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The Group Twice Promised: Reflections About Co-Teaching in Israel

Yousef AlAjarma and Keren Barzilay Schechter

Introduction

In the spring of 2006, Lesley University sent us, two Lesley Ph.D. candidates in expressive therapies, to teach a course in “Principles and Practices of Expressive Therapy” for first year expressive therapy students at the Lesley extension in Israel. Although both of us have had years of teaching experience, we were both highly excited. This would be our first time teaching graduate students and our first time teaching together. The fact that we are an Israeli Jewish woman and a Palestinian Muslim man with the intention of teaching a group of Jewish Israelis, merely added to the growing emotional storm we were undergoing. In this paper we would like to share the unique, cross-cultural experience we had two years ago—an experience that still resonates within us. We would like to open this paper with the sharing of our personal stories to place some context for our teaching together.

Yousef’s Background

I was born and grew up in the Aida Refugee Camp which accommodates about 4,000 people (around 650 families) who took refuge to it in 1948 and later in 1967. The inhabitants came from 35 different villages in Palestine and moved as the result of the two Arab-Israeli wars. This camp, like the other 21 camps in the West Bank and the 8 camps in Gaza Strip, as well as the other camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, was established with tents as an emergency and temporary camp, but was transformed to a permanent refugee camp.

However, after years and years of waiting, the refugees could not live in these temporary shelters created by the UN. Most of the shelters started to fall down. People were mostly poor and were not able to buy a piece of land outside the camp, and they started reconstruction inside the camp of new houses.

We became refugees on our own land, in our own country. Since the space is very limited in the camp, and there are no possibilities for horizontal expansion, the construction expanded vertically. That's why the camp lacked corners for children and playgrounds where children could play.

I grew up with a dream that I would return to my homeland one day, and in order to do that, I and other refugees had to fight the occupation. I learned that the only way to

fight the occupation is by continuing with education and to have higher educational degrees.

When the first Intifada started in 1987 I was 12 years old. At that time I and other children my age decided to fight the occupation by throwing stones. As a result of this, I was in an Israeli prison for two years from 1989 to 1990. I forgot what it means to be free and to have the freedom to choose. There are many simple things that I forgot and lost in this very brutal and cruel way. I kept wondering “How am I going to be free?” At that time, my healing and way of coping with the suffering of being in prison, was by carving stones and olives seeds to make art out of them. To spend days and weeks in sculpting was a very important way of “debriefing” and healing and made me feel that I am still “alive.” It was the only way I could do this with the tools that were available to me. For me, to shape a stone or something else means to put all my emotions and thoughts on it; the experience and its result motivated a healing process.

Teaching in Israel

Teaching in another country can be challenging and full of new experiences. It can be challenging especially if it is in different language and culture. When I got the opportunity to teach in Israel I was thinking about those two aspects and how I will deal with them, and I was wondering if it is just those two aspects that will be challenging or will the Palestinian-Israeli conflict be more challenging. After deep thinking and discussion with friends and family I was able to overcome the first two challenges: culture and language. I knew something about the culture through my past interactions and meetings with many Israeli students here in the USA and in Switzerland, as well as in Israel and Palestine. I knew I would pass the language barrier because I had already taught two courses in English at Lesley. My biggest worry was how the Israeli students will deal with the fact that I am Palestinian, how they will deal with their “enemy,” and whether I could deal with all the transference and the countertransference. I wondered how I would receive them and how they would receive me. Will I encounter resistance from them because I am Palestinian or will they welcome me and deal with me as with any other international educator? Would I need to face a political discussion?

Keren’s Background

Upon entering the PhD program at Lesley University, my national and political voice was called to reexamination. The first reaction I had to the presence of Yousef as my closest peer in the program was strong resistance. I had never met “a Palestinian” in my life and I was hesitant regarding my ability to build in the university the needed potential space in which to study while “the Palestinian” is attending classes. Being a

third generation to Holocaust survivors and a second generation to the Zionist ideology, the connections between my private identity and my Israeli-collective identity are hermetically intertwined. The eternal attachment between the Jewish people to the land of Israel is inherent and natural for me just as my blood bond to my parents and to my children.

