

Being and Becoming

Smaro Markou

Translation by Athina Psyllia

Volume 6

Issue 1

Spring 2023

Keywords:

illness,

identity,

systemic therapy,

power,

therapeutic

relationship

Abstract

This paper is a personal testimony, a short account of my experience of suffering from the side effects of covid-19 on underlying heart disease. Writing from within moments of pain and agony, I unfold my inner journey to the void and back. Reflecting on that journey I offer my thoughts, born upon my contact with therapists, doctors, and nurses in the hospitals where I was treated, and my inner dialogue with the voices of many people who have nourished my thinking and practice all these years. Travelling through the unknown conditions of my illness and recovery, who I am and who I am becoming personally and professionally, have been in constant movement and intra-action. From this place I offer some reflections on identity, power and on being a therapist.

Περίληψη (Greek)

Αυτό το άρθρο είναι μια προσωπική μαρτυρία, μια σύντομη αφήγηση της εμπειρίας μου από τις παρενέργειες του covid-19 σε υποκείμενη καρδιακή νόσο. Γράφοντας μέσα από στιγμές πόνου και αγωνίας, αποκαλύπτω το εσωτερικό μου ταξίδι προς το κενό και πίσω. Προσφέρω τις σκέψεις μου, γεννημένες μέσα από την επαφή μου με θεραπευτές, γιατρούς και νοσηλευτές στα νοσοκομεία όπου νοσηλεύτηκα, και τον εσωτερικό μου διάλογο με τις φωνές πολλών ανθρώπων που έχουν εμπνεύσει τη σκέψη και την πρακτική μου όλα αυτά τα χρόνια. Ταξιδεύοντας μέσα από τις άγνωστες συνθήκες της ασθένειάς και της ανάρρωσής μου, το ποια είμαι και ποια γίνομαι κάθε στιγμή, προσωπικά και επαγγελματικά, βρίσκονται σε συνεχή κίνηση, αλληλεπίδραση και ενδό - δραση. Από αυτή τη θέση προσφέρω κάποιες σκέψεις για την ταυτότητα, ως μια μεταβαλλόμενη κατάσταση, τη θέση ισχύος και ευθύνης του θεραπευτή μέσα στο θεραπευτικό σύστημα και τη σημαντικότητα της σύνδεσης και συμπόρευσης του θεραπευτή με τον θεραπευόμενο.

Citation Link

Journey into the Abyss

When your body ails, you remember you have a body. Until then, you had thought that all your functioning was taking place in your head and somewhere in your chest, where your heart beats whenever you are flooded by emotions. Some of them, every so often, make your stomach clench; you then take an antacid, and you move on. Where to? To work, to your engagements, to your day's schedule that becomes the schedule of your life. Your body is excluded even when you are taking care of it, while you are working out with an absent mind.

Your body returns inexorably when it ails. When you cannot breathe, move, work. When you need to check yourself into the hospital because you are in danger. The body startles you because it is in pain, it shouts, it demands. It's then that your body exists. And you are compelled to listen to it because it got you detained in bed.

You are forced to take it into account, as it not only demands your attention but also communicates directly with your environment in absentia. Your thoughts, your emotions, your mental needs, even your principles come second because the doctors "need to save your life". They need to operate directly on your body ignoring you; that is, ignoring what you conceive as yourself without your body. Occasionally, they ask you something to complete the diagnosis, ignoring all that is unnecessary; that is, ignoring that you hurt when they touch you, you suffer as they stick you, they violate you to save your life, they cause you inconvenience because "there is no other way".

The body suffers and the soul gets tired and doesn't want to keep trying to retain life or to hold on to life anymore. The body remembers, it shakes at every touch by a nurse, the body submits, becomes obedient, has lost control. The body denies, becomes unfamiliar, strange, cut off, no longer yours. It lets itself in the hands of strangers, in high ceiling hospital rooms with dim lights that become blinding during night care, when they stick you again.

