

Close encounters in the liminal zone: experiments in imaginal communication Part I

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Abstract: The phenomenology of the experience of being in psychic contact with another person was explored in a series of observations using a novel dyadic interaction in imaginal space. Research participants working in pairs with eyes closed received instructions to imagine being in mental contact with one another for three minutes while they observed their internal experiences. Their reports indicated that the imagined contact was experienced as real, as intimate, and aroused the ambivalences usually associated with intimacy as well as phenomena suggestive of projective identification effects. This first part demonstrated that the liminal zone, or the transitional space between individuals, can be experimentally observed through the imagination. Part II of this report will present evidence that the experienced psychic contact was more than 'just imagination', and involved transpersonal interactions, including suggestions of synchronicity and telepathy.

Key words: Imagination, communication, intuition, liminal, empathy, intimacy

Introduction

We appear to each other to be individual units because we are able to behave autonomously and independently. Yet through a process of communication we can co-ordinate our actions, form an agreement, and become in accord. Different human 'units' can somehow understand one another, achieve a shared consciousness, experience empathy or, as is commonly expressed, be 'of one mind'. Any communication process that can bridge the gap that separates us must begin with understanding. Despite the importance of empathy, not a great deal of work has been done that truly sheds light on its intersubjective nature, and most of this has been psychotherapy research (and a spin off of that research, infant observation). One of the great laboratories of human communication is psychotherapy. It should be no surprise then that the 'space between' people has occupied the interest of many therapists. Their profession necessarily confronts them with the conjoint human puzzles of identity and relationships.

Psychoanalysts have usually formulated that space in terms of the 'transitional space' of Winnicott (1953; 1971), where the interaction between therapist and patient becomes related to the changes in the patient's ability for inward communication and awareness. The anthropologists' vision of that space has been 'liminality', a term introduced by Victor Turner (Turner 1969). Variouslly called the in-between time, the incubation phase of transformation, or even 'betwixt and between', liminality is a concept concerning an intermediate stage in a ritual where something is in a state of transition, and is neither beast nor fowl, and it has recently been applied to the analytic 'transitional space' (Schwartz-Salant & Stein 1991). The space between therapist and patient belongs to neither one of the parties individually but to them both, and the primary issue seems to be finding the right relationship between oneness and separation. As the dialogic view of psychotherapy deepens, many analysts have begun to write about their experience in this liminal zone. In the past few years, there have been many articles in this *Journal* concerning the 'space between', 'liminality', and the 'imaginal' as it is experienced in interaction between the partners to an analytic encounter.

Recently, for example, Catherine Kaplinsky (1992) has written of her efforts to maintain the right balance between abandonment and impingement in the space between herself and her clients. Abandonment and impingement are, for her, like a pair of emotional crises that can accompany the two poles of separateness and oneness; autonomy and blissful union are the more positive pair related to the polarity. It is the polarity itself that creates a lot of the tension and paradox that we associate with the liminal zone between people who are engaged in the effort to communicate. Nathan Field writes:

Given the fact that each of us feels himself to be, and looks to others to be, a separate individual, the notion that we enter into states of merger puts a heavy strain on our credulity. . . . Jung, by talking in terms of the 'ego complex', would seem to be implying that our sense of a separate identity, however vital, is a specific structure which exists in the context of a larger whole he called the psyche. . . . I am arguing therefore not simply that we can enter into states of merger, but that we already exist in a state of merger. From the viewpoint of consciousness we appear separate individuals with a regrettable tendency to lapse into fantasies of fusion; but if we look through the other end of the telescope we will see that the fact of our connection is primary and that our sense of separateness is sustained by a system of defences that differentiates us one from another.

(Field 1991, p. 97)

To meet the challenge of creating consciousness evidently requires a heroic effort. The unconsciousness pertaining to the state of merger is more natural and always beckons like a comfortable bed. In the state of merger, two become one, but an unknowing one, for there is no second party to stand back and observe what is happening. Jung liked and often used the term, '*participation mystique*' to describe the delectable phenomena of being fused with another, as found in the raptures of romantic love, in moments of mob

mentality, or often enough in the transference/countertransference interactions of psychotherapy.

Therapists have long recognized that sometimes they have adverse reactions to the client during such moments of merger. Sometimes they become 'caught up' in the client's predicament and react personally rather than with professional insight. Investigating the occasions where the therapist transfers some of his or her own personal history upon the client has yielded the insight that sometimes it is the client who instigates these moments. The discovery that the client sometimes subtly influences the therapist to respond helped to give rise to the theory of projective identification (Gordon 1965; Field 1991; Scharff 1992; Schwartz-Salant 1988). Projective identification is a term used to explain the likely supposition that the therapist can be a channel for the manifestation of unconscious material belonging to the client. Whereas countertransference is a concept used to describe the therapist's reacting to the client in terms of the therapist's unconscious standpoint, the concept of projective identification recognizes that there are times when the therapist's countertransference reaction is elicited by the defensive posture of the client. Through projective identification, the patient's shaky standpoint becomes the therapist's apparent countertransference; the client 'deposits' some psychic material within the therapist who then reacts to its presence as one might an allergen, in a reflex manner. The enormous popularity of this theory among interactionally minded analysts has tended to obscure some of the interesting questions about the phenomenon itself.

Field (1991) asks for example, 'How is it possible that an unwanted bit of one person's psyche can lodge itself in the psyche of another? How does that bit get across the intervening space?' (p. 94). When we assume that the two participants are distinct entities, but then observe that one participant is behaving in ways that express something pertaining to the other, it requires us to re-examine our assumption of the separateness of the participants. Ever since Freud's dream of the dirty needle used to give Irma her injection (Bosnak 1984), psychoanalysts have been concerned about the possibility of contagion between therapist and client. Given the original model of medical care out of which analysis developed, the issue is a profound paradox.

Jung himself appreciated the paradox and presented a profound solution. His seminal contribution was to envision the transference and countertransference processes in therapy as a mutual alchemical event, leading to the transformation of both parties. Given that an interaction between therapist and client is unavoidable, Jung established a purposiveness to the phenomenon, an ideal *telos* that moves the coming together beyond simple fusion and toward a specific type of psychological interaction, the *coniunctio*. This conjoining is ultimately symbolic of a union of intrapsychic partners, as the dominant part-personalities of the total psyche come together to produce a coherent, integrated self.

Loosely known as the marriage of opposites, the *coniunctio* is depicted

through the alchemical pictures from the *Rosarium philosophorum* showing the mating of king and queen (Jung 1955; Schwartz-Salant 1988), a mating which involves several typical stages.

But many therapists have reported that the *coniunctio* is something that can, in fact, be experienced, even seen as a feature of the analytic interaction itself in less exalted forms. 'The *coniunctio* is an event that may be experienced in a tangible, here and now manner, in which case its rhythmical quality and capacity to transcend opposites of fusion and distance may be directly known' (Schwartz-Salant 1988, p. 54). For many therapists, the *coniunctio* is more truly an interpersonal event between patient and therapist, which either partner can access by a special form of relational insight that is sensitive not to events *within*, as in insight, but to events *between* the self and another. Schwartz-Salant advocates *imaginal sight* as a channel of such knowing (Avens 1980; Corbin 1972; Hillman 1975; Watkins 1986). By respecting and attending to the spontaneous images and those felt, almost-images as a real domain of information, the therapist can, he proposes, directly apprehend the activities of the *coniunctio*, or the events taking place 'in between'.

An effect of such insight has been to shift the Jungian paradigm away from an elucidation of individuation and toward the understanding of interaction with the analytic relationship as a paradigm for heightened mutual understanding rather than the vehicle for an individual's self-understanding solely. Schwartz-Salant has described experiences in therapy in which he and his client enter an imaginal space that exists between them (Schwartz-Salant 1984; 1986; 1988; 1989). He relates this space to the transitional space of Winnicott. Somewhat like the transitional liminality of the therapy itself, the space between the two parties is a space in between real life and fantasy. It is neither totally subjective, nor is it actually the physical being of the two people, but something in between these two. It is in this space that the therapist and the client can 'view' the play of the *coniunctio*. Schwartz-Salant says that transitional phenomena 'refer to another dimension of existence, a *third area* whose processes can only be perceived with the eye of the imagination' (1988, p. 43). Other therapists have also described the interpersonal potential of this imaginal space (Field 1989; 1991). Schwartz-Salant (1986) has written:

Two people can become aware of a state in which their subtle bodies are interacting. This is often felt as a change in the quality of space between them; it is experienced as energized and more material in nature. They are then at the threshold of an awareness of archetypal processes, a *mundus imaginalis*.

