

Co-presence and the Transpersonal Field According to R.D. Laing: Pointing towards Holism

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ABSTRACT: This article revisits R.D. Laing's legacy to the field on the 30th anniversary of his passing. He wrote a number of bestselling books, but never published anything about his personal approach to therapy. Fortunately, however, at The Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference in 1985, Laing gave a presentation on the *Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Psychotherapy*, which elucidated his views on this subject. This included his schema of the intrapersonal, the interpersonal and the transpersonal, and the idea of therapy as mindful attention of the client. Laing recognized the importance of therapeutic attunement and how this could lead to the potential achievement of a communion space with clients – which he later called 'co-presence.' For Laing, co-presence was always more than a mere theory: it was an experiential reality.

KEYWORDS: Laing, co-presence, transsubjective

As 2019 marks the thirtieth year since R. D. Laing died, it is fitting that we take the opportunity of re-appraising his legacy to the field of psychotherapy. Accordingly, this article will trace Laing's formulation of co-presence and the therapeutic encounter, as far as possible adhering to what he said about these subjects. I shall also introduce some findings in neuroscience that supply evidence of neural synchronization between people in an encounter. Then, I shall discuss various perspectives about Laingian therapy and the field of co-presence, before ending with some comments about what the implications of co-presence are from a transpersonal viewpoint.

Anyone who has considered it will know that it is extremely difficult to be fully aware moment by moment of every little nuance that occurs when two people meet and converse. R.D. Laing had the capacity to not only observe and be conscious of the subtleties of human encounter, but also to understand people in a way that sensitive therapists, i.e., the best ones, always seem capable of doing. Of course, Laing achieved fame in the nineteen sixties through writing several highly successful books, often around the theme of ontological insecurity, giving concise and clear depictions of the sorts of confusions and disturbances that can impact one's being in the world, especially with regard to states of alienation, dissociation and of schizophrenia (Laing 1960, 1961, 1967). However, none of these published books described in detail *how* he actually did therapy or more specifically, for our purposes, how he would form a rapport with his clients – leading to a state of interconnectedness, which he called co-presence. Alas, he had been toying with the idea for a book on this very subject (Mullan, 1995, p. 251), but was unable to commence writing it before he died of a heart attack in 1989.

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Laing's Relational Schema

Fortunately for posterity one of the things that remains, apart from Laing's published work, is an audio recording from 1985 of his presentation on the *Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Psychotherapy* at the Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference in Phoenix, Arizona. Owing to the lack of any printed version of this presentation, for the purposes of this article, when I quote Laing from this particular source it derives from selective, verbatim transcriptions that I have made directly from the audio recording.

At this Conference, one of the things he spoke about was having a basic schema, a relational framework, consisting of three elements: the *intrapersonal*, the *interpersonal*, and the *transpersonal*. The intrapersonal aspect described what was happening within oneself, one's inner world, which one might either choose to reveal to others or else keep private to oneself. The interpersonal aspect referred to "communication to each other from that intrapersonal state: we're in our different and separate spaces and we communicate interpersonally" (Laing, 1985). So at this interpersonal level of contact, we are two separate persons communicating from our own individual standpoints, trying to get our views across to each other whether that be adversarial or sympathetic. Finally, the transpersonal was about a different level of contact, "that is achieved by a sort of attunement, or at-onement, or a communion space. Now, communication at the interpersonal level has got quite a different feel to it if the communication comes from - out of - communion" (Laing, 1985). In other words, the interpersonal is that which gets communicated between persons, the source of which may be either directly from the intrapersonal state, or else might be mediated by the transpersonal communion state.

Therapy as Interpersonal Meditation

It is helpful if we consider another relevant statement by Laing at the same Conference: "I would say that a good deal of my therapy is a sort of interpersonal meditation. It's different from what you experience if you go to a Zen sitting meditation thing, or if you meditate alone. It's meditating together, it's a sort of meditative conversation - if words are being employed - or it's a conjoint or a shared experience of not going into separate worlds, but coming together in a reflective, meditative mood. Out of *that* can come all sorts of intuition - it's a sort of incubation" (Laing, 1985).

To describe therapy as a shared meditative conversation means envisioning it to be an entirely different process than that conceived by the classical psychoanalytical approach. For one thing, the therapist is open and together *with* the client and not a detached observer. Additionally, the therapist's task of interpreting the client, becomes secondary. Foremost in this approach is that, through having this meditative interaction, clients may come to a state of mind by means of which they can find their *own* way forward.

As early as the nineteen sixties, before it became even credible let alone popular, Laing himself had become aware of the therapeutic benefit of meditation in London

through his association with the psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Eric Graham Howe. He later met a Tibetan Buddhist Lama, Chogyam Trungpa, who consulted him in his professional capacity for depression after a car accident in 1969 (ICA, 1980). Not long thereafter, in 1971, Laing visited Sri Lanka where he meditated in a Buddhist monastery. In the late nineteen eighties he was invited to the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, which had been founded by Trungpa, where he gave a seminar on co-presence.