And then comes a moment, many days later, when something undetermined draws your attention; it's a voice in your head, a voice in your head saying "you are at the verge of abyss". "A flight notification" you ponder, and you remember all your youth's travels to another continent. Reminiscing of youth brings back other memories kept in your mind's trunks. You travel for a while on the wings of an airplane contemplating the world from high above and you remember Castañeda's travels.

Youth comes back in waves of words, abyss, consciousness, travels. You then remember that consciousness is what can keep you alive in the moment you literally fall to abyss. Consciousness, soul's immaterial element, stronger than matter, can build again a body that has been dissolved, can recreate the organs, assemble its members, and push the fluids in dried arteries to circulation; that something inside you that is able to set up data and create order at the same moment when you dissolve into the void and you connect, in thousands microscopic molecules, to the infinity.

You then find yourself in the yard of your family home in your birthplace, without remembering having travelled there. You were led by the scent of wet soil from the morning watering of the orchard, by the warm milk that awaits you at the table, the scent of your family home surrounding you. Your eyes cannot see yet, your ears cannot hear, only the scents bring you back. Slowly, on the bed your hand begins to feel the sheet, your feet move to recover from numbness.

In her morning round, the doctor notes “spectacular improvement” on your chart, leaving to the inexplicable the unexplored fields of existence.

Thoughts and reflections on the Journey into the Abyss

The thoughts cited hereby, were born upon my contact with most of the therapists, doctors, and nurses in the hospitals where I was treated, and they had the strength to approach, look at me in the eyes, address me personally, smile and encourage me, or become gloomy when there was no improvement and they were looking for alternatives. Those are the people that illuminated the old buildings, the lack of materials, the old machinery, the unbelievable fatigue of a double shift. They were my guides to the therapist’s human face in these dark times we live in my country and everywhere.

With them, I was myself as I know me and, at the same time, I was becoming someone else as I was connecting to faces, places, and the unknown conditions of my illness and recovery. I could sense my identity being liquified; my family was staying for hours outside the emergency room, I was outside with them, and at the same time, I was inside with the doctors and patients. I was all of this at the same time.

In the same way, it is happening now again, while I am writing down these thoughts, being in dialogue with the voices of loved people who I met in person or through their writings: therapists, writers, intellectuals, and theorists that have nourished my thinking and practice all these years. Everything I write and say belong to a language tank where I swim. How can I possibly discern whether I am or I become as I remember phrases like this: “there is an ocean of meaning in a drop of language” (McAdam and Lang, 2021). Our sense of self exists in the relationship with the others, what we call ourselves, our existence is relational. Bakhtin’s (1990) work on answerability comes to my mind: as I am thinking that there is nothing nearly as painful as a word left unanswered.

The voices of Peter Lang (see for instance Lang and McAdam 1995), John Shotter (see for instance 2012), Tom Andersen (see for instance 1991), Humberto Maturana (see for instance 2005 [1996]), during KCC’s summer schools are registered inside me. Also, Gail Simon’s voice talking in Athens on systemic therapy’s novelties (Simon, 2020, 2022), and on writing and activism (Simon, 2018), Jaakko Seikkula’s voice, here, in Greece, in Open Dialogue with therapists (Seikkula, 2012) Michael White’s voice in a private conversation in Plaka, on Narrative Therapy (White, 2015). From my favourite texts, the voices of Kenneth Gergen (see for instance 2009), Mikhail Bakhtin (see for instance 1993), Ludwig Wittgenstein (see for instance 1953), and Lynn Hoffman (see for instance 2002) are inside me, indistinguishable in my thinking and in dialogue with each other.

How can it be possible that the voices of alive and dead coexist, and how can I be here and there with them? Being and becoming the same and someone else, simultaneously, in an aethereal world and in a real one? Quantum phenomena or fantasy games? In Joanna Michopoulou’s article “The Voice of a Florist” (Michopoulou, 2022), I met the voice of Karen Barad talking about reality, “realism is not about representations of an independent reality but about the real consequences, interventions, creative possibilities, and responsibilities of intra-acting within and as part of the world” (Barad, 2007).

