A Felicitous Meeting of Attachment and Relational Psychotherapy

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Two cases will be presented – actually a case within a case. The outer case – so to speak – concerns a patient of mine, Anna. The case within concerns a female goose, called Felicity (Feli). While the clinical situation is unique and not likely to recur, it points up some of the general aspects of the meeting of attachment and relational theories and practices. These will become implicitly apparent as the cases unfold, without much need for explication.

My patient, Anna, was a woman in her early fifties who had never married, never had children. She was an extremely bright and creative officer in one of the agencies of the United Nations. She was born into a Russian Orthodox family in a city in the midwest of the USA. Her father was the beloved priest of the local Russian Orthodox Church. They spoke Russian at home. Their social life revolved around the Russian Orthodox community, and they lived in a self-created ghetto. Anna was the eldest of four.

Her father was a distant man, completely absorbed in church matters and religious research. Anna and her mother had a more involved relationship, with moments of closeness, but not many. Her mother had a frustrated career as a teacher. Anna's main functions at home were to take care of her two younger brothers and one sister, to be the good daughter to the revered priest, publicly and privately, and to be a helpmate to her mother. She wanted to go to university but her parents wanted her to marry, locally, a good Russian Orthodox boy and lead a traditional life in their community.

On her own initiative she applied to a university far from home, was accepted, and left home. Her family was very disapproving, including her mother, at least outwardly. Many years of no contact with her family followed. After graduation she held several good jobs and had some amorous and sexual relationships. Most of these, however, were in the context of her involvement with a cultish group therapy community. She had found another ghetto with its own 'priests'.

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She finally freed herself from that, too, as she had done from home. This took many years. 'Free', her life felt dull and lonely, but she was always productive in her work.

She was offered a job at the UN in Geneva and took it. She had no friends or good contacts there. She was taking a blind leap to change a life that she experienced as unrewarding. In Geneva she led a lonely life, some friends at work, some acquaintances, her poetry that she wrote in the evenings and during weekends, and her work, at which she was successful. Besides her intelligence, she had social grace and humour.

It was in the context of this loneliness and non-attachedness that she came to see me. Her depression was chronic but mild. Her chief complaint was not depression, but something more existential – a lack of being grounded in life and in the world. We worked twice a week in face-to-face psychotherapy. I liked her and enjoyed her mind and manner.

During two and a half years of therapy, I do not believe I helped her in any specific symptomatic or functional way, but she clearly became attached to me. Her sessions were very important to her. They were a steady source of social contact and grounding. I was a central port of security where she had found no others.

During this time the subject of her having no children came up from time to time. This lack constituted her greatest regret in life. She would become tearful when talking about it. It was never the right time to have a child. Her relationships with men never went that far or lasted long enough. She had thought about adopting a child at various points in her life, but again the right time never seemed to occur.

When she talked about this, I reflected on her history with children. She had been a co-mother to her younger siblings. She had baby-sat as an adolescent and liked it. She was the favourite 'aunt' to the children of many of her friends. She was not at all unmaternal and she would light up when talking about children and, as she related, when she saw them. She thought that a child would be the only thing to truly attach her to the world, to history, to herself, to life.

With this as background, after some reflection, one day I said to her, 'Why don't you adopt one now? Life is more stable.' She was both taken aback and excited about the idea. She said, 'I had been thinking about that too. Do you really think I could?' I said, 'I don't know. Is it worth exploring?'

My asking her this question did not come out of the blue. She had brought up adoption enough times before. But many problems needed resolution. There existed all the external obstacles to finding a baby, leaving much room for crushing disappointment for her. And there was the danger that if she tried to adopt and succeeded, the nature of the therapy would change.

I was also quite aware of the therapeutic adage, as I had been taught it: don't try to change the context, change the patient so she can change her own life

context. Finally there was a trade-off involved: direct personal change to alter her life context versus context change to arrive indirectly at personal change. Further, I felt that if she had some kind of attachment holding environment to accompany her, she could, perhaps, make steps to change her life. She had not had one before and I provided one. Still, none of these considerations made a therapeutic path clear to me.

She reacted to my question by starting to explore the possibilities right away within herself and outside. An adoption through normal channels was not possible in Switzerland, given her age. She could adopt through official channels, but being single and with each year above forty, her choice of infants was more and more limited. It was finally narrowed to only much older children with clear and difficult handicaps.

During this exploration she frequently asked herself (and me) if the whole idea was crazy, selfish, and unrealistic. I said I didn't know. She knew that I had experience in the mother–infant field. She did not know that I also had some experience of Eastern European orphanages, and had a sense of what life was like for unadopted children who stayed in the institutional system. My reflections on the fate of orphans inclined me towards supporting adoption, in general, regardless of some degree of problems of the mother. However, my concerns about this particular possible adoption, its motivation, its transference meaning, its likely success and its effect on her were far from certain.