Laing was aware that solitary meditation, work on one's own state of mind, did not necessarily always develop the capacity for rapport with other people. But what he realized was that psychotherapy could be seen "as itself a form of meditation, a particular version of the practice of *satipatthana*, or bare attention in relationship to what goes on in the presence - in relationship to the presence - of other people" (Laing, 1985).

Actually, the *Satipatthana Sutta*, which one might regard as the original Buddhist source of the mindfulness meditation techniques so in vogue today, identified four areas to be mindful about: the body, feeling, consciousness, and mental objects (Thera, 1999, p.24). Buddha himself did not actually specify bare attention focused on the presence of another person as an object of meditation – so at most, such a practice is only implicit. Strictly speaking, therefore, it is Laing's own innovation, or insight, to consider therapeutic attention as a variant of *satipatthana*. Nevertheless, I think he is right to view it as such, and I consider this link to have crucial significance for therapy.

Co-presence

Laing, later in his life, at some time I have been unable to pinpoint but I assume to be post 1985, began to refer to this shared communion state as *co-presence*. In the documentary film *Did you used to be R.D. Laing?* (Shandel, Tougas, & Feldmar, 1989), he describes it as, "a field effect happening prior to and behind the words actually spoken." Laing then gives a more complete definition, which is worth quoting in full:

Really to be with another person in a completely open hearted, unguarded way, where one is not on one's own part somehow or other cancelling, or altering or modifying who that other person is to suit one's own book. . .co-presence: being actually present without reservation, or precondition, or something that one might call communion, which I think is the perfection of what we're ordinarily meant to be together. That's the only peace there can possibly be (Shandel, Tougas, & Feldmar, 1989).

Co-presence requires two or more people for the field effect to occur. Once the field effect takes hold then a synchronization of the breath and body language of client and therapist can start to occur as a consequence. The body mirroring is not necessarily identical but a flowing together, harmonious and conjunct, in a parallel movement that has been termed 'entrainment' – a term Laing borrowed from the vocabulary of hypnosis. Suppose the starting point of a given session is for the

client to arrive in a confused or anxious state of mind. Then coming into co-presence with the therapist carries value because — at least whilst the field holds and often for some time afterwards — their fear will either start to abate, or else become more bearable. Laing's former student, Andrew Feldmar, has clarified that for Laing co-presence means: "Full presence, full manifestation, spontaneity and candor, without having to play roles. Our beings being together, mutual extinction of mutual terror." (A. Feldmar, personal communication, January 10, 2006). From this calmer, more assured state of mind the client will be in a better position to then clarify problems and difficulties in living.

How is the therapist to be with a client in order to allow the possibility for co-presence to manifest? Laing stated:

If one has been able to cultivate oneself, or has a natural flair for a certain sort of harmless inviting presence that doesn't offer threat — it isn't felt as threatening and isn't felt as pulling in, or doing anything, as just being — but actively not just sort of dead but very high vibrant energy — just being very calm. Then that is a good state of mind to be in for receiving patients or clients in the course of psychotherapy (Shandel, Tougas, & Feldmar, 1989).

Feldmar has added that co-presence is about *spaciousness*, "letting the other and oneself be" (A. Feldmar, personal communication, December 6, 2007).

In my own view, co-presence has, as it were, a palpable quality to it: one can sense the attuned effect of it in action. This can allow for the safe expression of feeling, sometimes very raw feeling, and thus can lead to a powerful sense of emotional intimacy between people. Once the co-present field is active with a client, so long as there is sufficient, mindful attentiveness shown by the therapist, then the co-present field has every chance of sustaining itself. Likewise, the therapist who becomes inattentive and loses attunement will be unable to maintain the co-presence. Additionally, the communion aspect of co-presence in the therapeutic encounter does not allow for desire — and if desire exists in the therapist that would then not permit the client to be as they are, nor to be wholly present without interference.

Does Neuroscience Provide Evidence for Co-presence?

Laing's view of the transpersonal as a communion space between people and his phenomenological descriptions of co-presence have been left largely neglected by the various schools of psychotherapy up to the present time. Given the contemporary pressure for 'evidence based' practice and cognitive approaches, as well as a seemingly unstoppable trend towards reducing therapy to the application of mere technique—or, worse, to an app on one's smart phone—one might expect that the outlook for a Laingian approach could be quite bleak. However, perhaps all is not quite lost. In recent years, from outside the profession of psychotherapy, an interest in mutual presence has been making some impact in the art world. In particular, the work of the artist Marina Abramovic has involved an engagement in interpersonal encounter, as demonstrated in live performances

such as the massively popular *The Artist is Present* at MoMA in New York, in 2010. She would sit down all day for silent, one to one interactions of variable duration with the queuing public. Another live performance of that nature was *Measuring the Magic of Mutual Gaze* in Moscow, in 2014. Abramovic's work attracted the interest of a group of neuroscientists, which resulted in a collaboration measuring how her brain responded to other people in these encounters.