Indeed, at the beginning of our acquaintance I felt that the basic foundations of my world were under fire. Primary fears, prejudice, rage and frustration were central to our work. I fought Yousef's own anger and sorrow, refusing to acknowledge his narrative that sounded like a *victimizing* propaganda to me. Although being a therapist and considering that the act of empathy is second nature to me, I hardly found any empathy for his story. I was so angry to hear about his violent acts and about the stones he threw on I.D.F. soldiers—remembering with a broken heart, young men who had been killed and seriously injured by just such stones. His harsh words about the Israeli army and government burned my skin like a personal insult.

Since our dialogue kept getting stuck on the verbal path, we decided to use the healing powers of the arts and delved together into a journey of self and other exploration. The progression of our work gradually pacified some of the extreme tones of my automatic negative reaction. From the “abstractly threatening Palestinian” he became “tangible Yousef, a kind family man.” As I kept listening to Yousef's story I could feel myself being torn apart. Through learning about his history I learnt more about my own, discovering piles of information that I avoided in the past. I started to wonder whether this act of avoidance might be considered a pattern of violence too. Everything was confused together for me at that point, a mixture of feelings of power and vulnerability, strength and weakness, being simultaneously right and guilty. During our artistic dialogue other elements were added to the experience, softly rounding off its edges. Art as a container enabled an authentic holding of hardship and grief while, in parallel, it progressed along new aesthetic channels of communication. We were using role reversal and mirroring techniques in our work together and reached new depths of understanding. There were points where I couldn't stop myself from identifying with him, knowing deep inside that if I were him, I would have probably behaved the same way. I painfully absorbed his hardships, shocking and shaking the roots of basic beliefs and ethos that I had been raised upon. For the first time in my life I realized how subjective history is. I also understood how each subjective history arms the conflict, the grief and the hate.

It has been a painful process in which anger and feelings of revenge have been learning to coexist with a therapeutic willingness for change and forgiveness. Through struggle and resistance I learned to integrate the ambivalence I felt regarding my own aggressiveness and vulnerability—as a private person and as part of the Israeli collective. Far exceeding any expectations, I have replaced inner feelings of hate, fears

and mistrust with an outer friend. Mutually obligated to our nations, profession and friendship, we were ready to move on to work together with individuals and groups from both nations in order to increase the creative dialogue.

Having the opportunity to co-teach in Israel felt like a wonderful opportunity for this new path.

Warming Up

To prepare for the upcoming course, we plunged into the learning materials for a long time—taking a close look at the “Principles and Practices of Expressive Therapy.” We wondered about the most suitable way for the content to be taught. We pondered: What is the correct balance between experiential activities and theoretical materials? Should the focus be on the essence and healing powers of each modality? What is the requisite equilibrium between teaching each modality and teaching the intermodal approach? Is the focus in teaching intermodal on teaching the right transitions between the modalities, over the course of therapeutic sessions; and when do these right transitions occur? Or, is the focus in teaching intermodal supposed to be on the combination and potential contribution of the modalities to artistic creation and to the healing process?

Questions led into and triggered other questions. We were attracted to the *inter* part contained in the concept of intermodal. What did this *inter* actually refer to? What is the inter-relationship between the different art modalities? How might they interact? Interchange? Interject? Interlace? Intermingle? Interfere? Intercede? How could one modality contribute to the development of the other? Or would it possibly diminish the other?

Some answers to these questions we found before embarking for Israel, thanks to our role as observers in a “Principle and Practice of Expressive Therapy” class given at Lesley University in the States. Other answers we discovered in real time in Israel, in the midst of their occurrence. Yet other parts are still not totally clear to us. However, taking into consideration the dynamic nature of art-making and of human beings, we believe it is safe to say that there probably is no need for rigidly strict and ready answers.

