## The Delicate Balance between Naming and Bearing, Giving and Receiving, Rejection and Return to the Other: A Levinasian Exploration of Holding Pain

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# (Nota bene: Claire will be presenting case material she did not include in this web draft for reasons of confidentiality.)

Nothing here resembles self-consciousness. It has meaning only as an upsurge in me of a responsibility prior to commitment, that is, a responsibility for the other. There I am one and irreplaceable, one inasmuch as irreplaceable in responsibility. (Levinas, 1981/1998, p. 103)

### Interruption

...for the other, despite oneself, starting with oneself, the pain of labor in the patience of ageing, in the duty to give to the other even the bread out of one's own mouth and the coat from one's shoulders. As a passivity in the paining of the pain felt, sensibility is a vulnerability, for pain comes to interrupt enjoyment in its very isolation, and thus tears me from myself. (Levinas, 1981/1998, p. 55)

In response to this statement, I ask myself, what is my bread to give, what is my coat, and what do I have to give? These are the basic questions that we as therapists and as human beings must ask ourselves. Where do we even begin? We have been drawn into this work for reasons. Good, good reasons. What are these reasons? I personally started out in psychology because I found the field absolutely fascinating, philosophy was riveting, and intellectual pursuits were captivating. But there was far more to it than that. At the age of about 20, most basically, I went into the field in order to understand myself, to get a sense of what had happened to me. I was far too sensitive to be doctor or a lawyer. I was too shy and already too much a champion of the underdog to be able to go into public service. I was angry, smart, and completely messed up in coming from a complex trauma background, various levels and manners of abuse, and lots of abandonment, grief, and loss. What else was there for me to do than go into to psychology? I also discovered that this is the reason that many of us go into the field, because we are trying to understand what happened, why we are the way we are, what we can do about it, and then, how we can help other people who struggle with similar things.

What is my bread? What is my coat? What do I have to give? If I had not had someone to walk with me, or someone to feel my way into this pain for, I am not sure I would have kept going. Just trying to understand something intellectually is one thing, very satisfying, but nowhere nearly enough to make the process of enduring worth it. Feeling and feeling fully the shape, contours, and textures of both my pain and enjoyment is work that paradoxically must start with myself and also "tear me from myself." The dialectical process of naming and feeling and feeling and naming are central in discovering what might be my bread, my coat, and what I have to give in any given moment for the Other. But, as Levinas says, I do not yet know what my bread is or my coat, because "nothing here resembles self-consciousness", and I must do the

work "prior to commitment" to allow for the "upsurge in me of responsibility." (Levinas, 1981/1998, p. 103) This is a process that Levinas points to in his description of denucleation.

#### **Denucleation**

Levinas (1981/1998) describes "denucleation," or "the coring out" of the nucleus of the ego (p. 64). This "coring out" is, for Levinas, the necessary drawing away from the "complacency of subjectivity" as "for-itself," towards the "one-for-the-other." In his book, *The Paradox of Power and Weakness*, George Kunz (1998) describes the paradox of the subject's freedom: "The self finds its meaning, not centered in itself as an ego establishing its individual freedom and power, but as a self facing the other person who calls the self out of its center to be ethically responsible." (p. 34) This meaning-making in "denucleation" or "coring out" of the self is a continuous process that is never complete. In this process of de-centering or rather, re-centering, it is the Other, in her radical "alterity," coming to me from a "dimension of height" (Levinas, 1961/1969, p.75) who institutes my subjectivity. Levinas (1985) writes, "I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity as a subject." (p. 101)

What this means is that I must also prepare the ground for my being called by the Other. I must do my psychological work. If I have not faced my abuse as a child, I am unprepared to meet the abused or abusing child of the Other. If I am living a deeply unconscious life, I am not awake enough to feel the percolating insistent cries of the Other for my care, for my substitution. If I have not, in some way, faced my own pain, then I cannot handle or hear the call of the Other because it is too deep for me to hold. It is too much for me to bear. I am either incapable of being interrupted or I lack the capacity to not flee in the face of the Other. In other words, I react because I cannot respond. This has happened for me many, many times.

One of the clearest examples of this came when I began working with a woman who was actively suicidal during a time when I was feeling the effects of living very close to the realities of losing someone I loved to illness. The questions about whether or not to go on living when she was hurting so much that every day felt like torture, where inordinately close to me and I found myself actually insisting upon life for this young woman. I could not even entertain the fact that her life was, of course, hers to take or not. For me, at the time, I required that she live because I could not risk losing another person I cared about. I therefore was not able to adequately stay with her in her pain or look closely at my thorough body or mental exhaustion after our sessions. My hands hurt after our sessions because I realized later that I had been clenching and wringing my hands unknowingly. It took me some time to realize that I had been trying very hard to hold onto her and to my friend who was dying. Once I discovered that I was actively grieving for both of them while they were still alive, I became calm and was able to allow the movement of the grief to come. The pent up sadness also brought more grief for other things, postponed or tabled grief flooded through me once the dam was broken. In the end, I was able to allow myself to return to her listening carefully to the movement of her own despair and longing. I was able to truly meet her where she was and unclench my hands.