In the documentary film *Innsaei: The Power of Intuition*, which featured this research, scientist Amy Tan comments, "When two people have the same set of oscillations, we call that 'neural synchrony.' We can actually see it now, in real time, when it happens, as it happens" (Gunnsteinsdottir & Olafsdottir, 2015). Research into neural synchrony has been conducted in various contexts; for example, between students in the classroom (Dickker et al., 2017), between musicians (Babiloni et al., 2012) and between caregivers and infants (Markova, Nguyen, & Hoehl, 2019). Evidence of speaker and listener neural coupling during successful communication has been found by Stephens, Silbert, and Hasson (2010). Finally, Atzil and Gendron's (2017) research on the development of conceptualized emotions has led them to conclude that the evidence "suggests that while mothers synchronously care for their infants using brain circuitry involved in conceptualization and allostasis, infants gradually develop the equivalent neural circuitry, providing the infrastructure for cognitive and emotional skills" (p. 166).

Whilst Laing himself would have welcomed these investigations, I daresay he would have warned against scientific reductionism, and reminded us that the mind is not the same thing as the brain. For us today, however, the main point is that there is now evidence that appears to endorse Laing's own descriptions of interpersonal encounter, such that the scientists are actually echoing, unawares, his own terminology by using words such as 'synchrony', 'in concert', and 'highly in tune' in their observations about what the paired brain scan data shows (Gunnsteinsdottir & Olafsdottir, 2015). This suggests that co-presence and the Laingian view of the transpersonal, are not mere ideas - but have scientific credibility as well as phenomenological value. Hopefully, co-presence might now gain some recognition as being a fundamental factor in authentic therapeutic experience.

Interpretations of Co-presence and Laingian therapy

I have already mentioned that Laing did not publish anything going into detail regarding his own approach to therapy. In the years since he died there have been various attempts, although by no means as many as might have been anticipated, to explain Laing's therapeutic skills and how he worked with his clients. Broadly speaking these articles view Laing from either existential (Bortle, 2000; Groth, 2014; Schneider, 2000), phenomenological (Gans, 2000), or transpersonal (Clark, 2004) perspectives, and thus emphasize different aspects of his practice.

Scott Bortle's article *Building context: Transpersonal reality in existential therapy* (2000) and Carlton Clark's *What was therapeutic about that?* (2004) share the same subject matter. Each article provides a commentary on the transcript of Laing's

filmed interview with a young lady called Christy, which also took place at the Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference in December 1985. The main difference between the two papers is that Clark focuses on the transpersonal themes of the dialogue, whilst Bortle offers an analysis from an existential perspective. Both writers also happen to include a section of dialogue from the post interview Q&A session, where a question is asked about 'transpersonal reality'. I think it is worthwhile to quote the question and Laing's answer in full, in order to more clearly understand where he stood on this issue:

Q: A couple of days ago, Dr. Laing, you spoke about creating a kind of transpersonal reality, or not creating, but stepping into something that is a shared reality between you and the person you are working with. And that spoke to me very deeply, and I was really interested in hearing from the young woman that you've been interviewing with, and also from you, about the experience of that, that moving into that place. You, and I'm speaking to the young woman... mentioned some feeling of Dr. Laing having read your mind earlier, and I'd like to hear anything you have to say about that experience. Either as something... as his stepping into your... your head, or the two of you being in some kind of shared reality.

Laing: [After consulting with Christy] Neither of us knows how to answer that question. But I'll start putting a few words to this. And tell me if I strike a wrong note [looking at Christy]. It's with the greatest reservations that I think one can talk about transpersonal reality. It is certainly non-verbal. And it is fundamentally, essentially, impossible to express in the content of words. It is possible to convey it, however, more in the... through words, through... in the music of words, in the manner of words. And in the other ways, which I was trying to explain two days ago. We communicate with each other interpersonally. If that realization is present of the transpersonal field, then nothing needs to be said between those people who are aware of that transpersonal field. When one tries to explain one's awareness of that transpersonal field to people who are not aware of it - and I know that in this company there are a lot of you who are aware of it - and many of you who are not aware of it. Now, to those of you who are aware of it, you know how difficult it is to talk about. And to those of you who are not aware of it, I would say this. Don't be too impatient. Don't, because you don't understand it, because you are mystified. Don't get angry. Something is happening. Something is happening between us in this hall, at this very moment. You can't express it in words. There is a conspiracy; there is a divine conspiracy, which has brought us together. There is a divine conspiracy as well as conspiracy of the devil. I'm not going to go on and say any more about that just now, but as I tried to say before, it makes all of the difference if there is a sense of communion which is unspoken. It doesn't have to be said. It shouldn't actually be spoken about anymore than it sometimes needs to be, out of which interpersonal communication occurs and links up with the intrapersonal. If that is there, it makes all of the difference. If that is absent, it's sort of going at it like this, making interpretations, trying to understand, trying to do psychotherapy. It's the same whether it is behavioral therapy, psychotherapy, psychoanalytic therapy or what not, etc. etc. It will come to nothing. It doesn't... it doesn't get anywhere with those people, those people who find it very difficult to live in the

world of the interpersonal and the intrapersonal and see how stupid it all is, how ugly it all is, how inexpressibly confused it all is, and yet are just regarded as crazy and mad, for realizing that, and are either locked up, or run away (Laing, 1989, pp.154-156).

