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Lisa C. Beritzhoff

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Psychoanalysis in the Meantime

Lisa C. Beritzhoff, M.F.T.

Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California, San Francisco, California, USA

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the psychic toll the migratory, humanitarian crisis is exacting on the self (and its sacred core) of displaced people worldwide, specifically young children and adolescents, who are currently being held in transit camps. The sacred core is Winnicott's elaboration of the true self and that which is most deeply personal and private, and "most worthy of preservation". For exiles held in detention, the self and its core are in urgent need of protection and recognition, as they struggle to exist in what I refer to as *The Meantime*. The Meantime is when migratory mourning stretches to infinity, resulting in extreme dissociation, or depersonalization, that becomes a collective way of life that destroys reality and the self. In order for the self and reality to survive *The Meantime*, relationships with "need mediating subjects," whom I call *The Responsibles*, must be created.

Introduction

Our world is fracturing—civil society is unraveling before our eyes. On every continent, people en masse are attempting to escape persecution and death as a result of war, despotic leaders and governments, violent and organized criminal gangs, terrorist groups, and climate change—all of which are tyrannizing people across the world. We are in the midst of a worldwide breakdown of sociopolitical order as nationalist and populist currents inflame our differences, forcing people to run for their lives and opening the door to trauma, writ-large.

People of various religious beliefs, races, and ethnicities now form a mosaic of humans on the move. The United Nations last reported that over 71 million people worldwide were forced to leave their homes, half of them children and adolescents and the most vulnerable among us (Belsiou, 2016; Picheta, 2019). Never before in the history of our planet have so many people been compelled to search for safe haven. Most are considered exiles rather than immigrants; they have little choice but to leave their homes, without preparation or hope for a return, to flee violence and catastrophic sociopolitical unrest (Akhtar, 1999; Andreucci, 2019; Achotegui, 2019; Harris, 2019; Orfanos, 2019). Whether immigrant or exile, asylum seeker or refugee, displaced people are despairing and desperate—yet, perhaps, the most resolute and resilient, too, as their strength and determination to live and restore meaning to life is unparalleled.

As displaced peoples make their way to more "developed" nations, the fortunate who survive the migration journey arrive on foreign land, unwanted and unwelcome, and

quickly become the disavowed and undesirable “other.” The moniker “refugee” is immediately ascribed to them for what might be . . . in perpetuity.

In one fell swoop of attribution, classification, and rejection, the refugee’s subjectivity is swallowed whole. In the eyes of the cruel-minded, the displaced person becomes another number added to “the polluting multitudes” (Shelley, 1845, p. 346). However, most citizens of the world are paralyzed by a global “evasion” (Levinas, 1947/1978) of where large populations are incapable of seeing or responding to the refugee crisis—a collective dissociation, if you will; the type of dissociation that Donnel Stern (2010) refers to “as an active defensive refusal to formulate experience” (p. 646); the kind that blinds eyes to dehumanizing atrocities and neglect, creating bystanders the world over. The humanitarian migration crisis is so massive and threatening that concerned citizens throughout the world feel helpless, overwhelmed and impotent to change the status quo. As a result, we turn away, not around; we move backward, not forward—disabled to confront it. Meanwhile, governments and politicians maneuver to keep the crisis “contained”—far out of sight, failing to find dignified solutions to include “the other”—in state (and in self), as personal subjectivity —“the ultimate reach of a sense of humanness” (Searles, 1960, p. 55)—continues to be assaulted. Currently, in refugee camps across the world, “living conditions are so deplorable that Pope Francis likened it to how prisoners were treated in concentration camps during WWII” (Magra, 2018, p. 1).

This collective evasion, or dissociation, differs from that of exiles. For the exile, multiple traumas inflicted by both individuals and states result in depersonalization, when the body splits from a legible self that can be felt, is knowable, and connected to its core. It is often accompanied by a bitter deadening of affect (Guralnik & Simeon, 2010), making refugee camps claustrophobic cities that produce the walking dead. Achotegui (2019) describes how migrants living in interminable exile undergo processes of “extreme migratory mourning” (p. 252). Eng and Han (2019) document a mode of “racial dissociation” among parachute children who inhabit a “psychic nowhere.” In the nowhere land that I will call “*The Meantime*,” the time of migratory mourning stretches to infinity and extreme dissociation becomes a collective way of life.

Once on foreign land, asylum seekers are corralled behind a chain-linked fence under a freeway or on a deserted, arid island—or sequestered in abandoned buildings on the outer margins of a city, where unaccompanied children exist alongside large populations of feral cats. Others are colonized inside former prisons—like Camp Moria, Greece, designed to hold criminals, not survivors of terror—where they quickly become criminalized for being unwelcome. The exile, when held in detention, is unable to pick up in any meaningful way what or who has been lost or left behind. For the displaced, the self and dimensions of time and space—the very ground of experience that binds psychic reality—are under constant threat of annihilation. Here, the self clings to *The Meantime*, not now or then, neither here nor there; no place to move from, no place to land; no place for living.

The Meantime robs the self of a dwelling place and the ability to be affectively (and effectively) alive. The Meantime is both external and psychic: transit camps and detention centers were initially meant to be temporary way stations for refugees from the global south, escaping violence and death in search of asylum in a new country in the global north. Characterized to be liminal in nature and design, they now resemble prisons—prisons for survivors of trauma. Exiles are forced to live in squalid conditions, subsisting on the bare minimum of provisions. Psychically, The Meantime is interminable incertitude filled with

existential terror as a result of death encounters and repeated assaults, past and present, enforced helplessness, meaninglessness, and an excess of unmourned loss. It is where depersonalization rules the day and “primitive agonies” are on full display, but mostly go unseen to the outside world.

In this paper, I hope to offer examples from on-the-ground experiences I had and interviews I conducted with adolescents and young adult refugees and relief workers from the transit camp in Moria, on the island of Lesbos, Greece. They demonstrate the shattering effects of the unmetabolizable excesses of trauma, hopelessness and despair that threaten to destroy the self when displaced persons are imprisoned in refugee detention centers around the world and have little hope for an open future. But the main focus of my discussion turns in another direction, as I hope to describe how it is possible to *preserve* and offer resilience to the self and its “sacred core” (Winnicott, 1963), that which is most “absolutely personal” within us, in *The Meantime*. For Winnicott, the sacred core is “a sacred incommunicado center . . . and is most worthy of preservation” (p. 187). It is also “the source of feeling alive and real” (Kalshed, 2015, p. 493). It is reliant on subjective objects and transitional ones, and generative object relations to nourish and safeguard it, as is the self. I imagine the sacred core to be the sentient seat of subjectivity, where truth, personal and ultimate, unite, to hold that which is *most dear*.

