

Kristin Beck

The Branch of The Other

Seattle University MAP Alum, '15

kristin@beckliotta.com

(206) 713-4128

Recovery Cafe, the site of my clinical practicum, is, according to its literature, “a center for healing and community, and a place where people come to know themselves as loved, as people who are instruments of love in the lives of others.” The Cafe is Levinasian ethics embodied, the realization of a clinic Levinas himself might have designed. Responding to the call of the Other and forming attuned, therapeutic relationships is the clinical objective. The backdrop to these relationships is the community meal -- for Levinas, an ethical event.

In this paper I intend to explore the ways in which I was out-Levinassed in Levinasland with a true face-to-face encounter with the Infinite Other.

(All names of clients have been changed to protect privacy.)

“To be free is to build a world in which one could be free.” (Emmanuel Levinas, 1969, p. 165)

Dina quietly asks me if I have any time in the next hour; I tell her I’m about to start my front desk shift. She says it’s not a “huge thing,” so can we just talk at the desk? Fine by me, but it might not be so private. She understands, and waits for me to

get settled at my station. Members stream through the front door: first Jax, then Angelo, then Rainbow, then Charla. I greet each of them by name and log his or her attendance into the computer system. Jax signs in with his standard giant, loopy cursive, makes the same joke he makes every time, points to his signature and asks, "Can you see that?" I answer according to our script: "I could see it from space." Both of us crack up, as usual. I turn and lock eyes with Dina. She sees that the desk is clear for the moment, leans in, and thus begins our session. "You know my friend? The one with the dog? Well, he..." She's interrupted by Marshawn, who approaches and points down, wordlessly requesting the dominoes and the table-muting pad. I hand them to him; he lowers his head appreciatively and walks away.

I haven't turned back to face Dina, but she knows I'm listening because I step sideways toward her, angle my left ear in her direction, and nod. She goes on, "I saw him get really, really angry this weekend and I'm still pretty freaked out by it. I had no idea he had such a bad temper!" Julie asks if we have any bus passes. I grab the bus pass logbook and the pass, hand them to her, and point to the line she needs to fill out while Dina seems to be holding her breath, waiting. Julie pushes the folder back to me, I initial her line; she smiles and slips out the door. Certain Julie's gone, Dina continues.

"I thought he was gonna punch the wall."

I ask, "Did you feel physically threatened?"

"No. But I did worry about the walls," she answers honestly. "What you said last week, that I need to check my gut..." Dina trails off politely in deference to floor manager Darren, who pops his head between us, reaching for the stapler. He hums the

chorus from Stealers Wheel's "Stuck in the Middle with You," and then vanishes. I point to Dina.

"Your gut," I remind her.

She leans in. "My gut didn't feel like anything," she offers, eyes wide, mystified.

"Like lead? Like... blank? Dina, did you feel like you had to shut down a little, to protect yourself?"

She turns her head slightly to the right and looks down, thinking.

"I think so, yeah. It was kinda scary for me. I mean, it was like I was a kid again, watching my dad suddenly explode."

Bridget, one of the Café's Jesuit Corps volunteers, rings the Buddhist singing bowl and waits for everyone to quiet down enough for her announcement to be heard. Dina and I look at each other, smile and shrug, tabling the conversation for the moment.

This vignette illustrates how "therapeutic interactions" typically occur in the milieu at Recovery Café, the *sanctuary from the streets* that was the site of my graduate practicum. At Recovery Café, men and women who have "suffered trauma, homelessness, addiction" and other challenges "come to know themselves as loved" through the revelation of close community. Recovery Café's founders believe that "every human being — regardless of past trauma, mental and emotional anguish" — matters, and that ongoing support makes it possible to maintain stability and break destructive cycles.

I was drawn to this clinic (such as it is) because of its unusual therapeutic model and continuity with the MAP program, specifically with MAP's emphasis on the

teachings of Levinas. In both, I find a version of social justice that appears tame and gentle but acts subversive; for me, a thrilling contrast. Baked into both is a deep respect for human beings, no matter what ails them, and a refusal to totalize sufferers.

