

**Julianne Appel-Opper:**  
**Relational living body to living body communication**

**Abstract**

In this article I want to focus on the role that the non-verbal communication between two living bodies can play in the psychotherapeutic process. In a case study I will demonstrate the healing potential of such a communication. I will also discuss the theoretical embedding of my therapeutic approach.

**Introduction**

For some years I have been developing and practicing a certain style of working from a living body perspective. My psychotherapeutic work started in a Psychosomatic Clinic in Germany, back in 1989. The on-going exchange in a multi-disciplinary team of medical doctors, sport therapists, psychotherapists and others was a good learning experience. What I learnt most was a holistic approach to the patient. In these early years I developed the impression that the body of my patient tried to tell me her/his story and it was on me trying to listen to these stories beside the words. In the last years I have been working in English. The words I hear are not my mother's tongue and this has helped me to focus more and more on these unspoken stories. Since 2005 I have been offering seminars to teach this approach. The participants supporting comments have encouraged me to present my work to a greater audience in this article. After a brief outline of the theories I will devote the main part of this paper to a detailed description of a fish bowl together with my reflections.

**On a meadow ...**

In the seminars I use the metaphor of a meadow in relation to a motorway. When I am on my motorway I organise myself in a certain way, I have a direction and I stay focused. On a meadow it is more about being there. I am less channelled, less focused. I am more in my senses, in a curious mode, I smell and I breathe deeply.

I physically attune towards the grace of the living body, as a living body I get a sense of how the world has been given to the other living body. There could be movements being frozen in the body of my client. Or shadows and echoes from contacts with the other with related somatic patterns. I welcome the stories the body wants to / needs to share. These words are packed into the body as atmospheres and volumes. Schmitz (1989) writes about 'milieus' and 'atmospheres' in the body: 'The felt perception is not a reception of signals but a lived body communication and incorporation'. (Schmitz, 1989, my translation) His 'alphabet' of the living body helped me to find words in this wordless world.

Parallel to the metaphor of the meadow I teach the image of an anchor. With a strong connection to my thinking as my anchor I can let myself be physically impacted by what is communicated to me as a living body. With the metaphor of an anchor I combine the concept of inclusion (Buber, 1958/1984) with the concept of the participant-observer (Sullivan, 1953). Hycner (1991) explains that 'inclusion is the back and forth movement of being able to go over to the other side and yet remain centred in my own experience'. (Hycner 1991:20) Sullivan pointed out that an observer is also a participant. I agree with Gilbert and Evans (2000) about the importance of Sullivan's concept that 'both psychotherapy and supervision

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are 'participative processes' (Gilbert and Evans, 2000:10) In my teaching I encourage participants to stay physically impacted in the process and to look at the process from a distance.

### **...rooted in good soil**

As a Gestalt Psychotherapist I learnt to explore the 'here and now emerging experiences' (Joyce and Sills, 2001) as a figure emerging out of a ground. With awareness I attend respectfully the unique world of the client with 'embodiment, feeling and thought' (Joyce and Sills, 2001). I root myself in the phenomenological method of inquiry and in field theory. The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty provides me with the soil for these roots. As a living body we are in the world ('etre-en-monde', Merleau-Ponty, 1945). As Des Kennedy states: 'The phenomenal field as the lived body is part of phenomenology and carries all the richness and promise of what we call 'field theory'. (Kennedy, 2003). The world is being given to us only as a living body. We make sense with our senses. In the 'between' of a 'healing dialogue' we also 'share meanings' and phenomenology (Hycner, 1991) (Yontef, 1988). Parlett (1991) points out, 'through creating a mutual field each of us is helping to create other's realities'. I could list many remarkable texts on field theory. Parlett's text touches me most. I like the way he so profoundly includes the impact of the person of the therapist into the forces of the co-created realities to witness the various 'selfings' (or selves)' (Parlett, 1991) of therapist and client.

My aim is to co-create a space in which two different living bodies can communicate with each other. I view us human beings as deeply interconnected. As soon as there are two living bodies there is a field of non-verbal communication unfolding.