The psychoanalytic research of Robert Lifton, who investigated the effects of trauma but moved away from Freud’s concept of the death instinct, focuses on the study of survival and the survivor. Paradoxically, he brings death and its multiple meanings and influences into the center of his theory. Of the many valuable insights that came of his research into WWII Hiroshima survivors, one concerns the lasting effects of death encounters:

Death transforms anything and everything. To take in death, and be open to it always means assessing what is ultimate, significant, or as one of the people years ago in our study put it, “what counts.” One asks the question of what really matters in one’s life. It has to do with what is most powerful, most life affirming, and what can survive one’s own death. (Caruth, 2014, p. 5)

In *The Meantime*, what counts is “going on being” (Winnicott, 1960, p. 143) of self and sacred core, and the creation of symbolic immortality (Lifton, 1979)— to carry forward *and* leave behind that which is most meaningful, which is at once both deeply personal and social (Peltz, 2009). For many exiles, symbolic immortality means carrying forward the living and symbolic legacy of one’s family, of those they left behind.

Laub and Auerhahn (1989), in their seminal research on holocaustal trauma, posit that in order for the traumatized to heal, “the link between self and other must be rebuilt” (p. 392). But in *The Meantime* the self continues to be traumatized and threatened with destruction and is severely challenged to *hold onto* any link between self and other, let alone rebuild it. Left to survive, individuals and families have limited opportunity to be witnessed—where a project of repair and reverence, and a willingness to know the truth of the other (Grand, 2015) can be undertaken. Instead, a related but more foundational project must be taken up: to keep open *the capacity* for the self to reestablish links with other subjects and avoid despair giving way to an all-consuming apathy that eviscerates the self’s instinctual life force and the mind’s ability to think (Alvarez, 2012; Beritzhoff, 2018) and leads to depersonalization or autistic or schizoid defense.

So much goes into the understanding and treatment of trauma, on so many levels. The level I am addressing here, unfortunately, is not about moving traumatic experience(s) out of the

mind's dissociative silos and into the symbolic of narrative and meaning—for analyst and patient to partner and psychically metabolize and transform the fallout of unbearable experience and rebuild a self and a life in the aftermath of a destructive relational upbringing or experience. It is not about patient and analyst creating an experience of healing. It is bringing what we have learned psychoanalytically about the development of self, and that which fosters intersubjectivity, intentionality, and temporality to the hellscape of these camps. It is about how to call out “the violent courage of life” (Arendt, 1943/2008, p. 264) and preserve the self and the sacred core—“that which is most worthy of preservation” (Winnicott, 1963, p. 188).

The Responsibles

For the subject to continue to move (Beritzhoff, 2018; Milner, 1969) a “need mediating” partnership with another subject must be created with a fellow exile or humanitarian aid worker, or both, whom I refer to as *The Responsibles*. If “life in time begins when there is another person there . . . one who offers ‘sympathetic responses’ . . . and who has kept the space open enough that there *is* room to move” (Seligman, 2016, p. 216), it is also sustained by a similar, “companioning” (Grossmark, 2016) and mirroring process. In *The Meantime*, that “other person there” is a Responsible. Responsibles act as “need mediating objects” (Cohen, 1985, p. 163), or subjects, that assist in preserving psychic reality and support and sustain the motivational systems of the self (Lichtenberg et al., 2001), including personal agency. Responsibles partner with the exile to rebuild trust and safety in self and object relations, bringing a level of coherence and organization to the self while imprisoned. Equally significant, Responsibles can mitigate the deleterious effects of timelessness and depersonalization by enlivening the psychesoma through play and by re-engaging intersubjective relatedness that awakens the internal object-tie.

For Responsibles acting-in *The Meantime* (whether they be fellow exiles or humanitarian aid workers or “house mothers and fathers” who care for unaccompanied children in shelters), the very basic preservation of self is interdependent and intersubjective. Indeed, it is imperative to be, oneself, in *The Meantime* to provide responsible care. Lila Watson, an aboriginal activist, academic and artist, once said: “If you come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (Aboriginal activists group Queensland, 1970s). As long as this migratory humanitarian crisis continues to ravage the self *and* the humane, no subject is free, no sacred core secure. All are diminished. But it is the life and self of the refugee that is lost. Humanity has collectively failed to create a revolution of the heart that has the capacity to change minds and immigration policies, to *respond* to basic human rights and needs of persons who are forced to flee their homelands—desperate to hold onto life, meaning, and self. We who move more or less freely in the Global North are *implicated* and need to assume responsibility.

And yet, moving beyond humanitarian concern to becoming a need-mediating object is more complicated than meets the eye. In this paper, I reserve the term Responsible for need-mediating subjects acting-in *The Meantime* who *respond* to the needs of the self and assist in the preservation of its sacred core, who recognize and respect the dignity, autonomy, and subjectivity of persons, and are answering for a failed humanitarian, socio-political response to the migration crisis (Brown, 2015). In this sense, to be a *responsible* subject is different from being a concerned subject though the terms are easily collapsed. The Latin word for

responsibility is *responsibilis*, which means *to answer for*. When applying the root meaning of the word to the idea of “Responsibles,” it can also refer to privileged White citizens and governments from the global north who, historically and in the present day, perhaps acting on genuine concern, *answer for, or assume responsibility over the suffering other*” (Levinas, 1969) from the global south. From the remove provided by concern, *answering for* another subject determines their fate and claims control over their life. This manner of donning responsibility for “other” ethnic and religious groups—predominantly communities of color—be it consciously or unconsciously, renders them abject. Though some of these efforts to take responsibility may be ethical and beneficial, most further the colonization and exploitation of minds, bodies, and lands of those from developing countries. Wittingly, or unwittingly, they enroll other into socio-political systems and societies that assert White privilege and status.