All of an interning therapist's interactions take place in the milieu, a social environment where members gather at communal tables to talk, drink coffee, have lunch and/or dinner, read, play board games, and hang out. People who land at the Café tend to have struggled from childhood into adulthood. Members are working on managing sensation-seeking in their lives; cravings for alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, food, relationships, cutting, violence, and so on. Instead of hard and fast rules, the Café is run on guidelines. There are only three requirements for membership, terms of what's described at the Café as "loving accountability" ("Recovery Café Membership Requirements," n.d.):

1. Be clean and sober for 24 hours before you show up.
2. Pitch in with chores around the Café.
3. Attend your recovery circle every week.

Recovery Café is not a place for practicing so-called traditional therapy. There isn't a waiting room with chamomile tea and calling cards. There are no private offices (besides the two tiny counselling rooms which have windowed doors), no white noise machines – nothing that automatically establishes one as a clinician, nor conveys the comfort and confidentiality of a typical mental health treatment site. Psychological

services are available not to clients or patients, but to *members*. Instead of caseloads, paperwork, diagnoses and insurance, there is an abundance of food, coffee, classes and community for anyone who maintains membership. This culture celebrates radical hospitality.

What kind of clinical setting doesn't have paperwork? Where do you see clients? How is therapy done out in the open? (Is it really therapy?) It's astonishing to consider... even though there's no paperwork, members, staff, and volunteers are all accountable to the Café, to the community. Killian Noe co-founded the Café in 2004 on the premise that in community we find our compass ("Recovery Café Community," n.d.). She believes that healing can take place within a circle of loving accountability, where the guiding principles are to:

- Live prayerfully (or, thoughtfully, if you prefer)
- Show respect
- Practice compassion
- Give and forgive
- Encourage growth

Killian says that "accountability through being known is very powerful" ("Daily Cup of Coffee, Recovery Café," n.d.). New members often arrive fragmented, agitated, and guarded. It is common for new members to avoid eye contact (as Dr. Lingis said yesterday -- when we avoid meeting other's gaze, we show that we're suffering) and to respond to gestures of hospitality with suspicion and/or confusion. But usually within just a few days, newcomers start to relax. For some members, this "refuge of healing and

hope” is literally the first community-focused place that hasn’t turned them away for behavioral issues.

There are those three *hard* rules around maintaining membership, and then there are the *soft* rules about maintaining good community status, including the following: Don’t fall asleep at the Café. Take your sunglasses off so we can see your eyes. Don’t bring drugs (even medical marijuana) or weapons into the Café. Don’t come in if you know you have a communicable disease. Don’t be weird with the young female interns. Do uphold the confidentiality of the Café space inside and outside of the Café. Do be hospitable to new members. Do show compassion for yourself and others.

There is no expiration on membership, though there is much turnover and instability – members “go back out there” (start using again), or die, or move to Florida to live with a grandmother, or get a job or go back to school, or get angry with another member or someone on staff and break up with the Café, and then get back together with it. Some people have attended the new member orientation meeting a dozen times after relapsing. Café Director of Operations Jason Fitzgerald, who runs the weekly orientation, always greets returning members warmly: “Great to have you back, man.” The rest of the staff goes out of their way to be welcoming as well. Being *known* in this community means you get a fresh start every time you blow it.

Supporting people to rebuild their lives is nuanced work, especially within a community of people who have a tough time with self-regulation. The inability to self-regulate is a result of a marked lack of attunement in infancy. Gabor Mate (2010)

notes that the poorly self-regulated person “is more likely to look outside herself for emotional soothing, which is why the lack of attunement in infancy increases addiction risk” (p. 251). Soothing the suffering soul is the objective here. The main difference is the relational approach to care: offering the containment, stability, and attunement most members missed out on as children.

