

Reciprocal collaboration with Jerome Liss

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Abstract

The sharing experience of mutual collaboration created by Jerome Liss, shows how deep and supportive an exchange between psychotherapists or other people can be.

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I met Jerome Liss many years ago and we would get together at least once a year in Rome.

He would promote these encounters with friends and besides that his projects went beyond clinical experience and were directed to the social world that fascinated him. He wrote several important articles, recently regarding neuro sciences, which are all to be found on the Internet.

Whenever we met, there was a ritual we liked to follow. It was a practice to which Jerome gave the name “reciprocal collaboration”. Wherever we were, very often in his studio in Rome, we locked ourselves in the workroom, lay on the floor with our legs resting on cushions or on a chair so that we could be as relaxed as possible.

Jerome took a stopwatch, which he always carried with him and allocated 10 minutes for each of us. We started off by holding hands (as I’m doing with my partner, Maurizio, at the moment). Each of us had ten minutes out of the hour to speak or do whatever we wished, while the other simply listened. We couldn’t speak unless permitted. We usually listened.

This was an opportunity to reflect on important life issues in the presence of a friend, colleague or collaborator. For one hour we took turns every 10 minutes, controlled by the stopwatch. As time went by, we arrived at places of great quality within ourselves. With the passage of time, eventual interruptions from the other became more frequent and welcome. This gave rise, where necessary, to a more complete form of expression of what was occurring.

These were unforgettable moments of learning, sharing and reciprocal collaboration. Friendship gives meaning to relationships. Without friendship there is no meaning.

The more the time we spent sharing, the more profound was the narrative. On many occasions it was possible to share very intimate parts of our lives. Small secrets, each of which had been carried within for a long time. The complete silence generated allowed the other to overcome shyness, which involved some personal emotion or fantasy.

Later, when the time for speaking was coming to an end, the protagonist could ask those listening for feedback. However, this request could only come from the protagonist. The listener could only give a subjective emotional response. No judgment or interpretation, technical or theoretical commentary would be given. The feedback was a type of emotional “colouring-in” by the listener.

“What he said in the beginning was very powerful...it scared me. Later on, I felt better about his decision....” This was evidently a typical “phenomenological” sharing by the listener.

I now stress that feedback can only be expressed at the request of the protagonist. It is a type of inversion of the traditional therapeutic setting.

This is in fact, one of two elements that differ radically from a situation of normal psychotherapy. It is one in which the patient speaks and the therapist listens.

In the reciprocal collaboration, which Jerome taught, the listener (the therapist) listened but did not intervene. The power relationship remained in the spotlight with the protagonist leading the process.

This state of affairs may bring a smile to whoever thinks that psychotherapy might be a constant struggle against the defense of a patient. Yet it might convince whoever considers an aspect of a cure to be the sense of leadership over one’s own difficult and intolerable inner state.

The other obvious difference from the traditional setting was the fact that the two “collaborators” could also be friends! This contrasted with our entire conviction. At the same time it also helped to shed light on the reality of the relationship nullified by “therapeutic simulation”.

In fact, there is a fundamental difference in sharing an intimate part of oneself with a therapist and sharing with an acquaintance or friend. These have clear advantages and disadvantages.

Should the therapist take no further personal interest in the experience of the patient, he gives free reign to the inner world of the patient. Should it be someone we know, there are more obstacles blocking our freedom of expression. It reveals him/her to be our ally. This is not so much from the point of view of content, but from the point of view of the general sense of existence. The other person is, in fact, together with us.

What is a congress if not a reciprocal collaboration amongst us? What purpose does a family, group, or team serve, if not one of reciprocal collaboration of the highest order?

At this congress, which is nothing more than a large-scale collaboration, I would like to perform a simple experiment. I want like each of you to hold your neighbour’s hand, to close your eyes and share anything you feel. You have one minute, which is all the time we have. I shall tell you when to stop and change over. We’re not going to discuss anything, only share.

Now I would like you to stand with your hands joined and repeat a sound that Jerome liked to practice whenever he needed to raise his energy levels.

BIOGRAPHY

Rubens Kignel has a PhD from the University of Bologna, Italy. He is an International Trainer for Biodynamic Psychology and Biosystemic and teaches and trains his own methods in several different countries including Brazil, Europe, Japan, South America and North America. He is Founder and Director of the Japanese Institute of Body Psychotherapy.

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Jerome Liss, PhD (1938-2012) studied at the Albert Einstein Medical School (New York) 1960–64 and went on to study psychiatry at Harvard 1965-1968. He joined the anti-psychiatric movement of R. D. Laing and David Cooper and then collaborated with Prof. Henri Laborit in the study of the neurophysiology of emotions in Paris. Jerome had several qualities, one of which was to be involved with social and political issues. He always connected the internal personal world with the external social one and developed several systems to work with communities, one of them called “reciprocal collaboration”, which is a deep experience of learning about relationships in communities. Listen and experience what he meant by that!