6 Going back to the glory hole

An (extra)ordinary story of meeting
shame, doubt, and arousal in the therapy
room

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*I keep going back to the glory hole,
I'm getting into it more and more,
but I'm not sure it's good for me.*

John (not his real name) makes this statement a few minutes before the end of a session. We are several weeks into our relationship as client and therapist, meeting weekly for one hour. We have covered many issues, and, while his sexual desires and practices have been consistent themes, he has never spoken this explicitly before.

I am thrown off guard. I have an image of a dirty wooden toilet partition, a hole, John's arse pressed up against the hole, waiting for a cock to find its way into his hole. I have another image of his mouth at the glory hole, his lips parted, waiting to be filled. I feel repelled, disgusted, aroused, confused. These images and feelings flash through my mind in an instant. I see the clock: four minutes left. I retain an outward composure. I speak of the polymorphous perversity of sexuality, of the irrationality of desire, of the moral relativism of sexual acts, of the objectifying nature of lust. I say a lot. I fill the space. I hear myself attempting to convey reassurance and acceptance. I hear the long and erudite words of my therapist jargon, but I know I am in flight. I am in flight from the images, words, and feelings that his disclosure has evoked in me. I know this, and yet I cannot change course. It's too late. The moment has passed. I have moved us back to the safe territory of professional exchange, to a scripted psychotherapeutic discourse. We come to the end of the session and I feel ashamed. I know I failed to meet him in his experience and vulnerability. I failed simply to listen and acknowledge and suggest we could return to this next week when we have more time. I panicked and fled the scene that his disclosure had conjured up. I could not bear to join him at the glory hole.

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Chris Jaenicke (2015, p. 59) writes 'each new patient we encounter will trigger aspects of our subjectivities in unforeseen ways that will necessitate a renewed silent self-reflection'. John's disclosure is a stark example of such

unexpected triggering. I will write into how this incident initiated a significant piece of personal work for me and how I was then able to return to meet him in the next session and repair the rupture caused by my panicked flight in this one. Through the detail of this story, I explore my theme of how the everyday life of the gay male therapist meets the everyday life of the gay male client in both the ordinary and extraordinary moments of the therapeutic encounter.

While the context of therapy is an intersubjective encounter and its work a co-creation of both parties, I will focus on my experience as therapist, rather than on the client's, for a number of reasons. Firstly, this is a collection of autoethnographic writings and the self in my story is the therapist. Secondly, it would be unethical of me to claim to know the experience of another and equally unethical to expose the details of a client's life narrative or therapeutic process. Thirdly, I contest the traditional form of psychotherapeutic writing, which seeks to emulate the objectifying nature of scientific discourse by focusing on the 'case' of the client or patient. And fourthly, aligned to this last, there is insufficient writing by therapists, especially gay male therapists, about their subjective experience of the work, addressing with honesty the personal challenges they encounter and thereby illustrating how the domains of the personal and the professional interpenetrate, integrate, and interweave in myriad ways that can never be disentangled.

The risks of resting on laurels

The glory hole exchange with John is a recent event. It occurred 20 years into my practice as a therapist. As I sat down to write up my notes that evening, I found myself red in the face like a schoolboy caught masturbating. 'I may have been doing this for twenty years', I berated myself, 'but *that* was a typical rookie error.'

In my work I pride myself on my ability to initiate and sustain open and frank conversations on matters sexual with my clients – straight, bi and gay, male, female, and transgender, young and old. In fact, only some weeks before, a client had ended a year of work telling me how liberating it was to have been able to talk openly about sex for the first time in his many attempts at accessing professional help. As a consequence, he had experienced our work as profoundly life-changing. While then I may have swelled with self-congratulating pride that evening as I wrote my notes after the glory hole moment, I felt utterly deflated. I had singularly failed John in exactly the domain that I claimed to be especially skilled in. I was a charlatan, a fraud, a fool. I knew then that I had to go back to the glory hole myself, albeit in 'a renewed silent self-reflection' rather than in physical reality, to work through what had so unsettled me about his disclosure, what had made it impossible for me to stay with him in his experience there.

Growing in soils of hate, fed in fear, watered in shame

The first place I went in my self-examination was to my experience of arousal in response to John's disclosure, to the shock of its sudden irruption into the therapeutic space and the automatic sense of shame which accompanied it, completely derailing my therapeutic sangfroid. To make sense of this event, I had to go back to the beginning: to my experience of sexual awakening and my first lessons in hating, fearing, and being ashamed of my arousal, of my desire for boys and men.