Taking Action

Something primal characterized the group we encountered in Israel. Maybe it is connected to the fact that the students were in their first year and not intimately acquainted with both the theoretical materials and the experiential exercises. Maybe it is connected to the fact that it was our first experience in teaching this course, in

particular, and in teaching together, in general. Be that as it may, our ongoing image of the experience was of a growing fetus, particularly due to the highly suggestible atmosphere, which was a central characteristic of the experience. This atmosphere was operationally demonstrated in different ways: in the depth of the personal sharing; in the raw emotions exposed; in the curiosity, seriousness and involved engagement in the different activities. The desire to learn, to experience, to absorb and to develop was continually present in depth for the entire duration of the group. The group acted with focused intention so that the “potential space” (Winnicott, 1971) was filled with meaningful intra and interpersonal communication.

There is also something highly suggestive in the nature of the learning material (therapy, healing processes, human nature and spirituality) and occupation with the arts. These specific contents foster the appearance of purifying elements. This in return triggers different modes of action and response. Jung (1931/1969) examined dance, expressive body movement, painting, drawing, work with clay and other artistic media and the way they give form to the unconscious. Through the interplay of the arts, spontaneity and creativity were revealed and were transformed into fertile material for the work. Images and archetypes emerged and provoked inquiry in different ways. Similar to an evolving embryo, our group worked hard and in depth; it struggled, took risks and progressed forward, both on a collective level and on the level of each individual in the group.

An example for this developmental process can be found in the social atom work we did in the class. According to Moreno (1953), human beings are born into a “social atom,” a social network which continues to affect them throughout life. More specifically, Moreno contends that the personality of the child evolves from relationships with parents and other important persons with whom there is intimate contact. It is therefore impossible to fully comprehend clients without taking their social atoms into consideration.

In our group, social atom work developed into a psychodrama in which the protagonist found an inner mantra—a mantra she kept telling her auxiliary ego and herself (her double). This mantra “I will grow despite, in spite of, even though – I will grow” had also been heard in a variety of versions from other members of the group throughout the intensive. Likewise, the group as a unit manifested this motto in a plethora of ways.

The vision expressed in the protagonist’s voice, as one that represents and reflects the group voice, was clearly demonstrated through the social atom activity and, as expressed earlier, reflected the parallel process the authors went through. From a starting point characterized by a devaluation of the artistic warm-up, the group had turned to a creative process that generated impressive artistic products. From strong

resistance at the beginning, the group consolidated and delved into personal and interpersonal work. Private stories were shared, relationships were formed and the presence of group cohesiveness was strongly felt. Despite expressions of anger, anxiety and hardship - the group chose to work and to make the most it could out of this experience. This was a group that chose life and chose to act with libidinal energy for the entire week. Perhaps our ongoing feelings of arousal and stimulation, feelings that we felt with fierce intensity during those five days, were an extension of this group choice.

However, such a life choice does not just occur without any struggle. We were frequently faced with the need to work with resistance and the expression of anger, hesitation and devaluations. We made a conscious decision to work and play with the resistance instead of running away from it or trying to bypass it indirectly—whether by succumbing to the tiredness of the afternoon by drifting into a slow meditation, discussing the familiarity of feelings of attraction regarding what’s going on out there, in other groups and with other facilitators, or expressing frustration through voice and images. Acceptance of the resistance helped transform it into a building block in the construction of personal and group development. Instead of giving in to accusations and irritating emotions of dissatisfaction, it appeared that group members used the different activities (among other uses) as filters for the negative emotions, took responsibility for and ownership of their feelings and behaviors and increased their self awareness. The group proceeded into creative synthesis, in which pain was forged into poetry and anger was reshaped into dance. It was a moving, live demonstration of how straw can be spun into gold.