(p. 21)

Given this opening up of the concept of *coniunctio* beyond Jung's initial formulation, we have to ask, does the experience of imaginal space between people occur only in the context of therapy? Is it not possible that this

imaginal space is simply part of the human condition rather than a by-product of analytic individuation and therefore available for exploration by people who are together in the context of a shared, community event, or even, by people who are just meeting? As much as therapy may be a laboratory of human communication, its therapeutic purpose, its healing focus, the power differential between the two participants, makes the interaction a special case, possibly not even the best place to explore *coniunctio*. Even though the ideas generated in the context of therapy may have wide applicability, it seems important to explore in a more general context the possibility of using imaginal sight as a means of perceiving interpersonal interaction. I believe that so doing will extend Jungian insights beyond a therapeutic paradigm to a more general educational framework concerning the nature of relationship (Bertine 1992). In an increasingly psychological time, we need to study what happens when two people attempt to communicate, not from the outside, but from the inside. Establishing a way to study this inner form of communication has been a focus of my research for more than a decade now.

The imaginal encounter

In the form of the experiment I have used most often, two people sit silently facing each other with their eyes closed. I ask them to use their imagination to explore what is happening between them during a three-minute period of silence.

The setting for this experiment most commonly has been public workshops I have given on the theme of 'Developing intuition' or 'Intuitive communication'. At these workshops there may be in attendance anywhere from 50 to 300 people, mostly strangers (some experiments, to be described later in the paper, were conducted in smaller groups of people who had come to know each other). During these workshops, participants are given opportunities to pair up, and each member of the dyad is asked to answer *vis-à-vis* a partner, 'How am I experiencing your presence from within myself?' 'How do I imagine what is going on between us?'

Introducing the experiment

To prepare the participants for the experience, which I have variously titled, 'Close to you,' 'Psychic communion,' or 'Close encounters in the transpersonal zone', I begin by briefly explaining to them how they will use their imagination as a means of perceiving.

We usually regard the imagination, I explain to my audience, as merely mental images whose origins and reach are solely within the skull of the person imagining. It is common to suppose that the imagination is merely a personal creation, or that it is a purely subjective phenomenon. We have

a phrase for dismissing as meaningless an experience that comes from the imagination. We say 'it's *just* your imagination'. When we say 'You are imagining things!', we mean that your subjective viewpoint has become distressingly at odds with objective reality. In this experiment you'll see that what you ordinarily think of as subjective may have an objective component.

When I ask the participants 'Who among you has been in a situation with another person where you sensed some feeling in the air, but you hesitated to mention it because the person might reply that you were "just imagining" things?', most people raise their hands. There is laughter because people recognize that situation. We have familiar phrases that also recognize this phenomenon. We say, 'The atmosphere was so thick you could cut it with a knife'. Or, 'It was a silence you could slice'.

Building upon that collective understanding, I ask the participants to consider that the imagination actually may be a way of perceiving. Romantic poets like William Blake felt that the imagination was the way that the soul saw: it is the eyes of the heart (Hillman 1982) and it may have something to do with introverted feeling. Such imagination concerns itself with interpersonal energies, which it feels and tries to articulate in images. The effect is to extend our normal sensitivity. To use a technological metaphor, suppose that the imagination were like infra-red goggles, granting night vision to see what is not ordinarily visible to the eye. Perhaps the 'eyes of the heart' exist to help us to see the spirit of what is happening in a situation, an energy that is often described in vague or New Age ways as 'invisible forces' or 'vibrations' or simply 'feelings', but that is no less real for being hard to articulate in more sophisticated ways.

I tell my students that it is easy to doubt the reality of magnetic waves because we cannot see them. Yet if we sprinkle some iron filings on a piece of paper and put a magnet underneath, the filings arrange themselves in a beautiful revelation of the shape and form of magnetic waves. Perhaps if we allow our emotional imagination to enter a situation, the situation itself will be seen to send off 'vibrations' that arrange the images of our imagination in such a way as to reveal what is going on.

Usually, participants readily see that we can use the imagination as our iron filings to develop the image of feeling-toned situations. They recognize that imagination helps them to experience their feelings in a different way when they see what they are feeling. For example, when someone says 'I'm feeling blue', the person is using the atmosphere and tone of the blue colouring to express a mood; blue is a visual metaphor to express a way of feeling. Similarly, a participant can be trained to ask: How does it feel to be with a particular person in a given moment? Usually words barely describe the richness and subtlety of one's feelings. On the other hand, it is easier, when one tunes into the feeling of being in someone's presence, or to the feeling of being connected with that person, simply to attend to those feelings and allow thoughts, day-dreams or pictures to emerge all by themselves. Such

thoughts and pictures are expressions of the feelings in symbolic form and they are one way of describing what the feeling function has been trying to track.

In order to be able to 'see' with the imagination in this way, it is important that we not try to direct it. I emphasize in my training that this use of the imagination is not 'visualization'. Rather, it is experiencing the imagination as a visioning that emerges spontaneously. What gives images their accuracy, or validity, is precisely that they come spontaneously. The subject does not decide in advance how to picture the feeling, and does not visualize a certain thing on purpose to force a picture of it. Rather, the imagination is a receiver, which can be tuned to receive information about emotional events.

I tell participants that this use of the imagination is much the same as learning to remember dreams and seek their perspective on events (Reed 1976a; 1976b). One goes to bed hoping that a dream will respond to one's concerns, yet we do not invent the dream. It is a spontaneous event, outside the conscious will. In the morning, to recall the dream, we have to tune into the feelings we have and wait to see what dream images arise. Although the person initiates the process, and it is therefore intentional, what is actually experienced is involuntary and spontaneous and outside the boundaries of personal control.

The key instruction is this one: To learn to use imaginal sight in perceiving what is happening in the connection, to perceive the intuitional level of the subtle communication, you must get out of the way, and let it happen. The motto I propose for this particular orientation to receiving intuitional communication is a New Age one: 'Tune in, let go'. To demonstrate this type of attitude, I refer people to the state of mindfulness of their breathing, giving these instructions:

Focus on your breathing, observe it without interfering with it or trying to shape it in any way. Notice that although it is easy to step in and influence your breathing, it is also possible to be present, to be conscious of your breathing, while at the same time letting it transpire completely on its own. When you can relax sufficiently to allow yourself to be the silent, do-nothing witness of your breathing, you can appreciate the mystery of 'inspiration'. That one word, inspiration, describes both the process of involuntary, spontaneous breathing, as a gift of life, and the process of receiving an idea or brainstorm totally out of the blue, involuntarily and by surprise. You can learn from your breathing, therefore, how to be a silent witness to the spontaneous flow of your imagination, allowing its waves to deliver upon the shores of your awareness new insights and revelations.

The above comments convey the style and orientation I imply in suggesting to the participants that they may trust their imagination to bring them information. Then I explain that we shall be exploring some experiences involving the 'space between' in a relationship with another person to see what happens. I say that we will use the 'imagination' to register within our consciousness events that are taking place within a 'transpersonal' domain.

I call it 'transpersonal' because, although they'll experience it personally as within oneself, it pertains to the experience of others also, thus transcending the boundaries of one's own mind.

Creating a relationship

I begin the experiment by having people find themselves a partner and sit face to face with that person. Then I guide them in a non-verbal activity designed to have them co-operate briefly in a simulated relationship characterized by rapport. It is my intention that what I ask them to do in the external, physical, behavioural sphere will have its correlate in the internal, subjective, imaginal sphere.

To get them to enter a state of rapport with each other, I ask them to raise their hands up by their face, palms facing the other person. I ask one person in each pair to make faces and hand movements while the other person attempts to mirror precisely the first person's expressions and movements. Obviously, this task is awkward at first, and there is much laughter and giggling as the playing begins. After a few moments, I request that the participants in the dyads shift roles, with now the first person mirroring the second in each pair. Ever more rapidly I continue to announce role reversals, having the partners switch back and forth between the initiator and mirroring roles until I announce, 'let the spirit between you initiate the movement while both of you mirror each other'. At this point, there is usually another rise of laughter and uncertainty as the partners look to each other for cues, then they are generally quiet as they explore this final mirroring experience.

Instructions for the encounter

After a few moments I stop this exercise and instruct the dyads to begin their imaginal encounter. In fact, this encounter has already begun through the exercise, and what follows is a fading away of the physical encounter to the purely imaginal. Here are the instructions I read to them:

Put your hands in your lap and close your eyes. Take a deep breath, exhale and relax . . . [pause] Notice how you are feeling, your energy level and your mood . . . Now I want you to become aware of the feeling of the presence of your partner . . . Just allow your awareness to expand now until it includes the feeling of being in the presence of your partner . . . In your imagination make mental contact with your partner . . . Psychically, making mental contact . . . Establishing a heart connection with your partner . . . As you imagine making mental contact with your partner, notice what you experience . . . Whatever it may be, simply assume it is part of the experience of being in mental contact with your partner . . . Allow the experience of mental contact with your partner to unfold now, on its own, in fullness, while you simply observe what you experience . . . I'll be silent now for three minutes while you explore the experience of being in psychic contact with your partner.

After three minutes, I interrupt the silence with this announcement:

O.K. now, gently and gradually let go of the experience of being in contact with your partner . . . withdraw from the contact experience . . . return to yourself, into your own body, your own space, being alone with yourself . . . Notice how you're feeling now, your energy level and your mood . . . Take a deep breath, wiggle your fingers and your toes, stretch, open your eyes. Discuss with your partner what you experienced.