### **surrounded by thinking/reflecting space**

I have been influenced by psychoanalytical thinking. Sometimes I found myself torn between the rich experience in gestalt psychotherapy and the freeing reflective space provided by psychoanalytical theories. What I realize more and more is that I draw from both approaches, especially from contemporary relational psychoanalytic theories.

Stolorow and Atwood see the between as a meeting and a negotiation of 'worlds of experience' (Stolorow and Atwood, 2002). Pizer (1992) gives us examples of these 'two person negotiations', in which analytic potential space can be ruptured and repaired. What about the living-body- to-living-body communication and negotiation? Beebe and Lachman (1998) see the 'non-verbal dimension of interaction' as gesture or self-touch as organized self- and affect regulation which is mutual and co constructed by therapist and client. The authors add that it is the task of the analyst to 'read' the non-verbal communication.

I see a living-body-to-living-body communication as an ongoing process of negotiation in physical attunement, regulation and communication.

I also want to mention two metaphors out of psychoanalytical thinking which truly talk to me. Bollas (1991) metaphor of 'the shadow of the other' illustrates how all the lived relationships continue to live within us. These lived relationships also leave shadows in our living body from how we were handled as a baby, how we were attuned to. Some of these areas of experience will be 'unthought known' to us, living in our bodies and waiting to be heard by 'some-body'. I also transfer Tolpin (2002) 's concept of the 'forward or growing edge transference' into the living body. For me there is also something like a hope, 'a healthy striving' in the body that one day 'some-body' will be able to listen, to see the invisible and just

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to be there.

In the following I describe a demonstration I did during one of my seminars. Following the description I reflect on my work. During my reflection I came up with some headlines which I have added. I hope this will bring some structure to the text and will help the reader to follow the process.

### **Work with J.**

The work starts after a break. Before the break I had told the group that I sometimes have had the impression that the body would bring the person into psychotherapeutic treatment. The body would ache and would tell stories and would cry out to be heard by another 'some body'. I continue to say that if it was possible that one part of the body could bring the whole person here to this workshop then what would this part of your body tell us? What kind of story would we hear? And for what would you be brought to this workshop?

I then invite the group to draw this part of their body. I encourage them to use crayons and felt pens. I give the instruction "let your hand do the drawing, your hand will know what to do, just watch your hand doing the drawing". I comment that I want to bypass the cognitive process and to let the body talk. I encourage them to colour in as much as possible. After everybody has finished we agree to have a break and to focus on the drawings after the break.

After the break we go back into the group room. As soon as we all sit down everybody is silent. The silence stays for a few seconds. I find this silence nice and comforting. I am arriving in the group again, my breathing is flowing and I am curious what will happen now.

### **A little girl talks:**

*J. sits on the floor opposite me, her legs crossed. Her drawing is on the floor in front of her. Like J. I had returned to a similar position I was in before the break. I sit on the sofa. J. says that she wants to work with me. She adds that she wants to and not, that she also feels 'resistant'. As I hear the word resistant my breathing changes. The flow gets interrupted and I inhale and exhale in a quicker rhythm. As I notice this I am consciously allowing my breathing to flow again. I look directly at J. and I tell her that she could do this with resistance. For a few minutes J. and I do not say anything. We look at each other. We both wait.*

I hear such a softness in her voice, which resonates with me. I feel an atmosphere inside me, light, thin, small and young. I am thinking that this is a young voice talking, about 7 years old. I let the atmosphere spread a bit more so that I am getting in touch with my 7-year old Julianne. I sense a nervousness, shyness and fear. I am thinking that my inner 7-year old girl has had experiences of that too. I sense that my breathing changes. I want to be touched by J's world and atmospheres and at the same time I want to be able to hold a meta-perspective' (Gilbert and Evans, 2000). I start to distance myself a bit, I am consciously allowing my breath to flow again. Now I sense my curiosity and my wish to look at J. I understand that her girl wants to be there and not. I try to say something to invite her. With spoken words I tell her that she can do this with resistance. With my eyes looking at her eyes I try to tell her that I hear and see her. I hear this voice as a growing edge transference (Tolpin, 2002) and I want to acknowledge that I receive this voice. My hunch is that this voice very rarely talked to 'some-body'. As we both wait I imagine myself on my meadow, waiting and not knowing what will

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happen. I have a clear sense to wait, waiting for J.'s readiness to communicate further.

