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# Minding What Matters

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## Relationship as Teacher

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*Avraham Cohen & Heesoon Bai*

*Working as a collective and among a growing network of kinship, we have found varying degrees of resonance with the writing and lives of others.*

—Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers, & Carl Leggo,  
*Life Writing and Literary Métissage*

## The Primacy of Relationship

**M**ost cultural and mythological narratives speak of individual leaders, inspirational heroes, and teachers: for example, the Canadian prime minister, the American president, Roméo Dallaire, Wayne Gretzky, the Pope, the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa, and the Buddha. One obvious commonality is that these names all refer to one person. They are mythic giants for humanity, and their achievements stand like colossal monuments. Some of these figures seem so super-human that they stand apart from the rest of humanity, and no one even dares to imagine that they could be like them. Such individuals very often seem to become objects of worship. Are they really singular? Do they stand alone? Is

worshipping them a sustainable and redemptive process? Ernest Becker (1973/1997), winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1974 for his book *The Denial of Death*, makes a point about parataxic distortion<sup>1</sup> in relation to heroes:

The mana-personality may try to work up a gleam in the eye or a special mystification of painted signs on his forehead, a costume, and a way of holding himself, but he is still *Homo sapiens*, standard vintage, practically indistinguishable from others unless one is especially interested in him. The mana of the mana-personality is in the eyes of the beholder; the fascination is in the one who experiences it. (p. 128)

Becker is underlining the reality of the inner world, and the immense capacity and propensity of human beings to construct a symbolic world and be convinced of the “objective truth” of this construction. Building on Becker here, we wish to point out that behind each of these colossal figures stand generations of humanity, history, traditions, cultural aspirations, and geographic factors: dimensions many are prone to forget as they slip inexorably into the cul-de-sac of parataxic distortion. Consider the present-day dalai lama, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Jetsun Jamphel Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso. The whole nation of Tibet and its karmic tradition of dalai lama re-incarnation is invested in nurturing and educating this one person. Fully knowing the vast network of interdependence and interpenetration, as understood by Buddhist philosophy, the Dalai Lama himself does not seem to be deluded and “puffed up” about his singular heroism. (Of course, our view could be evidence of our own parataxic distortions.) However, his deep humility presumably is born of the foundational Buddhist understanding of interdependence and interpenetration of the phenomenal world.

Each human being, however ordinary and limited, is—all the same—a product of a vast network and lineage of interdependence and interpenetration of people, culture, history, and geography. Each individual is the current endpoint of every ancestor who preceded them. Even more viscerally, humans are pack animals whose survival depends on close teamwork of bonding and support. This suggests that human existence, let alone flourishing, is not possible without the collective effort of well-bonded individuals caring for and nurturing each other in all dimensions of beingness: physical, social, energetic, volitional, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. The pervasive anxiety and insecurity that characterize the existential-psychological states of being for contemporary humanity speak precisely to what is often missing: lack of adequate and sufficient collective caring and nurturing. This, in turn, highlights the core of what is missing: strongly bonded relationships and networks of relationships that support both individual and collective optimal growth and sustenance. Unfortunately, what occurs is the outcome that is represented by many human beings who are psychologically and emotionally wounded to a greater or lesser extent as a result of the insufficiency

of early relationships that **did not** and could not provide the loving, caring, and nurturing that was **needed**. Evidence for this is all too painfully obvious on the streets of cities where **there are increasing** numbers of homeless people. This lack also shows up in classrooms, counselling offices, and in our homes. Everywhere, and most centrally in both the individual and collective psyche, existential-psychological insecurity—that is the outcome of the lacunae of validation, love, care, modelling, and experience of deep relationship—is evident.

Today, with the ever-increasing complexity that affects human lives, it seems to take far more than a village to raise a child. And yet in many instances children are being raised by a single parent and often without the support of extended families. It is possible to purchase various kinds of social and commercial services, but that certainly is not the same as strongly bonded, caring personal relationships that provide support and guidance and that can facilitate, cultivate, and nurture human growth and development. We propose that the next and crucial step to a more perspicacious understanding of humanity is to give up what is, in our view, the outdated as well as unsustainable notion of single individuals as leaders. Without falling into another illusion of collectivity that negates individuality (Ogilvy, 1992), we need to embrace the primacy of intersubjectivity. We are individuals within the context of relationships. Without the *other* we would exist as a singularity. This latter is a fictitious construction that, depending on your perspective, either is not possible and/or seriously obstructs human inter-relatedness that is vital to human flourishing. Yet, the logic of apparent impossibility notwithstanding, it seems that many are trapped in a vision of themselves as singular individuals. Barry Magid (2002/2005)—a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and Zen Buddhist teacher—describes the human existential situation of isolation and alienation in graphic terms:

