

Finding and hiding: Winnicott's potential space and Raspberry Juice's home

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Abstract

The paper discusses some analytical dynamics and terms as reflected in a Hebrew children tale, named "Raspberry Juice". The tale deals with the question of closure and disclosure, with the need to be discovered as against the fear to be found, or in fact with the existential tension described by Winnicott in innumerable variations between the need to be understood and recognized and the fear to be completely understood or inadequately exposed. It also deals with the process of creating one's identity, taking place within the potential space, enabling one's mobility between "me" and "not-me", between imagination and reality, between the need to hide and the need to be discovered, and perhaps thereby – between the need to take part and the need to remain individual and singular.

Key words: Raspberry juice, Winnicott, stories, thoughts, potential space

"Raspberry Juice" is a children's tale that deals with the question of closure and disclosure, with the need to be discovered as against the fear to be found, or in fact with the existential tension described by Winnicott in innumerable variations between the need to be understood and recognized and the fear to be completely understood or inadequately exposed. It is thus the eternal hide-and-seek play that takes place within the potential space, enabling one's mobility between "me" and "not-me", between imagination and reality, between the need to hide and the need to be discovered, and perhaps thereby – between the need to take part and the need to remain individual and singular.

"Potential space" is the general notion used by Winnicott to designate the intermediary zone of experience within which this mobility is indeed possible. This is probably the most important, and the most evasive, amongst Winnicott's ideas. Specific forms of potential space include the playing space, the transitional object and transitional phenomena, the therapeutic space, cultural experience and the creative zone. Although the potential space originates from the corporal and the psychic space constituted between the mother and the baby, during normal development both the child and the adult could form their proper capacity to create such a potential space. This capacity is based upon an inventory of psychic activities and upon the dialectical

relations among them. Winnicott describes the potential space as a hypothetical space that exists (but might as well not exist) between the baby and the object (the mother or part of the mother) during the phase in which the object is rejected as "not-me", namely in the end of the phase where the baby is immersed within the object (Winnicott, 1971). In another place he describes it as an intermediate zone of experience that dwells between the interior world or the interior psychic reality and the real or exterior reality, that while seemingly transformed by the situation of the one who observes it, actually stays permanent. This is the very space that exists between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived, between "extensions of me and not me" (Winnicott, 1971).

The psyche according to Winnicott constitutes a huge playing ground. The hide-and-seek play, Winnicott's most familiar metaphor for the dialectics at the basis of human existence, enacts the combination between one's wish to be found and the wish never to be discovered. Writing about the paradox of the artist, Winnicott claimed that on the one hand there is no artist who is not motivated by the wish to communicate his or her interiority to the outside world and be understood, but on the other hand there is no artist who would be ready to countersign the possibility of being absolutely deciphered (Winnicott, 1963). Life, and not only the life of an artist but life as such, constitutes the very perennial, recurrent movement between the effort to keep our most private core hidden from each and every eye – and the wish to become familiar, understood and visible. It is a pleasure to hide, writes Winnicott, but a catastrophe not to be found. All along "Raspberry Juice" we accompany two figures: a lion and a giraffe. This amusing couple goes on a journey in order to find out who is the animal that inhabits the house at the end of the wood and does not show its face. They seduce Raspberry Juice to get out, they hide themselves behind bushes and trees that do not quite conceal them, they lurk for every organ that he exhibits if only for a second, they call out all his names only to discover that he withdraws each time they are about to uncover his identity. Only when they linger long enough, renouncing to a certain extent their omnipotence, ready to be mistaken, he suddenly appears exhibiting his identity: Raspberry Juice is a rabbit.

This tale is not only about the process of creating an identity, it is also about the attempt to control the process of exhibiting this identity. The explicit reference to the theme of control comes at the end of the story, during the competition won by Raspberry Juice on the way home. He is the one to come first and he will reopen the door to greet them. This is his home and this is his door. These are his very psychic cornerstones, and although they know who he is – it is he who determines whether

they will be given the permission to enter. But even beforehand there is an incessant colorful and smiling preoccupation with the theme of controlling the measure of one's disclosure. Raspberry Juice lets out one leg and then lets it in, uncovers his ears and then retreats, shines every now and then another facet of his identity – his existence – but is not ready to exhibit the totality. This is why he is ready to say his name – but not his kind. "Raspberry Juice" is a name, and a name can belong to other animals as well. But the fact that he is a rabbit – testifies to his essence. And it is the very essence that he refuses to uncover. This process is analogous not only to developmental processes at the basis of the relationship between parent and child, but also to the therapeutic encounter. When do we really find out who our patients are? Which are the places in which we enforce them to be found at a too early stage? In other words, when do we uncover them in contrast to when do we invite them to uncover themselves? When do we name them aloud, exposing them too quickly to the light of our knowledge in contrast to when are we ready to question and make mistakes, not only because we do not know, but also because we leave them through this very ignorance a real space in which they can breathe and move?

