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Tenderness: comment on the article 'Passion and tenderness as political forces' by Jô Gondar

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After reading this article several times, I keep getting a twofold feeling: pleasure and estrangement.

I wonder why, and (as happens to me frequently) I Google the definition of the word 'tenderness'; Oxford Languages reports this definition:

1. Little resistance to pressure, cutting or processing, chewing: meat prized for its t.; t. of years, of age, referring to the fragility of very young organisms.
2. Feeling or manifestation of trusting kindness towards the beloved object.

I remember an advertisement for a well-known brand of tinned tuna that went like this: 'So tender you can cut it with a breadstick'.

And it is precisely this tone of tenderness that resonates most with me after reading the article.

In one passage, the author points out, 'What is the difference between passion and tenderness? They are two ways of relating to oneself and to the world. Passion in the language of adults constitutes for Ferenczi a strong and uncontrollable emotion. We can imagine it as a straight, incisive line, both in its movement of pouncing on the other and defending itself from the other. [...] Tenderness, on the other hand, constitutes another type of affection, more fluid and porous, which opens up a wider surface of communication with the outside world. It is more permeable to the other and to the potential of experience. It composes a world in which the individuality of outlines, the fixity of images and the solidity of ideas dissipate, giving way to other ways of being and communicating, less exclusive, more relational and interdependent'.

I feel a strong resonance (a sense of pleasantness in my belly) about the word Tenderness: this is not about the specific nature of this emotion (as opposed to other emotions, such as some of the passions mentioned by the author: fear and hatred), but about the stuff it is made of.

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I like the adjective porous to describe it, rather than fluid (also a property of matter) and certainly rather than the expression 'a straight, incisive line' used (in contrast) to describe the passions.

The word porosity brings a few thoughts to mind.

First of all, Piaget's (2011) assimilation/accommodation: to make room for new content (be it emotional or cognitive) requires a neurological and mental attitude (cognitive/emotional) disposed to 'put aside what was before': this is one of the cornerstones of science, which continually seeks to overcome previously established truths and, at the same time, one of the most difficult challenges for each of us limited humans.

The second 'window' that opens up for me is an older and dearer topic: the attitude (also referred to as the 'Pillar') of relationship with experience that Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) (and many others) calls the Beginner's Mind.

The author, in the wake of the 2,600-year-old teachings related to Buddhist Vipassana Meditation, argues that our way of approaching the experience of self and the world is a way forged by our previous experiences with respect to the particular aspect we are encountering (be it an object, a sound, a thought, a relationship, or something else) and that this greatly limits the subject's presence of mind and awareness, as well as the freedom to be able to encounter 'new versions of self'.

The approach that the meditative practices he is referring to (Mindfulness Meditation) invite one to cultivate is based on the intention to encounter an 'object of experience' as if it were always the first time (it reminds me of the psychoanalyst W. Bion who used to say that he entered the session 'without memory and without desire'): like a beginner approaching something he has never seen before. Curious, perhaps insecure, not pigeonholed nor creating pigeonholes. With a mind that is (as far as possible) a *tabula rasa*. Or, again I stress the confluence with Ferenczi, like a child: capable of changes that we as adults are often forbidden (by ourselves) to make.

In this sense I like the adjective porous much better than not being a straight line, to describe the kind of attitude explored by the author.

A porous attitude reminds me of a level surface (of experiences that have already taken place, of oneself and of the world) but with a certain degree of 'passage' between above and below, between here and there.

In this sense, it is tender (like tuna): it does not offer granitic (and defensive) resistance.

Certainly, the risk (I agree with the author) is the possibility of being hurt: no doubt about it.

And, again, I agree about the consequence of this woundableness: it belongs to everyone.

All of us have a certain amount of exposure to wounds every time we open our gaps (our pores, we might say): we may also be wounded when

we realize that we have previously done something wrong (a thought, an action, or something else), or when we realize we have made mistakes.

