



The Concept and Experience of Contact

By Julian Zanelli

Coming into contact is more than simple proximity. It is more than simply “bumping into”- although bumping into is a form of contact in its own right -it is just a little limited, that’s all. If you really want to know another, or be known, the starting point is “contact”. Until we come into contact with ourselves, another person, or the world at large, we cannot really determine their qualities.

Contact actually requires reaching out, to varying extents. Real contact does not occur until there is some openness (boundary softening). That does not imply for a moment that we have to let someone run over the top of us just so that we can know them. The softening of the boundaries that I am referring to here is more a matter of allowing ourselves time to “check someone out”. Whereas *dogs sniff..... we talk*. And when we talk, we learn a few things, and then we can think and feel and intuit what kind of a relationship might work. ‘Do I have to keep my distance?’ ‘Should I keep them at arms length...or not?’ We need to engage around our boundaries edge just enough before we can make an informed decision.

Before we extend this idea to other people or the world at large, I would like to suggest that we can be aware of “things” inside us, or we can even be vaguely familiar with feelings etc, **without ever really having come into contact with them**. As though we are able to keep things out of bounds inside us, packaged away, where we can see the box, but not the contents, with only a vague memory of those contents. Indeed, in a supportive and challenging therapy the degree of openness and contact with self increases.

Now that we can consider the idea that we are often only partly in contact with ourselves, what does that say about how much contact we have with others? Whilst it is true that our initial contact with others is usually superficial, which may work to our advantage, as it is not practical to have profoundly deep contact with everyone or everything. It is also true that we can learn how to deepen the contact and then to tolerate the results of this deepening with a few important people, and **this is life changing**. The experience of really meeting someone is an extension of the concept of contact. Although this is scary for some, most people eventually really enjoy ‘being met’ and meeting others. Contact with another person could really be considered the starting point of other much wider concepts like ‘engaging’, and ‘relating’.

It may be clear now why Ground and Boundaries are preliminary skills and concepts in the lead up to making Contact. Ground and Boundaries are both primarily intrapsychic (in your own head and body) whilst Contact suddenly opens the idea of dealing more fully with yourself and then with another person. In order to tolerate and make sense of Contact, we need to be grounded, and in order to feel safe when in contact we need to have boundaries.



In the therapeutic environment this order of **ground** first, followed by **boundaries** and then **contact**, is a very useful and safe way of creating change. It allows the client and the therapist time and space to create a relationship that is transformational. This relationship is usually experienced as one in which the client is being their best selves. Not their most obedient, but their most authentic, real selves. The groundwork of ground, boundaries and contact is a solid foundation that creates a level of authenticity and on which rests deeper and more engaging work.

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