

Intrigue and Impasse:

A session with Lucy.

By Russell Rose.

Asking Lucy how she is feeling is a source of slight anxiety and irritation for her, as she doesn't quite understand the question or how to answer it until I routinely reassure her that it's fine to simply connect with the sensations in her body without having to name them, and wait for an experience to arise in her awareness. She sits back in the chair, straightens her spine, aligns her body, and seemingly tries to work out how she's feeling.

Putting a name to feelings can be a therapeutically paradoxical process. It's helpful to learn how to do it, but doing it takes us away from the primary sensation itself, and we risk overlaying it with a linguistic abstraction; in short, privileging the *interpreting mind* over the *experienced body*.

Just as our feelings tend to follow habitual pathways so does our interpretation of them, and this can be as ambiguously accurate as it can be misleading: for example, behind an apparent rage might be an insecurity, on top of a feeling of rejection, concealing an early experience of abandonment and terror. Which layer of feeling or aspect of that feeling we recognise and identify with will always be guided in large part by our character structure. Our feelings, and our selective perception of them, will tend to habitually bypass those particular layers of our whole experience that we find most painful to connect to.

When feelings are named and identified they can be looked at in more detail, deconstructed and opened up, and that which is underlying can be encouraged into the foreground, but for a client who struggles with naming feelings it can be far more useful to simply encourage a connection to the sensations, the aliveness and vitality in the body, and see what spontaneously emerges from there.

One of the first lessons I was taught as a trainee, yet one I can still so easily forget in the moment, is that *something is always trying to happen*. We are complex systems and that which is in the foreground of consciousness is just the presenting filament of an intricate and multi-layered internal and relational world of constant dynamic process; seeking stability *and* chaos, equilibrium *and* transformation in an on-going implicit process of organisation, re-organisation, and co-organisation. There *is* always something happening and always something trying to happen.

On this occasion Lucy looked distinctly to her right as she focussed, expressing an habitual mild exasperation that she didn't *know* how she felt. I pointed out that she was looking to her right, and suggested instead that she look to her left and try again. Lucy is always intrigued when I notice and mirror any subtle inflection in her non-verbal manner.

She slumped forward, resting her arms on her knees, and turned her face to the left, to the extent that I couldn't see it behind her hair, quite contrary to the fully exposed upright version to her right; and she was excited when I commented. She wondered if she was hiding from me, which she obviously was, but I felt that in doing so she was paradoxically showing me more of her real self; that she was revealing herself by concealing herself, demonstrating her feelings rather than suffering a failed attempt to name them.

Lucy in some ways has been hard to get to know. She is very committed to therapy, and offers a lot of herself to the process, though often in the form of her rather magnificent dreamworld, ripe with imagery that she is keen to explore and understand. Although I

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really enjoy and appreciate this dominant side of her mind, I've long felt conflicted about it. On the one hand, it is an incredibly revealing window into her psyche, offering up insight and intimacy, but on the other hand I worry that her depth of connection to the night-time storylines serves to reinforce her disconnection from herself and from her relationship to the waking world at large. What she isn't connected to when awake becomes more accessibly symbolised in her sleep, both revealing and concealing her, but ultimately maintaining her secluded safe distance.

Lucy has become a little separated from the world. Very intelligent and educated, she spends much of her working life doing cleaning jobs for low pay and in relative isolation, doesn't seem to have a great many friends, certainly none significant enough to occupy much air-time in therapy, and hasn't had a relationship in some years. To my mind, there's something of a hermit about Lucy, popping out of her cave to forage, coming into contact with some familiar faces as she does so, and developing connections en route who are, whilst to some extent satisfying, rarely invited home. I often feel that I am the only person who is really trying to get to know her.

Intrigued by herself, she flitted back to the 'right' position, interested in exploring, and as I began to comment on this sudden movement she talked over me in a high voice, then immediately apologised. I like this spontaneous high voice in her, as I feel that the real Lucy is popping out through the restraints of appropriateness.

Interested by this emerging moment, I overruled an inclination to return her to the 'left' position, to explore that or at least her resistance to staying there. Asking her instead why she'd felt the need to apologise for her high-voice, she spoke of it in slightly embarrassed terms, and abruptly moved her hand in front of her mouth, fingers pointing to her face, as though she was holding a tennis-ball. The image that came to me was of a muzzle. That she should make an image of a muzzle in front of her face intrigued her, and we agreed to explore it.

I put my hand over her mouth and told her to be quiet, to stop raising her voice. Lucy has a considerable but very suppressed temper that has never been unleashed at me. Putting my hand over her mouth, I was aware that I was taking us beyond our respective comfort zones and potentially into the highly charged territory of enactment, and I imagined that I might become an outer manifestation of the figure that always keeps her quiet, the 'bad object' that muffles and disallows her voice.

The moment I touched her mouth the charge died and she gently removed my hand within a second or so, and said that her mother's face had come to mind. Her mother is kindly in many ways, but Lucy understands her also as someone likely to throw scorn at the child's neediness: "who do you think you are..." kind of thing.

On reflection, I can see that I took the image of the muzzle too literally, as an object rather than as a consequence, whereas the image now seems more obviously that of the nearby snarling mouth of a reproachful parent.

My impression of Lucy's childhood is that her generally decent parents disallowed her expressive self when it really mattered, when it went beyond the normal everyday needs of

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a child. With both parents having compromised their dreams in order to maintain the family-unit, my sense is that she was implicitly required to do so too, and that when she didn't their underlying resentment would translate into a dismissive, sometimes punishing, and sometimes scornful reproach. This particular theme can often upset her, but it didn't this time. Instead she was quite matter-of-fact about it, and continued in this vein as she remembered a story that had been told to her about her infancy.