First, and foremost, Laing is stating his opinion that you cannot express transpersonal reality verbally – i.e., it is not possible to do so semantically. So, it would seem that to actually try and get at what is *going on* in the interview by a textual analysis, which both Bortle and Clark attempt to do, is either to miss or ignore this point. The communion between Laing and Christy by *itself* constituted the basis of the therapy, and that contact was itself impossible to analyze from a transcript. In Laing's view, the verbal communication, in regard to the content of the words, remains only at the interpersonal level. Furthermore, without this sense of non-verbal communion, therapy in effect becomes the application of a dry and empty method.

Bortle's stance on the interview is that the therapeutic effect was a result of Laing's ability to skillfully offer Christy a way out of her confusion about how to reconcile her faith in Jesus with her need to be separate from her parents (Bortle, 2000, p.13). Bortle identifies Laing's expertise and insight but not any inter-relatedness in the interview. By contrast, Clark at least allows for transpersonal themes in the session and acknowledges the reality of the spiritual dimension in Christy's life, whilst still focusing on the movement in the dialogue. In other words, he too is seeking causal explanations for the bond established between her and Laing.

Clark (2004) remarks upon the response of the audience to the Christy interview, which is notable because the Conference delegates are more or less divided into two opposing camps, creating the context for Laing's comments in his answer above. The difference of opinion is between those people who do not understand what was happening in the session and seek some rational clarification about it, and those who appear to just understand it intuitively. Apparently, Laing's other presentations at the Conference also split the audience members: Clark, who was himself in attendance, relates how he was moved to tears listening to Laing's first talk, whereas his psychiatrist friend tells him he is unable to understand a thing of it before promptly walking out of the hall. Clark concludes his article with hope that "the two camps can move a bit closer together in this consideration of technique (that can be taught and tested) and of interpersonal meditation (that increases intuition and perception)" (p.176). Unfortunately, he leaves us with no proposals about how to create such a rapprochement.

By asserting that transpersonal reality is non-verbal, Laing poses the problem of the limits of language. It looks as if people will either just appreciate what transpersonal reality is, intuitively, or they will not understand it and most likely not believe it is real. If one is rational and is looking for explanations, reasons and causes, then none will be forthcoming. As for spiritual practitioners who do understand the transpersonal and experience its reality, they must struggle with how to verbally communicate this information to others.

How can these limitations and constrictions be overcome? In his paper *Awakening to Love: R.D. Laing's Phenomenological Therapy* (2000), Steve Gans writes that from early on in his career Laing had been concerned about the lack of love and ethics in the scientific framework that imbued psychiatry and orthodox psychoanalysis in the nineteen fifties. Laing's idea for countering this was to adopt a science of the heart and of relatedness, which he called 'social phenomenology'. Martin Heidegger had identified the opportunity for an authentic way of being, which involved waking up from the sleep of everyday convention and ordinariness to the finitude and time boundness of existence. However, Laing saw that this ontology neglected an inter-relational perspective, as exemplified by the Biblical commandment to 'love your neighbor as yourself'. Gans informs us that Laing (when he was only a young man) had written an unpublished paper, *Reflections on the Ontology of Human Relations* (Laing, 1954) where he stated that we must love others unconditionally, that we must respect the otherness of others, and that we exist in relation to others and not in isolation. Mental disturbance was not inside someone, but a disjunction in a relationship. This idea was developed in *The Divided Self* (Laing, 1960) which theorized that the cause of anxiety was the threat of the loss of love. Henceforward, Laing concerned himself with how power relations corrupted the realization of love in the family setting, in institutions, and at the national level. The main point, however, is that Laing, without ever having named it as such himself, practiced what Gans calls a 'phenomenology of love', which was "a way of continual and provocative awakening from one's dogmatic and loveless slumber" (Gans, 2000, p.528).

The subject of love, and co-presence, is also discussed by Andrew Feldmar in *R.D. Laing: Creative Destroyer* (Mullan, 1997), a book of memories and reflections about Laing by those who knew him. Feldmar recalls Laing defining co-presence as "the practice of non-intrusive attentiveness, a wholesome concern for each other's life and death... co-presence is being together lovingly", (Feldmar, 1997, p.350). Feldmar once also asked Laing for his definition of love, and by way of reply Laing clarified that he was talking not of desire but of such love as St. Paul described when he used the word 'charity' in his second letter to the Corinthians. It might be helpful in this regard to clarify that charity or *caritas* for Laing was equated with caring; in his words, "it's got to be about what we *care* about more than anything...to care about this world" (Kierulff, 1991, p.22). Further, Laing also quoted St. Thomas Aquinas, "for whom love consists in the knowing of that which is in its 'isness'. This obviously entails letting be, entails seeing and wanting it to be and cherishing it for itself, as it is" (Feldmar, 1997, p. 350). Laing adds that Aquinas said, "that there is no knowledge without love. You can't know except through the medium of love. Love is the only way through which knowledge can become apparent or manifest" (p. 352).