The room bursts into conversation and laughter. The participants are animated, their arms gesturing expansively and with flowing motions. The animated hand movements prove to have significance. I give the participants five minutes to share with each other what they experienced and then I lead them in some structured discussion as a group to further their training as observers of the imaginal.

Preparing trained observers

To begin the discussion session, I explain that this first round was a practice run so that they could become familiar with the procedure. After we have discussed the procedure, we repeat the process a few times with new partners for more extensive observations. I will present here in some detail the handling of the discussion following the warm-up round, as it has been the procedure through which I have obtained my 'trained observers' for the experiments that follow.

I explain to them that the purpose of the mirroring exercise was simply to establish a degree of co-operation and rapport between strangers. In point of fact, when people co-ordinate their movements in this fashion, a degree of rapport does come to exist. This kinaesthetic rapport has been suggested to be a channel of emotional communication (Bernieri & Rosenthal 1991; Bernieri 1988; Hatfield *et al.*, 1994). In other research, I have achieved a similar type of emotional rapport by having people imitate the sound of one another's voice (Reed 1994).

I remind the participants, 'The first thing that we did after you stopped the mirroring exercise and closed your eyes was I asked you to be aware of your partner's presence and to imagine being in mental contact with your partner.' I read again the instructions (quoted above) giving all the variations and paraphrases of the description of being in mental contact. I then request that the participants raise their hands if they found they understood what I meant when I said to 'make mental contact'. I ask, 'Did at least one of these descriptions make sense to you?' Almost everyone raises a hand, the group nodding in agreement that they understood the intent of the instructions.

So far, the only quantitative aspect of data collection I have conducted has come through this show of hands. At this stage of the research it has seemed

sufficient to note whether only a few or a majority of people observed a certain effect. No greater precision has seemed necessary.

The first result from this experiment is perhaps obvious, although it has subtle implications. It is that *people understand what it means to be in mental contact with someone*. The experience of being in mental contact with someone feels natural or real. People feel that it is easy and natural to imagine being in mental contact with somebody.

Yet this mental contact is a presumptuous fantasy, viewed from the standpoint of the materialistic philosophy in which almost everyone has been raised. To impress upon the participants the *psychic* reality of the contact experience I point out the enigma:

Take the point of view of a hypothetical video camera recording what is happening. What would it show? The camera would record people sitting in chairs, facing one another. Their eyes are closed, their hands are not touching each other but are quietly resting in their laps. There's no eye contact, they're not touching, not talking. There is obviously no communication going on, perhaps nothing going on at all. But what the camera wouldn't detect was that obviously you experienced that something was going on. There was a lot happening.

When I suggest that the camera would record that there was nothing going on, the participants laugh. They appreciate the humorous contrast between how the situation appears from the outside and how it feels from the inside.

To further draw their attention to the apparent gap between the materialistic, externally orientated view of the encounter from that provided from inner subjective experience, I discuss this point further:

It's a natural part of being with people to take for granted the psychic reality of making mental contact with them. In point of fact, however, we have no way of knowing that anyone else beside ourselves has a mind, much less detect that our mind and their mind is in contact. You can't see any one's mind, you can't hear it, touch it, smell or taste it. There is no sense perception to provide a channel of direct contact with another person's mind. We assume, nevertheless, most of the time, that the other person has a mind and we often feel in contact with that person's mind. How do you detect the presence of other minds? From the standpoint of a materialistic philosophy we would say that you do not detect the presence of other minds, you simply infer their presence, you simply assume other people have minds. You infer from your personal experience with your own mind that other people have minds. At least that's what the materialistic philosophy would have to say, since there is no sensory basis for knowing another mind. Yet is that how you experience it? Do you experience it as an inference or do you experience it directly? The experience you just had gives you an opportunity to observe how you actually experience the presence of another mind. It must be an intuitive experience, perhaps even a telepathic experience. This experiment is putting you in a position to explore that experience, to observe your impression of being in contact with another mind and see what it is really like.

Although my discussion moves into epistemology and philosophical abstraction, the participants' experience is more direct. In fact, should one doubt that they experience the contact as real, consider this result. When I ask

them, 'How many of you experienced the contact as intimate?' almost all hands fly up. *Most people experience this mutual mental contact as an intimate experience.* This result is most revealing of the quality of the imaginal encounter.

'How can it be,' I ask them, 'an intimate experience if none of the events that we associate with intimacy were occurring? There were no disclosures of feelings, no secrets talked about, no touching, no looking deeply into the eyes. Nevertheless, you felt it was intimate?' At this apparent contradiction, the participants smile and there is a look of revelation on some faces. I conclude that intimacy must be really an 'inside job', something that happens from within people, that can be accessed with an introverted, not extraverted feeling.

Underscoring the intimate nature of the experience, some participants report that they felt shy about making the imaginal contact. Some reported a concern about what might happen should they 'bump into this other person' in their imagination. One person said, 'I was afraid because I didn't want my partner to find out things that would make her not like me.' Such concerns made some people somewhat cautious about what they were doing. Their caution shows they regarded the imaginal encounter as a *real encounter*. It was an inherently intimate encounter. The presence of ambivalence is an important indicator of the psychic reality of the imaginal encounter and we shall examine it more later.

As part of their training as observers I explain to the participants my thinking on what is happening during the encounter: 'The communication, the contact, the intimacy, although non-existent or impossible from the perspective of a materialistic reality available to the senses, is nevertheless totally real from a purely subjective point of view. It makes intuitive sense. It is psychically real.'

Perhaps this one observation, in itself, is one of the most significant of this research. The reality of psychic contact is something that we take so much for granted that we tend not to focus on its existence. As the ocean is for the fish, the psyche is our common environment. Only during disturbances in its normal atmosphere do we come to be aware of its existence. Experiments like the ones I conduct allow participants to make observations about this psychic reality and to note variations that occur in this transpersonal, yet very intimately real, space in between them.

After the basic orientation to the experience of imaginal encounter, and a trial round of observation as just described, I debrief the participants regarding the content of what they experienced. I do so by asking for a show of hands from people who experienced a certain category of imagery. The categories (described later in this report) are based upon experiences reported by previous participants and are meant to cover almost all possibilities. The purpose of this all-inclusive poll is to make sure that every participant's experience can be seen to fit into the scheme. The intent is to encourage

participants to trust their spontaneous experiences without modifying them. I am seeking to create observers who will remain true to their experience without trying to shape it in some manner:

It is important that you surrender your flow of imagination, to let it be spontaneous and natural. While you exercise a certain amount of concentration, of focused attention on the experience of being in contact with your partner, at the same time you remain open to experiencing this contact in whatever way it comes to you. You've learned now that there is no need to direct the experience by intentionally visualizing yourself and your partner engaged in any particular activity. Afterwards, in the sharing with your partner, be willing to describe everything that you experienced because many aspects of the experience – which will seem to be at first tangential, not related, as if you spaced out or lost your concentration for a while and was off on something, some other task – may prove to be quite relevant. It is important that you disclose all that you experienced to your partner, including any negative, erotic, or bizarre feelings, which can also be a natural part of this experience. If you and your partner describe to each other everything you experienced, you will have better insights into what is going on during the period of psychic contact.

To reinforce this attitude of trust and *laissez faire* toward the imagination, I remind them of our demonstration of the breath meditation, in which I introduced the motto, 'Tune in, then let go'.

By this point I hope the participants are comfortable with the procedure, that they know what is expected of them, have learned how to engage in the imaginal encounter, and also know that it is quite O.K. to experience whatever they experience. Hopefully they realize that they need not be trying to 'fudge' by shaping what they experience into some kind of pre-set pattern. We are hopefully ready for a genuine exploration.

I now ask each participant to get another partner. Having been trained, they find they can establish a relationship based on co-operation and co-ordination very quickly. I ask the partners to look at each other, to raise their hands up by their face and start mirroring each other. They are to simultaneously mirror one another's movements. After I call out, 'Let the spirit between you be alive!' the people laugh as they move their hands and make faces and rock and roll their bodies. I let them do this for a minute and then I say 'O.K., let's be quiet now – close our eyes and put our hands in our laps and relax'. I lead the people through the experience once again with their new partner. After three minutes of silence, I bring them out of the encounter and ask them to discuss with each other what they experienced.

Observations of liminal encounter

I have led approximately sixty-five workshops on 'intuitive communication' that have included the imaginal encounter experiment. The experiment has had well over five thousand participants. I have solicited and received several hundred written descriptions of aspects of these encounters. The observations

that follow are based upon face-to-face discussion with participants as well as their written comments and drawings.

The experience of making contact

How does a person initiate being in contact with another? In face-to-face encounters we may speak the person's name. For long distance communication, we may write a person's address on an envelope containing our message, or we may dial the person's phone number. In the case of our experiment in transpersonal space, how does the participant initiate mental contact?

