J. Tyler Carpenter: How we communicate

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The *Relational Implicit* podcast explores somatic psychology, relational therapies, mindfulness and trauma therapies. It is edited by Serge Prengel, LMHC, who is in private practice in New York City. See: http://relationalimplicit.com

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel: So we're continuing the discussion that was started on the list serve about the difficulty that we sometimes experience communicating, uh, with one another as therapists and um, uhh, you know the frustrations that can come with the use of language.

Tyler Carpenter: Mhm.

Serge: And uh, you had uh suggested using language in a more plastic way, um maybe in a more playful way, in a more malleable way, so maybe we could explore this a little further.

Tyler: Certainly. What I was alluding to basically, was that very often a discussion of a case becomes, um, the framing of an experience that is identified and then described in one language or another; and I, in my personal experiences, find that to listen to two individuals of different persuasions talk about something often opens up that um behavior phenomena or focus into something else in which it seems to me that it would be more comfortable to um sort of leave or abandon the need to reframe it in any one set of terms versus the other, and instead to just talk about it in a broader way.

Serge: Yeah, so um, in other words, um, that the temptation comes to, to translate to reframe it in uh in another theoretical frame work and uh in doing that we lose uh, some uh, quality where as putting it into a wider framework actually would probably enable the conversation to go further.

Tyler: Right and I think that sometimes the meta-framework is the richest and fullest description one might make of a piece of behavior or a set of circumstances without feeling the need to put it into one framework or the other, or at least to hold that temptation in advance for a little while.

Serge: Mhm, mhm, so, um that um you know that reminds me of a, um, somebody that had a big influence on me, Yvonne Agazarian, she used to have, uh, or she has a phrase called "explore, don't explain" and that seems very similar to what you're uh, you're discussing.

Tyler: Yes in fact that's a modal example of an experience I remember of being in a group with Yvonne. We were with Mercario Geraldoa , um, a South American born and linguistically trained group Lacanian from the Washington School of Psychiatry, and uh, we were able to talk coherently and interactively with one another um for a while, but then at a particular point members of the group found, we found, ourselves in a position that was sort of beyond, um, language or concepts and we were all just sort of, sort of there, and um I think in a sense that's what I'm, what I'm talking about. One can, um, one can reduce or, or uh, put something into a particular kind of a framework, but to be purely mindful of that, to be purely in the moment involves so much in a particular point, it sometimes make more sense to go into the experience than to um back up stand outside and put it into um a framework.

Serge: Mhm, mhm, so um you know, not put it in the framework, uh, you know directly from framework to framework, um recall the experience; find a way to share the experience.

Tyler: Mhm

Serge: So, you know, in the context of what we're talking about, for instance, some of the conversations that we can have on the ListServ, uh that it would be you know helpful when the discussion reaches a certain level, to then back off and go back to the experience and find a way to communicate, share it, recall similar experiences that other people may have?

Tyler: I would agree and actually the more you talk about it in those terms, I think the less, at least for me, the temptation would be to, um, try to um, justify or solidify a particular point of view and the more I could see the broadening and deepening of the discussion coming out of a sharing that perhaps was beyond either particular framework. Perhaps just getting concretely in into an experience would be an easier way to avoid blockages or some sort of retrenchment.

Serge: So I'm noticing in your language you use the words like 'solidify' and 'blockages' and in contrast you know we seem to be aiming for a sort of fluidity and um it reminds me of um something we talked about before about thinking of language transitional objects so that seems to be an appropriate point to bring that up.

Tyler: Yes, I would agree with that. I mean at what point is it useful to be to concretize something to um flesh it out, to give it a form and to take that form and put it in a, put it in a particular theoretical framework, then at what point does it become useful to allow that framework to dissolve or dissipate, if you will, and to um be available for perhaps another kind of reformulation or a broadening and further elaboration of what seems, seems to be important to touch on.

Serge: So again I wanted to, to highlight as I'm hearing you the choice of words, you know on the one hand you have the word like framework which feels very solid, very um, you know very much like a

framework, a frame, you know something that is fairly rigid, and on the other hand you're talking about dissolve and so that uh, that alternance that, that uh that things are not just rigid but there is the possibility of things that seem very rigid to actually dissolve and change shape and reform and uh in the whole choice of word of transitional object the idea that something can be very solid one moment but that solidity is actually just a means to an end and it can shift.

