



## The art of listening in Romano Biancoli

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### Foreword

Romano was a great teacher, philosopher and humanist. I therefore thank Rainer Funk and Marco Bacciagaluppi for encouraging me to take part in this meeting. My tribute to Romano is an imaginary dialogue between a supervisor and his student. This dialogue is the outcome of countless group and individual supervisions in which I took part.

While writing the dialogue, I felt again the passion Romano had when dealing with patients. He expressed himself through carefully chosen words, which alternated with long pauses, during which he looked almost inspired, as if he were constantly trying to tune in his analytic sensibility with the patient's feelings, emotions and history. The aim of my paper is to make you feel the passion for listening which Romano passed on to us. This is a special kind of listening, which leads us to become the other while being ourselves.

### The Dialogue

The curtain opens onto Romano's office. A sober and secluded environment, with a desk against the wall. The armchair on which he sits is next to the door, and on the right there is a little couch, where his student will sit, on Romano's side.

The door bell rings. Romano stands up and goes to open the door. He welcomes the young student with a firm handshake and a reassuring smile.

**Romano** Good morning.

**Student** Good morning. I'm sorry, I'm a bit late. I was already in Via Nosadella and I didn't notice I had passed your number.

**R.** Don't worry. Please, come in.

**S.** I was so absorbed in my thoughts that I didn't see the number on the door.

**R.** That happens, especially if we are thinking about something which absorbs us.

**S.** Yes, I am really absorbed. This time it's a patient who worries me a lot. I'm afraid I might not grasp some important problems. I always feel I could do more.

**R.** You look worried.

**S.** I am worried.

**R.** Be careful. If you're worried you might not be able to catch the gist of what happens during a session.

**S.** What do you mean?

**R.** To be able to listen to a human being means a lot, we should not feel powerless. I mean, what we give patients is *a special type of listening* which rarely takes place in other settings. A therapist is trained to listen to the other, and listening means creating *a silent space* inside us which can receive *the other person's sounds*.

**S.** And when you feel the patient feels a deep anxiety?

**R.** You know, sometimes life is so wretched...



Long silence.

R. A therapist can feel anxiety, just as you are doing now.

S. But what can I say?

R. Words don't change the patient. Being there where the anxiety is, hand in hand with the patient, does it.

S. But... is this what analysis really means?

R. Analysis is a dialogue between two people, a therapist and a patient, aimed at discovering who the patient is and why he is that way. The patient communicates with words, gestures and silences and the therapist reacts accordingly. This creates a movement between two inner worlds. But in order to reach the centre of the other's world, *you have to offer yours first*.

S. How do I understand whether I am at the centre?

R. Let's draw an analogy with cities. If you are on the outskirts you see tall buildings which look more or less the same, right?

S. Yes.

R. That's why Milan, Turin, Venice and Ravenna are not so different one from the other. But if I go to the city centre, then it gets more interesting, because every centre is different. Therefore, if you offer yourself openly to your patient and focus intensely you can grasp his uniqueness. *Each patient is unique, each session is unique and each analysis is unique too*.

S. What about the setting, what should I prefer? Face to face or using a couch?

R. A couch is not enough, nor are armchairs, three sessions a week, nor all the pictures on the walls in your office. *The setting is the inner disposition of the therapist. He established the setting because he has it inside*.

S. I understand, I should improve my technique.

R. Beware! "Technique" is a word better associated with mechanics. The most appropriate word to use in psychoanalysis is *art*, and art in psychoanalysis is the "*art of listening*". If we are able to listen, then

we carry out analyses. If we're not, nothing happens.

S. Well... Indeed.

R. Moreover, if a therapist wishes to listen, his head should be free from *the noise of his own thoughts*.

S. Right. But in this patient I feel he carries a heavy burden, he is crushed by his own grief and he wonders what's the meaning in life.

R. I think the meaning is implied in the *journey*, in *becoming*, in a never-ending process. Even when we'll be close to the boundary, even then, with a foot on the other side, we should hope that the experience changes us.

S. I notice I sometimes focus too much on what the patient says and I'm unable to move beyond.

R. We must listen to the underlying music of the patient and then focus on ourselves to understand how we feel.

S. It is not easy, though. What about schemes, theory...?

R. If there is a centre-to-centre relatedness and you are him though still being yourself, you start a process which changes both of you. Our talk focuses on the patient. As a therapist, you don't talk about yourself, but you express yourself with your eyes, your voice and your gestures. Therefore, you reveal yourself.

S. So, we could say, you get to know each other?

R. Of course! When a treatment is over, one can't tell whether it's the therapist who knows more about the patient or the other way around. If the relationship is successful, a therapist might feel changes inside him.

S. Sometimes, however, you wish to distance yourself from certain experiences...

R. You have to get involved, dive into the depths of what is unpleasant and unacceptable. We can't help a patient if we don't plunge into what is unpleasant in his experience.

S. And the transference?



- R. We need to make a distinction, to understand what really belongs to the transference, that is to the patient's projections, and what instead is linked to the interaction with the aspects of the therapist.
- S. What about countertransference?
- R. What we call countertransference is a therapist's transference, actually. A therapist is a real person with his own experiences and projections, not simply somebody reacting to the other.

Step by step, Romano taught us the dance, the rhythm of the session and how to understand if we were on time or not by reading the further implications of the symbols. On the one hand, he used to say that psychotherapy is related to prostitution because it is a service for which you pay. On the other hand, sometimes it is such a rare gift that it becomes priceless. Listening to symbols and, in particular, to dream symbols, is central in Romano's art of listening. – Let's go back to our dialogue.

- S. This is the first time the patient has told me a dream.
- R. The first dream is very important. Sometimes it allows us to see the future development of the transference.
- S. How can we give a correct interpretation of the symbols a patient creates?
- R. Before interpreting symbols you need *to be captured by them*.
- S. Sometimes dreams are so enigmatic...
- R. When the therapist suggests an interpretation of dream symbols, the atmosphere warms up. This happens not only because the therapist expresses and

discloses himself, but also because of the involvement created by each symbol. A symbol tends to address people in their wholeness. It addresses them with ambiguous intensity.

- S. I think I have understood the second part of this dream, but the first one remains obscure.
- R. Analysing a dream means breaking it up, dividing it. But a dream is *a life experience, it's alive*. It's a dreamer's "*spoken portrait*" (Silva García). A therapist listens to the patient's dream, he observes his spoken portrait and tries to depict it in his head. He does this as his contribution to the ongoing relationship. Then he tries to bring this portrait to life, so that *he can address it in the here and now*.

To bring a dream in supervision was a very intense experience because Romano, before interpreting a symbol, was enraptured, as if he had just listened to a piece of poetry. Only after that did he start giving a reading which would help to understand it. However, he was careful to avoid making a "prose translation" of what he considered to be a creative human product, to be treated with due respect. Romano feared that a dream could be crystallized by the words which express it, detached from the dreamer and the therapist. This means we should let the symbols and the enigmatic figures speak for themselves, without trying to close them in a prearranged pattern.

We can therefore conclude by saying that, with Romano, the art of listening to words, silences and dreams turns a session into a living and fully humanistic experience.