The complicated Responsible

My journey from implicated subject burdened by a feeling of responsibility to complicated Responsible began in the summer of 2019. I became a volunteer for Refugee Education and Learning International, or “REAL,” where I conducted informal research on the psychological services currently being offered to unaccompanied boys and girls from the refugee transit camp located in the small Greek village of Moria. I also signed up to teach unaccompanied girls how to swim—in the Aegean Sea, the same sea they crossed by boat to arrive in Europe, the sea they navigated on the final leg of their dangerous migration journey.

Before I left for Greece, I had much trepidation. I was fearful that what I was about to observe and experience would lead to too much excess in me, as I knew I was entering into the traumatic of a kind that was unknown to me. I imagined I would be upended by grief, sadness, deep sorrow, rage, despair, and disgust—what human kind is capable of—after reading and watching from afar reports on the refugee crisis. I was aware I would be a witness to trauma up close, but have little opportunity to *offer* witness. I was unable to assume my psychoanalyst role, to enter into a healing project and a setting that I have come to rely on to navigate and contain, in the Bionian sense of the word, the effects of catastrophic human lived experience.

I was also aware that as a volunteer humanitarian worker from the global north, I was an

... implicated subject ... a subject that occupies positions aligned with power and privilege, who have indirectly benefited from systemic racism, colonialism, and historical injustices, without themselves being a direct agent of harm; [...] but nevertheless, are participants in and beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and unequal experiences of trauma and well being simultaneously. (Rothberg, 2019, p. 12)

I was aware that my class, race, and country (White, middle-class, multi-generation American) made me a passive participant and beneficiary of Anglo injustice and exploitation. My privilege is inherited and derived from many of the same oppressive, discriminatory systems of government and society that imprison people in The Meantime and create vast gulfs of inequality—often reflected in the humanitarian aid worker–refugee relationship. My subjectivity and its location occupy multiple, intersectional positions: some relating to the oppressor and others to the oppressed. I am a complicated and conflicted

subject, similar to other global north citizens of the world, aid workers, and some exiles, who offer assistance to displaced people and whose motivations are multitudinous, conscious, and unconscious, and often in conflict.

And yet, what compelled me to volunteer to go to Greece and work with unaccompanied children was not dominated by a motivation to repair what I was implicitly *responsible for* or had a *responsibility to do*. Affective states of implicit guilt and shame, that which derives from being “implicated,” if they had been in the foreground of my consciousness when I signed up, would have had me stay in retreat and not move me forward. Guilt and shame were in the shadows and lived in the preconscious, on the borderline of consciousness. Rather, I felt a visceral, gut need to *respond to* my own states of overwhelming helplessness and despair, after reading about and watching media on the migratory humanitarian crisis that was unfolding in real time.

At the time, I had difficulty grounding or psychically working through these states. They caught me by surprise, having never experienced the refugees’ trauma, nor had I been impacted by intergenerational trauma. One could think of it as empathic resonance or projective identification at a distance, or one could simply see it as humanity calling for its own survival, from within and without. My own analysis helped me process this experience, but the transformation of it radically changed me. In fact, the more I processed feelings of despair that felt untethered to my past and current experiences, reflections on my privilege and Whiteness moved from being a conflict that I wrestled with and was uncomfortable about to becoming something more; something that “carried all the sense of real” (Winnicott, 1963, p. 189) and something I needed to reckon with in a very immediate way. It was only later, after I began my interviews with exiles and the unaccompanied girls that my affective states of guilt and shame concerning my complicated and implicated privilege moved from background to foreground, from troubling internal conflict, and something of an analytic object, to full-on mental suffering.

Once in Greece, I had arranged a number of interviews with displaced persons. One day I met with a young male exile, whose homeland was a country located on the Arabian peninsula. We met at a small cafe in the village of Moria, just outside the camp. It was a quiet spot, which afforded some degree of privacy. Although he spoke little English, and I spoke no Arabic, I had my phone in hand and the Google Translate app open—and hoped to make the best of it. After introductions and pleasantries, we began the interview in earnest. About 20 minutes into it, and not too long after our meal had arrived, he began to disclose, in horrifying detail, experiences of past and present traumas he had experienced both in his homeland and in Camp Moria. At one point, he paused to look down at my plate and noticed it was completely clean. Unconsciously anxious, I mindlessly had “inhaled” my meal shortly after it had arrived. Meanwhile, he had barely eaten. The moment I looked down at my empty plate, a storm of shame, guilt, and confusion began to roil within me. When I looked back at him an expression of deep concern crossed his face. He said, “Not enough? Please, take mine,” as he moved his plate toward mine. At that point, I was unmoored; I struggled to explain that it wasn’t hunger that made me ravenous and mindless, but anxiety. What I said made no sense to either of us.

Now, looking back, I had convinced myself that the interview with this young man would provide a small opportunity for “witnessing,” both in real time and in this subsequent paper. But shortly after I began the interview, I became anxious when I realized my questions and inquiry might be cutting through the “scar tissue” of his trauma (Pizer, 2006) and could

leave him re-wounded and abandoned again, with no one there alongside him to help him suffer and transmute it. I was anxious I might be exploiting him by having arranged this interview to gain information and knowledge for my research and paper, similar to how other psychoanalytic writers and researchers feel when using case material to elaborate their ideas. But my shame and guilt extended much deeper: I felt as if I were the “perpetrator/bystander/beneficiary” (Straker, 2011, p. 642). The legacy of White/Anglo injustice was indigestible in my gut. But nothing made sense in that moment, as I was incapable of translating confusional anxiety into meaning and words—in any language.

Today, that moment continues to deeply impact me, and it will always amaze me. The expression I saw on his face when he looked at my empty plate and then looked back up at me, was one of genuine, human concern. But I had been expecting ridicule, which was disorienting. I did not understand how the authentic, spontaneous gesture of the generous of heart had not been extinguished in someone who had been robbed and denied of so much life and freedom. It left me awestruck and feeling wholly inadequate.

