

COUNTERTRANSFERENCE, REGRET, AND AGGRESSION: DRAMAS AND FREE ASSOCIATIONS IN AN OBJECT RELATIONS GROUP ENVIRONMENT

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Originally presented at the Annual Conference of the Object Relations Institute
in February of 2013

Nancy had been in and out of individual psychotherapy with me. After much rage, devaluation, insults and self-righteous assumptions about my moral shortcomings—which became tempered by her growing gratitude, love and admiration, and by her willingness to view some of her own failings, including, for a brief moment, her own narcissism—Nancy had decided to terminate her individual therapy. She also decided to remain in my monthly four-hour mourning and therapy group, which she had been in for at least four years.

Never having terminated an individual therapy in a totally open way before, the termination process with me was experienced as quite an achievement by Nancy. She had openly owned all her hate and love of me, and had seen her own growth. I had said she was less self-righteous and black and white in her thinking than before, although I certainly did see remnants of her former defensive splitting operations, where she tended to polarize everyone into good and bad mothers, and to idealize herself on moral terms, and tended to devalue her creative capacities, with some secret contempt for mere mortal scribbling writers, like myself, hidden behind it. When she went out the door in our last individual session, she turned around and smiled in a glow of warmth, said she couldn't wait to see me in group, and said working with me had been "a pleasure."

Now here we were, back in the monthly Saturday group. This was after Nancy had left the last individual session in a glow of admiration, acknowledging her well held secret that she had always enjoyed learning from how I intervened and engaged with different members in the group. She had also said that she and I shared a high and demonstrated intellect, and that she would miss experiencing my intellect in our individual sessions, but looked forward to experiencing my keen penetrating interpretations in group.

Now, we sat in a group several months later. Suddenly, a woman sitting next to Nancy in the group leapt up from beside her, ran across the room to a seat on the other side of the group, and said "I'm not going to stay next to that erupting volcano!" Eva said she had felt an erupting volcano of rage building up in Nancy, and that she wasn't going to just sit there and let her explode all over her. She also said that she felt terrified of Nancy because she was sitting there with her arms crossed across her chest like an imperious and imposing judge. Nancy responded at first with self-deprecating humor, by lifting her left arm and exposing the hanging plastic tag of a department store purchase in the underarm portion of her blouse. Nancy seemed embarrassed, but self-justifying, as if to say, "I'm not the mean critical judge that this woman sees, but rather an embarrassed woman who forgot to remove the store tags on the under arm of my blouse."

There was a momentary pause as the group members, somewhat nonplussed by the diversion to Nancy's underarm, tried to assimilate the twist of events. Eva, the woman who had leapt across the room to escape Nancy, and who had been sitting with a look of fear and intimidation in her eyes as she described the threatening judge across the room, won a few

moments with the comic relief. But just then, Nancy leapt outward with the words of pointed accusation just as quickly as Eva had leapt across the room. She glared with the flush of rage roaring up her cheeks at Eva and declared, "You always act like a therapist in the group! You never reveal yourself!" This came after Nancy had earlier reacted to the way Eva spoke as if she was a snob, to which Eva had protested that she did speak differently because of her accent, a mere consequence of her immigrant status. At that moment Eva had still been composed, and she had defended herself in an outwardly cool demeanor. But that coolness evaporated as Nancy's visceral volcano was felt by Eva, and was felt so intensely that she leapt for her life across the room. Now with Nancy's pointed accusation, which seemed to have a whole indictment lying behind it, it was Eva's turn to erupt. Eva's eruption was one of wounded hurt and injury manifesting as a long sobbing scream, with gushes of terror and pain escalating out of her whole body. It seemed as if every one of the pores on Eva's body was screaming, crying, and sobbing.

I looked at the clock. It was time for our half hour lunch break, in a four-hour group. It was my job to call the time out break. At first, I felt like a reluctant referee, given the conflict that had just transpired. Sylvia suggested we take a little more time since things were so hot. In these few minutes, I believe that Nancy tried to reach out to Eva, and said that she wasn't the kind of person to hurt people, and she hoped she and Eva could work together on this. But Eva was still deep in her visible and palpable pain, for all to feel. She shook her head "no" as she continued gut wrenching sobbing, her former childhood full of trauma leaking out of every pore. She managed to say, "It's too much!" She meant, "I can't respond to Nancy. It's too much." Then Nancy looked around the room for support, and defended herself by saying, "This is hard for me! Expressing anger is hard for me. And I can be overly aggressive sometimes. But I'm really an empathic person."

I felt the plea for support and did say to Eva, who was fairly new to the group, and had not known Nancy that long, "Yes. Nancy can be very empathic," but I was also aware that Nancy only wished to see herself as empathic, and had a hard time acknowledging the cold, enraged, judging part of her except when she turned it on herself. When she had turned it on me, she had always felt justified, and often self-righteously and indignantly so, but to be confronted with turning it on another group member was challenging her self-image of being the caring empathic friend to all her fellow group members, group members whom she had at one point seen as victims of me and my power in the group. To be exposed as the feared powerful judge before the whole world that existed in our psychotherapy group was leveled quite a tilt to Nancy's equilibrium.

