

Unexpected Moments

By Andrew Royle

This paper describes moments in the therapeutic process of Connor, a primary school pupil with autism, in 1:1 weekly dramatherapy sessions, over the course of a year. It is a journey from an internal and solipsistic world to an external world of being-with-others. I shall consider therapeutic interventions metaphorically as 'keys' that enabled passage between the two worlds.

Lorna Wing and Judy Gould (1979) in their important study, write of autism as being a 'triad of impairments' (1993, Wing), concerning social interaction, communication and imagination. Such impairments can result in a 'narrow [and] repetitive pattern of activities (ibid.). Denckla (1986) also found repetitive, stereotyped or ritualistic behaviour to be 'essential features' (ibid.) of autism; classically, those on the autistic spectrum can then seem to inhabit 'a world of their own' (2002, Awares.org)

Connor initially presented in such ways, he avoided interaction with others and was often 'very controlling'. He was sensitive to noise and would regularly wear 'ear-defenders' (head-phones) around the school. Before starting therapy Connor was spending significant amounts of time out of class; school assemblies were difficult to attend, or remain in. Due to staff and parental concerns Connor was escorted to his first dramatherapy session by his Teaching Assistant, who waited outside; Connor came holding a small plastic toy, brought from class:

*Connor knelt to one side of the drum, I the other, he held his toy with both hands, just above the skin of the drum. With a focus that was total, he carefully dropped the toy onto the surface of the drum. The toy vibrated a **Pat-pat-pat-pat** sound; its rippling beats ebbed away as it came to rest on the drum.*

Connor watched rapt and frozen. As the toy came to stillness, he squeezed together the fore-finger and thumb of each hand, forming oval shaped gaps, which he raised to his eyes and squinted through, peering down at the toy on the drum.

*Shortly, he scooped up the toy and repeated the sequence. A cycle formed, the same each time.....**Pat-pat-pat-pat**.....oval apertures.....*

This simple activity was repeated over and over again, not just in the first session, but subsequent sessions too. Connor's repetitive cycles reminded me of the self-contained, looping images of Dutch artist M.C. Escher (for example, *Waterfall* (1961); for more on autism and Escher, see Alvarez's *Live Company* (1992)). Escher's images and architecture contain no way in or out, instead they loop-back on themselves, creating a

unitary whole, rather than overlapping with any other system. At this stage, I felt *outside* to Connor, a mere observer of his unitary and internal world. His ear-defenders (which he would sometimes wear in sessions) seemed to symbolize a closing out of the outside world, including me.

The toy-on-the-drum activity became Connor's main activity (or event) in sessions. I mostly observed. I felt concerned that I wasn't doing enough. Yet, there seemed little opportunity for interaction. Nevertheless, Connor attended each week (and stayed for the full 50 minute duration). Whilst variations in the sessions were limited, there were changes around the session. Connor became content to be escorted to sessions by me (i.e., without his T.A.). Also he came without his toy; instead he used a ball that was in the room, to bounce on the drum. I began to relax in the sessions:

I felt absorbed in Connor's (ball bouncing) activity, calming noticing, not striving, not needing anything from him at all. He was safe.

The vibrating sound on the drum was mesmerising, the repetition compelling.

***Pat-pat-pat-pat** - the wonder of sound itself. The eternal moment, a sound can never be unheard, it will always have been.*

The perfection of it. Always this moment and not desiring or needing to be elsewhere.

German philosopher and founder of the Phenomenological movement in philosophy, Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938) wrote that true *being with* somebody or something requires a 'freedom from suppositions' (p.85 Moustakas, 1994). For Husserl, preconceived ideas and presuppositions get in the way of connecting with the *originary and given* of an experience. For Husserl, such prior ideas ought placed out of action, or bracketed. Husserl termed this method *the Epoche* (literally, 'to stay away or abstain' (p.85, Moustakas, 1994), and argued that it enabled a departure from the dominant and scientific approach (which Husserl called 'the natural attitude'), prevalent at the time. The *epoche*, then enables us to see things as if for the first time, or as Clark Moustakas writes 'as a perpetual beginner' (p.86, *ibid*).

What was revealed, by taking a Husserlian approach to being with Connor, were *my* underlying assumptions: that Connor's activities were 'pointless' or 'boring' or were merely manifestations of his autism, that ought to be quickly ameliorated. The letting go of such assumptions allowed instead for an attitude of wonder towards Connor and his behaviour: his bodily movements and position – crouched over the drum with bowed alertness; his precise repetition of hand and finger movements; and, his absorbed facial expression. The *epoche* was a key for me, which loosened and unfixed ties to prior assumptions and enabled a shift, from merely observing - to *being-with* - Connor.