### **J's body talks:**

*Then I notice that there is something in her body of a hardening/stifling, her back stretches and she moves slightly up. There is an upwards movement in her back. Her back looks as if she puts herself under tension. I see that her breathing gets lower. It is a bit as if her body prepares her for something to happen to her. As if somewhere in her body she knows what would come. I feel a somatic response in my body. My body feels the stiffness in my back and in my shoulders. This feels restrictive. My breathing rhythm changes becoming more shallow. I notice that I have an impulse in my body, I want to move. I am consciously opening my breathing, giving myself time to feel what is happening in my body. I discover that my body wants to do sideward movements and especially my hips want to move.*

I understand J's hardening as a creative pattern within her world of experience. I also get a glimpse of the shadows and echoes of her past. As I practice inclusion my body feels restricted and reacts with impulses for movements, which have been frozen in J's body.

### **I want to be with the little girl:**

*The impulse to move makes me think that I want to sit being able to face her at the same level. I start feeling too high up on this sofa. I ask her how she would feel if I sat down on the floor. She says that this would be 'fine'. The way she says 'fine' sounds to me that I can do this. I slowly move towards her, watching her changes in her body. I notice that her breathing pattern stays the same and she continues to look at me. I read this as signs that it is okay for her that I am moving towards the floor to sit with her. As I touch the floor I sense the difference of the floor compared to the sofa. This feels much harder.*

In this sequence of our work I decide to hold J's frozen movements a bit longer. Before doing anything else I want to create a good setting for a living-body-to-living-body communication. My body wants to communicate the held movements. I doubt that J. will take them in as I look down on her. If J. and I were to work long-term I might have decided to focus on the looking down and her experiences about that. For this setting I decide to focus on the frozen movements in J's body and the possibility of de-freezing those a bit in this short work together. As I start moving I get a sense that J's body is taking in these movements. I am glad that I started to move and that I changed the setting. As I sat on the sofa, I also got a feeling that we might lose her 7-year old girl. As if she could disappear into her usual pattern of toughening and disappearing.

There are different levels involved. I need to stay close enough to J's somatic process. I also need to create space within myself that my body does not freeze too much and is able to talk to her. I also need enough self-support. In parallel I watch how our bodies respond to each other and I keep an eye on the group.

### **My living body wants to talk to her living body**

*'The way I sit right now does not feel right' is my first thought as I sit on the hard floor. My hips still want to move. I follow both impulses and I start making myself more comfortable. I wobble a bit moving from one hip to the other trying to find a balance so that my back can relax. I am trying to find a position I feel held in and supported within myself so that my body*

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*can continue with this work. As I follow the impulses of my body I watch J.'s body closely. I get a feeling that her body listens to my movements and takes them in. These movements reach her, her back looks less stiff and tense. We both wait again.*

In this scene I am with J. in the past field, I feel the hardness. I want to communicate something new in a new field. I do the movements slowly as if I could honour and acknowledge the creative way she had to organize herself and I want to communicate to her body that there might be other ways now available. I also keep an eye on the group how they might be impacted by the work.

