

ENTERING THE SENSORY LANDSCAPE



Sue Curtis describes some work with a client in a dance movement psychotherapy group in school, where the child's complex and enduring needs occasioned a different, more sensory approach to understanding and relating

What speaks, what is heard and what is received in the therapeutic relationship? What 'language' is used by our clients, and how does the language of the body contribute to our understanding and making sense of what unfolds between client and therapist? Do we hear only with our ears, see only with our eyes? Or can we enter a sensory landscape in order to meet each other with an openness to feel and sense and be alongside?

I once worked with a client who had complex needs and learning difficulties, and was registered blind. I can clearly recall the moment when she first let me 'meet' her, and the valuable learning – relearning – that I will always be deeply grateful for.

The calling

Oo eaaaahhhhhh bbbbbbbbbbbeeejjjjjaaaaaaaaa...
Mmmmmaaaaaaaaaaatttttttaaaaaaaaaaa
gggggggggeeeeeeeeeeeelllllaaa...
Abedaaaaaahh...

Nama sings. On the edge of her tiny 'bean bag' island, she sings. Beautifully and hauntingly she sings, calling out her words into the space. Echoing the depth of her being into the room, she sings – until the room is transformed into a Nama world of sound and song. I feel my ribs expand in response and my being fill with

the resonance of her words. They are tangible – soft, long, drawn out – then considered and thought through as she pauses, breathes deeply, then calls forth again another twisting and entwining melody. I am captivated, enraptured and caught up in her rising tones, searching in the sounds, lost in her language, pondering their meaning, wondering if I will ever 'know' what she is saying. Her song has entered me and found a home.

Nama is one of a group of six teenagers (four girls and two boys) with profound and complex needs, who I see for a weekly dance movement psychotherapy (DMP) session. This is a newly formed group, supported by three staff and a DMP trainee, and so far we have only had four sessions. Prior to starting the sessions, I observed the members within their class setting and then joined them in sessions in the 'sensory' room. All but one of them are Bengali (the other being white Caucasian) from practising Muslim families.

My first meeting with Nama left me with painful feelings – seeing her curled up on her tiny bean bag, semi-foetal and turned away from the class, situated about eight feet away from them. On the outside, left on the periphery, seemingly 'forgotten', and isolated from the group. My eyes were drawn to her – to her closed eyes, short dark hair and slight body – and mesmerised by the way she constantly jangled across her teeth the pendant that hung from a silver chain around her neck. A support worker sat alongside her,





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only a foot away, watching the teacher, yet it felt like there was a chasm between them.

Nama was registered blind and I was told that that she had 'challenging' behaviour. At times she could have aggressive outbursts and hit and kick out at those around her. The gulf that appeared to be between her and the rest of the pupils felt suffocating and impenetrable. I found myself shifting between wanting to reach out to her, to make contact, and then feeling paralysed and split between her and the rest of the group. When her name was mentioned it seemed to fall and land short of where she lay, as if unable to reach her ears or enter her 'island' world.

In order to get Nama to go from one place to another, adults would stand her up, then rustle her bean bag in front of her, so that she followed them. On one occasion, she decided to stop, in the middle of the corridor and broke into a circular dance, swaying from one side to another, taking giant steps, while clapping or rubbing her hands. I watched as she moved, twirling around. Suddenly, she broke into a smile that seemed as if she had found a private moment, dancing to an inner song. Finally, she moved on, perhaps enticed by the sound of her precious bean bag, or by pangs of hunger, into the dinner hall. She was led into a side classroom and her bean bag was placed on the floor. In one movement, sensing intuitively where it was, she dropped onto it and awaited her lunch.

Nama – silent and enclosed.

Nama – dwelling deeply in another place.

Nama – far away.

In the first session, during which I joined her in the tiny 'sensory' room, Nama sat huddled on her bean bag, as if unaffected by the presence of others. Sometimes she would reach out to the adult beside her and place their hand on her shin or ankle and hold it there, glued together. Sometimes she would rock to the music playing and then after a while would revert to her semi-foetal position and clang her pendant across her teeth. She seemed so close and yet so far away. In the second session there, I asked if I could put on some Indian music that I had brought in. Nama sat upright, and a flicker of interest moved across her face. Eyes closed yet ears alert. She rocked to the sounds, then began to hum, and then offered a few words. I couldn't make out any of the words – I wasn't even sure if they were Bengali or not, but it was as if a door opened and a huge bridge appeared.

In the room's store cupboard there was a 'sound' machine that had a microphone and a complicated list to go with the dials and buttons, to produce different effects. I plugged it in beside her and managed to place it on an 'echo' setting. I sang her name and waited as her name reverberated around the room. Instantly her body searched for the source, almost

lurching into the space, and then she reached out her hand, found me and then grabbed the microphone.

Her lips devoured the microphone – touching the fine metal mesh like a sea anemone, sensing, exploring and then tapping it on her teeth. She breathed, laughed, then sang again! Her body tensed in excitement, her hands gripping and squeezing the shaft and cable.

Kkooori ma baa laaaa
Ma baa laaaa
Ba laaaa
laaaa

Nama sang – listened – sang again – listened and sang and sang.

