

FINDING THE FEET: TREATING IMMIGRATION TRAUMA IN CHILDREN

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Ana and the rat

Ana was a quiet, shy, six-year-old Mexican-American girl who spoke rarely in class. She was referred to me for counseling at school. We spent our first three sessions making bead bracelets together and speaking very little. I focused mainly on being friendly and present. Ana completed bracelets for herself and asked if she could make more for her sisters and cousins. I agreed and asked her to draw her family.

Ana drew a large extended family, and we wrote the names of all the people onto the drawing, adding the kinship terms in both Spanish and English: “grandma/*abuelita*,” “uncle/*tio*,” and so on. Ana was surprised when I asked her for the Spanish words.¹ My Spanish is rudimentary, but I felt my lack of fluency was less important than my demonstration of openness to the fact that there were two equally valid languages in our shared field. I explained to her that I, too, speak two languages (French and English), and pointed out that between us, we spoke *three* languages. I was trying to dissolve the false insider/outsider opposition between Spanish and English, at the same time joining with Ana in a shared bilingual, bicultural status.

On the world map, we looked at California, France, and Mexico. We traced how far her parents had walked in order to get to America, framing this as a heroic journey. After this, Ana suddenly began to speak more. In fact, she changed from being almost silent to chattering happily nonstop in her sessions, telling me long, complicated stories about her family. It seemed simply validating her language, her family, and her family’s story had created trust. But, as well as this, we had changed the predominant, hostile narrative about “illegal immigration” into a different family

¹ I, in turn, was surprised that Ana’s somewhat limited English vocabulary included so many kinship terms (aunt, uncle, cousin, second cousin, sister-in-law, etc.). This revealed a sophisticated grasp of extended family relationships. It was clear that extended family was central to Ana’s life and much valued in her culture (Skogrand et al., 2005), and this caused me to reflect on the comparative impoverishment of this aspect of life in Anglo culture.

story featuring courage and determination. Coherent family narratives, especially when the family has endured and overcome hardship and challenge, have been shown to be important in fostering resilience in children (Bohanek et al., 2009). I wanted Ana to have a narrative she could be proud of.

A few weeks later I was informed by the school that one of Ana's relatives had, in the course of a road accident, killed someone. The relative, who was undocumented, was arrested and subsequently deported, which meant that she was permanently lost to Ana's family, many of whom were also undocumented, and so could not travel (or speak) freely. When Ana came in, she was withdrawn and quiet but volunteered no news. I asked if anything had happened and she said no. Undocumented children may be taught not to discuss things concerning family with adults from the host culture, particularly when those adults are in positions of authority. Disclosing anything that could endanger the family's already precarious status must be avoided, so the children are encouraged to stay quiet. Also, in this case, the family was grappling with overwhelming emotions — I could only imagine how I would feel if I lost a relative due to such a profoundly shocking event.

Ana asked if I would draw things that she could copy. I wondered if this was a camouflage strategy: at a time of great unsafety and uncertainty, you might do well to keep your head down and do what everyone else is doing. But it also seemed to be a bid for support and an appeal for guidance. I agreed, and we spent the session drawing together. In the next session, she again wanted to copy my drawings. I suggested that we take turns copying each other. I wanted to show that Ana's contributions were as valuable as mine and that, as a representative of the host culture, I desired them. Ana's drawings featured nested hearts in the center of the paper, surrounded by simple flowers and a frame. She did not mention the accident or the loss of her relative. She drew the hearts and the flowers quietly and with great concentration.

These quintessentially Mexican motifs resembled the paper cutouts that are strung up for fiestas. But also, to my eyes, they looked like mandalas: the hearts were set in nested patterns, surrounded at the four corners by four-petaled flowers, held within a square frame. Mandalas seemed appropriate under the circumstances — Jung suggests they represent inner wholeness and psychic integration and possibly arise in “situations of psychic confusion and perplexity” (Jung, 1973). This certainly seemed to be one of those situations.

Next week, I suggested that Ana and I draw a story together. I usually begin such stories with a mouse. Mice are small, shy, clever, and operate out of sight. As such, they are a great symbol for the resourceful, slightly feral, real selves of children. Even a “good girl” like Ana, who goes virtually voiceless in the host culture in which she lives, will generally allow the inner mouse to slip out on shadowy adventures. So I drew a mouse in one corner of a large piece of paper, and said, “Once upon a time, there was a mouse ...”