I had assumed that work in community mental health would be intense and at times heartbreaking. But you don't really know until you're there just how draining it is. I was bone-tired, pregnancy-tired, especially in the first few months of my internship, when everything was new and I had yet to establish myself. It's not a physical job. In fact, most of the day is spent sitting around, listening and talking. Mostly listening. The Chinese symbol for the verb “to listen” speaks to the complexity of the act of listening in milieu therapy: it's comprised of the characters for ears, eyes, attention, and open heart.

There is so much to pay attention to, especially in the beginning... every moment sparkled with novelty. And at the end of my shift, my brain couldn't shut it off. Faces floated behind my retina, the desperate faces of Café members, full of need. I would replay the stories of the day in my mind as I cooked dinner for my family and cry. I cleaned and cleaned and **cleaned** my house, partly to prove my gratitude for having a dwelling of my own, and also as a way to try to exorcise the images of members bagging up all of their belongings to try to eradicate a bed bug infestation, or losing everything during a relapse. My difficulty in separating home and clinic was one of many boundary issues inherent in this work.

Café culture nullifies stigma, providing a normalizing environment where people can be with others facing the same kinds of challenges. But just as the Café can be a sanctuary from the streets, it is also a place of concentrated suffering. Most members are poor, which means having extremely limited power and efficacy. Attempts to dig oneself out of intractable economic stresses are met at every turn with an unimaginable number of fees, wait times, terrible service, no service, outright sabotage by so-called service providers... mind-boggling bureaucracy. Top it all off with a dual diagnosis of addiction and mental health concerns, along with limited access to reliable transportation, health problems and multiple medicines to manage, tooth loss, spotty employment history, and maybe a prison record, and it's mind-blowing that the Café can be a place of mirth at all. But it is place of mirth. Often. There is laughter and dancing and jokes and hugs and games and physical comedy and the quiet joy of watching people feel free in community. It makes sense that the initial point of connection might be suffering; connection happens, as Frankl (1946) muses, at the moment suffering finds a *meaning*. Killian Noe wonders, if suffering is an identity, "to step away would beg the question: who am I without my suffering?" She continues, "The Café holds up a candle and says *your pain and suffering is real, but it can also be a launching pad to finding your real self*" (K. Noe, personal communication, November 15, 2014).

The weekly recovery circles are a place where the suffering is aired and shared. The hope is that these check-ins will offer glimpses of the awareness that we are deeper than our trauma and pain and bigger than our negative behaviors. We are not just broken. "We show up and **reclaim our identity** in circle. It happens in moments,

when someone is listened to and treated with respect... they can see that they're not just *all this crap*," says Killian. When a member forgets, she says, we remember for them. "There's a ripple effect to that flash of insight that *I'm not just my suffering*, which carries forward and helps others see it in themselves." Showing respect is a way of demonstrating proper boundaries to people who have, for the most part, only felt useful if they were being used to gratify someone else's desires.

Coincidentally, this notion of *really seeing* clients, taking note of patterns of behavior over time, and respectfully encouraging them to do the same is vital to the work of an existential-phenomenological therapist. Darren Langdrige speaks to this value: "A key element of this process is pattern recognition, with the therapist acting as the memory bank for all of the therapeutic work, across all sessions, able to spot emerging patterns in the way the client is making sense of their world. This pattern recognition exercise will, of course, be informed by the philosophy underpinning practice, and so will be relational, with both parties seeking to work together, and hermeneutic, designed to open up new ways of understanding," (p. 53).

Boundaries, Girl

Of the 42 recovery circles currently offered, I continue to facilitate one of the only two specifically for women. Currently, our circle's ethnic composition includes six white women, one Latina, and one woman of the Duwamish tribe. The women are mostly high school educated, and range in age from mid-thirties to late sixties. All are living in

shelters or public housing and have been entrenched in the social services system for years.