### **Are you really here with me? Will you really try to be with me?**

*Then J. pulls with her fingers on both sides of her open cardigan and closes it more. As her fingers make these movements her shoulders move slightly forward. These movements talk to me and I notice that my arms and shoulders want to answer. I start moving my hands, arms and shoulders similar to how J. did that. I do the movement slowly and let my breathing flow. I am also touching my top. Like her I am wearing a cardigan and I notice that the two buttons are closed. I tell her, I say "it is good that my cardigan is already closed". After having done this movement especially my right shoulder and arm want to move more. I go with that sensation and start moving forward. I notice some pens lying on the floor right in front of me. These pens have been lying there from her earlier drawing. I start to combine the movement which my body wants to do right now with the movement of putting away the pens. My only focus is on my movements and how her shoulders and arms respond to my movements. The pens are not in my focus. I get a feeling that her shoulders and arms are taking my movements in, she starts breathing a tiny bit deeper. She looks at me, we have eye contact. Then she looks down at the pens and tells me that these are her pens. I think 'oh, no'. I respond by saying "Oh, I did not mean to take your pens away". I add that I could move them back. As I say that I already start moving them back. I do this very slowly to give J. time to respond. J. says that there is no need for putting the pens back because she could get them back at any time.*

I see J.'s movements as a response to my wobbling movements from before. My verbal response "it is good that my cardigan is already closed" does not make sense to me as I read this on the screen on my computer. Why is that important that my cardigan is already closed? And why is that good? In the situation itself this made sense. I remember that I said these words with a soft and confident voice and I looked at her. I have a few assumptions: my living body communicating to her living body that I am different and being different I still try to be there with her, looking after myself. It could also be that my 7-year old communicated to her girl that she has had experiences of being nervous, anxious and shy.

From experience I know that packed with old patterns or fixed gestalten there are feelings of shame. My fantasy is that J. had experienced shame. Sometimes I would directly go towards the shame and would welcome these feelings. Here in this short work with J. I sense that her shame is not uncovered yet. I try to find ways of letting my body talk to her body in a way that my movements do not come across as artificial, odd / strange or silly to her or to the group. I roll away her pens to continue to communicate movements to her body. I assume that anything else would have opened the shame in her body and this would have stopped the whole process.

I also hear J.'s response as a message that she could reach her adult at any second and that she

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feels in control. The two adult colleagues have to take part in this communication to let the worlds of experience of the little girls communicate with each other. This is also part of an anchoring, to make sure that there are many Juliannes and J's taking place in this process to contain the work and make integration possible.

### **Coming closer to the little girl**

*The movement in my shoulder and arm stops. I look at J. I notice that she looks at her drawing. I wonder what she looks at and I ask her where her eyes wander? She answers that she looks at the 'gold on the top'. As she says that she slightly moves her arms towards the gold on the top. J. tells me that she did not have enough yellow/gold to colour in as much gold as she wanted to. Somebody in the group tells her that she feels sorry that she did not have enough gold and whether we should look for more gold/yellow. J. does not really respond. As I look at her I notice that there is still some movement left in her arms and shoulders. So I ask her whether she could do the movement again. She starts to move again. As she does this her eyes move away from the gold. I ask J. what she was looking at now. She says that it is the 'small ones' she is now looking at. With 'small ones' J. is referring to the smaller circular lines in her drawing. I notice her eyes becoming more lively and I see her rubbing her thumbs with two fingers of her hands. With a certain rhythm the thumb of each hand is somehow circulating over the two fingers. I am drawn to that movement. This speaks to me. I tell her that I want to do that, too. I try.*

J.'s comment that she did not have enough yellow/gold makes me think whether there is a J. who is not seen enough. I continue to focus on her body and to help her body expressing what is held inside. I am touched about the way she says 'the small ones'. Again, her voice sounds soft and gentle. I assume that the 'anchoring' opened up more therapeutic space so that we were able to look at the small ones.

### **Entering the little girl's world**

*I think that this is hard sitting opposite her. I ask her whether I might sit next to her to see how her fingers do that. I move slowly next to her and watch how her body resonates with this. Her breathing pattern stays the same and the movement of her thumbs and fingers continue with the same flow. Now I sit next to her. I keep on trying. I notice that I cannot do it. This feels mechanical, not as smooth as J. is doing this. I tell her that my movements look mechanical, she agrees and she says that my 'movements look mechanical'. I keep on trying. I am starting to use my right hand only. This feels easier. I am starting to get the movement now. I am letting my longer fingers find a different position to J.'s shorter fingers so that my fingers become able to do that. All my concentration and focus is on this. I want to learn this in my own way. And in this moment this seems to be the most important thing to do. I continue to learn and to translate the movement from her hands into mine. A bit later during this process J. tells me that she never thought, she would be able to 'teach somebody else anything'. She adds that the others might be bored. I tell her that I wanted to continue. I add that I would not mind if they were bored. I shortly look into the group and I get a feeling that they are all there with the two of us. So I continue wanting to learn from her with an energy that surprises me. I have a strong feeling that this is important. I am getting the movement more and more. We do this for a few more minutes. After a while we look at each other again. We both do the movement now at the same time. We both found a way of synchronizing this movement each in our own style. This feels good. I also get a feeling that we could now finish.*