I realize multiple, overlapping psychoanalytic meanings inform this poignant exchange, including examples of mutual dissociation, projective identification, witnessing, unmetabolized pain, lack of containment and unconscious White privilege. The exchange was a micro-representation and enactment of the would-be Responsible who *answers for* the “suffering other”—a Responsible who is empty, even when full; obviously and voraciously consuming while the “other” works hard to restrain or dissociate genuine hunger; a Responsible, imagining generosity but unconsciously positioned toward exploitation. Fortunately, I was capable of repositioning once I woke up.

If this experience highlighted my conflicted and complicated subjectivity, it also offered an opportunity for deeper reflection and a working through. After hearing how this young man was able to survive his journey—the strength of his internal resources, the people who aided him along the way (many who were implicated subjects like myself)—it became clear to me that existential threats to self and the “urge to exist” (W. R. Bion, 1994, p. 169) exceed complicated intersubjective dynamics and relations, especially when physical and psychic mortality are at stake. In the moment “I AM” (Coleridge, 1817/1983, p. 750) drowning, and you reach out your hand, implicated or not, I care only that it’s true. When survival is at stake “everything counts” (Lifton, 1979) and *anyone* who can encourage and support “going on being,” while honoring the dignity and subjectivity of the other becomes an ally and a Responsible.

I realize this paper is positioned at the intersection of the sociopolitical and psychoanalytic, and many readers of this journal may wish me to tack more toward a sociopolitical perspective and examination of the refugee crisis. But I believe that would only position the implicated and complicated subject too much at the center of things, turning us away from the present day, existential crisis displaced people face (see also Orfanos, 2019). So I follow a phenomenological approach and inquiry in order to focus on the preservation of the exiles’ self and the sacred core while imprisoned in the *Meantime*.

Restoration of trust and safety in the Meantime

When I arrived on the island, my initial trepidations bore out; I was overwhelmed by what I saw and could take in. But what surprised me most about what I observed and experienced was that in the midst of profound misery and surrounded by multiple representations and

layers and levels of the traumatic, the resilient lived, too, poignantly captured by the young girls and women, from 5 to 18, whom I taught swimming. If “the creative spirit and resilience can live alongside emotional turmoil and conflict faced by survivors” (Gerson, 2018, p. 119), then these dozen or so girls, unaccompanied minors from Syria, Afghanistan, Congo, Guinea, Iran, Iraq, are a testament to that. They had traveled, on average, three to six years, after first leaving their country of origin. Their journey included many full stops, with no guarantees that migration would resume, numerous smugglers, more violence and trauma, dangers and hardships—all too horrific for them to name or reveal, except in bits and pieces, in the absence of a formal treatment—only to arrive in Greece and be transported to Camp Moria and eventually moved to a nearby shelter.

Two of the girls from Africa traveled six years before being imprisoned for months in a Turkish prison. Their crime was boarding a smuggler’s boat, attempting to complete the final leg of their journey, to cross the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece, and arrive in Europe, their final destination—but, as it turned out, not the Promised Land. These same girls came every day to the swimming lessons and looked forward to learning how to swim and to the delight they felt when playing together and with others in the water. When their heads would resurface from the sea, after an exercise of practicing “free-style” stroke, their smiles of pure joy and accomplishment seemed to light them up along with everything and everyone around them. They were playing, and the play served at once to restore and create the self (Beritzhoff, 2018; Winnicott, 1971), as they were determined to learn how to float and swim in the same sea that had swallowed up so many of their peers, whose boats had capsized as they attempted to cross the same stretch of water.

Two days after I arrived on Lesbos, a refugee boat had overturned just half a mile from where I was staying and near the spot where we taught the girls to swim. The news reports announced seven people had drowned, mostly children. The following day as the girls arrived for their swimming lesson, one of the girls was aware of what had happened the previous night and began to weep and shake, gripped in panic, as she told me and the other instructors and her friends, that she was afraid to go into the water. I told one of the girls, who also served as the translator to the group, to communicate to the young woman that it was in no way compulsory for her (or any of them) to go into the water that day; in fact, it probably was not wise to do so. Instead, I offered to stay with her on the beach while her friends took their lessons. She agreed, and as we sat quietly side by side on the shore, both of us overwhelmed by our own personal excesses the previous night’s tragedy had imposed, I struggled to be silently present for this young woman and attempted to contain the terror and grief that she was living and reliving. In reverie, I reached out to hold her. In reality, she reached toward me to be held. A place in her could still communicate need, to give and receive implicit and explicit communication and help from internal and external objects. She could use me to soothe her.

After a while, her tears subsided and she suddenly took my hand and held it tight, pulling us both up and leading us toward the water. I quickly called out to the young translator and asked her to tell our friend that I was concerned that it was not the time to enter into the water. They briefly spoke and the translator said, “She told me she wants to go. She doesn’t want to die like the others did; she wants to learn how to swim, and this is her chance. This is her time to learn.”

This young girl and I created a moment of *communion*, where “communication need not be explicit” (Winnicott, 1963, p. 182), but offered affect regulation that soothed the self,

enough to begin to restore *trust and safety in self and object*. The experience that this young girl and I shared on the beach may have enlisted her good internal objects to support the life force within her and reawakened a reliable internal object-tie, or subjective object. The communion of two can catalyze self-capacities in one—though not exclusively of the one—and reanimate internal objects (Alvarez, 2012). As a “need mediating object” (Responsible), I was able to partner with this young exile to co-create an experience of communion, offer empathy and succor that supported her courage *for life*. Her impulse to jump back into the water might be considered by some as a counter-phobic response and manic defense that defended against her fear, terror, and feelings of grief. Perhaps it was, but I saw it as a way to “overcome” (Alvarez, 2012) her death anxieties; the reality of drowning and death was all too real and near, and if knowing how to swim could help her survive in the future, she was determined to learn how.

To be clear, I am not in any way suggesting that what I offered, or the “third” that we momentarily created together, was equivalent to what occurs in psychoanalytic treatment—which assists patients in metabolizing and mentalizing traumatic experience that is defended by dissociative defenses, or establishes an analytic relationship of healing. However, what I offered may be, in part, the very stuff that supports resilience and the recovery of self-capacities and self-functioning. For instance, by co-creating a connection that builds trust and safety as a result of *responding to* the need of another strengthens the self-capacity for *intentionality*, meaning that “mental life is about things, connecting the individual mind to objects in the world, and thereby creating for the person the sense that there is a *there* there, rather than there being only fear, absence, emptiness, lifelessness” (Shane, 2016, p. 137). Intentionality creates personal agency and efficacy, and its foundation rests on a secure and responsive facilitating environment. The capacity for intersubjectivity—where subjects recognize other subjects, experience their separateness, and together create “a third,” rich with symbolic meaning and potential—presupposes having built some semblance of trust in early object-relatedness, and subsequent trust that the self’s separateness is not threatening or too threatening to the object but offers mutual growth (Aron, 1996).

