

Stuck in a Moment: A Developmental Perspective on Impasses

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Abstract

Transactional analysis often regards the experience of “feeling stuck” as the manifestation of an impasse, an intrapsychic conflict and/or interpersonal roadblock. This paper provides a developmental perspective on impasses. It examines the relationship between the individual experience of stuckness and the contemporary social context, and it discusses whether and how such experiences might present opportunities for developing new capacities and meanings of the self.

This paper deals with the widely reported experience of “stuckness,” of “feeling stuck.” In transactional analysis theory and practice, moments of “stuckness” usually are understood as the manifestation of an impasse, carry a largely negative connotation (much like in everyday language), and are worked with as roadblocks to overcome. My aim here is to broaden the theory of impasses, exploring whether and how “stuckness” may constitute a developmental opportunity. I shall begin from a portrayal of stuckness as reflected in a popular rock-and-roll song and endeavor to make sense of it with the help of sociological observations, psychological theory, and examples from literature. I shall then illustrate these ideas with a psychotherapy vignette and introduce some

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reflections on the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of considering stuckness as a potentially developmental experience. While I am aware of the provisional nature of my current understanding, I trust readers will take this contribution as an invitation to further thinking and dialogue about our theories.

And You Can’t Get Out of It?

The title of this paper is a reference to a pop song by the Irish band U2. “Stuck in a Moment You Can’t Get Out of” (Bono & the Edge, 2000) appeared on the album *All that You Can’t Leave Behind* and eventually gained a place among the band’s all-time classics. “It’s a song about friendship,” explained Bono, U2’s lead singer, to a New York City concert audience; “it’s for our good friend Michael Hutchence” (Pancella, 2000).

Hutchence, a close friend of Bono’s, was about his age, owned a house close by, and was himself a band’s lead singer and global rock star. Their closeness was not simply generational, professional, or geographical. It must have been psychological as well; as Bono once said, “Perhaps if I hadn’t found somebody as special as [my wife], or if I didn’t have the friends or the faith I have, then maybe I’d be there with Michael” (Mohan, 2001). Michael had killed himself 2 years before at age 37, leaving behind his friend, his wife, and a small child. The song Bono wrote for him, whether a tribute or a response, is not one of sadness or celebration. As Bono would explain later, “The song is an argument. It’s a row between mates. You’re kind of trying to slap somebody around the face, trying to wake them up out of an idea. In my case it’s a row that I didn’t have while he was alive” (“INXS Singer,” 2000). The core of the song goes like this:

I never thought you were a fool
But darling look at you
You gotta stand up straight

Carry your own weight
 These tears are going nowhere baby
 You've got to get yourself together
 You've got stuck in a moment
 And now you can't get out of it.
 (Bono & the Edge, 2000)

The lyrics capture the cry of a friend feeling bereft, powerless, angry, and perhaps guilty, while offering little helpful advice for a tormented soul contemplating suicide. A song might not be meant to be a psychology essay; however, looking at it psychologically, we find three interesting suggestions in that chorus: "You've got to get yourself together, you've got stuck in a moment, and you can't get out of it."

The first suggestion, implicit in the line "You've got to get yourself together," is that stuckness has something to do with a broken self, a self in pieces. The second suggestion has to do with a feature of one place we can get stuck in. It is a "moment"—a suspended episode in the unfolding narrative of experience. I shall return to the similarity between these two statements and transactional analysis theory of impasses. The third suggestion, which may also ring familiar, is that stuckness is a bad place, somewhere to get out of. But is that always the case? Has it always been the case? And if it is not, when is it a bad place to be? When is it, on the contrary, a useful place?

I believe Bono's verses deserve a closer look because they capture succinctly—as inspired artists often do—timeless psychological concerns that have become even more significant in the current social context.

Stuckness and Social Context

We live in times that glorify change and denigrate stability. Contemporary cultures, especially in the West, have wholeheartedly embraced (and perhaps corrupted) the humanistic values of improvement, betterment, growth, progress, and so on. We constantly hear that the world is changing fast, and we had better change with it. We witness daily profound challenges to the status quo in the political, economic, and environmental domains. Modern technology allows us direct access to a large amount of information from multiple sources,

and our familiar frameworks and systems of adaptation are continuously challenged by novel situations, unexpected viewpoints, and perceived options.