I wanted to dance across the ‘bridge’ to her – ecstatic with the joy of her having discovered her voice – elated by the lift in her spirits and mine, and convinced that everyone else was bound to be sharing the exquisite moment with us. I sang with her, attempting to learn her words, to grasp something of their meaning. My mind, like her hands, gripped and hung on! One person told me that she often chanted bits of the Koran, as it was chanted at her home. I had this image of her as an ‘Imam’ calling forth to the throngs of people, calling them together. She seemed to have grown taller, filled out, become sturdy, regal almost in her presence. My heart soared. Then another person said, ‘They’re just words and don’t make sense.’ My heart sank. Why was Nama relegated to a far-off, meaningless world? How did she feel having to bear such words?

In the ensuing initial DMP sessions (which were long sessions), I divided the time into two sections. The first section focused on movement, and the second section focused more on sound and visual stimuli. Nama loved to use her voice in both, but in the second half, when I plugged in the sound machine she would fill the room with her songs – intently and intensely calling out her words. The machine was ‘hers’ – she owned it, possessed it and was reluctant to give it up or allow anyone else to share it. I found myself increasingly intrigued by the words – constantly wondering what she was telling us, preoccupied by whether I could understand the meaning or not. How would I know?

Words, words, words. I loved to hear her sing. I delighted in her ‘aliveness’ and the sense of her echoing through the air. I found myself asking her to put some English words in to help me understand and always waited with anticipation during the seconds that followed to see whether she would grant my wish – watching her flicker her eyes, smiling and half laughing, as if sensing my desperation. On one occasion she put in some ‘English’ words.

COME HERE!
SIT DOWN!
SHUT UP!

Bang – the words hit hard – and, for a moment I almost wished that I hadn’t asked. Were these the words of English that she carried inside her? Oh, if only I could know the words she sang. Later that day a member of staff told me that a support worker who spoke her dialect had once translated some of the words and said she had sung about ‘not being right in the head’ or something to that effect.

The bridge between us felt perilous – fraught with potential dangers. No Disney staircase to a golden castle, but a ragged, worn-out rope that would have me swinging and crashing into the cliff face. The beautiful and haunting words were telling stories that I needed to be prepared to hear.

Nama tell me more of your words and stories – help me to understand!

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On the day I mentioned at the start, one of the teaching assistants, Jane, who regularly helped with the DMP group, told me that only Nama and one other girl were in school, the rest being sick or on holiday. We decided that just Jane, of the staff, would come into the session. We started by acknowledging all the people who were away (including the DMP trainee) and how different it was with just the four of us. We sat on the floor together, Nama on her bean bag, myself beside her and the other two a few feet away. The other girl began using her voice, and then reached out to Jane and they began exploring a 'hand' warm-up. I encouraged Nama to join with me and briefly we had a circle of hands together, but Nama withdrew back into her small island and sat on her hands.

I said that it seemed she had gone away as well. She smiled, then started to call out. I mirrored her sounds and called with her and instantly Jane called too. We called to all those members that were missing, naming them one by one, calling extra loud to the girl on holiday in South America. Nama smiled, and then took my hand, moving it up and down in front of her, as if not knowing where to place it. Finally, she placed it on her stomach and gently pulled it to wrap my arm around her. She searched for my other hand and pulled that around the other side, so I shifted behind her, until she was encased. And then she began to sing – short sentences at first, and then longer and louder, rocking as she sang. With each new line she would pull my arms tighter around her, until at one point I said, 'I can't get them any tighter around you!' Nama laughed, then held onto my arms and stood up, again pulling them tighter around her. I said that maybe she wanted me to hold on tight so that she didn't go away, like the others. We moved together – arms glued together, while she sang,

filling the room with her words. Jane smiled and said it was as if Nama was in the whole room.

Nama then sat back down and together we continued the swaying, dancing song. Again I found myself asking her about her words and whether she could say any in English to help me understand. She continued for a while in her dialect, then paused and took hold of one of my hands in hers. She gently placed it on her face, moving it up the side of her cheek and back, as if brushing the contours of her face. Then she held it still, so I was cupping her head in my hand and she leant into my hand and her body relaxed. Slowly she turned her head towards me, her eyes opening (a rarity for her) then moved back and forth so that her cheek and chin searched the contours of my hand. Silently she placed my hand over her lips, hovering gently, sensing together. She repeated this a few times, as if imprinting the poignancy of the moment deep within me. I was moved by her sensitivity and fragility and gentle insistence that the moment be registered and not lost.

Jane looked over, whispering that Nama didn't usually let anyone do that, and I was moved even more by the look in Jane's eyes, in being able to sense and receive Nama's movement.

My hand still feels the touch of her face – the delicate placing of it over her lips. We are together in the middle of the bridge and I hear her calling. The imprint on my hand remembers and my body speaks her words back to me. Finally I understand something:

Feel my words!

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Sue Curtis originally trained as a dancer and teacher before practising DMP for 19 years within mainstream and special education, particularly with clients in foster care and adoption, and those suffering loss, trauma and abuse. She has lectured and supervised on MA DMP training courses since 1993, and been involved in the MA in DMP at Goldsmiths since its inception. She has guest lectured in the Ukraine, Spain, Latvia and Poland, supervises privately and has also been engaged in the work of the Association for DMP UK. Sue has recently lived through three years of serious illness and treatment for cancer, which left her disabled, but gave rise to exploring 'body mapping' as a way of the body telling its story. She is developing this approach within her private practice of supervision.