Sylvia must have sensed it too, because she declared, more emphatically than I, "Yes. Nancy can be very empathic!" Then I had to call the lunch break. As everyone left the room for their brief and rushed lunch period, I sat with Eva, who was still doubled over with pain and injury and fear, quite a substantial contrast to the cool exterior that she had shown in the monthly group meetings up until this time.

The Afternoon

When everyone returned from lunch, Eva had moved to another location in the ring around of chairs in the room. She clearly had re-composed herself after her anguished expression of her vulnerability and need. The sense of an aftermath of conflict and a prologue to aggression emerging more openly in the group was in the air. Nancy began by saying, "I need to know if this will be resolved. I don't want to be in a group where this is going on."

I asked Nancy what she meant by being resolved. I added that perhaps she was being somewhat black and white by not realizing that Eva had just said she couldn't deal with things between them for now, not forever. I was indicating that this was all a process, and that it didn't all have to be sorted out in one group session. Nancy would have none of this! She especially wouldn't have that I saw it as a positive development that the group members' conflicts and aggression towards each other was coming out into the open, so all group members could all learn about how we dealt with aggression.

Nancy then turned particularly and pointedly to me, and with the volcanic rage arising visibly in her declared, "I think there are too many people in the group!" This also came after another group member had gotten angry that Nancy had said to her in an accusatory tone that she was taking 20 minutes. Nancy wanted Cecilia to realize that she had been listening to her when she spoke in the morning, and wanted her to see her empathy for her. Instead, Cecilia threw back at her that whatever empathy she showed, it was lost when Nancy said in that accusatory tone, "You took 20 minutes!"

Nancy wasn't accustomed to receiving this kind of aggressive defense from a fellow group member. She had receded from the group members, but then turned angrily to me, with her comment, "I think there are too many people in the group!" Here would lie my regret, because as she pushed my buttons about the size of the group, a topic much discussed that had led to my setting a ten-person limit for a four hour group, I lost my leadership role self-composure, and lashed out with my own angry retort. I said, "Nancy, that is such a red herring! It's not about the group size. This stuff happens inside of people, when they are cutting parts of themselves off! It also happens outside in the world, where conflict within competition is rampant, so how can it not happen in here in the group?" Her bringing up the group size, after she had recently declared that she was "letting go of that issue," was searing into my own equilibrium. I therefore blurted out, "What planet do you come from Nancy? This is what goes on all over!"

Nancy controlled her wrath, but the control would leave from fight to flight later. She said, "That sounds critical." Then a new group member, who had been in another long-term psychoanalytic psychotherapy group, began to speak for Nancy. Helen turned to me, and said, "I certainly would feel criticized if that were said to me, 'What planet do you live on?'" Nancy felt somewhat supported by Helen, but what she didn't get was that Helen also had said that all this stuff about being polite in this group, and about each person having their time without conflict, was "bullshit!" It was Nancy who most of all wanted this polite paradise that provided a retreat for her from the outside world, the same kind of retreat she tried to establish with her boyfriend, where they nestled with each other, away from the cold cruel world. In fact, Nancy's original intention in coming to the group was to risk going out into the world, one day of a weekend a month, away from her boyfriend.

Yet, here was Nancy about to run for the hills as conflict arose, not only in the group, but between her and others. She wanted me to provide some mythic seclusion where all this didn't happen. She concluded that less people, or me being a better person, or me giving her some kind of support she wasn't overtly asking for, would extinguish this conflict, and would let her go back to her role of group member empathizer. But now it wasn't working. And I felt the tug, the pull, the silent enraged demand that I somehow rescue her, but I was not yet aware that she would actually leave the whole scene for good. I was under the mistaken impression that with all the years she had spent in the group, and after her decision to stay after friends of hers had left, and

after her declarations to me of how she valued the group, and after her lauding my interventions in group, that she would stay and work on things over time. Yes, I believed we would all be working overtime—as the other members of the group continued to do after Nancy left.

The whole group was sensing that our work together was truly a process! I was wrong about Nancy being able to have this perspective when she was so upset. As Eva seconded me, and said that it was a red herring, about how many members were in the group now, Nancy bristled even more. But then she shut down altogether when Cecilia said, “You may have been empathizing with me this morning, but then you said, ‘You took twenty minutes!’ Maybe you just need to sit with all this now!”