Being-with Connor this way wasn't a passive activity. I felt the rhythm of Connor's movement with a readiness or potential to respond. As Connor's ball bounced

unexpectedly, I picked up the ball and bounced it back, not missing a beat, he accepted it and continued with his repetitions. I was becoming a part of the structure which contained the cycle of repetitions, which I served. However, I was aware of my positioning in the room (sat by the drum) and what assumptions this may harbour. I therefore, started a session away from the drum, in a corner of the room.

Connor entered the room. He lay on a small pile of mats in the opposite corner. Lying on his front, head turned away from me. Silence. Stillness.

*Time passed, I approached the drum in the centre of the room and raised the ball – holding it above the drum for a moment before dropping it onto the skin with a **pat-pat-pat-pat**.....*

As the ball bounced its last on the drum and the sound ebbed away, Connor sprang into place, sitting on the mats, facing me, ready to receive the ball.

I bounced the ball to him and he bounced the ball back to me..... back to him..... back to me.

This is how we started each week.

The familiar act of 'ball-bouncing' had transformed from being a solitary exercise to being a shared and reciprocal activity. I had presupposed that Connor may respond to the sound of the drum, so the *epoche* had its limitations. Whilst the *epoche* had allowed me to unlock my door, Connor needed an invitation to unlock his, i.e. a familiar sounding knock. It seemed that the familiarity or the 'sameness' of what I offered was the key that Connor needed. In so doing, he paradoxically stepped outside of himself - to himself; or as if towards a mirrored reflection of self. Connor's key then was forged of the 'self' that he had showed me, I simply (and mimetically) reflected it back to him.

I performed the ball-bouncing 'knock at the door' at the start of each session. It served as a ritual - a way of mutually transiting from 'self' to *being-with* each other. The fact that it came from the session, rather than something I had prepared prior, concurs with James Roose-Evans' writings on ritual:

New rituals, if they are to be efficacious, must well up from within the psyche of the individual or group'

(*Sesame Journal*, 2006).

Connor's tendency for repetition meant that after a while the shared ball-bouncing activity soon descended into rote (i.e. performed again and again, seemingly without thought or energy). Anne Alvarez has written of the 'reassuring stuckness' (p.44, Alvarez, 1992) of those on the autistic spectrum, this seemed to be the case with Connor. Yet, using the *epoche* again allowed me to be with such repetitions without necessarily wanting to change them; in fact, quite original and marked changes seemed to come of their own doing, I simply had to watch and respond to them when they did

come. The most original moments were the unexpected ones:

I sat in my corner, Connor in his, and it began again.

Raising the ball. Aiming. Throwing. Bouncing. The ball bounced to and fro, either on the drum or on the ground to the side. Catching.

And repeat.

Connor ecstatic. Each cycle brought more delight. Nothing else to do.

*Catch, Aim, Throw and Bounce.
Catch, Aim, Throw and Bounce.
Catch Aim, Throw and Bounce.*

The rhythm again mounting and intoxicating, the simplicity of the repetition, each cycle transcending time itself, drifting, continual.....

Catch, Aim, Throw and.....

the ball hit the side of the drum and careered off in an unseemly manner, skirting the ugly carpet, thousands of fragmentary vibrations across the bland colours of the floor..... Connor watched the ball until it had come to a complete stop, the energy of the session concertinaed up into an anxious and abrupt halt.

Connor eyed the ball, unblinking and still, where was he? A furtive, blank glance at me.....(what have you done?)..... It occurred in less than a second, the time of the session, session time.... how spoiling.... involving a you, a separate you and me.

Winnicott writes that 'the significant moment is that at which the child surprises himself or herself' (p.51, Winnicott, 1982). Such moments with Connor worked to bring an existential encounter. After the ball unexpectedly fell, it was as if Connor suddenly became aware of an existing world, outside the bliss of repetitious cycles. It was at these moments that Connor would gesture his finger and thumb 'stereotyped' response.

It is worth noting that the word 'stereotype' has etymological origins as a term used in printing, it refers to a 'mould made from composed type or an original plate' (pp. 1408, Pearsall, 2002). In other words it is a *copy* of an *original*. Likewise, the word 'control' (which was often used in respect of Connor's behaviour) has similar associations, coming from the French 'contrerolle': to 'keep a copy of a roll of accounts' (pp.310, Pearsall, 2002). If Connor defers to 'a copy', when something unexpected happens, it suggests a negation or withdrawal from what is *original and given* – i.e. Connor effects a reversal of the *epoche*. It may well be that Connor regards copies as safer than

originals. Furthermore, in Laban terms, Connor's stereotyped finger & thumb gesture has a *pressing* quality – possibly suggesting a squeezing or reducing of the new or original phenomena. Such analysis suggests that what is troublesome for Connor is his relationship to *original phenomena* which his repetitions serve to keep at bay.