Thus, Laing's conception of love is about a deep care and regard for the welfare of other persons, together with an attitude of non-harmful attentiveness. For M. Guy Thompson, a former student of Laing, *caritas* equates with 'sympathy' – meaning to feel with others, to be deeply affected by them—by contrast with the word 'empathy' where one might be more emotionally contained in one's understanding of another person (Thompson 2017, pp.164-165). Thompson adds that once Laing told him that he had learned: "the sincerest expression of love is to not 'trespass'

against others, which is to say, never to encroach into another's personal space, but to do so cautiously, tenderly, and carefully" (p.166). From this, we can see that Laing's view of love has a deeply ethical component, without any pressuring of the other. Without this loving awareness, this attitude of *caritas*, there can be no communion or co-presence.

Laing did not, however, allow himself to speculate about what co-presence *meant*, or what the nature of the field itself implied or might be. Rather, he appears to have preferred to keep things grounded in our actual experience of the world and of each other. The communion state did not lead to actual telepathy in his view, although it might create that impression for some people. Thus, he could say in his presentation to the Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference, "...if one's in the state of attunement with the space that the other person, in their schizoid, intrapersonal position is cut off from [in] themselves, they are liable to feel that one has somehow or other got into that intrapersonal thing and is reading it out from there. But it's not so" (Laing, 1985).

The communion state provides a space of calmness and clarity, which then naturally allows for any verbal communication to be expressed more easily. It would appear that the transpersonal communion feeds backward to the intrapersonal experiencing and thinking of the person and also to their interpersonal verbal communication. Therefore, if a person is in a disturbed state of mind, fearful and perhaps socially isolated and alienated, then this sort of contact could bring obvious benefits - in particular the experience of fellow human feeling.

Transpersonal Perspectives on Co-presence

Having described what happens in co-presence and transpersonal reality, and accepting that it *does* happen, various questions arise. How central is the phenomenon of co-presence and transpersonal communion to effective psychotherapy? And to what extent can the experiences of two people in co-presence together correspond? The brain scanning data, referred to above, shows that mirroring is indeed occurring at the neurophysiological level between people engaged in mutual gaze. Can we also extrapolate that co-presence is in some manner the *same* inter-experience with two individuals? Can there be, at its foundation, one essential awareness permeating two separate persons? The problem here, as I mentioned earlier, is that any attempt to accurately answer these questions will be hampered by the limited capacity of language to convey the essential nature of our experience. This is rather like wondering whether the red that I see is the same as the red that you see. How can one possibly know?

Laing's own position might actually look somewhat paradoxical. He asserted that transpersonal reality existed: therefore, human beings are able to be present to each other such that personal boundaries blur and transpersonal communion is experienced. But he also maintained a deep respect for the individuality of each person, thereby affirming an ontological framework that includes the separateness and alterity of the other. This paradox is only resolved once it is recognized that it is inter-relatedness that is of importance. Laing, earlier on in his career, commented:

“Personal relatedness can exist only between beings who are separate but not isolates. We are not isolates and we are not parts of the same physical body” (Laing, 1960, p.26).

Despite the linguistic and semantic difficulties referred to previously, some attempts have been made to investigate what occurs in the attuned intersubjective field from the transpersonal perspective. Susan Blackstone’s article: *Intersubjectivity and Nonduality in the Therapeutic Relationship* (2006) proposes that the nondual state of consciousness is both transcendent of subjectivity and also its very essence and ground. If nondual awareness can be achieved then contact with the very core of oneself will have been achieved – and the integration of that experience will be of great therapeutic value. She correlates Stolorow’s ideas about the intersubjective field (Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002) to her own proposal of the existence of a nondual unified field. Blackstone comments that intersubjectivity theory, “suggests, or at least draws near to the idea of an underlying unity, a single system or field, which gives rise to human experience and behavior. It begins to explore the hard question of the relationship between individual perspective and fundamental unity” (Blackstone, 2006, p.26).

Blackstone’s description of the nondual state involves the dropping of conceptual mental processes leading to a ‘bare perception’ of the world that culminates in a bridging over of the subject object division. Furthermore, this nonduality provides access to another dimension that is “the experience of a subtle, all-pervasive expanse of consciousness pervading one’s internal and external experience as a unified whole” (p.27). So, this spacious awareness is both aware within the mind and body and expands outwards beyond the body.

For Blackstone, if the client is on board with the benefits of nonduality then this opens the way for a therapeutic project aiming towards uncovering the nondual field. She has developed a method called Realization Process, which is a set of exercises to facilitate nondual awareness in the clinical setting. If the nondual connection is established then healing can occur through a ‘vibrational resonance’ between the two persons, as for instance in the shared resonating of the quality of love. The crux of it all comes down to this, “. . .when two people both experience nondual consciousness together, they have a vivid experience that the same one consciousness pervades them both. They experience that their consciousness is unified, or continuous, with each other’s consciousness” (p.36). She calls this space of unity the ‘transsubjective field’ (p.36).