That was it! Nancy withdrew. I felt her withdrawal, her underlying pain. I did want to give her the chance to speak, since I had disrupted her with my defensive and angry comment about her living on another planet. I said as others starting speaking about their internal struggles, related to the earlier psychic visualization, “Nancy. Do you want to say anything?” She was quiet then, obviously feeling silenced after Cecilia told her to “Sit with it!” She was quiet, but that quiet in Nancy would be the quiet before either a storm or a withdrawal to avoid the storm. I felt helpless as Nancy shook her head “no,” and said that she did not want to speak. I had acknowledged I had been critical towards her when Helen had confronted me with how critical I sounded. Nonetheless, I felt like Nancy had disappeared into some old kind of vacuum, like the one that she had withdrawn into continuously during the earlier part of her life—before therapy had awoken Nancy’s awareness of her anger, her rage, her hunger, her need, and her losses. She had retreated as she had done so often in her life. Yet I didn’t realize she wouldn’t be back!

As the group ended that day, there was a feeling of things being unsettled, and I sensed fears of people losing control. I had been part of this atmosphere. Yet Eva was so relieved that I had been there during lunch to understand her pain and terror, and to hear her talk about the sister transference that had been ignited within her by Nancy. She began talking of this sister transference during the next group, and other groups. Eva was so relieved as she left the room, that she grabbed my hand and squeezed it, and kissed me on the forehead, before I could say, “Please put it into words.” Just as she took me unaware like this, I saw Nancy had left the group room in my office, and was headed out the front door of my office, beyond the waiting room. “What perfectly horrific timing,” I thought.

I further thought that Nancy knew I never let her hug or kiss me. In individual therapy, I had asked Nancy to put her wishes to hug me into words, and this had allowed Nancy to have her full emotional surge of feeling come through her body, as well as coming into her eyes through tears. She then had said, “I love you!” That was a long time ago. Now, I became again it seemed, the hated and self-involved mother that wasn’t there for her! I felt the loss. I sensed her avoidant looks, as Nancy went through the outer door as if as if she were sneaking out the door. She appeared to be deliberately shrinking herself, as if to make herself invisible. I knew the rage was festering behind this attitude, but I didn’t know I would never get to see her again. I would never get to help her work all this all out, or to even apologize to her for my “living on another planet” comment.

Eva had turned to me within the morning part of group. Cecilia defended herself with Nancy, and then turned to me by email after the group to express her distress. Both these women would continue their work in group. Both would start to share with a whole new depth with the group, as they realized how angry they were and how terrified they were, each carrying a

traumatized child self within each of them. I would work on this with them. The group would work with them, would listen, and ultimately respond.

But Nancy was gone, and I wouldn't know it until she sent an email to me and the group next month. She said goodbye to me in a cold cut off tone in an email. She said she wouldn't consider coming into group or consulting with me individually. Apparently, my short email responses to her were experienced as intrusions. She coldly declared that she had no intention of speaking again in the group, even when I invited her to come share her concerns. She said she had tried that and that I had been "aggressively critical!" She was removed, behind a wall of rage. There was no touching or contacting her. After all our work, I thought, after all the years of individual work and group work. Her cut off was final!

Everyone else was to come in and continue the process. In the next group, I encouraged everyone to speak about their anger and disappointment with me for how I had responded to Nancy. They did, and I shared my experience and thoughts. The group felt really close together after this discussion, and in the next few groups there was enough trust to really open up interpersonal issues about aggression, and how the need to speak up after a life time of trauma could come out in aggressive ways that put each other off. There was room to talk also about how one group member had been holding on to a judgment about another that made her not like the other woman, and both women spoke.

Carol said that she was experiencing the discussion with the other woman group member, Cecilia, as reminiscent of her and her mother, each saying the other was putting their stuff onto the other. This led to sorting out who was angry at who. Both women got past the rage to a meaningful dialogue that included a group discussion of transferences, projections, and interpretations. I was very pleased with the group, and with my work in it then, but haunting me in the back of my mind was Nancy. That is why I had to write this paper. I had to write this paper to understand why I felt such a deep sense of regret as well as anger in relation to Nancy's abrupt departure, and in relation to her refusal to speak to me. I had to see if there was anything I could have done differently that might have changed the outcome with Nancy. Nancy had been a group member for many years. Suddenly, she was gone. I want to understand. I want to understand my own regrets.

What Kind of Regret is This?

Where do I start with trying to understand my regret in relation to Nancy? Would I have been feeling such a heavy and profound sense of regret if she hadn't left? I don't know for sure. I am asking if my regret is real in the sense of existential grief about hurting the one you love. It is this kind of existential regret that Melanie Klein seemed to be speaking of when she described the combination of guilt and loss in the depressive position. Is this the kind of regret I have written about being felt by patients in describing regret as a fundamental part of a developmental mourning process in my book, *Anatomy of Regret*? Or is this regret of mine towards Nancy some kind of spurious item, where my regret is ultimately more of a narcissistic concern for my own loss in having Nancy leaving me in this abrupt way, undoing the heated-up warmth of her former individual therapy good-bye? Is it a more narcissistic regret about losing the chance to have Nancy and the other group members see me repair things with Nancy? After all, I was able to repair things in the rest of the group, after Nancy left, when the fears of aggression being out of control, and the fears of anger at me as the group leader threatened to intimidate people or to cause others to leave?