It should be noted that resistance did not totally disappear. Throughout the whole week, its changing tones echoed in group space. However, its size, loudness and dominance had been changed dramatically through the process. With the chronological progress of the course, the voices of resistance decreased and it became merely one melody line along with others that composed the group's song. From the perspective of defenses, the group moved from handling anxiety and discomfort through the use of immature mechanisms—such as denial, projection, acting out and passive aggression—to more mature coping strategies—such as symbolization and sublimation.

For example, the fact that the group had received a Palestinian as one of its facilitators provoked (as was only to be expected) intense emotional reactions. When we broached this issue for discussion at the very beginning of the course, the responses were diverse. Some voices warmly welcomed the discussion; others questioned the very need to conduct that kind of discussion. Arguments such as “if he were a Swiss teacher would this discussion have also been happening.” Or, “there is no need for this type of conversation, it’s a waste of the course’s time,” were heard

loud and clear in the classroom. One member expressed her uncomfortable feelings in a more direct and overt way. Yousef tried to understand her and to listen to her from the point of view of teacher and therapist. This perspective allowed him to be more understanding and allowed her to relax and question her feelings. Afterwards, while delving into artistic work, one of the creations indirectly involved a devaluation of the Palestinian flag. While verbally discussing the creative products, the owner of this work omitted the Palestinian issue and mainly focused on the shapes and colors of other parts of the work. As this was indeed a loaded issue, and our time was limited, we wordlessly decided not to further deepen discussion and to leave it in the arena of unconscious group process. Once again, Yousef was called upon to employ his therapeutic skills to handle the situation and to consider the issue from an emotional perspective instead of from a political stand. At the end of the group, several students, with a considerable measure of excitement, expressed their feelings on the importance of the unique opportunity that had been afforded them by having a Palestinian facilitator and what a difference it had rendered to their political perceptions.

Attaining Closure

Throughout the course, we discovered numerous interfaces between the role of therapist and the role of teacher. There are many similarities between the hardships and obstacles that the therapist and the teacher encounter in their work, and between the projections that their positions evoke. In parallel, there is an affinity between the potential satisfactions that both types of work might grant. Furthermore, especially in classes of this type, the boundaries between the two roles are less formal. Although the purpose is learning and the setting is a classroom, therapeutic learning does take place and the need to juggle the two roles is constantly present.

Reflecting on the archetype of the teacher, it is probably no coincidence that the words art, earth, heart, ear, hear, ache and tear hide within the letters of this word. So does the verb “eat.” After all, does not the teacher supply the souls and brains of her students (her growing fetuses) with the nutrition they need in order to grow?

There are two different time frames for teaching this course—throughout an entire semester or in an intensive format. Naturally, there are advantages and disadvantages for each. Stretched out over a semester, the course is based on a gradual progression; there is much more room for digesting what occurs, both individually and collectively. The form of the intensive, as implied by its very name, adds a dimension of intensity to occurrences. This format often accelerates the pace of events; things happen quickly and vigorously. The energy level is often higher. A by-product of its sublimated

channeling can foster a suggestive atmosphere in which the evolving embryo can relatively easily accomplish the work she or he is meant to do—to grow.

Personally, we love the intensive format and think it contains the potential of magic triggers within its structure. Considering the issues of this course, “The Principles and Practices of Expressive Therapies,” we think it’s a match made in heaven; a living example of the Rogerian “creative connection” (Rogers, 1993). The physical/chronological density augments the influence of one modality on the development and use of other modalities and on artistic creation as a whole. Given intense movements from one art form to another, it is possible to maximize creative responses by deepening and widening the level of the work.

With reference to the appropriate balance between experimental activities and the theoretical material while teaching intermodal, we chose a psychodramatic formula in which emphasis was mainly on the experimental, but the closure phase of each modality was partially dedicated to analysis and to cognitive review of occurrences. Besides adding the academic dimension of the experience, use of this format helped in closing activities that often involved exposure and feelings of vulnerability.