At the same time, the psychological contract between us as individuals and the institutions we belong to has undergone a major shift. The relationships between employer and employee, elector and political representative, landlord and tenant, and so on, are often no longer sustained by contracts based on long-term commitment and reciprocal trust. They rely instead on contracts based on an exchange of goods and services, where commitment lasts only as long as tangible mutual gain is present (MacNeill, 1980). This means that we often feel deprived of the protection of familiar social systems, such as long-term employment, stable local communities, and national health care (Miller, 1999). As a result, we are more directly exposed to both opportunities and threats. It is left to the individual to take charge of his or her destiny by staying updated, seizing favorable prospects, and dealing with the uncertainty generated by the perception of a faster, more complex, and more dangerous world.

At first sight, a world of daily change; constant improvement; clear, specific, measurable contracts; and "high levels of choice over fundamental matters of personal meaning" (Cote & Levine, 2002, p. 1) might look like a welcome social realization of the core values of transactional analysis. This world, however, is not without its darker sides. There are two major consequences of living in a milieu of ongoing change, direct exposure, and quasi-instrumental relationships. One is isolation: Creating and sustaining trust—and trust's close relative, commitment—becomes harder (Putnam, 2000). The other is fragmentation: It is ever more difficult to develop a solid sense of self and fit the moments of life into a coherent narrative (Sennett, 1998). As a result, we may find ourselves stuck in moments of defiant loneliness—the belief that it is an individual responsibility to "get ourselves together," that needing others is a weakness. Or even worse, we may give in to a state of hopeless confusion and give up hope that we can make sense of our experience and of the world around us.

It is perhaps in the effort to address these pressing concerns that identity—its formation and undoing, its development or lack thereof—has become one of the most popular research topics in the contemporary social sciences (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Cote & Levine, 2002). It is in this context that we need to understand clients who, more than ever, walk into the psychotherapist's office complaining of an elusive sense of who they are, a difficulty in forming and sustaining close relationships, and a general lack of meaning in their lives. Given a social and psychological environment characterized by isolation and fragmentation, I suggest that we begin looking at stuckness both as an inevitable consequence and as the potential beginning of a solution.

Stuckness as Symptom and Developmental Opportunity

An individual's experience of stuckness can be a consequence—a symptom, in clinical parlance—of the social trends just described in at least two ways. It might conceal a momentary inability or unwillingness to change, which could be experienced or defined as a negative shortcoming. That is, we feel stuck instead of accepting or allowing ourselves to feel that we are not, at the present moment, able or willing to change. Or it might result from socially rewarded ongoing progress experienced internally as purposeless activity. In this case, the opposite occurs. We feel stuck because, to gain social rewards, we are changing faster than we can make sense of or feel comfortable with. Stuckness, however, is not always a symptom of the timeless friction between the inner pace of the individual and the outer pace of culture. It can also represent the beginning of a solution to fragmented isolation by functioning as a pregnant pause in the reworking of a life narrative.

Transactional analysts usually regard clients' stuckness, and their own, as a roadblock to overcome—the result of impasses to be redecided, worked through, or reorganized, depending on the degree of the impasse and on the therapist's inclination (Cornell & Landaiche, 2006; McClure Goulding & Goulding, 1979/1997; Mellor, 1980). Theories of impasses

describe moments of stuckness as the manifestation of intrapsychic conflicts rooted in early development (Mellor, 1980) and emerging in the interpersonal field as transference (Erskine, 1991; Shmukler, 1991). More recently, transactional analysis authors have begun identifying the diagnostic value of episodes of stuckness in the therapeutic or consulting relationship (Hargaden & Sills, 2002; Moiso, 1985; Novellino, 1990; Petriglieri & Wood, 2003; Woods, 2003) and to depathologize them, looking at them as an inevitable and potentially fruitful consequence of the intimacy that develops in the therapeutic pair (Cornell & Landaiche, 2006).

In all of the contributions just mentioned, the emergence of an impasse appears to be equivalent to a necessary regression—a (more or less) shared reexperiencing of a (more or less) remote past experience that can be (more or less) useful if worked with. I do not refute these views. Rather, I wish to contribute to this body of theory by examining impasses as a potential space for development in the present. I shall look at impasses from a progressive, rather than from a regressive standpoint, asking the question “Where is this leading?” rather than “Where is this coming from?” My focus is on the intrapersonal development process that an impasse can lead to rather than on the reexperienced and/or enacted interpersonal obstruction with which the authors just cited associate it.