Kavaler-Adler, S. (2020). Countertransference, regret, and aggression: Dramas and free associations in an object relations group environment. *MindConsiliums*, 20(6), 1-14.

Could it be a combination of all these three things, narcissistic and humane, some jumbled up mixture with more things added into the mix as well?

What I do know is that I regret my comment about Nancy living on another planet, because it was hostile and critical, and must have been humiliating for Nancy. Helen had said it was as if I was telling Nancy she was an alien by proclaiming, "What planet do you live on?" But some part of me wants to defend myself and say, "But you were trying to make a point, that it's not just about the size of the group. The point being that these things happen in all groups, and that's part of what we're here for, to look at our enactments and understand where people are coming from, and to look at the projections and transferences behind all the anger, as in when Eva acknowledged she was experiencing Nancy as her bullying and humiliating and scapegoating sister.

Countertransference

If I have to defend myself, and that particular comment that everyone agreed had been hurtful, and which Nancy herself had declared to be "aggressively critical" in her retaliatory email, then did I genuinely feel regret at all? How could I be defending myself and also be truly grieving the loss of Nancy and her loss in feeling that I didn't care about her? And did I care if I could have been so callous at that moment just because I couldn't stand going through her complaints again about the size of the group, especially after Nancy said she was ready to let go of that gripe, and after I had put a limit on the group size that I felt was fair for a four hour group? What was my heart feeling for Nancy in all this? Had I lost it all because she was demonizing me again, turning me all bad, and leaving me abruptly, with a cold shoulder and accusation on the way out the door? Couldn't I be beyond that, if I really cared deeply about her, if I really could love her, after all the time, and all the reparations between us?

I began to think not. I seem to have to acknowledge my resentment and regret about my own loss of face in all this, as I imagine Nancy glaring down on me as I wake from my sleep in the morning. Certainly, her ghost triggered a countertransference figure for me, and I didn't have to guess who it was for long. But I'm trying to get beyond this. I'm trying to see if I have at least a good kernel of genuine regret and existential grief in relation to Nancy. Don't I care that she is aching in her solitary rage, although I picture her being comforted and soothed by her boyfriend, a boyfriend who I envision as definitely not forgiving me?

I have pictured her in pain, and find it hard to dismiss this thought from my mind. But I feel angry at her the minute I think, "Then why the hell don't you come in and talk about it, either with me or in the group? Why didn't you respond to my invitations to come in and express yourself rather than taking flight after your fight? Perhaps this is the best way you consciously and unconsciously can conceive to punish me! So why should I feel so bad for you then?" But I do, because a patient is a vulnerable and frightening thing, and I, more than any other perhaps, know the child in you. Or will you not come in to therapy to talk about it out of mere spite, because you resent that I would be paid for my time? What if I offered you a free session? But wouldn't that be masochistic of me after you twice refused either an individual or group session to communicate your concerns. Your retort was, "I have plenty of resources! I already tried to speak of my concerns and received no support from you! Good-bye!"

What a bitch! Why should I suffer grief, anguish and regret for your hurt, when you can't even come in again to tell me off? And do I really want you back, if you never let go of the size of

the group issue, after you said you were letting go of it, and after I thought we could move into the heated things in the group without the diversion of this ongoing “red herring?” Eva agreed with me that the issue of the size of the group was a red herring. But that then most probably caused you to feel the group wouldn’t be a safe place for you again! I can see how you see it. It seems so vivid to me how you must see it! I can’t seem to let go of you! I can’t help continuously seeing your point of view side by side with my own. I can’t get rid of you! Why won’t you come in and talk to me? Is it because I’m the bigger bitch who humiliated you with my “What planet do you live on?” comment, when you were the vulnerable patient, and I was supposed to be in control?

I am writing all this so you will stop haunting me! Or am I writing this so I will stop being haunted by my regret that I couldn’t control myself, and also by my resentment as well as by my regret, that all our years of work together seem evaporated? Or am I regretting that they are evaporated for you? Have I robbed you by turning you against me and forcing you into a position of hate again? So am I moving back and forth between my own paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions? Am I also—in the manner of Fairbairn’s moral defense—turning all against myself to protect you and my image of you and my wanting to sustain love for you? Or am I the narcissistic bitch who is angry you wouldn’t cooperate with me? Am I the bitch who just resented the hell out of you for rousing the others in a cry of rage against me, with your continuing rant about the size of the group?

Perhaps it is all of the above. This must be my mourning process, my developmental mourning process, by trying to digest the Nancy in my psyche and soul, my internal world ghost that always haunts me with the polarized view that I am addictively attached to, beating myself with the sides of your vision as if to repair things between us by trying to make your vision my own. But it never fits, damn it!

***Regret as a Turning Point, the Transitional Pivot: Learning from Regret
(Melanie Klein’s Reparation at Work, a Critical Phase of Developmental Mourning)***

What do I truly regret? I truly regret the impulsive expression of my rage towards Nancy, which came out in the phrase, “What planet do you live on?” I believe this phrase did provoke someone who carried a great deal of shame within her from the past into a feeling of being aggressively shamed and humiliated. I would agree with the female group member who said that such words from me might be interpreted as implying that Nancy was somehow an alien in relation to others in our little group society.