Five months later, the constants of my identity are continuously being moved by this intra-acting. At the same time, I exist and I become part of a new world that creates me and is created by me. Post-traumatic reactions of fear of uncontrollable, abrupt catastrophes have brought change to my

everyday routine. Repeated measurement, medication, examination, medical consultation, hospital visits. Changes also at my professional employment; change of focus from others' needs to the maintenance of my own health. Work and availability to others have been structural elements of my identity and, as it is expected, my identity is constantly being deconstructed and reconstructed.

Gradually I become aware that things will never be the same again, my strengths are being restored but up to a point, decay shows up along with age and is settling in. Living in societies with a consumption lifestyle, age is another commodity for consumption. The knowledge and experience of the elders are not utilised or valued as a reserve of social life. Identity reconstruction, for a person of my own age who, furthermore, has fallen seriously ill is limited because of social norms. Therefore, I am and I become the person I am expected by others, so how will I escape from this image that exists also inside me?

During all these months, surrounded by doctors, nurses and healers of various fields, my thoughts on the work of therapists have grown. Having been in a state of inability, I have thought about all the people I have attended to all these years, coming to me with a personal or family problem, after having lost balance and control. Now, I believe I can listen better to the voices of their feelings of despair and anger. I have always thought that I have understood them well; I could enter their state of being and accompany them. This perception has expanded, and there is a gradual change, day by day, to the degree of my understanding. New thoughts emerge on the theories, methods, techniques, and philosophy on the work of psychotherapists.

I now consider how essential it is for them to have a place to speak and us enduring listening to their pain, suffering, despair, anger. For many years, I have been teaching to psychotherapists the power of positive reframing of an act or symptom; that is, how expanding the context of an act and connecting its different elements can change the meaning of the act. Today, I still think of it as a powerful tool of help, but the therapist needs to attune to the assisted person and take small exploratory steps with them along the evolvement of the therapeutic dialogue. When a person's thought is overturn prematurely, in lack of attunement, could this be received as violence? Can there be violence to the aid we are giving?

Systemic perspective, reframing, positive connotations, circular questioning from a not knowing stance, exploring alternative stories and all the wealth of techniques from the legacy of our enlightened teachers and persistent researchers, are they indeed what helps people that come to us for therapy? Is it the words we choose to say, sometimes a balm to their listeners, other times falling to nothing? Or is it the relationship that evolves between us, a context that confers value to words? It is indeed in a relationship that a person feels heard and understood, feels our empathy and companionship so that they can listen to us when we talk with different words about what is going on in their life, since words and language are creating the reality, we all live in. The words and the touch, the gaze and the rhythm of the voice, the sound of respiration and the physical presence, even via internet.

Could attunement and contact in the relationship serve as safeguards to avoid violence upon the practice of psychotherapy? So much has been said and written on the exercise of power via our family and professional roles. In our profession as psychotherapists, power is an inherent possibility of our role, due to our knowledge, experience, and sometimes due to our position in the services of mental health care where we work. Often, the assisted persons themselves have the expectation that we

exercise power or the situation demands so, for instance, on an imminent danger or when immediate action needs to be taken. To what degree are we aware of our privileges in a moment of vulnerability of the other person?

Again, everything is filtered through the relationship evolved with the other person, even if it is a short-term relationship at the emergency room of a hospital or a long-term relationship at the therapy room. If we engage a compatible language, our way of asking questions, our tone when we explain, kindness, a sincere expression of our thoughts and emotions are all agents that establish the therapeutic relationship as a conversation on an equal footing and not a situation of imposition and occupation. Everything we know about relationships, human psychology, social conditions, politics, and culture can become tools of imposition on people who are in a state of vulnerability. Let us not forget that conquerors, navigators, and explorers have destroyed civilizations and vanished humans to save them from ignorance. At least, that was the explanation they gave themselves, along with the accumulation of wealth and domination for their countries.