The main rule of engagement in our circle is that we respect each other; the less explicit tenet is that it's okay to offer what gifts we have. In our group, "gifts" generally mean pastries, tips (like where to get free cranial sacral treatment on Mondays), and/or heartfelt support. We talk about boundaries every single week. It's such a frequent topic of people's check-ins that sometimes the only group feedback is one word: "boundaries," with a *what are you gonna do* expression. The circle members are concerned about Dina's situation with her angry boyfriend: why is she always getting herself into these situations? Dina would say it's because of desperate loneliness. She says, "I was told my whole childhood that I was terrible, and that no one would ever love me," so she acts that out, again and again. She thought this new guy was a good guy, but he's not a good guy, and the women are tut-tutting and saying, *Oh girl, BOUNDARIES. This is crazy. Sounds like he's on the verge of actually hitting you. Get out, NOW.* We talk, as a group, about how having good boundaries is not just about saying no to unhealthy situations, how it's about trying to seek out or create healthy ones. Safety, authenticity, trust – everything about this is about trust, which by definition is about boundaries.

It Depends

The motto at the Cafe is, "It depends." It's the answer to most of the questions at the weekly group consult. This kind of flexible approach to serving members allows for

therapeutic interactions that feel dignified for all involved. Meeting clients where they're at is agile work, especially in community mental health. And yet it's the only way we can hold people in the Cafe milieu. Uncertainty is an organizing principle. Steen Halling (2008) addresses the practical function, the gift, of uncertainty in therapy:

Embracing uncertainty involves moving our mind to the open plane of possibility... if as therapists we come with fixed ideas about what to expect from our patient... we will be hampered in our efforts to be open to what his or her actual state of being is in that moment. We will not see him, we will not sense what is happening in her, and he or she will not *feel felt* by us (pp. 266-67).

The grey allows for people to work things out themselves, to advocate for themselves, members and volunteers and staff alike. For the interning therapist, "it depends" can be an intimidating approach, as it requires what Annie Rogers (1995) refers to as a "two-sided perspective" in order to appreciate where everyone is coming from. As an older intern and a parent, I liked the emphasis on supporting members to work stuff out themselves. Being available to different points of view, Rogers writes, "demands honesty and intimacy and sometimes extraordinary courage." This includes the courage to occasionally get it very wrong. Thrillingly, rupture and repair is a common and necessary cycle at the Café; staff and volunteers live in some phase of that cycle all the time.

Like I said, 'blowing it' at the Cafe doesn't get you cast out.

Laurel

Laurel is one of the Café's original members. At 67, she credits her ongoing recovery success with the "twisting and breathing" she experiences in her yoga practice (learned through the yoga program at the Café). She says she feels emotionally close to trees and would often bring in gnarly branches for me to enjoy looking at with her. I'd always ooh and ahh over them in part because they're really stunning – her eye for the find is great – but if I'm honest, I like the chance to stand close to her. We'd turn and face the same direction, our shoulders somehow touching even though she's nearly a foot shorter than me. As we examined the treasures together, she'd tell me where she found it and how she treated it, or what she planned to do with it. Apparently she does rogue art installations around town in park areas. She gets a kick out of the fact that no one desecrates or takes her installations down. I love the quality of her voice, deep and mellifluous, but somehow compressed because of her small stature. There's a little crackle on some of her words (and all of her chuckles) from years of heavy smoking. She is careful about the words she chooses and pauses for as long as she likes until she locates just the right one.

One afternoon, Laurel arrives at the Café with a bag. "I have something for you," she says with a wink, and hands me a shopping bag. It's about 20 pounds (a fifth of her body weight, if I had to guess), and she had lugged from her home to the Café, a 45-minute bus ride. Inside four wrinkly plastic bags I find a branch so magical I can't even identify the species of tree it came from. She doesn't know what kind of tree it is,

but she knows she found it on Mt. Rainier. “All these eyes, what they’ve seen,” she says solemnly, and I noticed the bark is mushroom-colored and smooth... and patterned with little swirlies. They really do look like eyes. “And watch out for the gargoyle at the top!” She points to an end of the branch and erupts in wide-eyed laughter. I see it – the profile of a squatting gargoyle. I turn to hug her and thank her, and she hugs me in return but then takes a step backwards. “I’m done with it – you have it now,” she says, waving her hands, and it almost sounds like a warning.