Tyler: Yes, I would agree with that. I mean one could take for instance the example of sitting, sitting in silence. How long does one let that go on? At what point does it become something that you name at what point is one participating in that silence inside oneself at what point is one drawing the attention away from the silence that both people are sitting in to focusing on the other things that are going on? I mean, there are an infinite number of ways in which one can um notice color, structure, name, um and experience in an infinite number of of um points that one can, one can look, can look at it an experience from, so at what point does one begin to give it form and at what point do we begin to let it become formless.

Serge: Mhm mhm.

Tyler: Is that coherent enough. ;-)

Serge: Well you know as you use that experience, what comes to me is the old metaphor of the different faces of the diamond. So that, um you're talking about the different things that we can focus on the color, the whatever of the experience, uh but that uh, in a way through each ever angle that we are looking at it, uh, that a sense that it's only an arbitrary and partial way of looking at it and uh, that uh in that an in you know beyond that mixture of entry points of the different faces of the diamond, there is that essential formlessness.

Tyler: Yes and I, um think that um, I wrestle with that, doing a paper on Carl Jung's Red Book at the moment, so I have come across a number of quotations on that that I've never come across before. He had one quotation that particularly struck me that was a little like a zen koan when I first came across it. He says, "a fool lives here or there, but never here and there."

Serge: Ha ha ha.

Tyler: It was a pretty rough take on anybody who doesn't have the kind of insight he (Jung) feels he does, but only, on the other hand, it's a marvelous way of looking at what you can articulate and how you can experience and how the ability to be in both places simultaneously is, is something quite different.

Serge: But so you know, what it brings up for me, since, you know, to bring it back to the topic is in a way the fools argument is: you have Fool A saying "We're here" and Fool B saying, "no, we're there" and our goal is to be here and there.

Tyler: Yes, yes, absolutely, and the place where we are in both places is the place that was, and not in an either position; and, I think perhaps one might also, to further complicate the matter, look at our own internal Greek Chorus of part objects or self objects and um the way in which the whole is greater than any one of those particular perspectives we can take at any moment. And then, when we bring it up to a conversation on a Listserv, say around a particular case, we can go back and forth

and lose the, the um, greater complexity by heading too much to a um one point of view versus the other.

Serge: Yeah, um, so that in a way uh from that perspective any clinging on to one point of view is um is, is an oversimplification and a loss in insisting on the here as opposed to the here and there and uh then from that place we lose the possibility of having some connecting antenna that can connect to someone else's multiple antennae.

Tyler: Right. Yeah wonder if there was some way we could computerize it.

Serge: Yeah, yeah.

Tyler: With example.

Serge: Yeah.

Tyler: I don't know how that sounds to you.

Serge: No I would love to, I would love to do that, I would love to do that as a, as a, as a question uh to say ok what do we do with it? So I have the idea in the back of my mind, I don't know if you have one.

Tyler: I have one too, but why don't… shoot ha ha.

Serge: Ok, so it would be to simply in a way uh at some point you know an earlier rather than later in the discussion but if possible by backing off and saying "hmm, what is this to me or what is this to you or what does this evoke to you, what does this evoke to me" uhh and it would seem that it would be a way to broaden a little bit, instead of in a way narrowing and uh and sharpening the focus uh to kind of, to kind of open it up a little bit.

Tyler: That sounds like a great idea.

Serge: So what's your suggestion?

Tyler: Um I was aa- I think what you're suggesting is fine. What I was thinking a bit um about the the-um. About difficult patients dealing with difficult issues because-

Serge: Mhm.

Tyler: I guess because my- um. When I first came into clinical work, um it was at the close of what some referred to as the Heroic Era of Psychoanalytic Treatment of Schizophrenia. Character disorders and schizophrenics were really um, for treating psychosis you would either have medication or no medication. Medication often snowed the patient and made it difficult; they were administered by people who were less interested in doing treatment, and treatments that were administered by really wild men and women um psychoanalytic psychiatry who were capable of bringing about experiences with patients that seemed to be quite meaningful and healing @ times.

Serge: Mhm.