The self-capacities of intentionality and intersubjectivity are dependent on time (temporality) and are interwoven and inseparable from it; time and space are the ground that frame and formulate our experience. However, when with an assault on dimensions of temporality and space, as occurs in the Meantime, psychic boundaries that delineate past, present, and future are unduly stressed and vulnerable to collapse, as one waits in interminable uncertainty for asylum and recognition of one’s personhood. When a postage-sized tent houses an entire family and a small room sleeps 12–15 unaccompanied men, or when individuals subsist on a stipend of 90 Euros a month, and a family a bit more, remaining an agent/subject with the ability to move through time and space is severely challenged, if not lost. This is *Madtime* and psychic reality hangs in the balance.

In a 2018 *New York Times* article that highlighted the refugee crisis, Dr. Alessandro Barberio—the lead psychiatrist at Camp Moria, where, at the time, 9,000 people lived in a space designed for 3,100 (as of January, 2020, the population has risen to 20,000 people), said this:

Moria has become a trigger for an acute expression of psychosis and post-traumatic stress disorder. Of the roughly 120 people my team has the capacity to treat, the vast majority have

been prescribed anti-psychotic medication . . . [T]he overcrowding is so extreme that asylum seekers spend as much as 12 hours a day waiting in line for food that is sometimes moldy. There are about 80 people for each shower, and around 70 per toilet, and aid workers complain about raw sewage leaking into tents where children are living. Sexual assaults, knife attacks, and suicide attempts are common. (Kingsley, 2018)

In “transit” camps and detentions centers across the global north, ongoing objectification and the interminable anonymity that accompanies refugee status combine to erase or diminish intrinsic aspects of subjectivity—*self-recognition and personal identity*. “I lost my eye when I was attacked in my country, but coming here to Camp Moria, I lost my face,” one young Afghan woman reported. Another young woman, an adolescent, who had experienced a similar brutal attack as a young girl, resulting in blindness in one eye, was able to partially transform her experience. However, this girl had help reclaiming her self, as a result of the effective therapeutic work and relationship she had with two Responsibles: a bright, young, committed social worker employed at the school for displaced, unaccompanied children, where the girl had the good fortune to attend; and the other, a humanitarian worker/teacher, who formed a deep bond with her and supported the girl’s innate artistic talent and encouraged her to paint—“to paint my feelings, my losses, and my dreams.” She was able to discover symbolic immortality and derive meaning and purpose from her experience that extended beyond self. She explains:

Now, I paint as a way to take care of myself and to represent those who are struggling in life, to know they are not alone. You know, when I was little girl, my parents told me my eyes were a reflection of my beauty, but now I realize, one doesn’t need eyes to be beautiful. It wasn’t until my heart opened its eyes did I realize I can now see more, perceive things, and feel more. And now, even with all my suffering, I am still standing strong. I stand stronger than before, and I do this for all the women that cannot be on their feet. Those who have fallen down—who have been hurt—whose bones have decayed in their graves with untold stories in their hearts. I will fight for this meaningless life. I will fight for myself and all of those who did not have a voice. And I promise to fight until my death for future generations so that they do not die dreaming about freedom like their mothers did.

In detention camps like Camp Moria, symbolic immortality and meaninglessness, despair and resilience, live side by side in the self and throughout the neighboring tents. Living unseen and languishing hopeless in the *Meantime*, it is difficult for the exile to hold onto “what counts”—to going on being—and to what drove them to make the journey in the first place without Responsibles to partner with, to help rebuild trust and safety that reanimate self-capacities and support an “internal representation of the empathic tie to the other” (Laub & Auerhahn, 1989, p. 397).

Ali and Anne

Ali, the young man I introduced earlier in this paper, was born and grew up in a country where tribes once held great power and structured society. Today, civil war, a succession of corrupt leaders from within and without, famine, anarchy, violence, and disease has decimated his homeland, making it a country that holds no center. It is in the middle of one of the worst humanitarian crises the world has ever seen.

Ali left his country when he was 22 years old after both of his parents died of natural causes—but also, possibly, of broken hearts and spirits after experiencing so much loss and

knowing so much violence was in store for their sons and daughters and their once-beloved country. Ali's brothers were being recruited into high positions in business and a government that he saw as corrupt, cruel, and violent. According to Ali, these roles would compromise his integrity and position him to betray or violate his people. His brothers and uncle insisted that he join the ruling faction as a way to survive in anarchist times, but Ali refused to follow their lead.

My brothers wanted me to stop protesting—to stop fighting for equality for all tribes and people in my country—and tried to convince me that because our family comes from one of the most powerful and esteemed tribes, that I would be safe and protected if I would come and join them. But safety came at too big of a price for me. I would have caused harm to my fellow countrymen and I could not do that. I do not believe that one person is better than the other. I would rather die on a smuggler's boat, or here in the filth of Moria, than believe I am better than anyone else, or wound my fellow countrymen. I felt I had no choice but to leave.

Though Ali refused “to other,” today he cannot escape being “othered.”

When Westerners look at me, they see a dark Arab man and are suspicious and frightened of me. After three years, I have only just received an identification card. On my card it says: “Refugee”—I am afraid in the eyes of the world, I will always be a refugee, with no ability to be anything more.

Ali believes that he, as refugee and Arab, will always be seen as a terrorist in the eyes of the Western world. This is what happens when disavowed affects of fear, hate, and shame and conflicts of inadequacy, loss, and failure get projected into the stranger of the other (Corbett, 2001), in this case, into the refugee. Eventually, the destructive projectile can carry and amass so much hatred and violence that it's capable of transmuting into world-wide xenophobia, acts of violence, and the desire to keep the refugee forever impoverished, desperate, and sequestered.