Co-teaching

It was an educational and therapeutic experience for us to teach together. Although we have known each other for a while now and highly respect each other's knowledge and abilities, we have never really seen each other in action as much as we did during the course in Israel. We discovered we could lean on each other and were able together to take the group in new directions and attain new heights. It was a wonderful feeling to add this professional dimension to our friendship.

There are many advantages to teaching as co-facilitators, both for the group and for the facilitator. From the facilitator’s point of view, we can testify that it was liberating not to have to deal alone with resistance and the hardships entailed in such a group. Our shared experience enabled each of us to rest from time to time and to lead the parts of group work with which we were more experienced and in which we each excelled. We supported each other (inside and outside the group) and complemented each other. Our cognitive and observational range was expanded: two points of view generated more ideas and strategies and we found it easier to carry the projections and transference reactions. This doubled our pleasure and feelings of satisfaction when things went well.

Through co-teaching we realized how psychologically right it is to supply the group with both a *mother* and a *father* and how a *good marriage* between parents relaxes children and enables their growth. Many times we felt like we were succeeding in the

simple yet complex mission of just letting the children play. We also found that it is easier to create a *warm nest* with the presence of both parents in the picture.

There is much agreement among clinicians in the relevant literature that a male/female co-therapist team may have unique advantages (Yalom, 1995). The image of the group as primary family may be more strongly evoked. Many fantasies and misconceptions about the relationship between the two therapists can arise and be profitably explored. Many clients benefit from the model setting of a male/female pair working together with mutual respect and without destructive competition, mutual derogation, exploitation or pervasive sexuality that is frequently associated with male/female pairings.

We found the fact of an Israeli group led by a Palestinian and an Israeli facilitator to be very therapeutic. How refreshing it is to experience a Palestinian man in the role of teacher (who is also a therapist and a father and/or an authority figure). How very different a figure this cuts from the nearly automatic perception of the "Palestinian man" by Israelis. The ability to venture beyond the labels, and encounter Yousef's unique personality, can only do good to ease what is truly a painful conflict. In general, any setting in which Israelis and Palestinians share an involvement in the arts has the potential of a safe and aesthetic haven within the Israeli's normally chaotic and violent existence.

However, similar to each member of the group in their own processes and like the group as a whole, co-teaching did not develop without its own struggles. There were moments over the course of the days that we did not agree with each other's feedback and answers. At times we could not understand each other's logic for choosing one direction instead of another and so on. We have different personality styles and different teaching strategies. However, we kept our dirty laundry, as we so fondly referred to it, outside the group and dealt with it in the evenings. Some things are private and for the sake of the children it is best to leave them that way.

According to Cook and Friend (2003) it is important to have the opportunity to reflect daily on the work, and indeed these evening sharings were an integral part of our teaching. Through the expression of our emotions and thoughts, we closed the events of the day and moved on to preparing for the next day. These sharings allowed us to learn immediately, implement new and effective instructional techniques, expand our insight into our discipline and enhance our teaching skills.

Disadvantages of the co-therapy format are a function of problems in the relationship between co-therapists (Yalom, 1995). Our relationship is not perfect and there is also a dimension of competition in it. Furthermore, according to some yardsticks we are also enemies. However, in our hearts, we are first of all friends. We find ourselves in this

awkward and peaceful place in which we do, in all sincerity, trust our *rival*. We believe that this trust is more relevant to our work than any specific and local controversy.

We believe that it is this sense of trust that is felt in class and will, indeed, trigger the development of the group. According to Erickson (1968), the first task of the evolving ego is to find a solution between the collision between feelings of basic trust and basic mistrust (toward the mother at first and toward other people later). Successful solution of the conflict between trust and mistrust, enables the baby not only to believe in her or himself and in others, but also instills in her or him the notion of hope—the ability to hope and to retain one's optimism even in the hardest of times. In this context, it almost goes without saying just how crucial the installation of the notions of trust and hope are for both Israelis and Palestinians.

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