Impasses occur each time we encounter a situation that our current adaptations cannot make sense of or handle meaningfully. The result is a difficulty in experiencing or making sense of experience. I suggest looking at the perception of “being stuck” as the manifestation of such an impasse, one that emerges when our cognitive frameworks, emotional capacity, and behavioral repertoire do not allow us to make sense of, be within, and deal with our present intrapsychic or social reality.

The view of stuckness as a situation in which the psyche brings attention to itself, and has a chance to regroup and develop, is not entirely new. Studying child development, Piaget (1969) described two mechanisms of adaptation to the environment—assimilation of new information into existing cognitive schemas and accommodation of cognitive schemas to fit new experi-

ences. The latter mechanism is set in motion when the child encounters a situation that cannot be assimilated into existing schemas. Piaget argued that periods of assimilation and accommodation alternate as children progress through a series of developmental stages requiring increasingly more complex cognitive skills. Vygotsky (1978) theorized the existence of a “zone of proximal development” (p. 86), a stimulating gap between the child’s independent problem-solving capacity and the potential capacity available in collaboration with adults or more capable peers. Erikson (1956/1980) described the frequent occurrence, during adolescence, of a “psychosocial moratorium” (p. 111), a period characterized by withdrawal and role experimentation fundamental to identity formation. Perls also talked about “stuck points” as a place for potential growth (Allen, personal communication, 24 April 2007). Building on and integrating cognitive and psychodynamic theories of human development, Kegan (1982) argued that “a lifelong process of evolution or adaptation is the master motion in personality” (p. 113) and that meaning construction is the core activity (both cognitive and affective) underlying this evolution.

These authors point to the capacity of the psyche to develop through moments in which we cannot find or create enough meaning in our experience. This is not simply a capacity of children or adolescents, and it does not necessarily occur at the boundaries of prescribed life stages. It is a phenomenon that can occur throughout life. Neither is it limited to experimenting with new social roles and relationships. It can involve reworking the very meaning of who we are.

Developmental Stuckness in the Arts

Berne suggested that we need to look closely at myths and classic works of fiction if we wish to find templates for psychological phenomena (Berne, 1972). Following his advice, we find many examples in world literature that provide descriptions, and even prescriptions, of how a period of stuckness can be deeply enriching and developmental. Ulysses held “captive” in Cyrcce’s palace, or Dante “lost” in Hell, are classic examples of how a seemingly undesirable

diversion can generate vital knowledge and necessary experience (Wood, 2007). We could go as far as saying that all great works of literature are stories of journeys punctuated by moments of stuckness. In the European literature of the last century, two masterpieces on stuckness are Thomas Mann’s (1929/1996) *The Magic Mountain* and Frances Hodgson Burnett’s (1911/2004) *The Secret Garden*.

Mann’s novel is about a simple-minded hero, young Hans Castrop, who finds himself, surprisingly, and at least at first unwillingly, stuck for an unspecified time in a sanatorium in the Swiss mountains—one of those secluded establishments where relatively wealthy Europeans affected by tuberculosis went to “recover” at the beginning of the 1900s. In this space, where normal rules of time and social mores do not apply, Mann’s “hero” is able, first, to reflect on and openly question the culture of his birth place, and second, through his relationships with people outside his usual circle, to explore and experiment with various—often opposing—intellectual, emotional, and political points of view. After 7 years (a mythical time span), the former engineer departs as suddenly as he had gotten stuck, to fight for his country in World War I.

Mann’s narrative is a textbook on stuckness because it is evenhanded; it is at the same time a cautionary tale of the dangers of stepping aside from the flow of active and productive life and also a template of the kind of psychological journey that leads one to revisit one’s background and shape one’s identity. One of the novel’s core themes is that a deeper understanding of human nature and a recovery of meaning often result from a confrontation with death. The psychological literature, as well as the experience of many of us, confirms this phenomenon; it is often the case that following an encounter with death or with its concrete possibility (through illness or the death of a loved one), we come to find a closer, more immediate appreciation of life (Yalom, 2002, p.126). A moment of stuckness has the potential to work the same way.