In this context the story contains a magnificently precise description of the process of disclosure: in face of the lion's and the giraffe's insistence, Raspberry Juice uncovers each time another essential trait of himself: an ear, a leg. But the minute they shout out "Here is Raspberry Juice", he withdraws. Only when they "stand up very quietly, not shouting" is he ready to step outside. This moment in the story is a rare moment of guidance to psychotherapists. In many places, in many moments during treatment, we are tempted give things a name. To cry out what we see even when we recognize that it is seen only to our own eyes. Also when our patients are way aback. Sometimes we shout out of arrogance. Sometimes out of will to raise hope. Sometimes because we forget the distance between knowledge possessed by one's eye and knowledge gained by one's heart. Often this very naming is what causes that leg that was already precariously put on the threshold – to withdraw. In my opinion, there is a crucial moment in this story when the lion and the giraffe mistake and call Raspberry Juice in names that are not his. "You are a pig", they say to him. "A frog". "A mosquito". This is a significant moment since it sharpens something essential to the therapeutic stance. Had they called him a "rabbit" immediately, they might have hastened him back to his cave. The very fact they are mistaken is what grants him space. By not hitting the target immediately, they provoke within him the wish to uncover. He thus finds himself at the same time enjoying their mistakes but also wishing badly they would know who he is. This is the magnificent gentle dance

that takes place amongst them, whose subtlety and complexity resembles the dance performed by the therapeutic couple, a dance within which the therapist invites the patient to discover him- or herself, looks for him or her but nevertheless stays careful not "to find" them too quickly. In this sense, their mistake signifies the therapeutic delay. The ability to defer something and to linger within it in order to give the patient the chance to crystallize and survive the discovery.

This gentle dance is also analogous to the dance that takes place between the mother and the baby. The mother not only discovers the actual baby - but also lets him create himself as a possibility. Thus she enables him not only to develop a sense of objective existence, by confirming his existence through her eyes, but also to develop a sense of subjectivity that results from the fact that she does not discover him too quickly, respecting his need to assert his own identity. Nevertheless, it is not only the lion and the giraffe that "discover" the rabbit. He discovers them as well, in the same way that the baby knows his mother and that our patients know us. In what way do they know us? The tale suggests an answer also to this question. Sometimes we hide, like the lion, behind a tiny tree that does not conceal us at all. Sometimes our maneuvers of searching are ridiculously manifest. Sometimes we also try, as therapists, to hide ourselves – but get discovered in this very hiding. Concealment itself is a sort of exposure. Closure is a mode of disclosure.

Moreover, the hiding of the lion and the giraffe behind the bush and the tree symbolizes an improper use of defenses. Each one of them hides behind something that does not really hide or defend him. But more than that, it symbolizes the search after a container. It symbolizes the most profound question within relationship: The question who contains me. And this story tells us that only through the question who or what contains us we enable ourselves to discover who we are. Through the object that contains us, be it a high cypress or a wide bush, a mother or a father, a beloved one or an therapist, we learn something about the limits of our body and soul, about what characterizes us, about who we are. Does Raspberry Juice know that he is a rabbit? Or else is it that by appearing to their eyes he also appears to his own eyes, learns about himself, discovers himself? Do we as therapists enter a room where one person knows himself while the other knows nothing? Or is it that the therapeutic journey constitutes also a journey of mutual discovery, of mutual learning, of walking together around a wall that does not encircle one person but a relationship, so that when it finally falls down it sets free two human beings? The biblical correlation between knowledge and love teaches us not only that each love is a sort of knowledge, but also that each knowledge is a sort of love. Knowing the other means

loving him or her. And perhaps only out of this love, for all its twists and turns, one could really know the other, whoever he or she is. "So if you are my friends", says Raspberry Juice by the end of the story, "then come to my place". Do not come in the first place and then become my friend. Make friends with me and then I shall let you in. Do not hit the door. Give me a hand.

References

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