No matter how judgmental and self-righteous Nancy was being in her judgments towards me and towards others in the group, such as Eva and Cecilia, I was not supposed to react impulsively like a group member was, nor even spontaneously like a group member who was allowed and encouraged to say whatever came to mind in the moment, because they were the patients. Even group members should be encouraged by the group leader to have some restraint, and some self-reflection as they speak, so that accusations like the one Nancy made towards Eva about acting only like a therapist in the group could be transformed into curiosity, questions that showed an interest in who the other group member was. But in the heat of a transference moment, it is accepted for patients, and group members, to enact their anger, and then work along with the group and the leader to process this.

Nancy didn't give us any chance to do this with her, since she abruptly left, and didn't stick around to hear that Eva was aware of her enactment of victimization in relation to her sister transference and real victimization in her childhood. I thought that Nancy was depriving herself by her withdrawal of so much, as she herself said how much she missed everyone, and left with a blind sense of her own victimization. However, I also realize that she left because she thought it was futile to convince me to reduce the size of the group, so that she could be at her comfort level. Nancy, like all others, would need to stay with the discomfort of new things opening up for her in group, beyond her comfort level, but she clung to the size of the group as if it could keep her physically comfortable if the four-hour group could be reduced to, in her own words, "four or five people." She had cried as she longed for this fanaticized magical number of four or five people, who would, supposedly in her fantasy, share in some idealized harmonious journey together.

Of course, Nancy's fantasy of an ideal womb-like mini group did not account for the practicalities of what I had to contend with as a group leader, who needed to have a certain number of people in the group to make it worth my while to work all day long on a Saturday once a month, when I wouldn't have had my practice open at that time otherwise. And her fantasy didn't account for the fact that people left the group periodically, and sometimes a few at a time, and that there might not be any group left if I only took four or five into the group. But it was my job to access all this, not hers. She was entitled to be angry about me setting the parameters I saw as necessary and she was, in addition, entitled to her transference rage towards me. Her retaliations against me for setting the group number limit, which she had referred to as "It's your way or the highway!" could have continued to be part of her therapy process, and could have been dealt with in the group as part of the group process if she had continued.

I resented her not letting this happen. But I also continue to regret that my assaultive phrase about her being from another planet came out as it did, stopping Nancy from bringing up once again that she did not approve of having so many in the group. Although I actually had a significant point about the issue of the group number being used as a "red herring" to divert me and the group from the more important issues of understanding how each person in the group was struggling with how to express and negotiate the communication and effect of their own aggression, I expressed my point as an "aggressive criticism," in other words, as a retaliation against Nancy. I had emphatically declared that Nancy must come from another planet if she didn't know that aggression, and people being hurt by aggression, were part of life. In fact, it was a part of life that I hoped we could work together in the group to understand together as time went on.

From my point of view, the spontaneous expression of anger and injury in the group was a first step towards working with conflicts over aggression and over childhood narcissistic injury that still haunted us all in our internal worlds. In fact, that is what would transpire in the group, and that is why I said to Nancy that Eva would come around to dealing with their conflict even if Eva had said it was too much in this particular group. But apparently Nancy, obviously in retrospect, being so injured herself—although she was looking on the outside like the tough one, while Eva temporarily crumbled—could not have any long range view. In fact, her rage must have triggered her despair that things could not be about meaningfully with change coming about. I presume Nancy regressed back to an early childhood state of feeling in which her outside and inside worlds were dominated by a family that could never change.

Since I was not responding to Nancy's repeated rage about the group size by decreasing the group membership limit even more than I already had, could I have seemed like the immovable

object to Nancy? In this way had I become, in her mind, an unchangeable and impenetrable object parent who refused to let her have any impact? “It’s either your way or the highway!” she had once said. How very sad that Nancy would not stick around to see how she could have an impact on me—even though I didn’t submit to her controlling, how I organized a group that I had created in my hard-won practice, and which I had worked with on monthly Saturdays for eighteen years of my life!

But still, the regret is there. I feel sad about the loss of what could have been with Nancy if she had chosen to stay and work as a member of this special group. I feel sad about Nancy not being in the group as I go beyond my own countertransferential sadistic thoughts, to just feeling the loss of what could have been with Nancy. This would be my mourning process in relation to Nancy, but my regret is also a critical part of surrendering to the grief related to her loss. My regret dialogues with my retaliatory anger in my mind. I think of Nancy suffering after leaving the group with a double-sided response. I feel bad for her, and guilty about causing her injury. I see her sad child face in my mind, behind the more adult face she tried to maintain at the end of the last group she attended.