I asked Ana what happened next. “He goes to a fiesta,” she replied and drew Mexican fiesta flags at the top of the page. I asked who was at the fiesta. “A lady,” she replied. I drew the lady, wearing a wide-brimmed hat. “And then....?” I prompted. “Then the rat bites the lady, and a boy has to kill it with the broom,” said Ana. I noticed that Ana had exchanged the mouse for a rat. Spanish uses the word *raton* for both mice and rats, so it is possible she was simply using a more familiar word for the rodent. But the abrupt change seemed to flag the eruption of shadow: the inoffensive mouse suddenly became a rat — an altogether more dangerous animal.

“Draw the dead rat,” she said. She was very focused on the story now. A great intensity had entered the room. I drew the dead rat, upside down with its paws in the air, making it as neutral as I could, though I also felt a sense of foreboding. As soon as I had finished, Ana grabbed a bright red wax crayon. “I’ll draw the blood,” she said. Her anger was palpable. She drew the blood with relish, and she drew a lot of it. I had the sense she was angry with the rat. It had to be punished.

I waited for Ana to finish with the blood. When she had finished, there was a pause, while she looked at the picture. I let this go on for some time so that she could take in the death of the rat. Finally, I said, “The rat is dead. What shall we do now?” Ana suggested we bury it. So, taking a piece of black craft paper, I folded it in half to make a casket. Ana cut the rat carefully out of the story, and we placed it into the casket.

“We need to glue it,” said Ana. She wanted that rat sealed up within the casket. I suspected it represented all of the shadowy emotions of anger, grief, loss, shock, and hate that Ana wanted to rid herself of. Now that they had come out, those feelings needed to be safely contained somewhere. Ana took a glue stick, ran it down the edge of the paper, folded the paper back in half and then banged on the casket with the flat of her hand with great force, several times.

I was in a tiny closet-like room with a six-year-old girl, and I felt as though I could hardly contain what was in the field. I was feeling the unbearableness of Ana's feelings, and because I was feeling them too, she was no longer alone with them. Not only Ana but her entire family must have been feeling this rage and grief. It had affected the entire community.

With the family in turmoil, it is possible no one had talked to Ana about how she felt. Indeed, no one probably had the time. Most of the adults in this community worked at least two jobs, and many of the younger children were being raised by their older siblings while their parents worked. All the children of Ana's relative had gone to live with Ana's family in their tiny apartment. Ana was a quiet child, and she was probably flying under the radar while everyone around her tried to cope with the crisis.

After a pause, I asked, "How does the boy feel now?" Ana said he felt bad. Now there was room for the other side of the story — that her relative had killed someone, and this was a terrible thing, which Ana felt sorry about. The mood began to shift and become more diffuse. "What would he like to do?" I asked. At this point, Ana drew a blank. It felt important not to leave her alone, in this grave, adult situation. So I asked if the boy would like to take some flowers for the rat, to show that he was sorry like people do when someone has died.

Ana said yes. She drew the flowers carefully. Then she cut them out and stuck them on the lid of the casket. This time she did the gluing gently, sticking the paper down with gentle pressure. "The rat is dead, and now it is in the casket," I said. "The boy who killed the rat feels bad, and so he took it some flowers to say that he is sorry." Ana nodded solemnly. She chose to leave the rat, in its casket, with me at the end of the session.

Cultural integration

Winnicott speaks of the importance of culture in the development of play, but he seems to be talking about culture in the sense of our human inheritance of art and creativity, which he calls "the cultural pool" (Winnicott, 1967). He did not specifically discuss the importance of secure attachment to a specific culture, probably because he, like many of us, could take secure cultural attachment for granted. We only notice it by its lack, if we experience the ontological insecurity of being lost in an unfamiliar country (Rapoport, 2008). But the invisible anchor of secure cultural attachment

provides families with the stability they need to provide a stable container for their child. The cultural and familial containers nest within one another, like Russian dolls, with the smallest doll being protected by the concentric shells of the larger dolls.

In cross-cultural work with immigrant children, in my experience, the key is a potential space that is specifically *intercultural*, in which both therapist and client are seen as cultural beings, and where culture itself can be played with. A culture-blind approach unconsciously invites the client to perform as an assimilated immigrant in the “white space” of the host culture — even though the therapist may be consciously well-meaning, empathetic, and positive about the client’s culture. But a culturally sensitive therapist can more consciously invite the child to step toward the host culture as a whole person.

