system has been subject to endless literary and other artistic depictions (including Kaka's Trial). It expresses our deep involvement with the relationship between the individual and the 'the law' as a moral order that transcends personal life.
3. The relationship between 'telling it' and 'telling on them' is explored extensively in a book co-authored by Ivan Urlic, Avi Berman and myself entitled *Victimhood, Vengefulness and the Culture of Forgiveness* (2010).
4. The value of seeing and being seen is part of the Foulksian notion of mirroring as a major curative factor in group analysis. The elaboration of this idea, of 'being vulnerable to the eye' and its various developments in psychoanalysis is beyond the scope of this article, but it is obviously relevant to the notion of being a witness.
5. I wish to stress that I am neither a biblical scholar nor a religious person who attaches sacred meanings to this text. What I say about it reflects only my personal reading with its private associations.
6. To 'have a God' in one's heart is a Hebrew expression that denotes the ability to care for others, to be conscientious and to be committed to a human moral order that transcends one's immediate self interest.

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