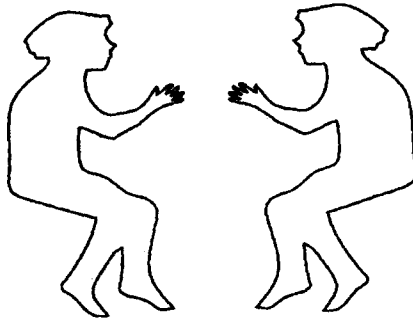


Figure 1

The most common experience participants report, active in the majority of participants, involves some kind of feeling. Perhaps sensation would be a better word, as the reports of feeling usually describe a physical effect rather than an emotional one. This feeling, or sensation, can either be externally orientated, as in feeling the partner's presence, or internally orientated, as in having a feeling in their body and attributing that feeling to the impact of their partner. The most predominant feelings are warmth and touch.

My body was full of warmth, with a flush on my face and arms, as the other person came closer.

(I gave participants a diagram of two people facing each other (see Figure 1) and asked them to draw on the diagram what they experienced. Sometimes I received some very graphic descriptions, such as in Figures 2-4.)

I felt a click in my forehead as if the two foreheads had touched and actually integrated into one another.

It was a sensation in my head, my forehead, like a dolphin's sonar, and it went out and it made contact and there was actually a physical sensation of bumping into another dolphin's forehead.

There was a sense of energy that came out from me and then it met a certain warmth and I knew I had made contact.

... a knowing of a connection between us as we each are trying to make contact ... was found in a prickling on our necks.

We definitely experienced an energy flow between us – physical sensations. We recognized the exact moment our spirits blended and when they separated again, always leaving a wisp behind.

I felt I was slowly reaching out and ... touching an unfamiliar substance.

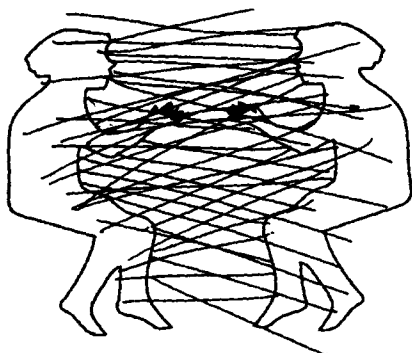


Figure 2

The references to the forehead probably reflects the subjective locus of thinking or imaging, or, as in the case of the person referring to sonar, to 'inner sight' or the 'third eye' of psychic sight. Interestingly the hands were the most frequent locus for the feeling of warmth. This finding may be an effect of the prior mirroring exercise, but, as we shall see in later descriptions, it also relates to the phenomenon of 'laying on of hands' as a way of interacting with the image of the other person's body:

Both of us used the same mental approach to one another: with our hands as in the mirror images, and with our foreheads.

I felt the build-up of energy between my partner's hands and mine. Then when we merged I felt heat and being tapped on my leg and arm. Then there was heat and my partner experienced static in her hair.

I felt great energy flowing between us. I would almost 'see' the electrical flow of energy passing between our hands and felt it throughout the entire arm.

I felt like we were both reaching out to touch each other's hands.

We may compare these reports with one by therapist Nathan Field, who is reporting an experience from therapy that he relates to Schwartz-Salant's

(1988) accounts: 'I have the distinct physical sensation that a flow of radiant energy is emanating in a direct line from my body towards the patient, while also coming to me from her. By contrast she feels her energy is flowing out and around me, even behind my chair, and is linked with mine; she reports a palpable sense of energy "like a solid ball' in the space between us' (Field 1991).

The second most common experience of initiating contact with the partner was through visualization, with about a third of the participants reporting this type of initial experience. Some of these images seem to be memory images, perseverations of the mirroring exercise. Others reveal the presence of forces at work in the transpersonal zone.

While facing each other we each visualized playing with each other like children.

I start with making an extension of myself to reach him. And when I did, it just was to call his attention, smile, and look up. I almost can see myself getting out of my body and looking for this person. When I found him he was kind of evasive.

Other person initiated our coming together by gesturing 'come here' to me. She pulled me up and we started chatting.

It was like a magnetic beam that went straight to my partner.

One common experience is that of something of themselves moving closer to their partner. As an observer, I watched many people lean closer toward their partner as the three-minute contact experience unfolded. They would then move back afterwards at the end. The experience of moving closer and moving away may be partly a result of the suggestive quality of some of my phrases ('*withdraw* from the contact experience . . . *return* to yourself'). It may also be an archetypal, spatial metaphor for making and breaking the merger experience. Consider therapist Kaplinsky's statement: 'At one extreme it feels as if I am leaning forwards, letting the patient know I am there, fearful he might slip away, cold and forgotten. At the other, it is as though I lean backwards in order to give space, fearful of intruding, wary of the delicate and potentially explosive space between us' (Kaplinsky 1992, p. 299).

When we were to disconnect, all the energy sucked back into my body like in a cartoon when the genie goes back into his bottle.

We blended our minds together again with an almost physical feeling of expanding and later withdrawing.

Participants report imagining their hands reaching out toward their partner. Some reported that they experienced a 'bubble' or some kind of energy that surrounds them, expanding and moving toward their partner. This imagery may reflect suggestions inherent in my instructions ('allow your *awareness to expand* now until it *includes* the feeling of being in the presence of your partner'). In some cases this bubble totally engulfs the partner while in other

cases, the partner has a bubble which moves toward the observer and the two bubbles join.

We both felt a bubble of energy between us.

I saw what kind of looked like this two-part bubble with me and her in it. I felt kind of like we were bosom buddies travelling around in it with a bird's eye view.

Many also report experiences pertaining specifically to feeling the *space between*. There was imagery, for example, referring to the *atmosphere* ('charged air', 'electrified space') of that in-between space. Some report finding themselves coming up against a pressure or a resistance. Some described it as an air door or a pressure chamber. Some provided a description of the air or space between themselves and their partner becoming energized. This description is reminiscent of Schwartz-Salant's metaphoric description, the space between becomes more 'energized and more material in nature' (Schwartz-Salant 1989, p. 133) or 'texturized and alive' (p. 141). This image is also reflected in the colloquial expression, 'the tension in the air was so thick you could almost cut it with a knife.'

Pressure change of atmosphere; advance and receding energy.

There was a pulsation between us and then I felt we were surrounded by cold flames. My partner said she also experienced these things. (Figure 3)

There was the sensation of a strong current between us and I felt this combined current being carried up and into the atmosphere. My partners also felt the strong current and felt a strong light enveloping the current.

A more subtle attribute of the space in between, a quality perhaps more difficult to put into words, was *the sensation of rhythmical movement*. One couple, for example, both experienced a pulsing with a left-right motion, as if pedalling a bicycle with their arms, a rowing or swimming motion. *Energy is basically, the pulsing, or oscillation, of polarity*. One of the fundamental manifestations of energy is vibration. Our language expresses the recognition of the psychic energy in a situation by using the term, vibrations, or 'vibes'.

What some participants describe is reminiscent of the origins of the mental image, or archetype, of energy, the mystery behind movement. They are very animated with their hands as they attempt to describe the energy they experienced.

I felt a definite presence of energy upon mutually meeting my partner. Before the two energies met I could visualize the physical form of my partner. As soon as the two energies intertwined the visualized physical form vanished and only the energies remained. There constantly seemed to be slight motion continuing. I guess without some motion it would be hard to sense energy.

Tuning into my partner I felt great amounts of energy coming from her in waves – like a ball.

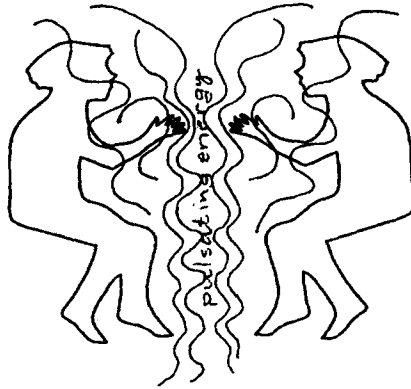


Figure 3

We both had the same experience of floating and moving.

We both experienced a gentle rocking sideways sensation.

I can feel energy waves very distinctly, they are palpable almost like a kind of wind blowing. You can't see the wind either, but you can feel it.

I have experienced this pulsing, and believe the polarity to be that of merger-separation, the oscillation of awareness of us as being one or two. Schwartz-Salant once reported that 'the energy field between us oscillated, separating and joining us in a kind of sine wave rhythm' (1984, p. 16). The energy that is felt in the encounter may indeed be created by two observation points in the psyche momentarily experiencing their potential merger into one. In a sense, this exercise is a meditation on the mystery of separation/merger as it relates to the creation of consciousness.

Implicit in the process for many participants was the possibility of total merger, of *becoming one with* their partner:

The feeling that we were both one in this same physical body.

I could feel two hearts beating coming together as one. Then I experienced a feeling of wholeness or completeness.

I felt her heart beating slower and slower in my hand and it felt very pleasant. Then I felt as if my lungs were no longer mine but her's breathing slower and deeper.

I had the distinct impression that I had somehow absorbed my partner's face and that I was using his facial expressions and had the urge to reach up and stroke 'my' beard.

