

The Concept and Experience of Ground

By Julian Zanelli

Ground, Boundaries and Contact are the 1-2-3 of coming into any relationship in life, whether intimate, corporate or therapeutic. If these three areas are working well, you'll be able to handle just about anything that life throws at you. This article is the first of a three part series to get you in touch with your groundedness.

Are you grounded? Do you know what I mean? You probably do. The term grounded is used widely to describe many aspects of experience. Lets look at the language side first. We know that a person can be ungrounded, gain or lose ground, get their feet back on the ground or have a good grounding in something. We have also heard concepts like, the ground of mind / being / existence. There are also associated descriptions like someone is "earthy", or they are "the salt of the earth". All of which pertain to a certain place and state of being. The concept of "ground" is a spatial metaphor that describes a place to stand on, sink roots into and be supported by. Of course the 'place' no more exists than the 'roots' of our being exist in a physical sense. However both these descriptive metaphors allow us to consider certain types of experience, and when we do consider these experiences we notice that something feels right about the use of such metaphors.

Why get Grounded?

It is a good idea to start with simple experiences that relate to a *lack of* ground, perhaps like racing thoughts and scattered thinking. We all know the 11th hour preparation feeling. That feeling in your gut as you know that you have a presentation that you have not prepared for, there is a churning feeling, along with racing thoughts, bits of your subject race through your mind, disconnected from the rest of the subject. Other thoughts cram in there as well, like, recriminations for being in this situation again. All this content of the mind and body is only able to dominate your sense of yourself because you are in a state that allows it. This state dependant processing allows certain things to happen and prevents certain other things from happening. Whilst you are slightly panicked and ungrounded, you are able to worry, "catastrophise", churn, chastise, regret. And you are not able to experience a focused, gradually progressive and coherent train of thought relating to only one relevant subject matter. Some of the basic factors of an ungrounded mind are: crowding and racing thoughts, jumping between unrelated ideas, and the feeling of speediness, or edginess. Physically there are several things going on as well, vaso constriction in the limbs (blood vessels have shrunk slightly



due to muscle tension), reducing the temperature in the limbs (especially the feet) breathing will be shallow, usually exclusively in the chest, heart rate is increased, adrenalin and other cortico-steroids are released, somatic muscles (those we have voluntary control over) move to a state of readiness. Processes like digestion are slowed down, usually including mild contraction of the muscles relating to peristalsis (swallowing and digestion).

How does it feel?

Now consider that psychophysical state of “groundedness” as it might relate to this person with 11th Hour Syndrome. This person would only be doing what is necessary for last minute preparations, keeping in mind that last minute preps are usually not that helpful.

...breathing would be full, slow and rhythmic...

...thinking would be balanced between right and left brain...

They would *feel comfortable and focused (bottom heavy) without feeling lethargic*. There would be a sense of clarity and ease with which the mind moves between ideas, the guts are relaxed, and warmth spreads from the belly to the feet from vaso-dilation.

Importantly the person feels a subtle downward movement from their head through their neck and shoulders right through the belly, relaxing everything as it goes, there would be a slightly heightened sense of connection to those body parts that are in contact with the ground or the chair. Almost as though that downward movement was meeting these points of contact. As though we are literally coming into contact with our grounding points. Can you feel it now?

Whatever we are doing, we will do it better when we are grounded!

Now I would like to turn our attention to the therapeutic situation as an example of a relationship and consider ground, grounding, and groundedness in this context.

Grounding comes first!

Groundedness is a fundamental starting point as far as I can see. Without this, the work that is done is not resting on anything solid. The implications for groundedness in therapy, like life, are that experiences become solid, clear and real. It is something that we can get in touch with, feel and consider. No longer are we stuck in our heads or in our emotions!



This is why grounding comes so early on in therapy. We all have different abilities in reaching a grounded state, many of us need some assistance when it comes to making “being grounded” a natural part of their lives. Can you see how this might apply to your intimate and professional relationships?

From this starting point, all the rest of therapy and life can proceed much more effectively, because being properly grounded means to a certain extent that you are focused, mindful, centered and balanced. The ground that we prepare becomes in time the ground that we launch off from.

Hopefully I have opened up the idea of ground, grounding and groundedness just enough for you to see it’s importance in all of life, and especially in the therapeutic environment. It is a metaphor and an experience. Gradually it can form the bedrock of your day to day experience, so that when you are met with life’s ups and downs you are able to stay grounded and think, act and feel appropriately.

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