A child prone to crying at night, her parents had taken the advice of covering the top and sides of her cot with a blanket and - following the standard wisdom of the day - they ignored her cries until they stopped. In the morning her mother entered Lucy's bedroom and feared that she was dead, as the blanket had fallen over the silent and still baby's face. Lucy said spontaneously that she'd been flailing and it had fallen, spoken as though a direct memory, and that her cries had been ignored. She quickly qualified her spontaneous remark by ensuring that I understood that she couldn't actually remember the incident; and it seemed that this accurate rationalisation over the spontaneous remark dampened any affect that might have arisen, as rationalisations generally do.

I was interested though in my own emotional response. Often when I perceive some process of suppression occurring in the client, I will feel in my own bodymind at least some sense of what is being suppressed – an embodied resonance communicated by right-brain attunement and mirror neurones, picked up and processed implicitly. However, I was quite calm too, fascinated by it all but largely unmoved emotionally.

My curiosity and emotional dissociation was further reinforced rather than compromised when I remembered an equivalent story from my own parents about me. Exhausted from the nightly rhythm of responding to my cries with attention, they decided to hold back from going to me one night, to see if I cried myself out. After quarter of an hour, I started singing a lullaby and then went back to sleep. The story was told as an example of how it's sometimes worth ignoring the more alternative wisdom of the day and just letting the child effectively self-regulate. I'd sung myself to sleep because no-one else would, having summoned my internalised parent and abruptly learnt to manage my own distress by re-enacting the response that I had anticipated but which hadn't come. Strangely though, I still felt nothing much except intrigue.

As I came to think of it in that momentary pause in the session, I remembered that I had often characterised my own childhood as being brought up by two good people who nevertheless generally didn't listen for my voice beyond the fundamentals of a child's basic needs; and as I'm writing this, I've remembered that in the processing time following my mother's death a few years ago, I came upon the realisation that it hadn't just been she who had been sacrificial in service of our family unit, as I'd always felt, but that my father very much had too, probably far more so in fact.

Anyone who has known me for a while knows that I have an embedded inclination to subjugate my own feelings in service of *what I think* people close to me need from me; and much of my personal work over the years has been to notice and disentangle my habitual characterological patterns of self-neglect and vicarious gratification from a more primary temperament that has always found it easy and natural to help. However, there's no denying that for much of my life I habitually hid my wounded, protesting, and furious self

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behind a compulsion to give. Lucy's parents and my parents had not lived the lives that they had imagined for themselves, and both Lucy and I had kept our deeper selves hidden in our respective caves and behind our respective variations of servitude.

Even without these subsequent realisations, it became obvious to me in the session that I *had* become caught up in an enactment. Lucy's childhood failed to attend to her deeper feelings, those that would unsettle the family-structure; she paralleled this in her relationship with herself, and I was paralleling it in the session with her. Neither of us were dropping into the feelings, but instead unconsciously colluded in our disconnection from them. Despite my attempt to encourage enactment, and despite the usefulness of the emerging image of her mother, I had aligned myself with the defensive adaptations that kept her pain quiet, that disallowed the high-pitched protest of the unsatisfied child. This is a familiar and paradoxical impasse in my relationship with Lucy, whereby the degree of insight isn't necessarily matched with a corresponding emotional re-experience.

Frustrated with myself, I tried to drop my awareness into my body in search of more feeling, but Lucy waylaid me by returning to the dream that she had begun the session with; which could hardly have been more coherent. The abiding image was of a little mouse, lying on its back in a box that was too small for it, with the end of its own tail in its mouth. Symbolically there is an obvious link to The Ouroboros, the serpent that devours its own tail in a symbol of eternity, the potency of the snake though replaced with, ironically, one of its common prey; the mouse, famed of course as a yardstick for quietness.

However, for me the image signified more simply the quiet child kept small, trapped in a literal and symbolic cot, contained by the incapacity of others to cope with its growth, expression, and expansion, sucking its own tail as an infant might suck its own thumb or sing itself back to sleep when yearning for the unavailable parent; an image of introspection, trapped isolation, and forced self-soothing.

It seemed that her dream-image meant as much to me as it did to her, and it encapsulated the underlying sense of connection that I've always experienced with Lucy, which has been partially exacerbated by certain intersections in our family histories that have left me imagining the possibility that our forebears might have crossed paths. The session ended, and I noticed as she left that I felt a little the way I do if I walk past someone in the street who feels familiar to me, but whom I can't quite remember.

I don't know how this is all going to unravel from this point, but I do know that I am colluding in keeping Lucy's deeper self quiet, perhaps in service of the comfortable therapeutic working-alliance that is our equivalent and replication of the stable family structure whose harmony is unconsciously deemed more important than anything underlying that might threaten to bring conflict to a comforting stasis.

It's clear that, despite our intentions and respective capacity for otherwise, we are both inclined to allow our observational fascination to dominate our experiential connection, that our inclination can be to collude with the defences, adaptations, and habitual distractions that keep the pain and the protests of our wounded children subdued. I think that it may be Lucy's anger that I'm awaiting, the rage that she has generally understood as destructive rather than reparative, and I need to acknowledge here that I also have a considerable

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temper, one that I spent a decade or three trying to stifle for fear that I might start telling everyone how I felt about them, but which I have been befriending for some time now.

What I'm left most thoughtful about though is the relationship between intrigue and emotional impasse, how it is that our fascination connected us robustly to an unfolding psychological process whilst keeping its deeper voice stifled, the engaged mind sitting upon the disengaged body. Our intrigue both revealed and concealed the story, opened it up and stagnated it and, as I'm writing, I can feel that as I'm trying to disentangle this impasse I'm in danger of leading myself further into it, of becoming intrigued by my own intrigue; and so on.