In terms of her idea of a transsubjective field, and her view of nonduality she is pointing out something of value for transpersonal psychology, which could easily be equated with Laing’s co-present transpersonal field, simply because both views recognize that what is occurring reaches beyond subjectivity. It is perhaps only when it comes to the *interpretation* and use of the transpersonal field effect that some differences come to light. For instance, Laing was not systematically generating co-presence, he did not have an agenda for it, whereas Blackstone has her own program directed towards it. By not interpreting what the nature of the field meant, beyond the fact that we are inter-related, Laing was also allowing for

some room for mystery and nuance on the matter, whereas Blackstone has been clear and definitive about her nondual view of it.

Blackstone appears also to have reached a highly advanced level of personal spiritual attainment – a level that many therapists (myself included), might not have personally experienced. Such spiritual attainment is not required in the Laingian approach where the alignment is potentially possible simply by either having, or cultivating, an attitude of caring attentiveness, together with the courage to be fully present with clients. Aside from this affective aspect of *caritas*, which itself can neither be forced nor mimicked, but seems to occur conjunct with the attunement, one can simply leave all agendas aside and *be there* with the client. Evidently, one need not be a realized nondualist for this to occur - although having some ongoing personal practice of meditation, or of contemplation, might be helpful.

Although Blackstone, from her nondual perspective, clearly asserts that when two people share nondual reality their consciousness is unified, she admits nonetheless that “we have no way of knowing whether the experience of unity is an ontological or a phenomenological reality” (Blackstone, 2006, p.36). One can compare this view of union with a comment Laing made regarding attunement in encounter: “it is very difficult to say, although it is a sort of exchange, but in that space where there’s a temporary suspension of egoic separateness it becomes impossible to say where some thought comes up, whether it comes from the other person, or comes from the same person” (Laing 1985). Thus, in effect, he acknowledges very much the same sort of experience.

Another transpersonal psychotherapist who has contributed to the elucidation of the nature of the field between therapist and client is Irene R. Siegel in *Therapist as a container for spiritual resonance and client transformation in transpersonal psychotherapy: An exploratory heuristic study* (2013) and in a later book (Siegel, 2017). Her initial research, based on data collected from interviews with psychotherapists working spiritually, is concerned with the nature of the healing interaction between client and therapist, and how to describe it. She uses the term *spiritual resonance*, which as a result of her inquiry comes to be defined as: “a vibrational pattern of greater cosmic wholeness, which is experienced as being accessed by soul awareness” (Siegel, 2013, p. 51). Therapists make the first step towards spiritual resonance by their personal attunement either to a transcendent ‘Divine spiritual power’ (p.55), or to a deep inner presence, which aligns to a connecting energy or frequency. Spiritual resonance is seen as central to life, not just to healing itself. The client can then choose to resonate, or not, with that frequency level active in the therapist. If resonance becomes interactive then there can be a ‘blending’ (p.57) that leads to a unified field between the therapist and the client. The benefits are dis-identifying with ego, change of perception, and transformation by the spiritual resonance in the transsubjective field. Siegel’s article in this volume (2019) focuses upon the process of spiritual awakening in therapy, with particular regard to internal light as a healing factor.

Essentially, Siegel’s spiritual resonance is an alignment to higher consciousness in the transsubjective field. It would seem that Laing’s co-presence/transpersonal field can operate without reference to, or awareness of, spiritual resonance. Conversely,

however, it would be difficult to conceive of spiritual resonance between people occurring without also feeling co-presence. Equally, if two people already together in a co-present field were to begin contemplating or discussing spiritual matters, then spiritual resonance would likely manifest.

The human connection to a spiritual dimension was spoken and written about by Laing at various times. One such relevant example comes from a seminar he gave to the Iona Community, an ecumenical Christian community in Scotland, where he spoke the following words:

John Wycliffe in his first translation of the Bible into the vulgar tongue in England translated what we now call, are inclined to call, the 'Holy Spirit' as 'Our Healthy Spirit'. I still like that a lot better than Holy Spirit. That is the correct translation, 'Our Healthy Spirit'. Now, whether I have a soul or not, whether my soul is an epiphenomenon of my body, or whether my soul is the whole point of my body and whatever state my body may be in, I do believe that all healing comes from 'Our Healthy Spirit'. That this is divine, that this is one in three who are three in one, and that it's only 'Our Healthy Spirit' that leads us to health in any respect whatever, whether it's physically, mentally, soulfully, emotionally or any other way – socially. It's spirit and this spirit (is) in coexistence with but distinguishable, in a certain sense, from Christ - that Christ is among us. This Healthy Spirit is in us, and Christ is among us and between us, whenever two or three people are gathered together in the name of Christ, or even in the name of this Healthy Spirit. (Laing, undated, MS Laing WE9)

Laing goes on to add that the word 'Healthy' is used to also mean 'whole' and 'holy.' The healing is the making whole again. He adds, "It points to the fact that when we split up, when we section ourselves - we are crucifying Christ, and we are sinning against our own spirit of health and holiness" (Laing, n.d, MS Laing WE9). Regardless of whether one interprets Laing symbolically here, or not, the correspondence to Siegel's spiritual resonance as the source of all healing is evident. Similarly, the reference from St. Matthew's Gospel, about Christ being amidst us whenever two or three people are gathered together in his name, can stand as a metaphor for the communion felt in spiritual resonance, co-presence and the transsubjective field.