It is death also—a symbol of radical change—that sets in motion the narrative in *The Secret Garden*. Upon the sudden death of both

her parents, Mary Lennox, a lonely and ill-tempered 10-year-old, is sent to live with her uncle. His empty manor, which she disobediently explores, hides several secrets: a confined cousin, Colin, bedridden by an imaginary illness and by script-reinforcing stroke deprivation; Dickon, the green-fingered little brother of a housemaid; and a walled garden, which has remained shut since the death of Mary's aunt 10 years before. During her restless wandering, Mary stumbles onto the garden's door, finds its buried key, and is immediately taken by the idea of being in a secret place, where no one knows where she is. She slowly brings the two boys into the secret, and they set off to revive the garden. As the story unfolds, we witness their profound individual and collective transformation. Their deepening connection allows them to confront each other's rigid view of the self and of the world and to entertain novel ones. As Colin puts it, describing how Mary allows him to overcome his hysterical fits, "It is because my cousin makes me forget that she makes me better" (p. 182).

The children vow to keep their work in the garden secret from the adults until it is somewhat complete. Their experimentation has to take place with each other, away from parental eyes, and it fosters both healing and growth. In finally witnessing Mary's and Colin's transformation, one of the adults cannot help exclaiming that their encounter was "the making of her and the saving of him" (p. 232), and there can be little doubt that new relationships and new ways of relating are the central conduit through which forgetting, recovery, and discovery occur in the novel.

The garden is also worth noting—both as a setting and as a symbol. As a setting, the garden is a place of wonder, of steady yet invisible growth, of rest, play, and hard work, where the pace is set by deeper, instinctual forces. It is bounded and shared. As a symbol, it is a psychological space of stillness and possibility, first and foremost. As Dickon poetically puts it on first seeing the garden, it is "a queer, pretty place. It is like if a body was in a dream" (p. 99). The meaning of "secret" in the "secret garden" is completely turned around as the story progresses. At first, the garden is an abhorred

"secret"—the frozen symbol of a past repressed, hidden, left behind. It slowly becomes a cherished one—the vital symbol of a future in becoming—a valued, sheltered, vital space where undisturbed work, experimentation, and growth can take place.

In summary, these two works of fiction portray defiant loneliness, hopeless confusion, or empty idleness as dangerous, even malignant, forms of stuckness. They also illustrate what developmental stuckness might require—restless curiosity, bounded experimentation, and relationships. The word "magic" is used frequently in both narratives, denoting the quality of a space in which taken-for-granted assumptions do not apply and narrow self-concepts and rigid patterns of behavior give way to more fluid, alternative ones. The atmosphere in both stories changes slowly from one of suspended animation to one of animated suspension. Stuckness shifts from being a solitary, unhelpful roadblock in the usual flow of life to being a lively, enclosed space of experimentation for the future. Facilitating this shift is the central task facing us when working with stuckness—our own and our clients'.

The Discovery of Doubt: A Psychotherapy Vignette

Emma walked into my office on a late winter afternoon. She had just started a demanding master's degree program. This had seemed to her the natural next step in her professional advancement, and she hoped it would facilitate a career change. She was bright, professionally successful, and respected by her peers. And yet she felt stuck, angry, and lonely in the enclosed, tightly managed, and fast-paced environment of the course. She also felt unsupported by her partner and afraid of not having a clear idea of what she might do once the course was over. All of this, I would learn later.

That afternoon she sat down, and after a brief silence, her voice did not falter as she articulated the first sentence of our first meeting: "I don't believe in psychoanalysis." I looked up, not yet accustomed to her presence. She had a natural poise that inspired respect and affection. It was a remarkable declaration for somebody coming to see a therapist. Was it the

opening strike of a long battle? Many clients come to therapy with the unconscious aim to prove that I am useless, that therapy is useless, and they are ultimately beyond help—miserable, but right! Before I could wonder all this, I heard my own voice uttering a reply: “Neither do I.” What a poor response to a grand opening, I thought; surely I could do better than steal a line from the psychiatrist in *Ordinary People* (Schwartz & Redford, 1980), one of my favorite movies. Perhaps not. Without a word, Emma got up, fetched a packet of tissues from her coat pocket, and wept for the best part of 2 hours as she began telling her story.