My elation over the gift prompts me to consider my feelings carefully. I am aware of a quiet pull toward concerns about the appropriateness of accepting the branch... Is this allowed? How will my supervisor react? I’ve seen other colleagues turn down presents from members, but, now that I think about it, they were always items purchased by male members for pretty young female interns. What can be wrong about a piece of found wood exchanged between two older ladies? Most importantly, is it weird that I feel *special* in a way I don’t think I’ve felt since childhood, strolling through Huntington Botanical Gardens with my great uncle? -- that same shimmery warmth radiating from my sternum. Like a soul-nourishing connection. Levinas discusses how this kind of encounter with the Other buoys and sustains:

“Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is the essence of enjoyment; an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized ... as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me” (T&I, p. 111).

Laurel is enrolled in a personal narrative writing class offered at the Cafe, which she says gives her time to work through the mental drama she lives with. Diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and PTSD, her big ideas and feelings frequently confuse and overwhelm her, causing her to doubt herself despite her tremendous intelligence and creativity. She told me once that she feels safer expressing herself with physical objects in hand to help her communicate. If we're both looking at the same thing, she says, she doesn't have to rely so much on her descriptions, which she doesn't totally trust. I tell her I too feel more comfortable if I have visuals to accompany my words, that it feels more thorough or something. She smiles and pulls two smooth, spherical rocks out of her pocket, one little, one big, and exhibits them on her hand platforms. "Here's an example. I've been meaning to tell you that I've made a decision. My pen name shall be Birch, like my dad, who was the most powerful man besides God. Laurel is for when I'm not writing." She shakes the big rock when she says Birch, and the little one with Laurel.

"Why? What does it mean to be Birch," I ask.

"I can do anything, say anything, when I'm Birch!" With that, she slips the little rock back into her pocket, clutches the big one in both hands, and dissolves into gasping laughter.

I see her the next day at the Cafe. She walks in, looks at me as if she expected me, and slides right up to me, taking my hand in hers.

"Do you have any time? I have questions for you."

We grab an unoccupied room and she sits yogi style on the floor; I join her.

“I’ve been thinking of asking you to call me ‘Little Brother.’ Would you do that?”

I pause to consider my words before I answer. I am so knocked out by this gesture of relationship and trust that I feel a musical number coming on, like in the movies.

“What does being Little Brother mean to you, Laurel, and why is it important that I call you that?”

She tells me about having had spinal meningitis at age three, which nearly killed her and left her small and less capable of the hard labor her father required of her growing up on the farm in Utah. Knowing that I would call her Little Brother would help her feel more powerful.

I say I will, of course.

That night, I thought of my mother, who also grew up on a farm in Utah. Her family was actively rejecting of the brothers and sisters of the Mormon Church, which she described as ‘violent and oppressive.’ But, as she always said, you can’t live in Utah and not be haunted by the Mormon west. I considered Laurel’s hard living and her trauma, her Utah accent (which I can only describe as a semi-sarcastic drawl), and the twinkling mischief in her hazel eyes. My arms and hands tingled with hot recognition and I cried, missing my late mom.

Week after week, for months, Laurel had questions for me.

“Do you believe in soul mates?”

...I mean, some part of me loves to imagine a universe in which death is just a temporary interruption, a weigh station wherein we meet up with our celestial homies between incarnations, I tell her, sure.

“Because I think you might be my soul mate,” she says, very serious. My heart lurches in some combination of love and fear.

“I love that you say that,” I offer. “But, honestly, I sort of think it’s enough just to like each other a lot... you know... that’s a special, rare thing on its own,” I fumble.

She looks a little disappointed, or maybe frustrated?

The next week, she lays another one on me. “When were you born? Was it 1971? Because I had a baby girl who died... maybe you’re the reincarnation of her!” She seems pretty excited about this theory.

“Sorry,” I say, “1968.”

“Oh, I see... well... that can’t be it, can it? Okay...”