We try to put up a shield between ourselves and life, thinking to protect ourselves from suffering. And these shields do work in their way, and perhaps at vulnerable times in our lives, we've felt we couldn't live without them. But ultimately they turn from being walls that protect to walls that imprison. One day we wake up and realize that we've crawled into a glass bottle to hide and now we don't know how to get out. (p. 45)

Notions of leadership in any sphere, including education, parenting, the workforce, or governance seem to lack this understanding about the primacy of relationship. We wonder if what leaders as singular persons attempt to provide—security, wisdom, guidance, facilitation, and role-modelling—is in actuality exemplifying the opposite of what the complexity of a postmodern world requires: relationship as teacher. Mind you, the primacy of relationship has been a part of the world's many wisdom traditions, including the previously mentioned African concept (*ubuntu*) of needing a village to raise a child. One person standing up as a leader most obviously does not stand up (pun intended) well to the

words of Jesus—a super icon of heroic singularity—who seemed to have had a deep insight about the fundamental reality of human intersubjectivity: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20; Schuyler, 1952). Also, as already mentioned, the core teaching of Buddhism is about our interdependence and interpenetration—as Thich Nhat Hahn (1993) renames it, *interbeing*—of all phenomena, including humanity. The historical Buddha challenged his students to find an independent self, an *I*. Buddha’s students, as well as our contemporaries steeped in *New Science* and postmodern thoughts, have confirmed that what we call *I* is really a matrix of relationships and a dynamic site of interpenetration and transformation within such matrix. Indeed, it is ironic that the two major teachers who taught intersubjectivity, Christ and Buddha, have progressively over millennia been constructed into super heroes worshipped by their followers. The message of these teachers seems to have been subsumed and consumed, as Becker (1997) points out, by a collective un-consciousness that has a voracious appetite and will for attributing god-like powers to these two very human and humane beings.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1970) encapsulated this critical understanding about human intersubjectivity: “All actual life is encounter” (p. 62). Throughout his celebrated book, *I and Thou*, Buber returns again and again to the crucial importance of human encounter: The tangible realization and substantial enactment of interbeing and creative transformation can only lie in the space between individuals and their discrete subjectivity, in intersubjectivity. We understand *substantial* to mean the nature of encounter that involves a knowing of the other and being known by the other in a multiplicity of integrated dimensions (intellect, emotions, body, and spirit) with a reciprocity and simultaneity to this knowing. Buber’s (1970) articulation of these dimensions and how they manifest is rich and precise:

The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation. There are three spheres in which the world of relation arises.

The first: life with nature. Here the relation vibrates in the dark and remains below language. The creatures stir across from us, but they are unable to come to us, and the You we say to them sticks to the threshold of language.

The second: life with men. Here the relation is manifest and enters language. We can give and receive the You.

The third: life with spiritual beings. Here the relation is wrapped in a cloud but reveals itself, it lacks but creates language. We hear no You and yet feel addressed; we answer—creating, thinking, acting; with our being we speak the basic word, unable to say You with our mouth. (pp. 56–57)

The dimensions of intellect, emotion, body, and spirit are all included in knowing possibilities. We note that Buber’s invocation of language, as a dimen-

sion of encounter, is in line with the basics of Karen Meyer's (2010) pedagogy of *Living Inquiry*. She identifies the dimensions of time, place, language, and "self-other" as central factors that affect the encounter. We believe that only substantial encounters in the relational matrix have the power of transforming how and who we are. Hence, the most powerful and authentic transformative agent of teaching and leadership is not the individual teachers and leaders, but rather the relationships—the in-between spaces of meeting—that they create and the relational encounters they both represent and facilitate. We believe that the time has come for humanity to move out of the stage of the individual leader and teacher. What is now required are relationships that are multi-dimensional and a central part of what teaches, facilitates, and leads. We propose and illustrate in our dialogue below that while a person can learn and grow in relationship, which we certainly believe, a relationship based on mutual learning and growth is itself a teacher. Two-or-more individuals within a group will supply the most important learning through the nature and process of the relationship between them.