Tenderness/porosity is a quality of the dialogue with ourselves, first of all.

What happens if we admit that we are all woundable?

It may be that we feel 'part of a whole', 'all in the same boat': that of limitedness, finiteness, mortality, temporality fleeing.

And it might be harder to hate 'those who are like us'. Better still: we might feel compassion.

When I speak of compassion I am referring to Buddhist Compassion and I understand it in this way: the intention to free oneself and others from suffering, the ability to feel one's own suffering and the suffering of others without being overwhelmed by it. It is the inner strength that helps us to see things in a perspective of interdependence and interrelatedness allowing us to see beyond the limited space of our ego.

Compassionate behavior requires certain components described in the definition I have just tried to provide: the ability to feel the other person (or ourselves) in a porous manner (as I have tried to refer to the author's meaning), the desire to free them from suffering, the ability (rather: the belief) that one will not be overwhelmed by that suffering (because one has already dealt with it in the past), the ability to see things from a perspective of interdependence (somehow aspired to by the author in her discourse).

So, I agree with the author's proposal to define tenderness as a political and relational force. I would agree, yes: however, I also sense a certain ease in using the word tenderness as a change. I sense an idealism that, while beautiful, does not pose certain key questions. All under the heading of Fear.

The issue of Fear has always fascinated me, the most intimate figure of my inner life, as I imagine is the case for many.

Fear is a primary emotion not only in its facial expression - as highlighted by Ekman (2007) -, but in the basic meaning of biological existence: staying alive.

Our brains have evolved in increasingly complex and fascinating ways, but remain anchored to a basic imperative: to survive. Neuroscientific studies tell us that if our life is at stake, everything else is put on hold.

(We should note, too, the contribution of J. LeDoux (2020), who explored the possibility that moving away from a life-threatening danger is a 'movement in the world' that does not strictly require a nervous system because it predates the phylogenetic advent of a brain).

And what puts us in danger today are no longer (for those who live in cities) lions or other ferocious animals, but other far more subtle ways (fear of losing a job, fear of uncontrollable social judgment, as well as more self-produced fears such as states of anxiety, *etc*.).

To my mind, an interesting fear to explore is what underlies the formation of personality and identity: if we were continually to produce different responses to the world and ourselves, an underlying bewilderment or anxiety about 'not knowing who (we) are (steadily)' would probably arise. I hypothesize that this condition could be a mortal enemy to flee from (almost always unconsciously).

Some studies on the nature of consciousness (in 2023, Anil Seth has tried to describe them) underline that the construction of reality may be a continuous hallucination that attempts to control an underlying inscrutability of sensible reality, be it an apple, a more complex social phenomenon or ourselves: a forcing that allows us to defend ourselves in the face of this underlying disorientation could therefore be the personality and (even more) the identity itself.

Here, then, fear as a defensive passion, which the author spoke of (and which has been explored by all the studies on Groups), becomes the companion of a more intimate and profound fear, resulting in them being synergetic in the encounter with reality, especially when it is perceived (also in a somewhat forced manner) as contrary to our values and therefore dangerous.

In this sense, the author's proposal of tenderness as a political force seems either a little utopian or very hopeful about the possibility of building personalities made of more porous, more woundable material: but this in turn can only happen if one is able to be willing to encounter various kinds of fears.

One of these is the fear of not knowing *a priori* who one is, but meeting it would mean discovering who one is in the encounter with an experience that is always new and as little filtered as possible by our past: having a beginner's mind in our relationships.

To become once again, then yes, tenderly children.

And encountering our fears requires the kind of awareness that is preverbal, non-narrative awareness: an awareness capable of making itself porous to 'what is', to what we really feel in the simple building blocks of our emotional existence; it requires an awareness that 'we are all in the same boat', a boat of limits, indeterminacy, not knowing, interdependence, wound-ableness; and it requires kindness and compassion (as I have briefly tried to define above) towards our own and our fellow human beings' difficulties.

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