In Greece, as in other countries where the public health care system is degraded, private practice of psychotherapy and medicine thrives and can be lucrative, so we need to be especially attentive to the relationship we develop with the assisted persons and each other. Ethics and matters of principle and ethical stance are extremely relevant to any of us who want to participate actively, with relational and ecological responsibility, to a society that, according to H. Maturana (2005 [1996]), possesses the capacities of a biology of love; those same that are being destroyed in the jungle of power struggle, along with the Amazon rainforest and the Antarctic glaciers.

References

- Andersen, Tom (1991). *The Reflective Team: Dialogues and Dialogues about Dialogues*. New York: Norton.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1990). Art and Answerability. In *Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin; Michael Holquist (Ed.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1993). *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Holquist, Michael (Ed). Translated by Lianpov, Vadim. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Barad, Karen (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gergen, Kenneth (2009). *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hoffman, Lynn (2002). *Family Therapy: an intimate history*. New York: W.W Norton and Co.
- Lang, Peter & McAdam, Elspeth (1995). Stories giving accounts and systemic descriptions. Perspectives and Positions in Conversations. Feeling and Fanning the Winds of Creative Imagination. *Human Systems. Journal of Systemic Consultation and Management*, 6(2), 70-101.
www.taosinstitute.net/files/Content/5694552/McAdam-Lang_-_Stories,_Giving_Accounts_and_Systemic_Descriptions.pdf
- McAdam, Elspeth & Lang, Peter (n.d.). Linguagrams: An ocean of meaning in a drop of grammar. Retrieved 20th November 2021. <https://peterlangsystemiccommunity.com/docs/new-document-from-peter-lang/>
- Maturana, Humberto & Verden-Zoler, Gerda (2005 [1996]). The Biology of Love. *Metalogos, Systemic Therapy Journal*, 8, 85-98. <https://reflexus.org/wp-content/uploads/biology-of-love.pdf>
- Michopoulou, Joanna (2022). The voice of a florist: a message about we-ness awareness. *Murmurations, Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 5(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.28963/5.1.2>

Seikkula, Jaakko (2012). Personal Communication. Volos, Greece.

Shotter, John (2012). More than cool reason: Witness Thinking or Systemic Thinking or Thing about Systems. *International Journal of Collaborative Practices*, 3(1), 1-13.

https://ijcp.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/shotter_final_english-cool-reason_new.pdf

Simon, Gail (2018). How Differences exist in Language, Moral Issues [workshop]. *Thesys Center for Systemic Therapy*, Athens.

Simon, Gail (2020). Questions of the Era of Panmorphic Crisis [workshop]. *Thesys Center for Systemic Therapy*, Athens.

Simon, Gail (2022). Preserving and Disrupting Culture [workshop]. *Thesys Center for Systemic Therapy*, Athens.

White, Michael (2015). Personal communication. Athens, Greece.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: MacMillan.

Author

Smaro Markou has been a social worker since 1967 and a family therapist since 1986. With a group of colleagues, she created the Center for Systemic Therapy in 1994, which is until now EFTA's Associate Member. The Center became a non-profit organisation named THESYS Center for Systemic Therapy and offers systemic therapy to families and couples, training and supervision to mental health practitioners, consultation and training for companies, organisations and communities. Smaro collaborated closely with Peter Lang and the KCC between 2000 and 2010, and the Thesys Center has been training systemic professionals in the Systemic Appreciative Approach since then.

E-mail: iounios45@gmail.com

URL: <https://www.thesyscenter.com>

Citation

Markou, Smaro (2023). Being and Becoming. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, 6(1), 25-30. <https://doi.org/10.28963/6.1.5>