Paradoxically, children being raised biculturally and bilingually mostly inhabit monolingual, monocultural spaces. They have to consistently split off one-half of themselves: speaking only Spanish at home, for example, while outside the home they speak only English. Educational strategies that ban bilingual schooling reinforce this split. Such children need a place where they can flesh out their culturally and linguistically rich *dual* identity. Mexican-American writer Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) speaks to this when she writes:

Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (p. 59)

Anzaldúa refuses to choose between English and Spanish. She insists on interweaving the two to create a truly bilingual narrative. As a bilingual adult, I have found that bilingual children are generally fascinated to find an adult role model who moves between both cultures as the child does. Children are hungry to be able to be all of themselves, and the potential space of therapy can provide that opportunity if it supports the child being able to play with and in both cultures.

Lucia and the goose

Lucia, aged six, was referred by her mother, following a series of

“tantrums,” during which Lucia threatened to call the police so they could take her away. Lucia’s family was undocumented, so the issue of who takes people away was enormous for them. Were Lucia’s threats to have herself taken away an attempt to gain mastery over a terrifying possibility that could happen at any time? Or did they reflect a fantasy that the powerful institutions of the host country, of which her parents were afraid, would look after her? If this was the case, was there abuse happening at home? Or had unspeakable things happened in her lineage, in El Salvador, during the brutal history of that country, when people were taken away by the police and disappeared?²

Transgenerational trauma is a crucial element in work with migrants, especially when they (or their parents) came from countries riven by war and dictatorship. In this case, the probability of trauma is high (Valenzuela et al., 2013). Very often the events are not talked about, and the children are not explicitly aware of them. But they can be felt in children’s nightmares, in physical symptoms including unexplained anxiety, and in “problem behaviors” (Schützenberger, 1998). When working with these populations, I educate myself about the history of the culture that was left and look out for signs that something traumatic may have happened in the family lineage. Even if it cannot be worked with explicitly, there is the possibility it can be worked out through the play or through storytelling.

Lucia was always very prettily turned out in rainbow shades of pink, orange, aqua, and green. Despite a lack of money, her mother had brilliantly recreated the spirit of ancestral textiles in clothing bought at Goodwill, in a way that showed pride in their culture. Lucia’s hair was braided, and she had a way of turning up her face and smiling charmingly at grown-ups. At school she performed perfectly, acting the part of a pretty little good girl, while at home she screamed about being taken away. I was curious what was going on at home. I asked her to draw her family in the U.S., and she did so with great care, using a lot of very carefully shaded colors.

She started with a straight green line for the ground. On it, she drew two angular blue agaves. Then she drew a house, and only then did she start on the people. This suggested to me that the issue of the ground and, thus, of

² The Commission on the Truth for El Salvador estimated that more than 5,500 people, including children, “disappeared” — i.e., were apprehended and executed — during and after the Salvadoran Civil War. Their report was published by the United States Institute for Peace: www.usip.org/publications/truth-commission-el-salvador.

where we are geographically, was of paramount importance in Lucia's psyche. She drew her mother, her father, her sister, and herself, outside their house, with the dog. The people were perfectly drawn, with smiling faces, but they had no feet. Their unfinished legs hovered above the carefully drawn green line of the ground. Having obediently delivered what I had asked for, Lucia gave me her perfect smile.

I asked Lucia where her grandparents were, and she replied, "El Salvador." I asked if she had met them, and she said no, but they spoke on the telephone. I acknowledged that El Salvador was far away, and asked if they were here in her heart nevertheless, and she said yes. So I suggested she might want to add them to the picture, too. She drew them in the top right-hand corner, starting once again with the line for the ground. But this time the people had feet, connecting directly to the green grounding line. The contrast between the U.S. family, who were "ungrounded," and the family members in El Salvador, who had a connection, quite literally, with the land, was striking. This seemed to be depicting a dislocation-related trauma; as if, although they were here, Lucia's family could not really "land." In the U.S., you could say, they had no leg to stand on.