Below is a record of a multi-faceted encounter between the two authors of this chapter. Our intention with this dialogue is to illustrate our thesis of intersubjectivity being the most transformative teaching agent. We invite you, the reader, to see what shows up and what you might learn from this relational encounter on matters that matter in our lives. Here are some guideposts as to what relationship itself can teach:

1. The how and what of engagement with the other(s)
2. A sensitivity to the other and how that facilitates respect
3. The reality of connection between beings, along with the how and what of such connection
4. The innate complexity of deep communication and connection (Cohen, 2004)
5. The nature and value of expression of feeling
6. The meaning and use of feedback in relationship.

## Relationship as Teacher

*Heesoon Bai (HB):* When I look back at the almost seven years that I have been with you, what stands out to me is just how transformative my learning and growth has been, and how all this took place within the matrix of intense and rich relationship that you and I built and continue to build between and around ourselves. The relationship we have built is the alchemical cauldron that transformed the everyday

materials—our experience of **tension**, conflict, confusion, and despair—as well as joy and excitement **about our** experience, our personal insights, and our growth. At times, more **often than** not at the beginning of our relationship, our relationship cauldron **was not big enough** or strong enough to handle the heat of all the crude matters of life we were cooking. We had some rough moments; moments when I **thought**, either the pot was going to explode (what a mess!) or fizzle, turn cold, and **nothing** will come out of it (what a sad disappointment that would have been). However, each time we persisted in shedding light on our own personal Shadow,<sup>2</sup> the cauldron was strengthened and enlarged. As the pot became larger and stronger through the process, the more base and subtle material it could handle.

*Avraham Cohen (AC):* I believe that the alchemical process is deeply influenced by the attitude of the alchemist(s). What I have learned is that my attitude is not exactly the—lovely, kind, compassionate, especially the “nice”—one that I always imagined to be central. I see that we are involved in multiple ways. We are the alchemists, the raw material, and the container. At times, it turns out, my contribution has emerged from my dark side. I have poked holes in the container, further fouled a brew that was already foul, and had attitudes and feelings that can only be described as less than constructive. I recall an incident in earlier times when we first started to co-author papers. I was the first author, or so I thought. After I gave you my initial draft I received the document back from you, filled with revision and changes. I was shocked. I couldn’t recognize my work. I quickly returned the paper telling you that I had only made one change. You were shocked to find out that the one change was the removal of my name from the paper. This turned out to be my way of cranking up the temperature, stirring the ingredients, and pushing out the walls of the container. I felt that you did not understand what I was doing and did not appreciate me or my efforts. I was determined to make a strong impact on you, and to let you know that I was not going to be a pushover, and that I had some important things to say. It turned out that I was in the process of learning more about my personal psychological structure than I ever imagined possible.

*HB:* I can say exactly the same. I have learned an immense amount about myself during our relationship, which bespeaks its intensity and richness: how my identity is put together, where the cracks and fault lines in my personality are, where my knife of competency can either heal or kill. I really saw all my Shadow materials spilling out, at times uncontrollably and seemingly interminably. The co-authorship incident you mention above turned me inside out, too. I was shocked by your reaction, which precipitated the usual chain of flight/fright/freeze response, which, in my case, usually starts with the freeze and ends up as a fight response! I

witnessed again and again what my reactive pattern is: shock and aggression. And I kept defending this particular reactivity pattern by justifying its necessity and legitimacy—I can and did argue until the light went on in my understanding that this pattern had been role-modelled for me in my family, and that I was trained to respond to challenges first by freezing (shock) and then by fighting (aggression). This whole process of witnessing and gaining understanding took place in our personal cauldron that was becoming increasingly hotter.

AC: The jet fuel of you and me was very hot; at times hotter than I thought I could bear, but bear it I have, and so have you. I am reminded of many presentations we did together, both at conferences, and in the mindfulness workshops that we developed. In these arenas the outcome of our heat emerged. I was struck from the outset by the fact that we received at least as much feedback about how we related to each other as we did about the content of our presentations. This further strengthened my growing conviction about the idea of relationship as teacher. I believe that our audiences could see that we were not two individuals coordinating but one unit of relationship that was working very hard on what mattered to us both individually and collectively, and on our collaborative contribution. My sense from these occasions was that people were seeing something unfamiliar to which they were drawn (or perhaps repelled in some cases), and they wanted to learn more.