At about this point, she learned that her UN job gave her diplomatic status, and, as a diplomat, she could adopt any baby outside of the restrictions of local laws. This changed the landscape. Her exploration and her desire to adopt sharpened. This issue began to take up more of the session time. I tried to remain open and gave no pronouncements about what she should do, or about her motivation. Actually, I had little to give. I occupied a position, mostly, of judgemental ambivalence, not so different from her rational and affective ambivalence. I decided to tolerate the not knowing, with the realization that she might take this as a green light. But too much was at stake for a too early foreclosure, even a subtle one.

After many months she identified a baby girl in an East European country. Her excitement and anxiety rose as things got closer to the possible. She went there and fell in love with a baby girl. She put the administrative wheels in progress. It was still far from done.

During this phase her fears and anxieties grew, along with her positive expectations. Did she have the energy for a baby at her age? Would she live long enough? Was this desire really all for her benefit alone, for her happiness and fulfilment and not for the baby's? Could she sustain interest and love – she never had before? Would she just run away at some point, as she had done so often in her life? What did this have to do with correcting, reliving, her own childhood? Did she really want to repeat the experiences of her youth, having to take care of her siblings? And where was her mother in all this? Where was I in all this? Was

I the 'father'. Indeed, she needed to have some kind of real embodied connection and attachment with the world. Now she was just floating, unattached, in the universe. If she died, it would make no echo, no one would miss her. She would leave no trace of ever being here. Was the baby a neurotic solution? Was it a baby's job to fill an existential void in her? Were there not other ways that did not involve another person's young life?

As the sessions followed one another they were building to a crisis, namely, the moment she had to decide to take this baby, or to forget it all as a misplaced, excruciating, wonderful dream.

One morning during this phase of running up close to the imminent crisis, she came in and started the session routinely, speaking of what her day was like, etc. Then she stopped. Suddenly, she sat forward in her chair, looked at me with anguish and held my gaze. She said, 'Can I be a good mother?'

I was rocked. Her question was so direct, so felt, so appropriate in its way. I didn't know what to do. It was a moment that, if I failed it, I would question how I worked, who I was. I would hate myself. The moment would not come around again. Whatever I did had to fit the immediate situation. It could not be a technical response, such as 'Tell me more', stalling for time to form a reaction. To hide behind technique would not suffice. It had to be an authentic response – now, on my part, from who I am, a response that carried my signature.

This kind of moment is what the Boston Change Process Study Group calls a 'now moment'. (BCPSG, 1998, 2003). It is a moment of *Kairos* when, all at once, many things come together and come to crisis in the therapeutic relationship. In that short time window if you act, you can change the destiny of what will happen. And if you don't act, the destiny will be changed anyway because you didn't act. *Kairos* is the 'moment of opportunity', like a 'moment of truth' or a 'decisive moment'. Such 'now moments' cause much anxiety in the therapist, who is not sure what to do, and there is not an appropriate technical fall back position that is acceptable, clinically and perhaps morally. Therapist and patient both sense that something momentous is happening, that the ongoing therapeutic relationship has been threatened and put at risk. Also hanging in the air is the therapeutic framework or at least the traditional, personal way the patient and therapist have been working together, up until now. Such moments demand an alteration in the intersubjective field between the two. It is not important whether one wants to put this in terms of the transference –countertransference momentary stance. It is a two-person event involving a potentially perturbing change in the intersubjective field of the total relationship, transferential and real.

The something that gets called forth from the therapist ideally makes for a 'moment of meeting'. In this moment, an authentic response on the part of the therapist resolves the perturbation, not in the sense of its going away, but rather in transforming it into a new intersubjective state between the two, so that they can go ahead at a new and hopefully higher level. This kind of leap is where much

of psychotherapeutic change takes place. It is experienced as a leap because it arrives unexpectedly, the perturbation (now moment) and resolution (moment of meeting) are neither planned, nor logical, nor causal, nor even necessarily verbalized; they can remain implicit. They occur in a moment (Stern, 2004). They just emerge – the 'upsurge of a fresh present' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

This kind of implicit change process can be in the service of attachment and jump the attachment state into a higher orbit. It can also be partially prepared by attachment work.

When Anna said, 'Can I be a good mother?', the way she did, exactly when she did, I felt that we were in such a moment.

I answered, without thinking it through very far, nor very clearly. I said, 'Can I tell you a story? Can you listen to it now?' She nodded. And I proceeded to tell her the following story, the inner case.

Several months before this day of crisis, I told Anna, I had gone to a conference given by an extraordinary woman, Helge Fischer-Mamblona, an ethologist and later psychologist. She followed the life of a goose, 'Feli', for more than a decade, from the time Feli was hatched. It is probably the longest close psychological follow-up of an animal in the literature (Fischer-Mamblona, 2000). I walked away from her conference dazed. Here is what I remembered of what she recounted, so this is what I recounted to Anna. (The reader can refer back to the original article to check if I remembered it accurately. In any event this is what I told my patient.)

