

# **The Three Dimensions of Listening**

## **2023 IACP Forum**

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### **“Listening to Me”: Mindfulness of Thoughts**

#### **Reverie and Mediation**

Perhaps the most productive use I have made of observing my thoughts has come from paying attention to what psychiatrist Thomas Ogden calls our *reveries*. Reveries are what we experience when we momentarily space out or drift off. They include “our ruminations, daydreams, fantasies, bodily sensations, fleeting perceptions, images emerging from states of half-sleep, tunes and phrases that run through our minds, and so on.” Most of us assume that these are worthless distractions, and if they tell us anything at all it’s about how we’re not being good conflict professionals—not being adequately present, or focused, or attentive. It can be difficult to believe that something as mundane as daydreams could actually have value to us in conflict work. But Ogden has shown how these productions of our wandering minds can tell us a great deal about what may be happening in the room:

I believe that the emotional disequilibrium generated by reverie is one of the most important elements of experience at the analyst’s disposal with which to get a sense of what is happening at an unconscious level in the analytic relationship. Reverie is an emotional compass that I heavily rely on (but cannot clearly read) to gain my bearings in the analytic situation.

Although intensive psychoanalysis is very different from conflict work—among other differences we typically don’t have the benefit of multiple sessions over weeks and years to allow our reveries to ripen and develop—paying attention to where our wandering mind goes can provide us with valuable and otherwise inaccessible information about the particular conflict we’re working with. To access this information we have to refrain from dismissing our reveries as simply “my stuff” (e.g., my boredom, my unresolved issues, my fatigue, my inadequate training), although sometimes they can be that. But in some mysterious way our reveries can be *both* our own individual intrapsychic event *and* an intersubjective creation of our own unconscious and that of the people we are working with. They can be, in other words, a way in which our own unconscious minds communicate with the unconscious minds of others. That communication is often experienced more as “an elusive sense of being unsettled than a sense of having arrived at an understanding.” But if we remain patient and curious, sometimes an understanding emerges. Here’s an example.

I was mediating a divorce case in which the parties were at an impasse over how to divide the proceeds from the sale of their house. After crunching some numbers, it became evident that the deal husband was offering (splitting the proceeds 50-50) was actually a very generous offer. But wife still

would not agree. Then, as if out of the blue, she started to cry. When I asked her what her tears were about, she said, “it’s okay. I’m fine.” I pressed the issue, but got the same response. So I asked husband if he wouldn’t mind stepping outside, which he did. I then asked wife if she could tell me what was up. She said she didn’t know. I told her what I do when I have tears I don’t understand is to ask my heart, “what are you sad about?” and then wait for an answer. She did that, but nothing seemed to be coming up. As she was doing her inquiry, I noticed myself in a reverie about being in the sled of the Ice Queen from the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale. I saw myself as the little boy in the story, who had lost his ability to feel his feelings and been separated from the little girl who loved him, nestling up against the Ice Queen inside her comfy fur coat. I remembered how, as a child reading that fairy tale, I had wanted some magical feminine figure to take me away from the loneliness and pain I felt in my home growing up. I could feel a sense of both neediness and desire as well as loss and grief. At first I brushed all this off as childish nonsense. But then I remembered to ask myself, “what might it mean that I’m having a reverie about the Ice Queen and feeling these feelings?” I got that it had something to do with neediness, about wanting an opposite sex parental figure to take care of me, but also about loss and sadness. But what could any of that have to do with what’s happening with this woman?

I sat with that question until something clarified just enough that I felt I could ask a question. “Could it be that the sale of the house, now that it looks like it’s truly happening, is triggering something in you about what the loss of the house represents? You’ve told me that you want to move on to the next phase of your life and regain your self-empowerment—could it be that your need and desire to be empowered, to truly stand on your own two feet, also involves a loss of some kind, one that you didn’t anticipate?” She started to slowly nod her head. “It feels like grief.” I did my best to feel into her grief with both tenderness and curiosity. After a while I asked her, “could it be that part of what your newfound empowerment is asking of you is that you grieve the loss of what the house—and your husband—represented to you? Perhaps the father archetype, who is supposed to take care of you, provide for you, protect you, and love you? And even if [husband] in the end didn’t provide those things, maybe moving on still feels like a loss to some tender part of you.” That’s when the dam broke, and her tears flowed. She seemed to be clearly touching an unconscious part of her that still clung to the hope of a magical father-figure who would rescue and shelter her, and allowing herself to mourn the end of that dream. When she was ready I brought husband back in and she explained that the sale of the house brought up grief around a deep wound. Husband was very tender with her, and said, “I understand.” They then agreed to split the sale proceeds 50-50, and we quickly wrapped up the rest of the mediation.