In the following sessions we traveled together along the path of discovery and recovery. First came the tears, as Emma revisited her childhood, her upbringing, her losses, and her well-concealed sadness. Tears gave way to confrontations, stillness, fear, frustration, deep tenderness, and genuine laughter. We carefully examined her roles in the various groups she was in and at home. Then our relationship came into question. She never shied away. Love and competition, closeness and distance were all tackled head on, experienced, and understood to the extent possible. Finally, Emma turned her attention to the present and to the future. When I think back, all I did for many a session was just be there and not judge and use my skills to keep her from judging herself. Talkative as I can be, I could spend 20 or 30 minutes in silence—witnessing a degree of openness and emotional honesty that I had trouble with myself.

So what about that opening exchange? “I don’t believe in psychoanalysis.” “Neither do I.” It would be magical thinking to say that a simple transaction provoked or had a major impact on Emma’s work and subsequent development. However, it remained etched in both of our minds, because, I suspect, it was symbolic of everything that mattered. A course of therapy—like any intense developmental relationship—closely resembles a symphony. An inspiring composition may keep us glued to our chairs for hours, resonate with our innermost feelings, be deeply soothing at times and profoundly stirring at others—or both at the same time. And yet the tuned ear will recognize that

the whole symphony is the skillfully varied repetition of a basic tune. It is the same in psychological work. The major area of development and change—the core theme, if you will—keeps emerging again and again, in endless variations.

My first thoughts reflected the classic psychotherapist’s response—wondering about the potential causes of Emma’s opening, casting it into her past, asking, “What is wrong with this?” Was it brutal intellectual honesty demanded by very high standards of behavior? Was it a classic case of aggression toward the therapist as a potential father figure? Possibly. Emma had grown up in a loving family placing a high value on integrity and had developed a strict and demanding Parent, which left no option other than submission or outright rebelliousness. Emma responded to her internalized moral standards by continuously aspiring to ideal behavior, perfection, and decisiveness in all her endeavors—or taking strong stances against authority. Her internal world featured an ideal Emma, ideal relationships, and ideal jobs. She could not settle for less. Being very talented, she accomplished a great deal. However, being human, and ideals being ideal, reality always had the lower hand. She often felt she was falling short, took herself too seriously, and could not shake the feeling that she was “missing something.” Seen in this light, our initial exchange provided excellent diagnostic data on Emma’s relational templates. However, this is only half the work.

Looking at the purpose of that opening, projecting it into the future—asking “Where is this leading?”—reveals a most important picture. Uncertainty, insecurity, not being good enough, being torn between two equally attractive options—and living with it—had no citizenship in Emma’s conscious mind as she sat down. But they were filing an application! As she began therapy, unconsciously, she posed a fundamental question. Her opening was neither about me as the therapist, nor about her father, nor about psychoanalysis. It was about belief. Would I try to convert her to another religion, or was I willing to be with her? Her statement communicated the domain that needed addressing and created the terrain for healing and growth. My

reply—disowning psychoanalysis, something that as a therapist I should value highly—reassured her. She was not making a mockery of me, therapy, or psychoanalysis. That secret part of her—the fully human Emma that needed to be incarnated—could not stand a unidirectional life any more. She was enlisting me as an accomplice in the upcoming, necessary crime. We needed to make a mockery of belief.

Throughout our work, that initial exchange returned in many different guises. Time and again she tempted me, begged me, enraged me, cornered me, presenting the same choice between belief and closeness—between the perfect, “ideal” Emma and the human one. Each time, I made it clear that my heart stood with the latter. As she would write later, the core of her development was “a handing over of control or destroying control.” We understood and fought the tyranny of her internal censors and unattainable ideals, which took a heavy toll on her capacity to experience life as it was. Emma found in therapy the space for experimenting with alternative, unfamiliar, forgotten capacities and ways of being with herself and others. She could cry, laugh, be loving as well as ruthless, expose herself, allow herself doubt and uncertainty and insecurity—and she could still be loved, joined, appreciated. Complicit in dethroning her internal censor and ideals, she recovered her sorrow, desire, love, and capacity to experience. There was no dramatic catharsis or major decision. As she reflected on her future and her life choices, she was finally free to be indecisive. Life did not need to be an unfor-giving one-way street. Each choice was not, irremediably, the last.