Lingis (1981/1998) writes in the preface of *Otherwise than Being* that these simultaneous movements of "being thrown back upon oneself, being backed up against oneself, and being put in the place of another, are inseparable." (p. xxxvii) This, he says, is not an active stance. It is not something that I will or initiate, but rather something that I undergo, for the sake of the

Other. It does not make my suffering meaningful in and of itself, but it has the action of hollowing and therefore, hallowing it in its being for the other. In what sense, in what capacity can suffering ever have meaning? If it is only for myself, it collapses upon itself. It is gratuitous and therefore meaningless. Suffering for its own sake is either masochism or sadism. Levinas, however, gives us a way out of solipsistic enclosure. Or, to put it another way, he gives us the possibility of redemption. Yet, because this is a passive movement, I cannot initiate it. I cannot will it. I cannot call redemption for myself. I can only ask it in offering myself for the Other.

This, in fact, is a question of motivation or rather, point of departure. If I act and move for myself, for the joy of being-with the Other, or the possibilities of my own rapture in enjoyment, of self-actualization, self-realization, or even individuation, the movement is inherently isolatory. The fundamental disparity between Buber and Levinas is in the point of departure, in the motivation. This is a very slippery slope. If I want something for my client, namely for them to see themselves the way I see them in their absolute beauty and radiance, for them to be and recognize themselves as Thou, this is my motivation. It is a good one to be sure, but it is mine, and certainly not a passive stance. The Other, here, interrupts me, even in (and I say especially in) my desire to do good. I want to traverse this distance. That motivation, that stance, that belief, is mine, not theirs. The question of "who is this for?" is of constant and central importance. It is also not always easy to tell. Levinas writes, "as an absolute orientation toward the Other, as sense, a work is possible only in patience, which pushed to the limit, means the Agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering into the Promised Land." (Levinas, 1972/1987, 49-50)

Many examples of this happened in the course of several sessions with a severely depressed client who would often tell me flat out, "You don't know what it's like. I am not a good person. I don't believe this is ever going to change. I am always going to be the same me, broken, bad, worth nothing, deserving nothing." He did not see and did not want to see what I saw, a gravely hurt and wounded person who had been completely neglected as a child but who was intelligent, funny, experiencing moments of real joy, and insistently focused on being someone who did not deserve regard and love of any kind. He could not bear the way I saw him. He did not believe it. Interruption, in this instance, came from him telling me that I did not get it, back off, and this is too much. This happens time and time again.

The relationship with the other puts me into question, empties me of myself and empties me without end, showing me ever new resources. I did not know I was so rich, but I no longer have the right to keep anything for myself. Is the desire for the other an appetite or a generosity? The desirable does not gratify my need but hollows it out, and as it were nourishes me with new hungers. (Levinas, 1972/1987, p.94)

Over the course of many sessions, I relax more into my own openness to being interrupted. I see and feel in my own life, the times when I have felt similarly, going back to a very young age, a small child. I am thrown back into places of real despair as a child (or as an adult), and I know these places because I have spent a great deal of time organizing around avoiding them and also subsequently being crushed by them in the times when I had dared myself to hope. I remember what it was like when hope was dangerous or I have believed so fully that there is something fundamentally wrong with me. I remember a time before I learned how to bear both the pain I felt and the possibility of hoping for something different. He was right, I did not understand because I wanted him to see his own beauty and I did not want to

remember how hard it is and how much work is involved being otherwise. But I started by being interrupted in what I wanted and I began to really meet him by hollowing a place for real acknowledgement and honoring of his pain.

Even in identifying that there is a process of naming, there is invitation. Being welcomed into a journey of discovery with a client is the greatest gift any person can have. The approach I have is and must indeed be passive. The Other must first invite me to witness. On this card, the client could just have said, "I see nothing but empty white space," or even "I see that you are trying to trick me." But this client did not worry about those things, instead, he offered me an invitation and a statement of readiness to name even though he was afraid of what dangers he might find in the fog. We entered the fog walking together, shedding light and understanding on the outlines of things, until he could walk alone, sure of his feet, sure of his vision, sure of his movement through the world.

#### Conclusion

The verb "to bear" has important relevance for the world of psychology and for the philosophy of Levinas. To bear means to hold, to carry, to endure, to support, to give birth, and move in a deliberate way. We use the verb to bear in both the passive and the active voice. Bearing something shapes the way we live, the contours and comportment of the body, and the movement of the psyche. We bear both the pain and the joy of our experience. The manner of the bearing is important as well as whom the bearing is for. There is an exquisite balance between naming and bearing that we all must do in order to be taught by the Other, what is my bread, what is my coat, what do I have to give. And, as Levinas says in quoting Dostoyevski, "We are all responsible for all for all men before all, and I more than all the others." (Levinas, 1982/1985, p. 101)

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