



**IPA Webinar, 17<sup>th</sup> November 2023**

# **The almost impossible and the absolutely needed science and art of listening to the other**

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When we consider the history of humankind, it is possible to identify some periods that are named a golden age in each different civilization, when the arts, science, philosophy, human relations, and justice, are developed in a predominantly creative and stimulating way. What we currently call humanity, human values, human rights, are possibly the outcome of what has been jointly produced in each of these periods, thus building a legacy that is constantly threatened by the presence of the death drive, described by Freud.

Among his many contributions to the understanding of the human mind and behavior, I would like particularly to stress his insights on the continuous internal struggle between love and hate and the ways this tension produces powerful unconscious mental mechanisms (among them splitting, denial, projection, projective identification) that can lead to different expressions of hatred, violence, and war. This internal struggle is significantly influenced by the way early upbringing contributes to fostering aggression or, alternatively, to developing and enhancing the capacity for love and consideration for others.



This means that a lifelong process of mental growth begins with the quality of the mother-child relationship, together with the presence of a father figure (or some equivalent), essential in supporting in the development of the reality principle. The family and the community then hold, stimulate and assist in the capacity of the individual to think independently and to transform primitive feelings into the expression of civilized relations with others.

This process of development of subjectivity needs, ideally, optimum or at least reasonable internal and external conditions. When democratic and open social structures are lacking, significant damage may occur.

Analytic treatment of victims of the Holocaust, of other genocides, dictatorships, situations of abuse or different expressions of violence demonstrates how these traumatic events are psychically integrated and represented. Often there is unresolved mourning and the inability to symbolize. These deficits in mental processes can be and often are passed on across the generations, only to reemerge subsequently in later generations. The terrorist attack of Hamas against unarmed Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, with its horrors and inhumanity being filmed by the own perpetrators, was a tragic example of such evil, and produced, as it was possibly intended, a strong and deadly reaction that exponentially increased the death and suffering of unarmed Palestinian civilians.

What we are witnessing now is a moment of acute toxic polarization, as it happened in other historical moments, but currently taking advantage of undeniable progress in technology and ways of producing fake news with sophisticated resources.

When lies and misdemeanors are perceived as sanctioned social values within a culture, for instance the different forms of prejudice manifested through racism, a lack of respect for women, minorities, the elderly and immigrants, this can produce transgenerational transmission. Currently we are witnessing an impressive surge of Anti-Semitism throughout the world. A newly established International Study Group of Anti-Semitism is precisely identifying the evolution and the current presence of this particular expression of hate.



The current situation in the world, with areas dominated by grinding poverty, ethnic wars, religious fundamentalism, urban violence, and other similar situations, produces trauma and violence which can only contribute to the transmission of more hatred and violence to future generations.

All these facts strongly demonstrate that there is an almost impossible science and art of listening to the other, which at the same time is absolutely needed.

The question that arises, in my view, is not why it is so difficult and sometimes impossible to listen to the other, but the opposite: how is it possible that sometimes this sort of almost miraculous achievement can occur in social, international, organizational, group and family relations?

Just to give some examples: how was it possible for Nelson Mandela and his contemporaries to establish and develop the process of forgiveness and reconciliation after a long period of apartheid and violence in South Africa? How was it possible for Martin Luther King and his collaborators, both Black and White, to lead and make happen the movement of civil rights in the United States despite all its problems and ongoing struggles? How was it possible, in the psychoanalytic world, for Shmuel and Mira Erlich and Herman Beland to put together German and Israeli and Jewish psychoanalysts to create a special conference setting, in which each group could face its own deeply held prejudices, assumptions and beliefs in the presence of the other group, thus facing the reality of past atrocities? How was it possible that in 2004 the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said and the Argentinian-Israeli pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim were able to create the Barenboim–Said Foundation, where Israeli and Palestinian children and adolescents learn to listen to each other, play together and produce high quality concerts? How was it possible that a group of Brazilian analysts organized themselves in the project SOS Brazil in order to offer holding and an analytic listening for an impressive amount of adults and children with psychic suffering during the terrible period of the pandemic in our country?



All of these and many other initiatives were and are possible when some kind of listening to the other was and is put into action. In order to arrive at this apparently impossible achievement, we need to acknowledge our shared helplessness, or *Hilflosigkeit* described by Freud, and the fact that we inhabit the same pale blue dot described by Carl Sagan (referring to our shared planet Earth, just a grain of sand in the Universe); to acknowledge that the other, the stranger, that we perceive as and so often transform into the enemy, shares the same fears, wishes, concerns; to have a humble look into ourselves and to have the courage of identifying our own defensive maneuvers of narcissism, splitting, projection and self-idealization.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, we understand the need to produce and play new sounds, the sounds that can only be heard when collaborative efforts put together different people with differing values and prejudices in order to build tolerance and new ways of working and living together.

All these considerations may seem naïf and even ridiculous.

Yes, indeed they may be.

But I am in good company, because the greatest Brazilian poet, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, once wrote:

*Stupid, ridiculous and fragile is my heart  
It lacks space even for my pains  
This is why I bare myself, expose myself bluntly in bookstores  
I need everyone.*