Developmental Stuckness and Ego States

The work Emma and I shared could be conceptualized as a traditional sequence of Adult decontamination from Parent prejudices followed by deconfusion of the Child ego state within the therapeutic relationship (Berne, 1961). However, it seems to me that what troubled Emma, or what stood in the way of her development, is not accurately described as “confusion.” Quite the opposite, her Child suffered from excessive certainty limiting her capacity to be indecisive, experience, and learn

from experience—perhaps the most precious of Child functions. Her beliefs and ways of being kept her stuck in an unsatisfactory system of prescribed meanings.

Since Mary and Robert Goulding (McClure Goulding & Goulding, 1979/1997) described the client’s Child as the ever-developing protagonist of any successful therapy, several prominent transactional analysts have attempted to tackle the apparent contradiction in Berne’s writing about the Child ego state—on the one hand, a fixated relic of a historical past self that can wreak regressive havoc upon entering our present life; on the other hand, an autonomous, valuable entity capable of contributing to an individual’s life “charm, pleasure and creativity” (Berne, 1964, pp. 24-25). Starting from Berne’s structural model, Hine (1997) proposed conceptualizing ego states as discrete systems of mental activity that form progressively “out of the generalized representations that develop as the individual interacts with the environment and with his or her perceptions of self and others during the period of infancy and childhood” (p. 278). In short, ego states are shaped and stored, through childhood, from generalizations of our interpersonal experience. Allen (2000) suggested that this process continues throughout life and that “reorganization of self-with-other schemas is possible, even common, because of brain plasticity, although these reorganized schemas remain out of awareness in implicit memory” (p. 264).

Synthesizing these perspectives with recent neuroscience and infant observation research, Cornell (2003) invited us to consider the Child ego state “in procedural rather than structural and historical terms, which is to say, as a coherent and enduring system of organization and motivation. This system has deep, often compelling historical roots, but it is a system that lives and changes in the present” (p. 37). These authors hint that ego states form within encounters—at the boundary between our predispositions and environmental challenges. Perhaps we form one as a successful adaptation each time we successfully negotiate a moment of stuckness, that is, a mismatch between our existing cognitive, emotional, and physical templates and our current environment.

I was initially tempted to conceptualize a shift such as the one Emma experienced in the context of our work together as involving the formation of new ego states since it featured the emergence of new coherent patterns of feeling, thinking, and behavior about self and other and about self with others. This is, however, problematic. Crafting and consolidating new ways of being with oneself and with others requires all ego states and their functions, and it also involves unconscious work that cannot be ascribed to the ego alone. Until transactional analysis theory finds more precise wording for these profound shifts, we might be better off describing them in terms of recovery and/or discovery of new “capacities of the self” leading to new “meanings of the self,” that is, new ways of experiencing and making sense of one’s experience.

Allen (2000) suggested that we look at all ego states as overall patterns of neural activation with their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral correlates as states of mind that can be formed and transformed in the present (Allen, 2003). If we do that, and take on board the knowledge about how neural tissue learns—how the brain learns, which is by forming either new connections, new ways of connecting, or both (LeDoux, 2003; Squire & Kandel, 1999)—a question arises. Do these discrete mental states, generalized representations, patterns of activation, ways of being with self and others emerge fully formed in an instant? It is unlikely. At first, these patterns will not emerge as coherent—they will come up as fragments, disturbances, impulses, fantasies. They will neither be clear nor apparently meaningful or well bounded. Looked at this way, the experience of stuckness might occur while new connections are being made and patterns of neural activation are in between states of coherent organization.

Acknowledging the ongoing generative capacity of neural networks requires that we conceptualize a transitional capacity of the self involving, and underlying, ego states—whose job it is to recover, or generate, coherent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors starting from incoherent episodes and seemingly meaningless fragments. It is the work of therapy to provoke, protect, be attentive to, and make

deliberate this kind of experimentation with episodes and fragments—which at first can look like a digression, a distraction, something that does not fit. I am not talking about therapy providing a corrective emotional experience (Clarkson & Fish, 1988) but providing the conditions for alternative experiences.