In 2016, Ali made his way to Turkey where he paid over 2,000 USD to a smuggler to ensure his unsafe passage to Europe—to Greece. He immediately was transported to Camp Moria—to subsist along with other unaccompanied boys and men and families from other Arab and non-Arab countries. He has been waiting for asylum ever since.

In 2018, Ali met Anne, but first, let me back up. In 2011, Anne, an expat from Britain, opened a gift shop on the island. Business was good and so was life; idyllic would not be an overstatement. The natural beauty of rolling olive tree groves; the unspoiled beauty of the Aegean Sea and surrounds; the meandering, slow-paced life of elegant simplicity that Anne had created with her friends living on this beautiful island. She moved there after living and working as an artist and entrepreneur in an urban city in the UK. She had grown weary of the long hours she worked and the glorification of a lifestyle that became increasingly meaningless to her. Moving to Greece was a new chapter and simpler lifestyle, and one that Anne fully embraced.

Then, in 2015, everything changed. Suddenly hundreds of refugees—first from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan—began pouring in every day onto Lesbos's beaches. Traveling across a treacherous stretch of the Aegean Sea from the Turkish coast, the refugees arrived on rubber rafts and rotting fishing vessels that the well-paid smugglers had instructed them to abandon once they had arrived. The smugglers did not travel with them; instead, they would choose a refugee to captain the boat; someone who had likely never been on a boat before. Most were given fake life jackets lined and filled with packing foam: nothing that could keep

them afloat. By the end of 2015, more than 500,000 people had arrived on Lesbos, a rural community of fewer than 90,000 residents. Many were relocated to Athens and other transit camps in Greece; others to Camp Moria.

For most of that first year and with little support from the EU or United Nations (UNHCR), many Lesbos residents partnered with volunteers from international NGO's, to do their best to offer the basics to keep people alive—food, shelter, and clothes. One local resident said, “We acted with *philotimo*”—the literal translation means “friend of honor,” one who assumes a responsibility to honor and respect every human being—essentially a Responsible. But the sheer numbers and lack of early humanitarian response crushed that spirit, as the Greek residents felt abandoned, too, and overwhelmed by the crisis on their shores.

Anne, along with other residents of Lesbos, was one of the first to respond. At the beginning, she would leave her house on one end of the island and drive to the other side, where most of the refugees were landing, to offer them food and clothes she and her friends had gathered. Then, she began to sleep in her car so she could be ready at any time, day or night, to bring the donated blankets and clothes that Greek residents were giving the refugees who arrived on Lesbos's beaches. One day, as she was distributing clothes and blankets to the most recent boat of refugees, she noticed that once the refugees had changed into dry clothes, they were ordered to throw away their own clothes—for many, their “best clothes.” Before embarking on the boat to cross the Aegean Sea, exiles would change into their finest clothes, believing that Europe would be a hospitable host. They were intent on showing they were dignified, appreciative guests.

But the Europe they met on the other side was not the promising land that they had hoped. Once on the shores of Lesbos beaches, they were given blankets and ordered to change their clothes and throw away what they were wearing. Soon the local refuse company was overflowing with discarded clothing and blankets. So Anne began collecting them and bought vans and hired Greeks residents to transport them to an industrial cleaning service to wash and dry them, then turning around and offering them to the next boat of newly arrived refugees. Now this group would have clean, dry clothes and fresh blankets when they landed on the shores of Lesbos.

Eventually, Anne abandoned her small business as thousands of displaced people kept arriving.

At first, I could not believe what I was seeing—what was occurring. I was in shock along with everyone else. It felt apocalyptic: hundreds and then thousands of people coming ashore, with not much more than a sliver of hope to survive. They had lost everything and they were about to lose more. I don't understand, and it enrages me, how human beings can turn away when this is happening and leave people behind.

The Responsible from the global north is not a refugee; we are free to move around in an insulated world that we and our governments have created. But the Responsible from the global south has been invaded and are free only in flight. The privileged subject works to live; the refugee toils not to die. Often, the self of the privileged subject is hollow and empty—when we have lost sight of “what counts,” lost touch with the meaningfulness of going on being and the real of the sacred core. But if our sacred core is lost, the refugee's has been stolen and violated. However, together we can recover the humane and preserve our sacred

cores, as “our interdependency is the basis of our ethical obligations to one another” (Gessen, 2020) and offers survival to humanity.

Eventually, Anne set up a nonprofit to organize her work. Across the world, friends began to fundraise for her efforts. One day at Camp Moria, as Anne picked up discarded blankets and clothes and labored to lift them into her car—she’d injured her back carrying too many wet blankets—Ali and a few others saw her struggling from his tent and came down the “Olive Grove” (where unaccompanied boys and men were sequestered) to help her. Ali recalls:

Someone like Anne is a very special, but an unusual person—almost impossible to find in this world anymore; but without her [and a few others I have met like her], so many of us would not have survived —our bodies and our spirits would have perished long ago, as governments *bleed* out the days of our lives.

Thus began a partnership of mutual recognition (Benjamin, 2004), however great the disparity and inequities in living and resources that existed between them. Ali and Anne formed a deep friendship and an interdependent relationship, born of mutual admiration and respect. The bond assisted the self to *hold on* in The Meantime, staving off, for the time being, death anxieties—depersonalization, falling into bits, liquefying. Responsibles enable “the face” of the exile to reappear to self and other—and, if their stories are told, to become visible to the world. Responsibles also allow “implicated subjects” to move out of their collective “bastions” (Barangers, 1983), the dynamic structures that create a posture of self-protection that reinforce psychic defenses, like denial and apathy.

All the blankets that Ali and Anne wrapped around the shivering, terrified, newly arrived displaced person may have given only a brief respite of warmth and momentary “second skin” (Bick, 1968), providing little toward the ongoing struggle to keep body and self alive. Yet it signaled that some measure of humanity was still in supply.

Subjective objects, transitional space, and play

According to Winnicott (1963) and, more recently, reimaged by Thomas Ogden (2018), for the sacred core to survive traumatic assaults and be preserved it is reliant on two sources: subjective objects and transitional phenomenon. Subjective objects offer self and it’s core a felt sense of authenticity and contributes to “going on being.” Transitional phenomenon also supports the true self; the interplay of the internal and external animate the imagination, enriching self and world. In what might be his most mystical— if not mystifying—paper, “Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Opposites” (1963), Winnicott offers three elaborations of subjective objects, which, when taken together, create paradox—something near and dear to Winnicott’s sensibility. This allows the reader to continue to squiggle meaning. Understanding Winnicott is a development and comes only if one can play outside linear lines.