But I also feel angry sadism that resides within me as well as within her. I feel a sadism that wants Nancy to suffer and be tortured, just as I have been tortured after her leaving. I have been tortured because I can’t continue the work and create a meaningful of dialogue of understanding and resolution between us. It was this sadism, I am aware, that propelled me into my verbal attacking exclamatory question to begin with, “What planet do you live on?” This sadism does not seem to evaporate in the face of regret. However, my awareness of my regret is a pivotal point in my countertransferential mourning process. Through my conscious regret I am learning how to contain my reactions and process them, as I continue to work with the monthly mourning and therapy group. Through all this, I become more capable of helping all the other group members work with and understand their own aggression as it emerges within this group!

Countertransference Regret and Facilitating the Group: Aggression and Transference Work as Part of the Group Developmental Mourning Process

The sharing of my countertransference regret with the group seems to have allowed the group to feel safe enough to risk openly dealing with their own aggression. My countertransference sharing took place in the group that met after Helen had said that the idea that we could be all be nice and polite if there were less group members was “bullshit.” However, since Helen said this just at the moment when Nancy was just reacting to my “other planet” comment, Nancy didn’t seem to get it at all! Helen seemed to think that Nancy didn’t get that Helen thought Nancy’s expectation for everyone to be continually polite and supportive of one another was what she, Helen, meant by “bullshit.”

As Helen stated that Nancy may have had a whole different vision and agenda about what being in a therapy group was about, it paved the way for me to not only acknowledge my impulsive hostility towards Nancy, but to explain my angry motivation that lay behind it. I said, “This isn’t an excuse for what I said or how I said it, but that’s what pissed me off!” I meant that what pissed me off was Nancy’s demand that everyone be well behaved, while she discounted her own accusatory behavior towards me and Eva, since she thought her attacks were justified. I also referred to Nancy’s assumption that if people in the group were angry and upset and competitive, it meant that I was the causal perpetrator of putting too many people into the group. Such an

assumption by Nancy was what had ticked me off. Nancy's fallacious assumption about what the group was all about could put everyone in a strait jacket! But most of all Nancy may have wanted to put me in a strait jacket. This would be a way of punishing me, with the further punishment of a group rebellion and mutiny, which she might hope would provoke everyone into "abandoning ship!" This could be just my own paranoid countertransference, but there had been some evidence for this in Nancy's emails to other group members, where she got to point an enraged cold finger at me.

Fortunately for myself, and for all the other members of the group, and for all the new members coming in, things didn't go the way of Nancy's retaliatory impulse. In fact, instead the pendulum swung quite in the other direction. This occurred as I went to the hull of the group ship and began to take more control, beginning to guide us through the stormy waters of group aggression, as well as guiding everyone through the psychic visualization at the beginning of the group. This emerged naturally through the interactive process of me responding to the group's emotional evolution. I could see that themes of individual developmental mourning in the group could involve the angry and aggressive stages of mourning, as well as the grief laden feelings of loss that would stimulate love and empathy between group members. Cecilia and Carol were to be the manifest couple in conflict in the group that allowed for a whole group engagement around aggression, hate, and transference rage with underlying longings for nurturance and mothering.

The Paradigm Conflict of Cecilia and Carol

Cecilia had been taking a lot of time in the last group with Nancy, and also then in the two monthly three-and-a-half-hour Saturday groups afterwards. Most of the group members were receptive to this since Cecilia was going through an extremely acute crisis, and was taking time to leave the crisis to come to the group and share the current trauma to get support. Cecilia took time to speak about the current trauma that had brought up a new heightened awareness of past traumas, which had directly threatened her very existence on an ongoing basis. Cecilia's description of all this could be hard to stay with. Some, in the group, could be more fully with her as she spoke than others. In the case of Carol, Carol as a group member questioned out loud in this third monthly group, after the last group with Nancy, why she was unable to feel empathy for Cecilia as she listened to her. Carol said, "Something is blocking my empathy and I want to know what it is."

Cecilia's response to Carol's comment was to declare that she had never liked Carol. Cecilia said that among other things that had caused her dislike Carol was an incident that had occurred after group one day. Cecilia reported that she heard Carol speaking to someone on the phone before hanging up. She recalled the incident as Carol complaining that she had been sucked in by this person. According to Cecilia, in her frustration Carol threw out some angry comments about the person on the phone that reflected derogatory judgments she made against someone who had wasted her time. Cecilia's reaction to Carol's angry judgments was not to understand why Carol needed to ventilate her frustration in this judgmental manner. Instead, Cecilia would make her own globalizing judgment against Carol. This Cecilia had kept to herself for some time, allowing her resentment against Carol to fester until she felt it was the right moment to reveal it in the group.