Working with Stuckness

I have so far attempted to describe stuckness as the emotional experience of a situation that our current adaptations cannot make sense of or handle meaningfully. As such, I have argued, it represents a potential developmental moment, an opportunity for the renewal of internal and external coherence and for the formation of new capacities and meanings of the self. Taking this opportunity, however, requires work. I shall briefly outline here a template for surfacing the developmental potential concealed in moments of stuckness.

Two preconditions are necessary for stuckness to be bearable and developmental as opposed to hopeless and damaging. The first is the presence of turmoil—tension, restless curiosity, even sheer frustration will do. The second is the willingness to attempt to trust another. I doubt that prolonged, solitary stuckness can generate developmental potential. There is no need to trust fully. That is too much to ask, and perhaps even dangerous, at least at first. Given these preconditions, the work of transforming suspended animation into animated suspension can begin. This work has both a cognitive and an emotional aspect.

The cognitive aspect of the work includes reframing and understanding. Reframing stuckness in a hopeful way entails suggesting that stuckness may not be just a block or a prison to escape—that it may be a message, a way for the psyche to call for attention, a sign that it is time to change direction and find new meaning. This leads to understanding our individual way of getting stuck, and in particular, what we are getting out of it—which is best achieved through structural analysis and game analysis focusing on the advantages of the games we play inside and outside of the consulting room.

The emotional aspect is a combination of imagination and behavioral experiments. Some

of us try out new ego states by imagining them first, that is, as fantasies; others do so by experimenting with new behaviors and then making sense of them. I consider this to be work of an emotional nature, to stress the difference with simply thinking of possible solutions to our predicaments. This kind of imagining has to do with recovering and experiencing capacities of the self that for one reason or another have been left behind or with shaping entirely new ones. It is important during this part of the work to let these capacities and their products emerge, express themselves, and slowly acquire coherence. There is no need to analyze them to death, especially while they are still in the form of delicate fragments of thoughts, feelings, acts, and images.

The attitude required to facilitate this work calls for the suspension of disbelief and the sharing of compassion (for a related perspective see Landaiche, 2007). The former was once suggested to me by a client. During our first session, as I often do, I asked what kind of therapy might work best for her. She responded, after thinking a while, that it would be most important for us to suspend disbelief. The suspension of disbelief is a term borrowed from fiction, where it indicates the necessary attitude for narratives to be written and enjoyed. It applies beautifully to psychological work as well. Compassion was described by Campbell (2004) as the principle that “converts disillusionment into a participatory companionship” (p. 78). It is different from empathy. If empathy is the capacity to enter and share another’s experience, compassion is the ability to join another while claiming one’s own experience. To use an image, if empathy is the capacity to wear another’s shoes, compassion is the capacity to show up (psychologically speaking) and walk alongside another on his or her path while still wearing our own shoes.

Conclusion

We all have experience, if not conscious memory, of the primal form of developmental stuckness, which is life in the womb—a suspended state on the edge of life, without which life is not possible. We emerge from that in a seemingly messy world that only slowly and

with assistance gains coherence, continuity, and meaning (or to which we ascribe such attributes). In this paper I have borrowed from literature, sociology, psychology, biology, and my own experience to argue that moments of developmental stuckness—that is, losses of meaning that lead to the creative discovery of new ways of being with self and others—do not just occur in our first few years. They happen throughout our life. I have suggested that in the contemporary social environment characterized by isolation and fragmentation, moments of developmental stuckness may occur more frequently than we were previously used to. These moments do not necessarily entail a regression. Building on existing transactional analysis theory about impasses, I have argued that impasses may occur not only as a symptom of regressive intrapsychic and social conflicts but also as a progressive precursor to the development of new meanings and capacities of the self. Finally, I have outlined a template for working with developmental stuckness and shifting defiant loneliness and hopeless confusion into creative experimentation.

To return to Bono’s moving lyrics, they seem to suggest that stuckness is a bad place, that it is a suspended episode arresting the flow of life, and that it has to do with a divided self. I have attempted here to offer a more hopeful perspective, arguing that being stuck in a moment might sometimes be good news. It might mean that we are in the space between stories, faced with the opportunity to shape new ways of being with ourselves and with others.

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