Call it what you will - intersubjectivity, transsubjectivity, or co-presence - it appears that therapists will be able to monitor when the field itself is active between persons. Siegel reports that therapists can sense a harmony come into the field when clients attune to spiritual resonance; also she informs us that, "Intuitive knowing, inner vision, and kinesthetic sensations such as lightness, tingling, expansion, relaxation, steady deep breathing, flow, or quickening may be used as internal feedback mechanisms. The integration of intuitive knowing with an immediate experience of sensation provides the therapist with the internal feedback mechanisms to assess resonance within the shared field" (Siegel, 2013 p.64). Similarly, Blackstone has also stated that there "is a discernible shift in the depth and quality of contact and in the spontaneity of dialogue, whenever the subjective organizations of either person give way to the mutuality of the nondual field" (Blackstone, 2006, p. 36). For Laing the indication of attunement would be

observable in entrainment of the client with the therapist. For instance, he says of the breath, “if one’s sitting in a room with someone else in this meditative frame of mind – one’s breathing does begin to become attuned with the other person, like a mother and a baby. Not necessarily - the rhythm and the tempo isn’t sort of *identical* but there is, as in music, different rhythms and different tempos but in harmonious, synchronous, conjunctive relationship” (Laing, 1985). Laing puts more emphasis on the inter-relationship of voices, breath, physical posture, subtle body language etc. as concomitants of co-presence. Beyond this monitoring of the alignment, what Laing and Siegel particularly emphasize is intuitive knowing. For Laing, intuition may emerge for the client in therapy directly from that state of co-presence or meditative communion, without necessarily being led by the therapist.

Implications of Co-presence and the Transpersonal Field

The meeting space of co-presence, or the transpersonal field, is essential in psychotherapy. Without it there cannot be any effective therapy, only the application of dry technique, which will be of limited value for clients. The phenomenological and ontological reality of the transpersonal field is both challenging and wonderful for the same reason: it shows us that subject and object, mind and world, and self and other cannot be separated. If we are not isolated then we must somehow be ontologically inter-related. The critique of the Cartesian world view, and its remedy by a participatory view of nature has already been made by Richard Tarnas (1991) and applied to transpersonal psychology by Jorge Ferrer (2002).

One of the challenges that concerns us, in practical terms, is how we discuss the transsubjective field in a common vocabulary. Siegel has commented on the difficulty of finding the language to describe spiritual resonance, including problems with the translation of spiritual terminology from different traditions around the world (Siegel, 2013 p. 50). Moreover, as referred to already, Laing felt that it was only possible to talk about transpersonal reality with reservations. One solution to this apparent impasse is to acquire the resource of a meta-vocabulary, that is to create a specific, holistic, inter-relational epistemology so that transpersonal knowledge can be communicated. The alternative is to ally transpersonal psychology with an existing epistemology, for instance the one created by Robert Brandom (2001), the philosopher of inferentialism.

The communication and description of the transsubjective field is, however, more than a linguistic issue. I would suggest that this Cartesian, analytical mindset has become so embedded in our use of language and our habitual ways of approaching existence that we are virtually incapable of interpreting our experience in any other way. In other words, it seems that many western people cannot help but think dualistically - even when they are trying not to. I am by no means exempting myself from this state of affairs. What we do, habitually, is use our minds to examine and explore things by splitting things apart (sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally) and seeing how they work, looking for causal explanations. We either view things subjectively, from our own side, or make an attempt to be

objective from a position of supposed detachment. What we do not usually do is see things *relationally*, holistically, in their togetherness and unity.

At the collective level, the paradigm of the mechanistic, lawful universe in which we are all isolated, thinking subjects observing the world has been gradually coming apart since the formulation of quantum theory just about a hundred years ago. We find ourselves situated in a liminal space of change and potential chaos, caused by the breakdown of that which was previously held to be certain. The last great change was a period when the newly created scientific method of Bacon and Descartes transformed society in the seventeenth century – before which time in the west the alchemical view of reality held some sway. Except now we are coming out of the other side of this dualistic era, which has been an era of scientism, and are slowly approaching a post-Cartesian world. In the meantime, both science and technology appear to be unable to halt the processes of the decay, destruction and harm that have been unleashed and which are manifesting ecologically, environmentally, politically, economically and socially. How long this process of breakdown will take before a new paradigm evolves is anybody's guess. But prior to the invention of the scientific method, alchemists had intuited the link between mind and matter and one perspective might be that having learned how to measure and observe the natural world we need now to revive something like that alchemical wisdom to prevent us from laying it all to waste. Specifically, we need to understand that mind and matter are somehow simultaneously both distinct and not distinct - which was the alchemical intuition in the first place.