Tyler: For me, integration was started with that particular point and then moved forward as we began to experiment and feel more comfortable with a wide variety of different kinds of techniques and using medications that were not quite so um extreme in their impact on people. So if I were going to work with somebody who was extraordinarily idiosyncratic in their thinking or uhm had a very difficult time modulating their affects or talking with another person; and, they (the patient) in a way that allowed them a certain amount of idiosyncrasy in their thinking, but the flexibility to bring that back into the therapeutic relationship. For somebody that was so um caught up in it that the problems they had modulating their, their anger and their behavioral responses to that, um, medication provided for a variety of ways of engaging with that person would allow what you couldn't contain, or would lead to something other than therapy to be contained in a relationship between two people.

Serge: Mhm.

Tyler: Although as I began to talk about it I think your example might be a better one because you could come up with something concrete I could react to that and then we could go back and forth with that and perhaps that-

Serge: Well, no, it's it's I I, I actually when I am struck about is actually in a way you're applying you know it- you're talking as we're talking about finding something. Uh, what's happening is you are bringing back a larger experience. So in a way you're coming up and saying, You know, it's I uh, you know what I'm hearing is it's not just a simple thing, it's not just a simple step, uh it brings me back to this and this was the experience, and these were the times, and these were the kinds of people, and this was the problem and so in a way it's kind of shifting into a whole gestalt of, you know, the kind of complex situation and how to deal with it. As opposed to um, you know just like a quick uh couple of words to describe something.

Tyler: Right, I think in a way when you put it like that, I guess the other example that comes to mind to me are the transitions that one makes, or I find my self making as I'm doing a disability evaluation with somebody who's spent a great deal of time in prison and who was extraordinarily violent in their younger days and could terrorize neighborhoods. The experience of them coming in, not knowingly sitting down with me and then the two of us getting to know one another and moving from an initial position in which nothing, not very much is going on, to a position which is quite beyond where either one of us was and they're talking about their current life and where they are in a way that's opening and evoking things for me and I wouldn't have noticed otherwise. I could move back when it comes to time to um make a clinical formulation and I can sort of be aware as I go on along, you know in the way a which a doctor might conduct a physical exam, um to see what's going on here, what's the person feeling here,

Serge: Mhm.

Tyler: how did these responses go, what do they tell me about the individual but, that's not the, that's not the experience of moving from two individuals who don't know very much about one another, each of whom has an agenda or way of looking at it to something that's much more um-

Serge: You know, I want to, I wanna just stop you here because uh something very striking about the image you use, I was listening, you just said, two individuals are moving toward each other and um

you know, as you're saying that, I have this visual of almost, you know, cartoony two cave men but uh in a way just um uh you know if you imagine that cartoony thing of two cavemen, so it's a concept of the origins of time of the origins of consciousness and so that sense of moving together and moving toward each other is a little bit of what we're trying to do as we're trying to exchange ideas we're trying to move toward each other and so there is this process of negotiation, reassurance, you know, ascending signals, picking up and exchanging, uh that is going to allow for that peaceful getting together in the case of the cavemen and maybe that uh in a discussion we have too often the tendency to, you know, to kind of attack or be pointed or be sharp as opposed to first defining the safe common sphere.

Tyler: Um yes, actually your image it caught me off guard initially and then I was thinking, thinking of myself and the um and the uh one of the inmates I was working with, or he wasn't an inmate anymore. Recently it did remind me a bit of two cave men but um, there's a um a quotation from Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert that, that um seems to be reminiscent of what we're trying to talk about and it goes like this: "Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to play music that will melt the stars." I haven't read Madame Bovary. The quotation came from a marvelous book entitled "Is that a Fish in Your Ear" by a Professor of Linguistics named Bellos @ Princeton University. I think to some extent it it captures the uh simultaneous attempt to describe a situation and yet uh to convey a longing or a goal that's quite beyond the language.

Serge: Yeah. So actually maybe would you mind as a closing to this conversation rereading the quotation just to uh, make sure that it's uh, it's heard

Tyler: Sure. "Human speech is like a cracked cattle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music to melt the stars" That's from Madame Bovary by Gustave Flaubert

Serge: Thanks, Tyler

Tyler: Thank you, Serge

This conversation was transcribed by Mark Bankin.