I saw her eye coming very close to mine until as it swivelled I found myself looking at my face as if through her eyes.

I became fused with my partner. There was a swirling, something like an energy rushing through me and around me and I felt as if my partner and I were breathing the same air. (Figure 4)

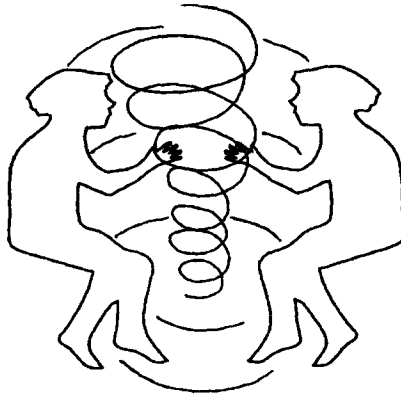


Figure 4

These descriptions closely resemble an observation made by Field: 'A man patient reported that he felt himself sinking into the couch and the couch was my body . . .' (Field 1991, p. 105).

The experience of being embodied within the partner is an extreme form of empathy, *einfühlen*, the *feeling into*. The origin of the concept of empathy derives from aesthetics and is founded on the primal experience of mimicry (Bavelas *et al.* 1987; Wispé 1987). The empathy seen in the reports of the imaginal encounter may be a perseverating residue of the mimicry of the initial mirroring exercise. In one of contact experiences with a partner, I experienced a shift in my identity as I found myself to be 'sitting' in my partner's body. As I did so, I was aware of the contours of her face as if they were mine, then I experienced pain in my jaw. Afterwards she told me that she had just had some dental work. Here is an instance of what Hatfield terms 'emotional contagion' (Hatfield *et al.* 1994), which is a common result of physical mimicry.

This result is similar to much interaction in psychotherapy. As therapists listen intently to their clients, often they imagine how the client experiences his or her world and they begin to have syntonetic physical sensations. These are the result of trial identifications, in which the therapist feels as if he were the client. Larson (1987) described instances where moments of empathy with a client seemed to make a quantum leap for her, to become encounters of extraordinary 'resonance', in which she felt in her body symptoms originating with the client. In my group research I have asked people to mimic the sound of another person's voice (Reed 1994). The imitator often reports experiencing physical feelings and imagery that prove to originate with the

person providing the voice sample. Field (1989) has reported similar observations, empathy taking on the qualities that might be a physical form of telepathy. He refers to these spontaneously arising physical feelings in the therapist as 'embodied countertransference', yet notes that they originate in the patient's own emotions, meaning that this experience is a form of that unconscious communication we now term 'projective identification'.

Empathy, identifications, projections, and other such terms have long been used by analytical psychologists to describe nuances and variations in the interaction of two parties in a therapy relationship. All of these processes are present in this imaginal encounter between relative strangers meeting for the first time.

However it is visualized or described, people experience the imaginal encounter as an *interaction*. That the participants experience an interaction during their imaginal encounter is our third major finding in this study. Another way of putting it is that the participants experience the imaginal encounter as real, intimate, and characterized by a transaction.

Ambivalence about intimacy

Consistent with the psychology of intimacy, most participants evidenced ambivalence about being 'close' to one another during the imaginal encounter. They expressed this ambivalence first as a hesitancy to make contact and then a reluctance to give up the pleasant feelings of merger. There were also anxieties about 'intrusion'.

I would have a tendency to draw back. It took me a few tries to feel comfortable in the other person's space.

I visualized swirling energy enveloping us both and then felt my partner need to pull away. She later reported a feeling of being swallowed up and dropping a shield to protect herself.

A barrier went up at a certain stage. I seemed to pass right on through the body of my partner which surprised me to no end.

I really wanted to stay out there with my partner. I was reluctant to come back. I didn't quite enter into myself completely. When I returned there was an extra warmth in me, all the way down to my ankles, as if the other person's body warmth was heating me up.

We felt connected and peaceful. A sense of loss and sadness came over me at the end of the session.

I had a difficulty in returning to normal [conditions] but with my partner's help and lightly smacking my hands I was able to do this.

I didn't realize how connected we were until I was told to pull back. I instantly got tears in my eyes becoming one again.

Another theme of ambivalence was secrecy, again reflecting how much reality participants attributed to the imaginal encounter. Sometimes they expressed a concern for the loss of secrets, about being exposed; sometimes as a concern about prying into the other person's secrets; on the other hand, sometimes there was an expression of intimate delight in sharing little secrets.

I still cannot believe how well connected I seemed to be to one person I did this exercise with. I just kept getting image after image and finally pulled myself away because I was afraid that I might find out something she didn't really want me to know.

[My partner] described someone I'm having an affair with. He described him as definitely not my husband and said he 'lost it' after that because he was feeling he had invaded my privacy.

The things that my partner saw about me all made sense and yet in the instance of the secret garden room, I realized she had been able to tap into an area of deep meaning for me, yet not something that I was consciously thinking about.

The parts of ourselves brought out were not entirely what we show the world. There were little secrets that were shared that my partner had never mentioned to another.

When asked about how they experienced the initiation of contact, the majority indicated that there was a 'mood shift'. This shift was clearly an emotional response to the contact experience, or the prospect of it. Even though a show of hands indicated that this mood shift was very common, very few participants elected to write about this part of their experience. I suspect it is because some of the feelings pertained to the ambivalence over making contact. Such reports as I received mentioned changes in temperature, 'energy' and even odours:

I was at first nervous, worried that I was venturing out into the unknown, and perhaps could get lost. When I felt the warmth of my partner, I made the contact and the nervous feeling went away.

When I first connected with my partner I smiled. I enjoyed her energy.

I became aware of a foreign odour that made me feel I was in contact with his person. Once full contact was made I felt a heavy unhappiness drop on me, my head dropped on to my chest and an overall oppressed sensation went all through my body.

Some participants' experience of making contact was highlighted by the resistance to being able to do so. People experienced actual barriers of one sort or another (Figure 5). The disappearing of these barriers signalled the end of the resistance and the deepening of the contact.

I was paired with a man who I felt very, very different from. And it seemed like

that there was a barrier between us. But as we did the exercise, the barriers disappeared and I saw both of us as seekers.

We both experienced an initial barrier, in the form of a screen, a soft fabric screen, then it let go, dissolved, and we both felt this dissolving as a relaxing in the shoulders. (Figure 5)

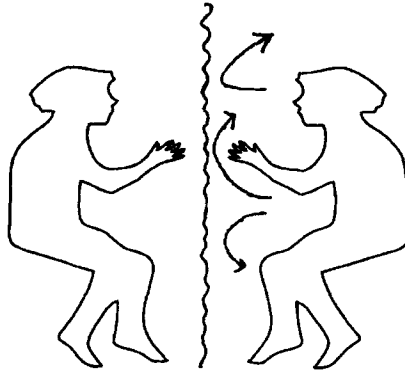


Figure 5

She tried to keep me out at first. It was like hitting a piece of foam. Then she said, 'I don't want this'. And then she said, 'here I am'. I couldn't get any impressions until she allowed me access to herself. Then we really connected.

With my partner I think there was a stiffness. I found myself wanting to know more about her as a little girl, her adolescence, her life now. I tried to reach out to her but it was as though the door was closed.

A barrier is a defensive form of boundary, one that expresses one's will to keep separate. In a different experiment exploring intuitive communication, one that involved listening to the sound of another person's voice as a means of gaining understanding about that person (Reed 1994), listeners have often reported imagining a picket fence around the person's house. The picket fence is like a semi-permeable membrane; it marks a boundary yet you can see through it. In the current experience, we see a number of images of the boundary.

The boundary itself is an interesting symbol which deserves exploration. It is a physical and spatial metaphor referring to something psychological in nature. The family of metaphors dealing with boundary conditions are typically physical and spatial images ('close', 'distant', 'open', 'closed', 'contact', 'connected', 'intrusive', 'invasive', 'barrier', 'inner/outer'). We use these metaphors so naturally that it would seem as if we meant them not as metaphors, but intended them to be taken literally. These metaphors function symbolically in that the understanding they express is still largely unconscious. My

research provides some understanding of the meaning of the boundary symbol, which I would express as the 'awareness of the possibility of choice'. There are initially two beings, each faced with the choice of whether or not to become one. Without such a boundary, without the initial respect for the twoness, for the individuality of choice, unity would have no meaning. In this context, metaphors of boundary violation ('intrusion', for example, or 'contagion') might mean that the process happened without awareness of choice, that is, by compulsion or through an unconscious mechanism. Metaphors of boundary conditions also become more clearly understandable. For example, 'close' might mean 'shared experience' (Schwartz 1993), and 'distant' might mean unavailable for shared experience, while 'closed' might mean actively resisting shared experience. The imaginal encounter of a 'barrier', therefore, would be an experience of the other person's resistance toward shared experience.

As common sense would dictate, the ambivalence about intimacy often was specific to certain pairings. People noted that with some partners they could make contact, but with others they could not.