Now Cecilia came out with her secret resentment and made it public, which is what allowed the group process to work to detoxify Cecilia's judgments and Carol's judgments of each other. We were beginning to understand what Cecilia and Carol had triggered off in each other, from the

sadomasochistic aspects of early relationships that they both carried with them within their internal worlds. Cecilia said that she didn't like Carol since the day of her comments about the unknown person on the phone. Cecilia said that she didn't want to associate with someone who had such contemptuous attitudes towards others, and that this had made her wary of being in a group with Carol as well. Of course in all of this, Cecilia was being reactive, and might not have been fully aware of her own level of contempt manifesting towards Carol. When Cecilia told her reasons for not liking Carol, I remarked on Cecilia having made a globalizing judgment about Carol from only one incident, in which Carol was in a state of momentary intense anger and frustration towards someone, and was getting off her chest. My saying this helped Carol to express her point of view, which was also her way of justifying herself and being self-protective on her side, just as Cecilia was being self-protective on her own. Carol said, "If you judge me that way then I certainly don't want to share anything with you again, which I had done when I thought of you as a fellow group member."

As Cecilia and Carol each established their polarized platforms of defense and self-protection, Cecilia began to say that Carol was putting her own problems onto her, and Carol in turn began to say that Cecilia was putting her contempt onto her. This interpersonal stand-off then became a paradigm for each woman's internal world transference conflicts. Carol made this explicit by saying, "This is exactly what goes on between me and my mother! We end up with our heels dug in, each saying that the other is putting their stuff on the other, each feeling blamed by the other for things that are the other's responsibility. My mother and I go through this all the time. My mother says I'm putting blame on her for my own problems and for my own projected judgments, and from saying I think mother was doing the same to me. Then we're stuck!"

I took this opportunity as the group leader to say that since Cecilia and Carol seemed to be in an impasse at the moment, it was time for the other members of the group to be invited in to say what they were, experiencing and thinking, during this two group member conflict. Larry spoke up first and said that he had felt like Carol that Cecilia could be contemptuous and judgmental. He said he had felt scolded by another group member, Sandra, and was sensitive to what he experienced as contemptuous judgments. Sandra was eager to begin the group process after the lunch break, and had turned to Larry and said, "Turn your cell phone off!" Larry said he felt like a child being scolded. He said as an adult he would like space to explain that he was on the phone with an urgent call. Instead he felt judged by Sandra, so here were the themes of self-righteous contempt and accusation that had gone on between Nancy and Eva, which had led to Nancy's fight and flight reactions.

Sandra, Cecilia and Carol were willing to work with these conflicts within the group. Consequently, there could be a different outcome than with Nancy. This time we didn't have to lose a group member. We didn't have to conclude that all this was due to the number of people in the room or due to the size of my office. We could see the internal world of each group member, with all their transferences manifesting in the external and transitional world of the therapy group.

After Larry spoke, Sandra said that she had thought he was rude because I had said it was time to start the group again, and he wouldn't put his cell phone away. Again, she had felt liked the wronged party, just as Larry did, and she got to express her viewpoint and to have her voice. Then Victor said that he had felt for Larry, Victor also believed that the way Sandra spoke to Larry had been more cold and domineering than it had to be. Victor shared that he thought that Sandra's

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tone might have made Larry feel like a little boy being shamed and humiliated by a mother's scolding.

The Vulnerable Child Emerges in the Next Group after the Fight and Flight Reaction

The dialogues between these group members illustrate how rapid-fire negative judgments and projections can turn into communication and conversation. This evolving conversation had meaning for the whole group in terms of understanding these negative judgments and projections as defenses against a feared interpersonal affect contact that can potentially be transformed from disowned aggression, in the form of accusatory hostility, into empathic understanding and mutual surrender into curiosity about who the other is, also reducing the fear of not having one's own voice if one lets in the other.

This kind of transformation was even more dramatically experienced in the next monthly group as Sandra became the center of attention when she was in need of expressing a lot of anger related to every member of the group. I suggested that we go around the room, with Sandra saying what she was angry about to each person, which could lead to a dialectical exchange, reducing the polarization of angry rapid-fire judgments, as each person could speak back to Sandra in this way. Victor went first, but then Laura and Sandra became engaged in a negative transference exchange that started to take over the group.

Laura was experiencing Sandra as a "scary mother" who was constantly critical and who couldn't be satisfied. Sandra was experiencing Laura as an incompetent child who wasn't worthy of being her peer. She told Laura that Laura wasn't willing to make the commitment to attending group, every month, regularly, as she, Sandra had. Laura picked up that Sandra wished she would leave the group, and she began to fight to have her voice in the midst of Sandra's judgments. At one point, Victor looked at Laura and said, "I can see the terrified hurt child in you who feels she could not have a voice with her mother, the child who felt suffocated by the mother silencing her with her negative judgments." Tears came to Laura's eyes at this point. Laura really felt the pain of the agonized silenced child as she experienced Sandra as the "bad mother" who lived inside of her. Victor's empathy helped her open to her vulnerability and get past her silence. But then vulnerability turned to anger and she raised her voice and told Sandra off.