One way of thinking about how a holistic epistemology might operate is to consider, again from alchemy, the notion of the opposites. We can view any two opposite aspects (for example love and hate, hot and cold etc.) as being separate and conflicted. Or, we can see them as linked together by the symmetry of their polarities, which means they must be inter-related, not isolated but merely two ends of the same spectrum. In the case of the scientific method what became opposed was mind and matter, which Laing spoke about when giving a lecture upon the subject of transpersonal psychology in 1982 in Sweden. In his critique of the scientific paradigm he condemned Galileo for having proposed that we observe nature as if we were outside of it, as if we and all life were dead and we were to inspect what remained. Laing's view was that science had thereby split us away not only from nature but also from our own experience and yet, paradoxically, physicists working from within that very paradigm found consciousness in the world and so "having started from this schizoid duality... we don't find a schizoid duality, we find a dual unity" (Laing, 1982). Both terms are apposite, the schizoid duality of scientism and the dual unity of holism. By 'dual unity' Laing was referring to the mirroring of mind and world, but I would say this term could be extended for our own purposes to refer to that which occurs between people in the active field of co-presence or transpersonal communion. Similarly, the word 'co-presence' immediately and directly connotes *two* or more being present with each other, the inter-relationship is implied in the word itself. By these means we begin to bring into consideration the need for an expanded vocabulary of human relatedness.

Conclusion

Laing's notions of co-presence, interpersonal meditation, and the transpersonal communion state are all vital in order for therapy to be effective. Over the thirty years since Laing died these powerful - and yet paradoxically subtle - ideas have not been embraced by the mainstream therapeutic world. Nevertheless, skeptical opinions about the transpersonal have been gradually softening to the point, for example, that we now live in a society where teaching mindfulness is standard procedure in clinical settings. Also, science has recently discovered that our brains can have oscillations that entrain and synchronize together; although this does not prove co-presence as such, it does at least indicate that we are neurologically interconnected. Therefore, in the present day, attitudes would seem to have become open and amenable enough for Laingian therapy to potentially gain traction and be more widely recognized.

Laing thought that spiritual love, *caritas* - care - was essential for being with and understanding other people. Co-presence is a way for each person in an encounter to be present wholly as they are. Laing himself, however, appears to have been concerned more with the fact that the field was a felt experience rather than *what* it was, whereas, Susan Blackstone's transsubjective field is defined as a 'mutual space of subject/subject unity' (Blackstone, 2006, p.32), which is a nondual relational field. It is my position that co-presence could be viewed as a dual unity, and whether this is synonymous with a nondual field or not comes down to a matter of how one interprets what seems to be essentially the same communion phenomenon. Co-presence can also be a shared space for spiritual resonance to manifest between client and therapist, where a feeling of togetherness can be sensed - the transsubjective field, if you will - out of which positive change may occur. Thus, psychotherapists are not healing their clients; rather it is the case that clients are making their own way to wholeness as a result of what arises in, and from, the shared field. This connectedness means that we each extend beyond our own subjectivity, and as a consequence may start to engage with a holism through our participation and co-existence with others.

How this mutual attunement originates does not necessarily depend upon the therapist offering a sort of unspoken invitation to the client. I think it has, at least, the potential to manifest spontaneously in any given encounter. Phenomenologically, there is that which has its source in the transpersonal field itself, and this is received back into our intrapersonal perspective (in so far as we are aware of a subtle sense of interior perception in such moments) giving rise to a sense of spaciousness and co-extensive awareness. To say any more about the shared field than this will tempt us into becoming speculative and metaphorical, as our words inevitably begin to lose their capacity to give shape to that communion phenomenon which by nature has no form, and yet is energetically so active.

In co-presence, we stand, as it were, either fully outside of our intrapersonal framework, or else at the threshold with our perception wide open to the transpersonal field. This dynamic is more than two persons keeping company - something else is transpiring between us - and that is why Laing called to mind Jesus's saying that where two or three are gathered in His name He is among them.

We can say that the spacious awareness engendered in the field is included in the co-presence – we might also wonder whether there is co-being, co-awareness and co-knowing. Finally, to repeat the point, in order to comprehend all this more fully we need a holistic epistemology with a meta-vocabulary either created for the task, or adapted from an existing philosophical system.

Finally, three decades on from his passing, Ronnie Laing deserves to be honored as much for his contribution to the theory, art, and practice of psychotherapy as for his humanizing influence on psychiatry. Laing approached both in the same way, explaining that “the treatment that we give someone is the way we treat that person. It should not be a noun; it should be an active verb. The way we treat one another is the therapy” (Shandel, Tougas, & Feldmar, 1989).

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