Unexpected moments brought original phenomena, on the edge or horizon of Connor's repetitions. Whilst Connor's tendency was to negate the phenomena and 'stereotype' or return to copy, I saw such moments as key-holes or portals into *other* spaces - they suggested a way-out, an alternative, something different. When the ball bounced unexpectedly, I embellished the retrieval, in unusual and performative ways. I walked my fingers across the carpet, crawled, rolled and stretched to the ball. Later performances included hurling a lasso of fabric above my head, I then reeled the ball in as if hauling a catch of fish.

These performances were then keys that slotted into the gaps or keyholes provided by the unexpected moment. They obliquely represented ways in which to exit the edifice of repetitions, not as an imperative for Connor, but simply as an alternative option or choice. Connor seemed intrigued (or bemused?); yet, if the ball landed within a certain radius of his corner then Connor started to retrieve the ball, albeit purposely and functionally to begin with, but later imitating the unusual ways that I had previously performed.

A question arises: Is Connor's imitation of my movements merely another way of him 'copying'? Samuel Taylor Coleridge makes a distinction between *imitation* and *copying* in the arts; for Coleridge, imitation, unlike copying 'consists in the interfusion of the *same* throughout the radically *different*...' (pp.72, Coleridge, 1983). Whilst Connor initially retrieved the ball with movements that were the *same* or similar to mine, what was radically *different* was that, in doing so, he moved into new physical and psychic spaces. Physically, he would literally stretch out into new parts of the room to retrieve the ball. Psychically, there were changes evident, in Connor's lessening of stereotyped gestures (particularly at unexpected moments), also he made more eye-contact with me and took more risks (sometimes competing with me to get to the ball first); plus, he smiled more.

Connor's movements in retrieving the ball soon developed beyond imitation, for example he lay face down on the floor, stretching for the ball, whilst keeping his foot firmly rooted on his corner spot (something I hadn't done before). In short, he developed an artistry and originality that was his own. In this way, our ball-retrieval performances were not only keys that enabled egress and access to new psychic and physical spaces, but - in the doing – *allowed us to* be together in new and original ways, such as in spontaneity and simultaneity:

*Sitting in this – **bounce** - timeless ritual, for that is what it has –**bounce** - become now, we stay here – **bounce** - until we experience a sign – **bounce** - it'll come, it always does, let go of words, thoughts, time, aims, needs, I'm here... **bounce**..... here **bounce**(here) **bounce**.....()bounce*

.....*bounce*....

The ball lands squarely on a cushion - a severed-head, a plum-pudding – both regal and comic. Released. We look at the ball – then each other. Stasis into movement. I instinctively pick up the cushion with the ball on top and run.....the ‘Benny Hill Theme Tune’ ringing in my ears. Legs and arms swinging.....the wailing horns of the saxophone coming up from my diaphragm and out, shrill, into the room.

Connor chases me.

‘Give me the ball’ he breathes, grinning, jumping, grabbing for the ball. ‘Give me the ball’

I twist and turn, trailing the ball over his head, still on its cushion, like an acrobatic wine-waiter. I move sideways, crawl under the fabric, propel myself off the wall. Connor leaps, wrestles me for it. He gets the ball. I plonk myself into his corner spot. He sits in my corner. Red-faced. Grinning.

‘The chase’, which became a regular feature of the sessions was, spatially at least, the apotheosis of the work with Connor. Physically, the activity allowed us to use the whole room, including a reciprocal sharing of our corner-bases; and our whole bodies. Psychically, the spontaneity and free-flowing nature of the chase, allowed for expressions in the play which were more unconscious. This felt an important departure or exit from the turn-taking, ordered and quite conscious nature of the previous interactions.

The unexpected moment of the ball landing on the cushion provided a signal or symbol for passage, which we travelled through together. The ‘chase’ became a key that we both turned; it transited us out of a performer/imitator dyad and into the space of *co-experiential being*. A space that was characterized by simultaneity, that is a ‘being-together’ and a shared experience in the flow of movement and play. In this space Connor was engaged in sustained moments that were necessarily *original* rather than *copied* or repetitive. It wasn’t so important what Connor was doing here, as much as what he was freed from repetitively or compulsively doing.

Later sessions resembled a chronological journeying through earlier activities. In this way, one activity in the session worked as a rite of passage to another. The opening ritual, the ball-bouncing activity, the performative ball retrievals, the chase and eventually movement-with-touch interactions without the ball. Together, with a ritual returning of the ball to rest on top of the drum at the end of each session, the sessions came to resemble the stages of the Sesame Method, with the *main-event* being the chase and movement-with-touch activities. I stayed aware for the emergence of *original phenomena*, which never failed to present itself, to provide further passage and development.

I'm pleased to say that feedback from Connor's parents and his teacher have been very positive. His mother feels that Connor's dramatherapy has contributed greatly to his development; in particular, that he has developed more 'confidence' and is 'willing to try new things'. He is also much more 'accepting of change'. One of the new things he has been able to do, is attend the school assembly, in which after a year of commencing dramatherapy, he received the school's 'most improved pupil' award.

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