On and on, the theories kept coming, until one week we talked about our surnames. Pretty soon we were on the computer, researching our ancestries and looking for connections. Incredibly, we found them: two births in the late 1800’s, the products of our two families. Eureka! Holy shit!!!! I sat slack-jawed and frozen while she clapped and rubbed her hands together, satisfied but decidedly unfazed by this revelation. She said, matter-of-factly, “All Utahans are related in one way or another.”

The relationship with the other puts me into question, empties me of myself and empties me without end, showing me ever new resources. I did not

know I was so rich, but I no longer have the right to keep anything for myself. Is the desire for the other an appetite or a generosity? The desirable does not gratify my need but hollows it out, and as it were nourishes me with new hungers. (Levinas, 1972/1987, p.94)

Hollowed out and nourished with new hungers, I walked around in a daze. The Cafe laid out the context and invited Laurel and me to meet in an unmediated phenomenological face-to-face. We accepted the invitation. And we ended up HERE.

The branch Laurel gave me is on display in my kitchen; I notice new things about it all the time. It takes on a different character depending on the angle.

Carl Rogers (1969) wrote: “It is a sparkling thing when *I encounter realness in another person*” (p. 15). Rogers is referring to the moment when a person speaks a truth found deep within himself. Yet, “sparkle” fits in the case of Laurel and me as well. The *realness* I encountered in her was the unspoken between us – what she didn’t say, but meant; what I felt, and how what I felt matches what she meant.

If I were to try to put words to Laurel’s *realness* and the gift of the branch, I imagine they’d go something like: *I thought of you when I was at home. I remembered that you always appreciate the funny things I bring in here to show you, and how that always leads to interesting conversation about things we both really enjoy, like trees and treasure hunts and running around appreciating stuff. I wanted to share this*

beautiful, unusual chunk of treasure with you because I know you will care about it the way I do, and knowing that you do makes me feel good and whole. So here it is.

Kristin Beck (MAP alum 2015) continues to work and volunteer at Recovery Cafe (the site of her clinical internship), and is busy setting up a group practice focusing on teenagers and their families. kristin@beckliotta.com / (206) 713-4128

References

- Berg, J. H. van den. (1972). *A different existence; principles of phenomenological psychopathology*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Berger, J., & Mohr, J. (1981). *A fortunate man*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Buber, M., & Smith, R. G. (1965). *Between man and man*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Daily Cup of Coffee, Recovery Café. (n.d.). Retrieved December 11, 2014, from <http://www.alltreatment.com/recovery-cafe>
- Frankl, V. E. (2006). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Haas, S. (1990). *Hearing voices: the notes of a psychology intern*. New York, NY: Dutton.
- Halling, S. (2008). *Intimacy, transcendence, and psychology: closeness and openness in everyday life*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kohut, H. (1971). *The analysis of the self: a systematic approach to the psychoanalytic treatment of narcissistic personality disorders*. New York, NY: International Universities Press.
- Langdrige, D. (2013). *Existential counselling and psychotherapy*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Lévinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity; an essay on exteriority*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.
- Maroda, K. J. (1999). *Seduction, surrender, and transformation: emotional engagement in the analytic process*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.

Maté, G. (2010). *In the realm of hungry ghosts: close encounters with addiction*.

Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Orange, D. M. (2011). *The suffering stranger: hermeneutics for everyday clinical*

practice. New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Recovery Café. Retrieved June 10, 2015, from <http://www.recoverycafé.org/community>

Rhodes, L. A. (1991). *Emptying beds: the work of an emergency psychiatric unit*.

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Rogers, A. G. (1995). *A shining affliction: a story of harm and healing in psychotherapy*.

New York, NY: Viking.

Rogers, C. R. (1969). *Freedom to learn: a view of what education might become*.

Columbus, OH: C.E. Merrill Pub. Co.

Sullivan, B. S. (1989). *Psychotherapy grounded in the feminine principle*.

Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications.

Winnicott, D. W., Winnicott, C., Shepherd, R., & Davis, M. (1986). *Home is where*

we start from: essays by a psychoanalyst. New York, NY: Norton.