



Feeling felt: The heart of the dialogic moment?

Guest post by Robyn Penman

In Maria Flora Mangano's post on "A space of relationship for dialogue among cultures" (<https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/2014/01/02/a-space-of-relationship-for-dialogue-among-cultures/>) she describes how a student was able to talk about his personal experience during the genocide in Burundi because of the space of the relationship that was created for class members to speak without any fear of offence. The experience within this space of relationship was so profound that by time the student finished talking, the class was so "touched they couldn't speak".

As I read Maria Flora's post, I was struck by the way the experience was described metaphorically in terms of physical contact: the students were "touched", the speaker "felt" understood. I know this is a common way of talking about poignant moments in dialogue and other "close" encounters. However, my recent foray into the interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB; www.mindgains.org) research literature has made me more alert to such metaphors and given me reason to draw attention to it here.

Extensive research evidence across the neuroscience field indicates that relationships are crucial to brain development and neural functioning throughout the life cycle. We are, to use Mona Fishbane's phrase, "wired to connect" (<http://www.conflict2connection.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/wired-to-connect.pdf>). The fact that our relationships, and presumably the quality of them, can impact on brain development is, in itself, something to take note of. However, IPNB has taken this broad notion further and fleshed out a number of ideas about how these connections work and what their impact may be. One of these ideas concerns the sense of "feeling felt".

Daniel Siegel (<http://drdansiegel.com/>), who coined the term interpersonal neurobiology, uses the concept of "feeling felt" to describe the ability of one person to empathically and authentically encounter another person; especially in the early parent-infant relationship. According to Siegel, "feeling felt" is characteristic of secure infant-parent relationships: the more infants "feel felt", the better their attachment and the sounder their development pathway.

While there is still some controversy about the specific role played by neural mechanisms (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brain-myths/201212/mirror-neurons-the-most-hyped-concept-in-neuroscience>) in the ability to be empathic, the concept of feeling felt and its role in childhood development has a great deal of merit. The concept of feeling felt also seems to have merit when we come to adult relationships, and to dialogue specifically.

When I was reading descriptions of the “feeling felt” phenomenon I was struck by the extent to which it resonated with Martin Buber’s sense of “being”. In his discussions of dialogue, Buber made a distinction between “being” and “seeming” in an encounter with another. For Buber, the being person is acting authentically into the encounter and, in acting thus, makes dialogue possible. The moment when two people fully experience each other as “being” in the relationship signifies a dialogic moment. In exactly the same vein we could say that dialogue has occurred when each person feels felt by the other.

The interpersonal neurobiology literature would suggest that this striving to feel felt is part of our neurological make-up. We strive for connection, and we yearn to feel felt from infancy onwards. But, equally important, the existence of this neurophysiological dimension would also suggest that “feeling felt” is a cross-cultural phenomenon. It may be that the way this “feeling felt” is described in different languages differs but the yearning for it may not. It leaves us with an interesting possibility. As scholars, we may not be able to agree on a definition of dialogue but, as participants, we know one when we have one: we feel felt.

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