Winnicott (1963) first introduces subjective objects as “objects that are in the *process* of becoming objects objectively perceived, objects emerging “from the area of omnipotence as a living experience . . . where communication need not be explicit” (p. 182, as quoted by Ogden, 2018, p. 1289). I interpret this to mean, essentially, that development proceeds from objects subjectively perceived to objects objectively perceived. Subjective objects develop in

the first phase of the self's development: the process that begins with object relating (being merged with primary object) and moves to object usage (being able to contact and communicate with the primary object by being separate) as outlined in Winnicottian developmental theory.

The second elaboration of subjective object seems to be an outgrowth of the first, when he describes subjective objects to be “as mere phenomenon based on bodily experience, and these being scarcely influenced by an objectively perceived world” (p. 183). He explains that one can see this occurring in autistic patients, where communication happens in a cul-de-sac (not meant for anyone else), “that is subjectless, objectless, and bodiless” (Winnicott, as quoted in Ogden, 2018, p. 1291) and devoid of meaning. However, this cul-de-sac communication (or non-communication) seen in autistic patients, Winnicott contends, has a healthy counterpart in normal development, where communication with subjective objects is birthed from *mere phenomenon of experience of going on being that “carries all the sense of real”* (Winnicott, 1963, p. 189). Here he introduces us to inherent aspects of the sacred core, and, I would contend, of *play*. Play can be the carrier of the real when mind-body coordinated actions and activities, when playing games, for instance, give birth to embodied metaphors that hold deep personal meaning, and express and reflect one's unique subjectivity, contributing to the growth of the self. In this sense, play has the potential to create and inform subjective objects and contribute to the preservation of the sacred core. Winnicott asserts that feeling “real” is reliant upon subjective objects, but that the sacred core needs to be left alone *to be*, not probed, or directly communicated with or understood, but later he states transitional objects also offer a felt sense of real and supports the sacred core, like their subjective counterpart, but transitional objects have a way of imaginatively communicating with others and allows the world to communicate with us, which contradicts his postulation of the incommunicado sacred core, which brings us back to more Winnicottian paradox.

Winnicott's final elaboration of a subjective object further undergirds my ideas of how to preserve the self and its core. I will leave Thomas Ogden to explain:

One of the meanings of the term “subjective objects” refers to an object relationship characterized by a *state of being* in which the mother and infant are so closely tied to one another that the mother communicates with her infant (both expressively and receptively) in a way that does not involve “understanding.” So a different, fuller way in which the analyst might help the patient (and himself) to be isolated without being insulated involves not communicating with the patient, except in so far as the patient is a subjective object. (2018, p. 1296)

And now it's my turn to squiggle. Ogden is implying that communication here is not conceived in the symbolic register but conceived in a presentational and experiential one and one that encourages the development (and movement) of self and life. By creating a communion (intimate rapport) with another subject or object (Responsible) subjective objects are awakened and created; internal object-ties preserved; transitional space is kept open or reopened, and the sum of all provide nourishment and protection to the sacred core. Again, play has an essential role *to play* here.

In *Playing and Reality* (Winnicott, 1971), Winnicott contends playing and reality are intertwined and co-determinant in creating the self. If we imagine this to be true, surely play can aid in preserving and restoring reality and assist in awakening the self from depersonalization and other forms of dissociation. When subjects *play together* bodies, affects, and

minds alchemize to create meaning and connection; playing restores self-capacities and self-awareness. *To play with* involves other subjects, nature, music, singing, whistling, skipping, dancing, art, athletics, language, stories, pets, sand castles, teams playing together or in opposition, and more. Play has the potential to introduce love, over and over again. In regards to athletics, play allows aggression a safe outlet and provides containment when it's bound by rules and framed within a field.

Often, for psychoanalysts and psychotherapists working within a psychoanalytic setting, the restoration of an internal object-tie is possible when our patients feel understood. However, in *The Meantime*, the restoration of object-relatedness develops in the pre-symbolic level of experience in which play and the body become vehicles for it to be built. "When two people can create a rhythmic third, a rhythm of trusting mutual exploration in regard to a shared experience . . . it is part of what creates the change in neural wiring and the internal attachment paradigms" (Benjamin, 2013, p. 361), and facilitates psychoanalytic movement and mind that is desperately needed to maintain psychic reality in *The Meantime*. Playing in *The Meantime* opens up the transitional area in order for the psychesoma to awaken to what the world has to offer . . . if it's on offer. I see play as an essential medium that allows the sacred core, this "creative well spring of the self" (Goldman, 2017), to imbue all manner of life and experience with authenticity and the genuine of the real. When playing, it's possible to experience an "at-one-ment" with a variety of objects and transitional phenomena; music and musical instrument; thoughts and the written page; image, brush and canvas; ball, court, slope or field—anytime when body, mind and potential space harmonize to transport self and core into the still and sublime of the transcendent and transpersonal. When we play "out of our minds" we experience moments of pure joy and bliss, gratitude and wonder. Here, play and the unconscious combine to create subjective objects that nourish, if not involve, our sacred core. *The Quiet* communicates.

Fantasy and reality playing together offer the self a threshold to the imagination. But not all play is fun and games; play can take us to the extremities of love and hate, gain and loss, violence and death. Play also introduces paradox and experiences of growth *and* destruction; it can transport us into the depths of self while simultaneously being engaged in relationship. I can play and win, and still suffer loss; play and lose, but still find gain. When playing a game self-states rapidly shift and move, yet affects and mental operations can be mobilized and developed—framed and held by rules of play and requirement of purpose and task that serve the organization and coherence of self.

In their investigative research on the trauma of the Holocaust and the healing of trauma, Laub and Auerhahn (1987) indicate that before a survivor can face their past or (executioner) "an act of encouragement to live—to play . . . was required in order to counteract the unconscious verdict of the executioner and to set the analytic process in motion" (p. 395). Playing in *The Meantime* is an "act of encouragement" *to stay alive*.