Feli was hatched in the laboratory of the famous ethologist Konrad Lorenz in Germany. She was designated as an experimental subject. She was put into an isolation pen for many days after hatching. She saw no other geese and no other animals, not even humans. She was fed by machine on schedule. The only sound she heard was the clicking of the thermostat when it made an adjustment. When she heard that sound she would run towards it. But when she got there she would wag her head from side to side, like an exaggerated 'no'. Then she would run away in fear. She was torn between attachment and fear. This pattern became habitual, a sort of sign-symptom. It would stay with her for much of her life.

During her time of isolation, at the beginning of her life, she missed the critical period for creating an attachment (to geese). She was then let free to roam among the flock of 'normal' geese. She was a misfit. She did not know how to react to them. (The other geese had all been normally imprinted and attached to their mothers during their critical period for imprinting. This occurs when the goslings first follow their moving mother, and gives us the familiar sight of mother and her young following her, all in a line.) Feli had never imprinted. She had no normal attachments.

She stayed on the periphery of the flock. She did not play with other goslings. She ate alone, waiting for all the other geese to finish eating at the feeding trough and leave before she approached it to eat. Once when she was at the feeding trough, another goose unexpectedly approached from behind. Feli turned and

directed an aggressive display towards him. However, her display was not the one a goose normally addresses to another goose. It was the display used only for a predatory animal.

At times Feli would inappropriately run up to join a family of geese and goslings with whom she had no prior relations – a sort of social promiscuity. They would chase her away. Otherwise the other geese tolerated her.

But she was not a total misfit, she retained certain species-specific behavioural patterns. When she was an adolescent, young males would approach her to court. She had pieces of the appropriate behaviours, but could not successfully engage the task. She would then wag her head from side to side and run away from the male.

When she was a young adult, she showed some nest building behaviours. These innate patterns had apparently not required a normal attachment and socialization to remain intact. Fischer-Mamblona gave her some goose eggs to sit on. Feli knew what to do, but not completely and did not remain sitting on them consistently enough. They did not hatch. Later she was given another clutch of goose eggs to hatch. She did much better this time and the eggs hatched. But when the freshly hatched goslings approached her, got close, and solicited her behaviour, she would wag her head and run away. They all died.

After this failure, Fischer-Mamblona reasoned that young goslings were too demanding of maternal care for Feli. Ducklings, on the contrary, are hatched in a more mature state and are more independent. They ask much less of their mother. Feli was given a clutch of duck eggs to hatch. The ducklings hatched. Feli did not reject them, nor did she do a great deal for them. They would walk down to the water by themselves. At night they slept apart from Feli, all together. Feli did not let them stay too close to her.

One night, there was a terrible storm with heavy rain, thunder and lightning. The ducklings were afraid and came up to Feli and crawled under her wing for protection. She let them stay the night with her.

The next morning, after that night storm, when the ducklings marched down to the water, Feli followed them – an imprinting line of march, in reverse. They continued to sleep under her wing.

By this point in my recounting the story of Feli, my patient Anna, who had been tearful since the point when the little ducks were hatched, began a soft sobbing, holding her head in her hands and looking down at her feet. I was moved, too. I continued with the story of Feli.

Feli's ducklings grew up well. She could approach them and be approached by them without running away. She resumed her life at the periphery of the flock, slightly more harmoniously. One day a goose from another flock arrived. He was a slightly older male goose. He, too, was a sort of outsider. He courted her. She now knew what to do and accepted him. They made a tight couple and stayed together.

At this point, Anna was sobbing fully. I continued the story.

After a while Konrad Lorenz retired and his laboratory was disbanded. The geese were sent to a place in Austria. Feli and her mate lived there together for several years. One day he was flying over the lake and into Switzerland and a Swiss hunter shot him.

He never returned and Feli went into a depression. Not too long after that she died, having had a surprisingly full life.

Neither Anna nor I spoke for a long while. Her sobbing subsided. Gradually she lifted her head and looked at me, tears still running down. My cheeks were also wet. She looked at me intensely. We held gaze, silently, for many long seconds, both tearful. This was the culmination of the moment of meeting. It locked home.

She nodded her head, once. The session was over and she left my office.

I never had to say, 'Can you be a good mother? Your daughter will lead you.'

Epilogue

After this session Anna left to get her adopted daughter. She brought her home and they did very well together. After several months she left her job and took an anticipated retirement. She moved back to the American midwest, near her parents, who now love their granddaughter and daughter. The family reunited in their fashion.

I telephone her from Geneva once a year. Anna is doing well enough. And her daughter, now in grade school, is doing very well at home, at school, and with her grandparents. She is the light of her mother's life.

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