I'm glad we did this experiment with different people. My first partner was an older gentleman who was quite tired. Neither of us got anything from the experiment. The second partner was a retired school teacher who had severe difficulties 'letting go'. We had contact but it was uncomfortable. My third partner and I had instant rapport. Our baseline psychic contact with each other was excellent with both visual images and feelings and sensations.

I felt vibrations that were unlike mine. The person was very afraid of coming close. The second person and I were very close, and had incredible energy between us that was shared – very intimate experience!

Remarks such as these suggest that people are discriminating. They can distinguish between a good and poor contact. There were, in fact, occasions when participants experienced no contact. Consider this example:

I felt a resistance from my partner when I tried to make contact. I sensed a hesitancy. I can feel warmth in my hands and I want to hold hands but feel rejected. I reach out and the other person seems to disappear. I try to communicate but it's like I'm talking into emptiness, like a voice into the wilderness.

Her partner wrote:

I have difficulty staying present in this experiment . . . too many other things going on in my mind. I wanted to fly away and one time I saw myself walking out of the room . . . another time I flew up and out on a flying carpet. I had a hard time talking myself down into the ground and being in the experiment, then later I hopped up and out on a pogo stick.

The first person correctly picked up that the partner was having a hard time being there and was not only not interested in making contact, but was actually more interested in leaving or going away. The experience of no

contact can paradoxically validate the reality of the imaginal encounter when one of the partners is psychologically absent and that absence is reflected in the other partner's inability to make contact. People who report having nothing happen, no sense of contact, often have their partner report the same thing. Then, when switching partners, they experience something better. Perhaps they can tell from a brief meeting whether there is compatibility between them. Nevertheless, some people found their evaluation of their partner changing as a result of the contact experience.

Experiencing the encounter

What happens when people are in contact? The imaginal experience is a subtle, fragile phenomenon, extremely sensitive to the mood of the participants, to suggestion, to expectations, and to the relationship. As with any channel of detection that is so sensitive, it is also easily influenced. In this preliminary research, my interest has been primarily to allow observation of a wide range of experiences. Thus I 'trained' these observers not to attempt to achieve, or even visualize, any particular result coming from their interactions, but simply to be open and note what happened during the contact.

As part of the discussion after the first session, I usually review with the participants the types of experiences they had during the three-minute period of silence. After hearing many accounts, I have learned that they can be placed into four categories: (1) Impersonal energy images (2) images of the two partners (3) images of other actors (4) apparent mind wandering.

Impersonal Energies

As reported above, experiences of energies were common at the moment of making contact. About half the participants also reported that this type of imagery predominated during the three-minute contact period and account for all of their submitted drawings. Such descriptions involve accounts of energies and lights in various patterns of movement and interaction. Partners may experience themselves exchanging heat and/or light. They may experience vortexes and swirls of light. Sometimes there are fountains of energy rising in the space between them. There may be ribbons of light or heat or energy or electricity moving back and forth between the two participants.

Sense of warmth . . . saw patterns of flashing lights, like flashbulbs going off.

Spirals, or a spinning sensation. Power source of one sort. Could speed up or slow down.

A feeling of warmth. Bright white light diffused into a round area.

First felt congestion in chest and rapid heart beat, no distinct thoughts, just heart

beat and ears filling up. Then experienced a lot of electrical energy, felt as if floating on air current with my partner – all joy, physical body not clearly defined from waist down.

The energy would leave my head and go to the partner and then come back to me and swirl quickly around and around me until I felt dizzy and rotated. Then very quickly it would shoot out to my partner and my body and I would begin to feel very thick and heavy then it would shoot back to me and swirl me around and around again. I did not imagine what I felt. It's almost made me nauseous with the movement.

It would seem as if images of energy patterns is one of the psyche's natural language or symbol systems for experiencing the imaginal contact. We can compare the participants' descriptions with one reported by Schwartz-Salant:

We both experienced this energy, which seemed like something between us . . . I saw a shimmering image, which partook of both of us, move upwards from where it was, near the ground . . . I saw the image as white; she saw a kind of fluid that had a center.

(Schwartz-Salant 1984, p. 16)

We might recognize in these reports some instances of imagery that is like that of healers and aura readers. As Schwartz-Salant (1986) has pointed out, imaginal sight perceives the subtle body and is the medium for many occult phenomena. We shall discuss these dimensions later.

Fantasies of Interactions

The second type of experience is that of having some kind of fantasy involving themselves and their partner. Perhaps it is a continuation of the 'hand dancing' they were doing before they closed their eyes. Or the observer may have had a fantasy of the two of them in some setting outside the room where the experiment is taking place, going for a walk in nature, going shopping, or engaged in some kind of conversation, having physical contact, hugging or something of that sort:

My partner pictured us dancing together in the woods with elves, fairies and such, then drifting into the very highest tree together spiritually. I pictured myself with her bouncing about in the sea and then drifting up into the stars.

I saw my partner with me in a beautiful wilderness place. We were walking through lush green grass, smelling the flowers and laughing as little girls about 8–10 years old. Then we were walking on a beach in an east direction. Our pantlegs were rolled up and we were so happy. Suddenly were sitting by a campfire in the high mountains wrapped in woolly animal fur coats, cold but smiling at each other, still the same age, little girls. The last sequence was in a country home on the floor playing with dolls and a tea set. My partner also saw us as little girls in another set of scenes, playing with dolls, riding double horseback walking in green grass, laughing as best friends do.

During the time our energy was mixing I had my hands in my lap at one point and it felt like I was cupping her hand in mine instead of my holding my own left hand in my right. I also felt she was taking me somewhere to teach me or show me something. When we discussed our experiences she said that in her imagination she reached for me and I took her hand. She said she then took me to the ocean and sea and showed me something – we kept sneaking looks at each other the rest of the day – we would get eye contact and laugh.

Fantasies of involving other actors

Sometimes the partners' fantasies do not focus on each other. Instead they involve other actors, persons both known and unknown, and animals:

I saw a lion and a lamb. And the lion licked the head of the lamb, and then the lamb licked back. Then there were two little boys throwing a ball back and forth. They had their arms around each other and they were rolling down a hill, tumbling in green grass. Then I saw green energy going back and forth between me and my partner.

There were two bucks, two deer. They were facing off. They were pouting up their noses, wanting to make contact with their antlers. They put the antlers into confrontation and started moving in a circle. Then I started hearing a song, 'Jingle Bells, here comes Santa'. Santa's flying through the sky and the deer watch, standing side by side, up into the air to see the source of this singing. They then wonder why they are fighting.

Notice that in these two stories, there is the theme of confrontation that is halted or brought into question. The stories may reflect the course of the person's feelings about being in contact with the partner. Also note that in these two examples, the other actors came in pairs. This pattern of two may have relevance to the notion of the 'couple', a term from the alchemical *coniunctio* that Nathan Schwartz-Salant has observed in his studies of the imaginal interaction.

Mind wandering

The fourth category is one rejected by the participants themselves as not being relevant. I include it, however, for it may have significance; I also want to be sure in the workshop discussions that participants learn to report *whatever* they experience. So-called 'mind-wandering' involves day-dreams and other subjective events that the participants label as 'not paying attention' or other forms of drifting away from the experiment at hand. This apparent lapse of attention may represent an introverted reaction to the contact, perhaps a defence of the self against it, or an attempt to process it in displacement.

I was lost in thought and wasn't paying attention. I became bored.

I forgot about the experiment and was thinking about a movie I saw.

These reports resemble those described above where the participants did not experience making contact. Just as countertransference reactions such as the therapist's boredom, sleepiness, mind-wandering, etc. may have clinical significance, so too these 'irrelevant' reactions of participants, which they believe have no pertinence to the interaction, may in fact be significant. It is beyond the scope of this initial research effort to attempt to categorize such reactions, or to explain their role in the contact experience. Like so many therapists before the discovery of countertransference, the participants believed such experiences to be meaningless, and so they rarely provided detailed written descriptions of them.

My purpose in reviewing the range of experiences that may occur during the contact, I explain to the participants, is to assure them that there is not some particular experience that I am looking for. It is very important that they feel free to, in fact encouraged to, let their imagination take them where it will. Providing instructions in the use of the imagination is a very tricky business. In the process of active imagination, for example, it is difficult to convey the notion that it is not required, or even desirable, to intend a certain image or result, and that the experience must unfold on its own, even if one finds oneself joining in as an imaginal participant. The baseline training experience of observing the breath as a model of attention has proved most beneficial in helping participants contemplate the imaginal encounter. The contact experience is in many ways a form of meditation. As a group experience, it is a co-operative meditation, but the meditation is not by any means characterized by any rote activities. There is no other focus for the meditation save that of mutually focusing on the contact between the two participants. I found that it was important to emphasize this attitude to counteract many participants' assumption that they should be 'doing' something.

I do, however, give them enough time to discover that their own experience has patterns. I provide them with two to three more opportunities to explore the contact experiences, sometimes with the same partner and sometimes with new partners. I have noted that switching to a new partner tends to bring up some feelings about separation that was part of the contact experience itself, further attesting to its psychological reality.