HB: What was fantastic for me is that all that I theorized and wrote about the Buddhist philosophy of *interbeing* (Hahn, 1993) or interdependence finally became very real for me, sometimes very painfully real, and, at times I felt I had hit a concrete wall! And these moments of awareness—that I was challenged to live what I wrote about—were both fulfilling and humbling experiences as I could plainly see my shortcomings, blind spots, incongruencies, and even duplicities. I could not just dismiss them with the usual platitude of “nobody is perfect” or “we all break down now and then.” They were too persistent and systemic, and at times too ugly, for me to just respond with a sheepish grin. I thought your re-working of Parker Palmer’s (1998) line, “We teach who we are” (p. 1) to “We teach who we are not, and that’s the problem” was just priceless! I am not an exception to the problem you are identifying here. I came to see increasingly that so many educators, my colleagues included, are mired in this problem, which collectively has a huge personal impact on all those we teach, guide, lead, and try to support. Indeed, *teaching* here often happens not explicitly and intentionally but implicitly and without the alleged intention. It’s most unlikely that an educator or parent explicitly and intentionally says that they will “screw up” a student or a kid. My father did not mean to teach me to go into anger and rage when confronted with frustrating and painful challenges, but that’s the patterned behaviour

that I watched time and again as I was growing up, and in the absence of **other**, better coping responses to **challenges**, that pattern subtly imprinted itself in **my** unconscious and made **itself** available to me in those unguarded moments **when** I was bereft of any better defence mechanisms. None of this understanding **would** have come to the surface **so** compellingly if our formidable relationship cauldron was not there, ready to receive, hold, process, and feed what's cooked back to **us** (which sometimes caused chokes and hiccups) in order to nourish our **growth**. Hence my growing understanding and conviction that relationship is the teacher.

AC: I am very appreciative of your openness about your own life and your willingness to share these vulnerable personal experiences. It is great to be able to have this dialogue about your insights about yourself. I firmly believe that this openness, yours and mine, is directly related to the capacity building of our relationship and its extension into the network of other relationships we are building together. We had this idea that we could build a relationship that could teach us deeply, and we put our faith and trust into, and worked very hard to create, such relationship. We are now seeing more and more, in concrete terms, how such relationship works.

For my own part of learning through our relationship work, confronting your anger gave me the opportunity to revisit my own fears about being on the receiving end of anger, and also my own experience that was really about my fear of the damage I could perpetrate with my own anger. I remember well the exact moment in a Gestalt therapy session many decades ago where I realized that I feared that I might murder someone in a moment of anger and realized within seconds that I didn't have to, that I had choice and that I could choose to feel my anger and not act in ways that would damage others while I was trying to get rid of my excruciating feeling. As Janet Dallett (1991) so wisely put it:

I saw, too, that my willingness to crucify myself on dark impulses and emotions distinguishes me from the criminal, who merely acts on them. (p. 11)

And:

I want it to be clear that emotion is not what is sacrificed, but rather the acting out of godlike power. It is crucial not to repress or deny emotion, but to endure it until it changes in its own way. (p. 120)

It takes a strong psychic cauldron to hold and cook powerful emotions. When two or more people come together and create a communal cauldron, the transformative power of the brew increases exponentially. The well-known idea that the whole is more than the sum of its parts applies here. The relationship of two or more teaches far more than what each person can teach by themselves.



## Coda

The braids of the métissage stories in *Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our Time* (Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009) tightly correspond to our idea of relationship as teacher.<sup>3</sup> Our individual histories and stories weave into one tapestry along with the lingering strands of all those with whom we are also connected. We are “Sojourners Sojourning” (p. 97); “All Our Tangled Relations” (p. 127) continue to further tangle, disentangle, and re-entangle. We are learning from our increasingly blended and nourishing stories, and in that sense our “Stories Take Care of Us” (p. 151). We have encountered some “Dangerous Strokes” (p. 175), and from these encounters we have learned the most. And finally the sum total that is still being totalled is our growing capacity for “Opening to the World” (p. 203). So much said here and so much more in the gaps between. For now we will wrap up our dialogue about relationship as teacher.

What has become evident to both of us through this process of writing is that it is not easy to convey these living experiences in textual form, and that it is important to do so. A major challenge has been to convey the feeling or tone of each of us individually and both of us collectively. Of course, we don't know if our thesis that relationship itself is the teacher/leader is evident to our readers or not. What we have learned through the process of writing this paper is that everything we do, including this writing, leads to a deepening process between us. The major theme that has emerged is that there is no end point to this exploration and that the aliveness of the process between us is in an ongoing process of development. By writing this paper we hope to encourage you, our readers, to explore the possibilities of relationship in your own lives, both personally and professionally.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 The tendency to conflate inner reality with what is external in the world, and, in particular with what is believed about a person.
- 2 This is a concept from Jungian psychology that refers to all that is out of conscious awareness of a person.
- 3 All quotations in this paragraph are headings from *Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our Times*.

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