For me, in my limited role as a swim instructor, and as a result of many hours I spent with the girls in "*La mer de Aegean*," that felt, to me, more like the sea of "*La mère*," or The Mother, because of its ability to provide a holding and facilitating environment in which the self, first and foremost, could *be* and then could work to think and learn and recreate itself through play (Beritzhoff, 2018). Though we were unable to directly speak to one another, I experienced many of these girls using me and the other volunteers to assist them in shoring up their resolve to go on living.

If I could provide a psychoanalytic threshold for some of these girls, then they, too, provided one for me: they gave me an opportunity to feel a semblance of value and efficacy, as I no longer felt helpless in my search for small ways I could mitigate the enormous challenges for a few along their migration journey. My engagement with them offered me a sense of purpose and strengthened my good internal objects and created transformative subjective objects. Mutual recognition was alive in the playground of the sea and amongst the girls and me and with my fellow volunteers/allies with whom I worked alongside. I came away with an understanding that the trauma the girls experienced in their former lives and the trauma they continue to experience in *The Meantime*, along with all that they have lost and are struggling to mourn, did not prevent them from wanting to learn and grow or experience moments of joy, wonder, and excitement while playing and learning with their sisters and us in nature—and called out the courage for life. As one of the instructors who volunteered to watch over some of the youngest girls of the group, who were not ready to learn how to swim, I would play music from my phone, and together we would dance until it was time for them to go back to the shelter. Other days we would fly kites or teach them how to ride bikes. Responsibles encouraged the girls to sing their favorite songs from their native countries and teach us their childhood songs. I held skipping sessions where we all skipped together and joined in laughter; it's impossible to skip and not smile. Try it.

At other times, mostly at the end of the day when instruction was over, I sensed they were in communication with their sacred cores. When the instructors were talking with one another while gathering equipment and bringing it to shore, some of the girls would stay behind in the water—to quietly float. With their eyes closed and sun, salt, and gentle smiles on their faces, and with their “sisters” floating nearby, they allowed their bodies and minds to surrender to nature's *la mere*, allowing her to hold and gently rock them, opening up a moment of serenity and repose on the surface of the sea.

To *commune with* nature and awaken subjective objects that nature lends itself to appear is to touch the “sacred core” of the self and the sacred core of this world. And being privileged to observe these brave girls in that moment allowed me to connect with my own.

The preservation of the sacred core of the self

If the self is to survive destruction in *The Meantime* and beyond, it will depend upon its ability to continue to find meaning in survival and for its life force not to be extinguished. In order to preserve the sacred core, *the desire to go on living* must be supported, and the quiet of going on being protected. In refugee transit camps, transitional space, communication, and fertile non-communication with subjective objects (and internal objects) are all severely challenged, in all the ways and more that I have described. Yet it is precisely in this place that Responsibles, aid worker and exile alike, can offer succor through their actions and interactions.

In *The Meantime* the self needs opportunities where the *communion of two can reignite and strengthen that which is most valuable and integral in one—the sacred core and life force of the self*—and to rebuild security and trust in self and object relations, in order to reestablish intersubjectivity, temporality, intentionality, and hold onto psychic reality.

This communion of two can be conceived in play *or* discovered in the quotidian, yet registered in the extraordinary, much like how one might experience the world of objects, when one first comes into being, in the beginning years of life.

I imagine when the infant *feels* she/he has “created the breast” (Winnicott, 1951/1975), or first experiences being bathed in her mother’s passionate love, or upon hearing a father’s song, he joins the beat that he keeps and discovers the rhythm in body to move both to dance—that these types of experiences, and others like them, contribute to the creation of the self’s sacred core and burns the life force brighter.

Communion is not the same as communication. Communion is born out of grace that emerges from relationships where the confluence of trust, safety, and a deep felt connection animate prosaic events and turn them into foundational ones. It is an experience of unity, first announced in hearts and bodies. It lives wherever truth and beauty abide, and maybe where Keats and Bion reside, too.

To be in communion with includes any number of experiences that create contact and presence; that open up a “sense of real” and an at-one-ment with someone or something of this world or beyond—reuniting with a good internal object as it’s reawakened by the familiar aroma of a grandmother’s spice; creating a rhythmic third of high focus, form, and flow when two boys are one as they dribble and pass a soccer ball downfield toward goal in an ancient Olympic stadium; gazing up at the stars and remembering that mysterious, wondrous places are still aglow; finding peace in the waves of the Aegean Sea, or falling in love in *The Meantime*. It can also be found observing—*in vivo*—a pair of dung ants, working in mesmeric synchronicity as they roll a perfect cylinder of manure, 300 times their weight and size, up a steep mountain path, *responding to* the needs of their fellow creatures whose fate they must answer for. Is that instinct and urge or want and will? God *and* ant?

To be in communion with adds to psychoanalytic movement, but it is not a psychoanalytic project; it is freer, less constrained by knowledge. It begs off interpretation or narrow purpose of mind. It is the savory of the genuine, not saccharin of the sincere. Like Winnicott’s sacred core, it’s difficult to find, but like bedrock, you know you’ve found it when you *feel something real* . . . born from all manner of relationships, large or small, but with some measure of differentiation, however narrow or wide. Simple yet sublime; easily lost, surprising when found. Lastly, it is not made in the company of many but mostly by the power of two.

Without the ability to bring psychoanalysis to displaced people in *The Meantime*, or a way to secure a home and setting for analyst and patient, our imaginations and agency are challenged to find new expressions to bring the psychoanalytic mind and sensibility to this shared global crisis or to do psychoanalytic research that can contribute to changing the status quo. Whether we bring our thinking and voices to all places psychoanalytic, or into the center of a wider public discourse, I believe it’s imperative to discover new avenues for our psychoanalytic theories, poetry, and play into the heart of the traumatic—into *The Meantime*. The sacred core of humanity is on the line.

Notes on contributor

Lisa C. Beritzhoff, M.F.T., is a psychoanalyst currently practicing in San Francisco, CA. She works with adolescents and adults. She is Faculty at the Psychoanalytic Institute of Northern California. She works as a consultant to and volunteers with Refugee Education And Learning, an NGO dedicated to supporting unaccompanied children held in Camp Moria, a transit camp on the island of Lesbos, Greece.

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