Separation and terminating the encounter

At the end of the contact experience, I asked participants to describe how they broke off the encounter. The question usually creates some puzzlement on their faces. It is not something they paid much attention to during the process. Only in retrospect did they recognize it was something that did happen. The most common report was 'pulling back'. As I give the instruction, 'withdraw from the contact experience . . . return to yourself', I see

many people's bodies lean back in their chairs, echoing Kaplinsky's observation, previously cited above. (In case the word, 'withdraw' was too suggestive of a physical manoeuvre, I have recently substituted the word 'disengage', believing that it is a more neutral metaphor.) Participants also report imagery such as 'a screen coming down separating us', or 'my bubble closing around me', or 'the light that was around her zapping back into my forehead'.

The reports of terminating the contact experience have generally not been as lucid as those of the imaginal interaction itself. I believe this lack of awareness of the separation process to be quite significant. A few participants mentioned that the contact experience was one of feelings and images and it seemed that switching to a more intellectual mode, thinking, was part of the process of separating. Hearing these comments, I realized that the veil separating them was very thin, a matter of the focus of attention. At subsequent workshops, therefore, during the discussion session, I would ask participants to notice if there was any remaining or residual sense that the contact between them and their partners was continuing on some other level. There would be an immediate look of amused surprise on their faces and the majority of hands would fly up. It is clear that the sense of separation is a constructed experience, what I term the 'fig leaf effect'. The contact experience is always potentially available as an underlying reality when attention is directed towards the imaginal zone.

As already mentioned, many participants reported a sense of sadness at breaking the contact. There was a hesitancy to come back because the contact experience, brief as it was, was a pleasant one. It was sometimes unpleasant to break it off, and several made reference to how it wasn't easy to separate: One described it as something like 'a taffy pulling feeling'.

We were so strongly bonded we both had to physically move ourselves back to break the bond.

When it was time to return to myself we both saw and felt a kind of a vacuum cylinder tube going into my third eye that just swooshed back into itself.

I really wanted to stay out there with my partner. I was reluctant to come back. I didn't quite enter back into myself completely. When I returned there was an extra warmth in me, all the way down to my ankles, as if the other person's body warmth was heating me up.

One woman who reported that she did not want to quit the contact said she got a headache when she did separate. When we discussed the experience, she revealed that she felt very peaceful while in contact and forgot all about herself. When I gave the instructions to separate, she did not want to do so, but finally complied with some effort, but found herself still thinking about the experience.

Psychotherapists will recognize the theme of attachment and loss in this last report (Lewin & Schulz 1992). A merger experience is destined to be

surrendered. This subject felt some sadness, perhaps even some anger, about that separation, with the resulting headache. She explained that her mother had recently died and she was still recovering from this loss. The imaginal contact with her partner had stirred up her feelings about feeling close and feeling loss. She also experienced some disorientation after the separation. Her report is suggestive of borderline symptomatology. Schwartz-Salant (1989) has, in fact, shown the domain of the imaginal encounter to be the necessary medium of healing of borderline processes. Here borderline may best be understood not so much as a pathological condition lying between psychosis and neurosis, but concerning processes that occupy the borderline, or boundary, of self and not-self. This theme will become a leitmotif of the imaginal encounter. The borderline we are exploring here concerns the mystery of the polarity between union and individuality.

Empathy or projective identification? Whose feelings are these?

One of the most outstanding characteristics of borderline process is that of confusion of boundaries. In particular, the ownership of feelings become confusing in an interplay of unconscious communication. As many writers have pointed out (Field 1991; Gordon 1965; Hedges 1991; Schwartz-Salant 1988; Tansey & Burke 1989), projective identification is a 'borderline' process involving a 'contamination' of feeling from one person to another. The terminology and what the terms refer to can be confusing. Rosemary Gordon, for example, has found that Jung used such terms as 'primitive identity', 'contamination', 'psychic infection', and 'feeling into' to describe instances of the merger and intermingling of feelings between people, but most often he used the term of Levy-Bruhl, '*participation mystique*'. Many participants in our experiments in the imaginal encounter reported leaving the interaction with a feeling or mood that turned out to originate with the partner.

My partner said she had experienced a sharp pain in her left shoulder area. I have been going to a chiropractor for two years receiving treatment in my left shoulder and neck area. Although the pain is much reduced, I was having some discomfort there by that time of the day.

I immediately found my shoulders tighten stiff and experienced a definite shortness of breath, feeling that my breathing was only going partway down into my lungs. The woman I was working with told me that her shoulders and neck ached terribly from sitting in the straight chair all day and that the shortness of breath referred to her only having one lung.

I felt very heavy and tight in the chest. Afterwards I learned that my partner had just gotten over pneumonia.

I received a pain in my shoulder which I did not have before. My partner admitted she was having pain in her shoulders. Feeling someone else's pain certainly builds rapport very quickly, getting rid of that pain that isn't mine is a problem.

Shall we view these examples of mysterious participation in another's reality as cases of psychic contamination, unconscious communication, projective identification or of empathy? Perhaps we should speak of telepathic empathy. And we have to decide how 'normal' the phenomenon is. One distinguishing feature might be whether or not the 'receiver' was aware, or suspected, that the feeling was not of one's own. In some cases, the perceiver immediately suspects that it originates with the partner, and in other cases they claim it for their own and then are surprised to learn that it matches something within the partner. We may wish to restrain the use of the term projective identification, which has a pathological or at least an 'abnormal' connotation, to those situations where the contamination serves a defensive purpose for the originator, who might 'transplant' the feeling into the partner. Perhaps psychic contamination is a better term when the transplanting of the feeling is unintentional or serves no defensive purpose. Such contamination could be a 'normal' hazard of close contact.

Consider these cases where the person who was the source of the emotion was unaware of that emotion during the interaction, but in some cases recognized it upon hearing about it from the person who 'picked it up'.

I felt a sense of reluctance from my partner as we were making contact. Once full contact was made I felt a heavy unhappiness drop on me, my head dropped on to my chest and an overall oppressed sensation went all through my body. I felt confused because there was no sense of dialogue or direct communication. In talking with the woman afterwards, I got the definite feeling that she was being depressed by something by some of her quick denials and nervousness.

When I was tuning into my partner I saw her with shorter hair and an upside down bicycle. I saw her and I arm in arm. I then swallowed and swallowed and felt as if I had to cough, but didn't want to. I swallowed again but the urge was so strong I felt as if I was choking. My eyes started to water and I had to leave the room to relieve the choking feeling. The choking and cough then left. My partner then said she used to have a shorter hairstyle and she had to go to a specialist when she was young because she would swallow wrong and start coughing and choking with watering eyes. When she felt me choking, she soothed her throat as she was taught and my cough left. We both sensed swirling. The amazing thing is that I was actually choking as she used to do.

I felt during the whole three minutes a pressure and dull ache across my chest. My impression was heartache. I also felt my heart beating faster. During the feedback phase, my partner was going through the last stages of divorce and he had been through a lot of heartache. He was imagining himself and me dancing. Thus the fast heart rate. I had just come back from a week of folk dancing seminar. I also had recently been through four weeks' separation from my boyfriend when my chest did feel that same way.

These examples show that there is definitely a transfer of meaningful emotions and feelings during the imaginal encounter. The respective role of the originator and perceiver remains unclear, as well as what purpose the transfer may serve. The last example does suggest, 'like attracts like', or, in

the jargon of psychoanalysis, that projective identification finds a welcoming home in the countertransference inclination. As we gather further evidence concerning the nature of the imaginal encounter, perhaps we will be able to clarify some of these questions.

The effects of the encounter

Aside from the pains and moods that some 'picked up', there were many other reports of mood shifts. Specifically, many expressed a feeling of pleasure or satisfaction. They felt better than before. At least half the participants agreed with the general characterization that upon going into the experience they felt some shyness, some loneliness or self-consciousness, but that after the experience they felt pleasure, felt good about themselves, confident, refreshed, at peace, and connected with their partner. These are the kinds of affects that come from being close, that attachment theory says that we get from being connected.

A great number of people mentioned how they felt closer to their partner as a result of the experience. For not talking or exchanging information, note in the descriptions that the effects of shared intimacy are clearly present in the following reports.

I believe that my partner feels more at ease with the situation and we now share a friendly intimacy between us that we probably would not have known.

The identical visualizations, the feeling, the warmth, the sensation of closeness and understanding, letting down of the walls to lay open the possibilities of showing self completely. Almost soul-bonded.

We both felt a contact and we both were walking and talking about family. There was a feeling of happiness and camaraderie between us. The experiment makes me feel more warmth for the other person.

I felt very close to the person I interacted with. It was as though I had always known her.

That we could feel each other's pain and feel the actual warmth flow between our hands without touching and tingling in fingers. We feel very close even without past acquaintance.

I felt a warm, friendly feeling unlike tense, nervous feeling I expected to feel with a stranger. I thought it was interesting he felt me smile.

I feel I know her more than just an acquaintance.