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*I feel we are at an end. I ask J. whether we shall finish here. Immediately she says 'Yes' and we stop.*

The movement of J's fingers is like a magnet for my fingers. After I had expressed whether I could sit side-by-side to her I realized cognitively what I had asked for. Would this be too much, too close for her? I wanted her to stay and to keep her movements going so I thought I have to move. As I sat next to her I was looking out for reactions like tiny movements in her body, in her muscles, in her face, just for anything. I remember now that I felt a certain intimacy sitting with her on the floor and trying to join in with her movements. I could feel that we both had co-created a certain therapeutic space/field in which this had become possible. This felt special. J. said her comment that she had never thought she could teach somebody else anything in a way as if we had changed this. Something new happened and we both witnessed what our two girls working together were able to do. For me there is a relation between that scene and the one in which J. tells me that she did not have enough yellow/gold to colour in as much gold as she wanted to. I am not sure yet how to put this into words.

### **After the work:**

We are all silent for a moment. I look into the group and wonder where everybody is right now. I also look at J. I am still a bit in this intense place I just have been in with her. So I am also looking out for her to check how she is doing after our work. I lost some bits that follow. I remember that J. uses the words 'magical and important'. She also says that "it did not matter what we did", "something happened really deep". I look at her as she talks and I notice that she looks different to the start of our work. She looks calmer. The group joins in and they all talk about our work. I do not respond much to what is said. I notice that I am exhausted and that I cannot go into talking/thinking mode yet. I hear words like 'so much happened', 'magical', 'I could see what happened in your bodies' I could see how you communicated without words'. I realize that I felt safe during our work. The others were very important for our work as they held and contained both of us. I value that I am sitting with experienced colleagues.

### **Feedback by email from J, a few days later:**

'Firstly thank you sooo much for the amazing workshop. I appreciate more than I can express the way you work, are and the level and depth of your availability. I feel the way you work goes beyond words. The means of communication you access/use is not primarily words. I felt you attuned/spoke to the core of me, my soul, and by doing so bypassed my defences, fears and resistances, of which i have many, to really give me what I needed. I didn't consciously know what I needed so to get to the place we did would likely have taken years. The beauty of the way you work is also so gentle and respectful so I was left feeling peaceful, calm an satisfied. i feel also I haven't quite caught the importance/ significance of what happened because the meeting/growth happened on a level I don't visit often. My experience during our work was profound. i felt you were communicating with my higher self.'

### **Feedback from another group participant:**

'I had such a deep experience again on Sunday - and it is staying with me. I feel so RELIEVED - as I have been with my clients since - softer , quieter, more 'tuned in' - sensing a lot, sharing some - big impacts...You seem totally confident in what you do / what you offer - your belief of your body / our bodies... That comes from you as a calmness, and a surety, I like your trueness / honesty. You are doing what you do. There is no edge in that way as you work. You are so interested in that person / those people, and what they are experiencing, and

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your interest and commitment to be there with them to explore is more than tangible. You are sophisticated I think in knowing who needs what in terms of support to do what they are doing, whether it be to sit alongside, or facing, or touch or not, to stay with one figure, or to move through figures. You 'know, as you go along, according to what you feel and observe'.

### some thoughts at the end

With this work with J. I very much regret that we will not continue to work with each other as an ongoing training psychotherapy. I miss that J. and I will not re-visit her inner little girl again to be with her. I would have loved to talk to her and to help her finding words of what had happened to this little girl.

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