A few sessions later, Lucia chose to play with a farm, which consisted of a piece of plywood with a house stuck to it — so there was ground to this toy — and a large set of wooden figures. These included a farmer and his wife and two of every animal: pigs, horses, sheep, cows, dogs, cats, chickens, ducks. Plus a solitary goose. Lucia took them all off the plywood, two-by-two, and placed them carefully on the table. Then she picked up the goose and asked me where the other one was.

Issues of "disappearance" were big in Lucia's lineage. When I thought of the recent history of El Salvador, the seemingly simple question seemed to echo with shadowy associations. Where had the goose's mate gone, and why? Was it taken away? Who took it? Would it come back? I wondered if Lucia was grappling with the conscious or unconscious fear of deportations, or with the grief resulting from them. If this was so, then the question was equally loaded. What might life be like for a goose left behind? Was it lonely? The solitary one-of-a-kind goose seemed poignant when I thought of Lucia's position as a child negotiating life in a new culture. But perhaps the goose wasn't lonely at all; perhaps it felt special. Or perhaps both might be true.

I said I did not know where the other goose was. Where did she think it might be?

Lucia ignored me and put the goose down. I wondered if my words had disrupted her thread — maybe I hadn't quite understood. Or maybe that question was too loaded. She picked up the cat instead and walked it into the house. The farmer immediately told it to get out of the house because no one gets to go in the house unless they ask. The cat went back to the table. I blandly reflected that the farmer had told the cat that no one is allowed in the house without his permission. I was thinking that perhaps this was about as close as a five-year-old child could get to symbolizing U.S. immigration policy. I could feel something building in the room, and although it was time to end the session, I wanted to give it time to play out. Just as the bell rang for break, Lucia took the goose and walked it straight into the house. I had a brief urge to yell, “*Yeah!*”

Winnicott refers to the “significant moment ... at which the child surprises himself or herself” (Winnicott, 1971). For Winnicott, these surprising moments represent breakthroughs of newness that foster change. This moment of Lucia's with the goose was surely one of these moments. The central theme of *where one is allowed to be* had entered the play. The naughty goose defied the prohibition of the farmer and went where it wanted to go — permission be damned! Lucia surprised both of us with what I understood as a spontaneous act of differentiation. And she did it without becoming disregulated (in a “tantrum”), without the support of a higher authority (the police), and without having to physically separate from her family (the fantasy of being taken away).

In a session soon after this, Lucia started making small rounds out of Play-Doh. Then she squished them between her hands. Fiddling with Play-Doh alongside her, I asked what she was making. “Tortillas,” she replied. So, I said, in that case I would make the beans, and set to making tiny blobs. We worked quietly for a while, and there was a happy feeling in the room. “My mom taught me to make tortillas,” Lucia told me. Then after a little pause, she added, “And her mom taught her.”

I affirmed this back to her. “Your grandma taught your mom how to make them. And then your mom taught you how to make them.” Then I added that when she had a little girl, she could teach her, too, and then her daughter could teach *her* daughter. I wanted to mark the thread of her lineage and the possibility of its continuation in this new country. Shortly after this session, the teacher reported that the child's family had called to tell her the child's tantrums had stopped.

I understood the work with Lucia to be about establishing a connection backwards to the land that had been lost, which in turn would enable a more grounded existence here and now. At no time did we specifically discuss any of the material. The themes were raised and worked through in the play.

Choosing to belong

My work with Ana and Lucia was brief, comprised of ten sessions during a single school semester. But I have never forgotten either of these bright, lost girls. I was one of those girls myself long ago, displaced and trying to work out how things were done in a new place. Trying to belong.

At the time of my therapy, I was living in the U.S. on a Green Card. My passport was British, and I had lived for most of my adult life in France. I'm white, but I was born in Hong Kong, and as a child, I spoke Cantonese. My parents moved every two years, and I went to nine schools. A long time ago, in a workshop, asked to say my name and where I was from, I said some shorthand version of this, and another participant muttered, "Too many identities." I remember stifling both tears and a snarl. It was both true and not true: I did have too many identities, but they were all real, and they all mattered to who I was. Did I really have to choose?

The answer I would give now is no. At 54, I'm a U.S. citizen in a region where almost everyone is from somewhere else, and this comforts me. Over the years I've resolved my multiple aspects of identity into something more consistent than my previous chameleon self. It took me almost five decades. The work with Ana and Lucia may not have resolved all the problems faced by two little Latina girls in America, but I hope it gave them a leg-up in getting over the wall.

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