My partner and I were both amazed that you could feel that comfortable with a total stranger. It was like a longtime knowing of one another.

We developed quickly an affinity and hope to correspond.

As part of this closeness there was a sharing that they recognized was rare, they shared secrets, they were close as with few people:

Both of us felt a warm closeness as one would feel between best of friends – and yet we had just met not long ago. There was a willingness to allow each other access to those private thoughts, feelings we shield from others we come in contact with. After the exercise I hugged her as I would a cherished friend.

We really connected. She was very different in her feelings about herself than I am. I was able to feel how solid and supportive she is. That feeling has continued since that moment. The parts of ourselves brought out were not entirely what we show the world. There were little secrets that were shared that my partner had never mentioned to another. When we were complete we were still part of one another. She could still smell my essence and I could feel her presence. We felt a degree of love and warmth that would be unheard of in the short time we shared. We knew we'd see each other again soon with no concern for contact, or phone or letter.

There was a feeling of closeness as though I knew this person on another dimension. A nonverbal communication, as though I have an intuition about this and something that is happening in their life, but we've just met for the first time physically yet it feels comfortable to talk about something very personal.

These descriptions are reminiscent of Jung's discussion of kinship libido in his seminal work on the phenomenon of transference in the analytic encounter. Jung (1946) defined kinship libido as an instinct for human connection and described it as 'the satisfying feeling of belonging together' (para. 445). Schwartz-Salant (1984) made many references to experiences of kinship libido in his imaginal encounters with his patients. In one case, he reported that after a moment of imaginal relating, his client said 'she now felt I was her friend, that it felt like an I-Thou relationship', a blood relationship, siblings (p. 17).

My partner and I could feel our energy outside of our body; meeting, actually touching. I could also feel her feelings of happiness, joy, excitement. Because of the experience we do have more of an affinity towards each other. By that I mean we both just feel closer and have more intimate sort of bonding with each other.

We felt like we had actually touched each other by warmth. The second time we 'found' each other immediately and felt very comfortable when embracing—like old friends. It makes me feel like I have actually made a new friend whom I know.

There is further evidence of a transformation taking place in the perceived relationship between the partners. Sometimes they described their new-found rapport as a change of heart, as a new attitude about the person. The general theme was the reminder that you cannot judge a person by appearances, but by the inside, the essence. This change of heart seems to be a change from a relationship at the persona level to a feeling of connection via kinship libido.

You don't feel like strangers anymore. All the preconceived notions your ego constructed about the other person from the way they look dissolve.

The experience was almost stupefying to both of us. At the beginning I was disappointed in the woman with whom I was paired. For some reason I did not like her but the experiment could not have had a better outcome. I knew what I had experienced but she described every single movement and feeling that occurred which was extremely different totally from that which my husband and I experienced. The end result made me ashamed that I had succumbed to a bad snap judgement about her. She was really a very nice woman. She chatted very easily afterwards and her somewhat surly attitude disappeared. If someone had taken separate accounts from us there would have been no doubt that there was an ESP contact.

The mental contact exercise was done with a stranger and although I felt that she was a nice person, I still felt somewhat guarded. I saw her with a baby when I tried to tune into her problem. Afterwards she told me that she was having a problem with her 15-year-old who is considered her baby. I have a 14-year-old daughter and could understand some of her concerns. I also felt that she needed to let what society thought of her go – live to her own convictions. As soon as I told her this, I knew I was speaking to myself. After we talked over our problems a little it was nice to have another view on the situation. I talked with her about something that I had discussed with few people.

In addition to this sense of connection with the other person, some participants reported a sense of healing or improvement in mood. The contact experience left many participants feeling pleasant or positive:

I have distinct feelings that more happened between us than I am able to know now. I feel enriched and whole as a result. None of this would mean much to a septic, but I know some healing happened for me.

This last statement refers to the transformative power that Schwartz-Salant has often observed in connection with contact with this imaginal area of interpersonal connection (1988, p. 43). It is a testament to the healing power of what Jung called 'kinship libido'.

Sexuality in the contact

After a demonstration of the imaginal encounter, where I had guided the participants to simply make contact, then let it go without further exploration, one of the participants said, 'You told us not to stay there very long, and so I didn't feel like I could go all the way.' At the use of the phrase 'all the way' everybody laughed. There was an immediate recognition that the phrase, with its sexual meaning, pertained to what we were doing. Field (1991) commented that the imaginal encounter felt like the 'quintessence of coitus'. Schwartz-Salant (1984; 1989) has made several observations on how the imaginal encounter has sexual overtones. A few participants in the workshops made similar observations.

My first partner was a young person. I have had my sexuality in deep sleep for a while. So the first thing that hits me like a bomb exploding is all that lively sexy stuff, energy coming at me. It actually made me fear that I would get myself on a sexy trip. And with a person of the same sex yet. I immediately had us do a very strenuous series of outdoor sports that made us literally break out and sweat physically both. I kept it up throughout the three minutes. The surprise was, so had she. The difference was I had chosen tennis, hiking, rowing, etc., and she rope jumping, hula-hooping, and marbles. I didn't tell her why I had worked us to death. There was fear of shame and embarrassment there for me.

I had a lot of sexual thoughts which I thought were projections; now I think I was really picking his brain. Nothing else really sticks out at this point (no pun intended). I'm female, he's male.

The sexual response to the imaginal encounter is yet another piece of evidence that the contact experience is very real to the participants. Because of the large group format and the largely introductory nature of the work presented in that context, there has been no effort to follow up with further exploration of the sexual dimension of the contact experience beyond noting its existence. Schwartz-Salant (1984) has brought forth the theory that most sexual acting out in therapy may be attributed to a naïve response to an unrecognized *coniunctio* event in the imaginal realm. In that regard, I recall one instance where a man telephoned me after a workshop to obtain the phone number of a female participant whom he had as a partner in the imaginal encounter. He was clearly 'turned on' and wanted to pursue her. Ethical concerns over sexuality that immediately arise in the context of a psychotherapeutic relationship do not have the same apparent persuasiveness in the context of equals meeting in an educational setting. Rather than emphasizing ethical concerns, I referred to the mistake of confusing levels of experience.

A story I often include in my presentation illuminates the difference between trying to grasp the energy of the encounter for one's own gratification and respecting the energy as a revelation of a mystery. The story is a Native American myth about how the sacred pipe came into the native culture (Brown 1953). Two young braves saw a beautiful maiden surrounded with light appear out of nowhere. The first brave looked upon her with lust and wanted her for himself. She beckoned him toward her and enfolded him in her aura. After a brief whirl of light, she opened her arms and the young man was but a pile of dust upon the ground. The second brave approached her and asked with respect, 'Will you come and teach my people?' She agreed, and among the ceremonies she taught them was the use of the sacred pipe to create a reunion with the Sacred Circle of Life. This story teaches that it is foolish to mistake for personal sexual pleasure the energy that beckons from a transpersonal level of existence.

The dimension of sexuality in the imaginal encounter is a subject deserving further study. But by way of supporting some of the intimations put forth by Schwartz-Salant (1984), I will note that there is an Eastern tradition of

sexuality involving the imaginal body (Chia & Winn 1984). In one instance, a visual representation of what happens between adepts (see Figure 6) very much resembles the drawings made by our participants (see Figure 7).

Suffice it to say, there is great potential for encountering the numinous in the 'space in-between', but the barrier to doing so lies not so much with the intangible quality of the imaginal as with our reflexive attitudes towards the sexual. The integration of the sexual and the spiritual is a potential healing modality of the imaginal, as Schwartz-Salant has tactfully suggested. Both belong to the reality of the experience, which this pilot study documents.

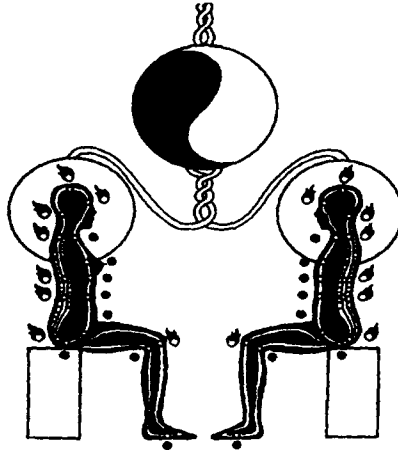


Figure 6 From Chia & Winn (1984)

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© Mantak Chia 1984, *Taoist Secrets of Love*, Auro Press, Sante Fe, New Mexico

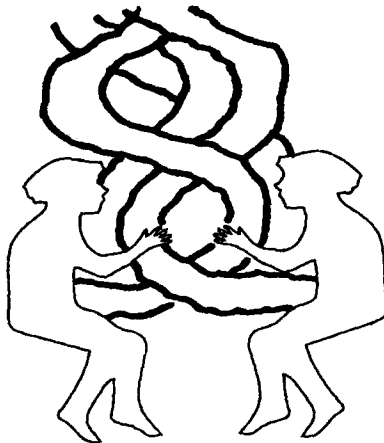


Figure 7

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