At that point, Sandra got up to run out of the room and leave the group. I stopped her. I closed the office door that she was opening, and asked Sandra to sit down so we could understand what was happening for her. I said that both Sandra and Laura were feeling like they were being silenced and suffocated by a rapid-fire judging and accusatory mother. I commented that throughout the group that day Sandra had heard everyone as being contemptuous, sarcastic, and critical, way beyond any of this contempt actually being expressed, and I referred particularly to Larry who she experienced as contemptuous. Then I said to Sandra, who was listening to me attentively, even when projecting negative judgments onto the group members, and making such judgments, "I think you have an internal contemptuous object mother you are projecting onto others, embellishing all that is said to you with the attitude of contempt."

Sandra listened. I then said that I thought she, Sandra, was feeling inside a lot like Laura had been feeling, as if she was being silenced and accused by a contemptuous, angry mother with rapid fire judgments. However, I said, Sandra was enacting the mother's part, and I sensed that the intimidated child self was afraid to come out and be seen. As I spoke directly to Sandra at that

moment, the child pain came into her eyes through tears just had happened a few moments ago for Laura. I said that now we could feel her. I said that everything she had told us about the traumas in her life could mean so much more to us now since we could feel her.

There were a few moments of peaceful quiet while everyone in the group felt the vulnerable child self in Sandra emerge into the transitional and potential space of the object relations therapy group. We all felt Sandra and Sandra also felt us. Laura even reached out and said that she could feel Sandra now as “one of us” rather than as “Scary Sandra.” This tranquility was about to be sabotaged by Sandra as she began to go back to her negative judgments, but I was able to stop her, just as she had trusted me enough to allow me to stop her from running out the door. I said that she had allowed us to be with her but was in danger of running back into her fight and flight behavior. I said, “If you had run out the door we couldn’t have gotten to this!”

At this moment, Sandra was able to surrender her self-protective aggression, in the mode of identifying with her internal judgmental mother then. She let it go and allowed herself to stay with meaningful conversation and dialogue with me and with the group members. Then people listened, and she was able to speak of memories of her highly critical, rejecting, judgmental and contemptuous mother then. She also spoke about meaningful memories of her father that had made her feel he joined forces with this mother, the same mother who had been internalized as her internal contemptuous mother, who could so easily be anticipated in others, which then resulted in a self-fulfilling prophesy of provoking negative judgments at the moment that she made them.

Now people listened intently and empathetically to Sandra, including Laura, and Laura even said she felt a new commitment to the group, because now she could see that we could get past the hostile exchanges that she and her mother had always had to the point of communication and empathy. The whole atmosphere was changed in the group as everyone listened to Laura because they could feel her. Sandra, in turn, demonstrated that she could feel the others. She spoke of how she had been listening to each one of them attentively for almost a year, before she plunged in to speak at length about herself. Her capacity for attunement and listening to others was validated as she went around the room and said what she had retained of each person’s struggles in life that were shared in the group. I underlined this validation by putting it explicitly into words.

The rest of the group that day was a free flow of mutually meaningful exchanges, and Sandra had people genuinely curious about her now. Now the group members could listen to Sandra, ask questions, and also understand her transference dilemma. They could do so because each of them shared this transference dilemma with Sandra in their own unique way. Consequently, each member learned from this group meeting about their own internal “bad object” parents. They also learned how they each had flight and fight impulses along with rationalizing attitudes towards their disappointing parents.

Conclusion: Voices Being Heard, Transferences Being Dealt With, and Differentiation

All the transferences were emerging through this conflict, which was being contained in the group’s holding environment. So now we could all work to understand it. We could work to understand how such conflict related to everyone’s hunger for empathy, attention, and understanding, as well as to everyone’s fear of the hostile and contemptuous judgments of others.

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With this progress, the other group members began to chime in as well. Consequently, the whole group became engaged in expressing what fears they had of others' judgments. The group began expressing how difficult it was to trust that these difficult things could be given voice to, rather than being hidden and acted out in split off ways outside the group, including by people dropping out as Nancy had. Before Helen had said that Nancy had been criticized by me in the last group she attended. However, she also said in the group afterwards that Nancy seemed to have a different agenda of expectation for what the group was about, referring to what she thought was Nancy's expectation for everyone to be polite. Helen now came out and said, "This work is what I thought the group would be about, having all this intense stuff come out and be worked with. It's too bad that Nancy, who led the way with her own aggression, should not be here to benefit from what she began as the others are!"

I think Helen's words echoed a lot of what I had been feeling. Beyond my own regret about my critical comments towards Nancy in the last group she attended, was my underlying loss and grief, related to not having had the chance to work with Nancy in the group at the level that I and the group were now working with aggression, in relation to the conflict between Sandra and Carol, and between others in the group. Through the group process, a polarized opposition in the group, with Cecilia and Carol, and Sandra and Laura being enemies, was now transforming into the communicative dialogue of interactive human beings who were trying to understand and know each other. This could in turn lead to each group member in the room having their own individual internal capacity for psychic dialectic facilitated, as the external and internal worlds interacted, and empathy and compassion was created through dialogue.

How to cite this article in APA style?

Kavaler-Adler, S. (2020). Countertransference, regret, and aggression: Dramas and free associations in an object relations group environment. *MindConsiliums*, 20(6), 1-14.