



Inscrutable to Myself

William J. Coburn, Ph.D., Psy.D.

Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis, Los Angeles

Human connection arguably is the bedrock of psychoanalysis, and through that connection we engage in interesting conversations, as Adam Phillips says, and then we see what happens (2013). (In this light, symptoms are simply entry points.) This sense of connection, real or hoped-for, is the fabric of our work, and if growth is to be had, however that might be defined, it is that lingering sense of connection, present or past, that provides the scaffolding for it. Our recent pandemic has challenged our psychoanalytic bonds, and yes, perhaps in some instances deepened them.

I find zoom connection wearisome, a simulacrum of the in-the-flesh connections with others I've come to value and respect over the last forty years. Paradoxically, I much prefer the phone. That's for many reasons, not the least of which is that I can focus better on the real person "in front of me" without having to be distracted by them. The phone frees up more of the reverie part of my mind, which I have found is useful to me and to my patients.

How strange that we might long for human connection, and then find such encounters now, when enacted in the flesh, tainted with fear, suspicion, and even aversion. My friend (or my patient) is my potential death sentence, or maybe at least a preface to getting really, really sick, or, maybe, nothing to worry about. That's the tension, we couldn't really know until it was too late. And I cannot imagine sitting across from a patient now, both of us wearing masks (or worse, separated by plexiglass). Don't we wear enough masks as it is, those we aim to remove? Isn't there enough plexiglass already, the kind that prevents us from ever really knowing another's actual lived experience? The paper mask somehow concretizes this, and I think it would be comedic, though perhaps physically lifesaving, to conduct a therapy with them. Who knows?

This elevates Sartre's general feeling about the dangers of relationships to the level of hilarity. He thought, with some exceptions, that human connection could be destructive of one's own sense of knowing oneself—his idea of "prereflective self-consciousness" and its inevitable distortion and subversion in the presence of others. Hard enough to begin to know oneself as it is, under the best of circumstances. Hence, his memorable words: "We only become who we are through the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us" (Sartre, 1963). This was in stark contrast to Kohut's (1977) (and many others') idea that we might come to know ourselves precisely through the eyes of the other. Martin Buber (1970) was certainly onto this. But I-Thou connections have their drawbacks. Excruciating, Derrida (2001) wrote about the fly in the friendship bond ointment. He tells us: "To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die. One of us, each says to himself, the day will come when one of the two of us will see himself no longer seeing the other That is the . . . infinitely small tear, which the mourning of friends passes through and endures even before death . . ." (p. 107). But could he have predicted an additional tear, that the shared gaze of friends (or of patient and analyst) would not only imply the inevitable loss of the other, but also now a loss of one's self or one's family at the hands (or should I say breath?) of the very other whom one loves? Pandemics breed paranoia.

Butler (2004), too, addressed the potential loss of the other and how the self becomes reorganized in the face of it. She writes: “If I lose you, under these conditions, then I not only mourn the loss, but I become inscrutable to myself. Who ‘am’ I, without you?” (p. 22). Have we already become inscrutable to ourselves in some way? Now potential carriers of destruction? Now my handshake, were I to offer one, or accept one, feels lethal, of course notwithstanding the presumed benefits of our obsessive use of hand sanitizer.

Each day I ask myself, when will I see patients in person again? What kind of risk/benefit ratio are my patients and I willing to assume? But hasn’t that question always been embedded in all psycho-analytic relationships? The other day a repair person arrived at my door, invited, and spontaneously smiled and outstretched his hand for a shake. It seemed perverse to refuse his gesture. I accepted his warmth and his hand with a tinge of lethality. It was his humanness that seduced me. It felt familiar, like home, a gesture from a careless world. After our exchange, I was thrust back to our worrisome present and obsessively washed my hands, yet again.

References

- Buber, M. (1970). *I and Thou*. (W. Kaufmann, trans.). New York, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London, New York: Verso.
- Derrida, J. (2001). *The work of mourning*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.
- Kohut, H. (1977). *The restoration of the self*. New York, New York: International Universities Press.
- Phillips, A. (2013). *One way and another: New and selected essays*. New York, New York: Penguin Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1963). *Preface in Fanon, F. The wretched of the Earth*. New York, New York: Grove Weidenfeld.