I came of age as a young gay man in the environment of sectarian hatred and violent paranoia that characterised 1970s Northern Ireland. The only thing which successfully united the two warring communities in that benighted time and place was their shared virulent abhorrence of gay male sexuality and a woman's right to choose an abortion. Sensing my difference from a young age, yet immersed in the culture of homophobic discourse and violence that characterised my school, church, and neighbourhood, I learned to conceal myself and drove my desire underground, policing my every look, gesture, and comment. With the ever-present threats of public shaming and violent assault, I purged from my everyday any hint of effeminacy, campness, or displays of interest in other boys. As a weedy teenager who knew no girls, I was unable to pretend a virile heterosexuality, so I cultivated an asexual, bookish persona, adopting the defensive façade of the intellectual too caught up in matters of the mind to even notice the flesh. Along the way, I experienced the kindness and friendship of a few other boys, who sensed my difference and saw through my dissembling. I now see those boys as the true inheritors of an Irish culture of generosity and acceptance, standing in gentle defiance of the misplaced moralising of the hypocrites and liars, the priests and teachers, who were our appointed guardians.

While my days and time with others were spent in this exhausting cycle of fearful self-policing and self-censorship, my nights and time alone were given over to fantasies of boys and men's bodies, of school friends and neighbourhood lads, and to endless masturbation, equally exhausting, but for completely different reasons. Those formative years cemented this pattern of dissociation between my outward presentation of an asexual self, with all sexual expression eviscerated from my interpersonal relations with others, and my private experience of a vivid sexual imagination and extensive enjoyment of self-stimulation, shrouded in secrecy and shame. It was as if I believed that I could unknow and make disappear my sexuality, so long as I kept it in the realm of the wordless and asocial. Though profoundly impoverishing my sexual and social development, this magical thinking, and its associated tactics of hiding, deflection, and dissimulation, also served me well in keeping me safe through a time of threat and danger, until I reached the safer shores of a different time and place where my constricted sexuality could finally be allowed to breathe.

I have come such a long way from that 70s Northern Irish childhood, and yet the glory hole moment with John immediately threw me back into defensive reactions of freeze and flight. Here, 40 years later, in the safety of my therapy room, the sudden and unexpected appearance of the sensation of sexual arousal in the professional context immediately triggered acute feelings of shame, fear, and confusion from which I automatically reverted to defensive patterns of dissociation and deflection. In my subsequent personal work, I had to acknowledge the limitations of what I had achieved in terms of my adult sexual liberation. With humility and gentle care, I returned to call out, welcome, and embrace the frightened boy who continued to reside within me, still scanning his environment for danger, still reading threat onto the faces of the others.

Sexuality rampant and relinquished

My second area of personal work focused on the glory hole itself and, in particular, my relation to dimensions of my sexuality I had chosen not to explore.

After the challenging start described above, I spent my twenties in a protracted and often painful thawing from the sexual deep freeze of my adolescent years. It was only in my late twenties, after the end of a long-term relationship in which I had felt emotionally stifled and sexually thwarted, that I began to explore my sexual subjectivity more freely. I promised myself a moratorium on serious relationships and gave myself permission to play creatively with sex, experimenting with new and diverse contexts and encounters, with fetishes and kink, learning the qualities and tendencies of my desire now that it was finally unchained. I was only six months down that road when I met the man who was to become my life partner. I knew from our first meeting that being with him mattered more to me than continuing on my quest of sexual adventurousness, and I willingly curtailed that journey into the unknown to build a life with him.

Yet over the years I have sometimes wondered about that decision. Not that I regret my choice to become partnered or wish my life had taken a different path, but I do wonder wistfully about the roads not travelled and what might have emerged had I followed one of those instead. I question if perhaps I foreclosed on the potentially challenging process of sexual growth by opting instead for the security of an exclusive and monogamous partnership, so akin to the traditional notion of a heteronormative marriage. I wonder where my political queerness would have taken me had I been able to give longer than six months to my evolving process of sexual flourishing. Rationally, I accept the choices I have made to enter an exclusive, monogamous relationship and to relinquish opportunities to develop my sexuality in other directions, and, simultaneously, I can experience envy of the sexual experiences of peers who have not pursued exclusive relationships. There remains a background hankering for the sexual explorations I relinquished

when I chose to partner, and while mostly quiescent, even imperceptible, it can emerge at times in powerful and unexpected ways. The glory hole moment was one such occasion.

John's unexpected disclosure of his growing interest in the excitement of anonymous, depersonalised sexual encounters at the glory hole hit me squarely in this place of vulnerability and doubt. Distracting questions about my own experiences and choices ran in rapid succession through my head. Do I want that? Do I find that exciting? Would I have wanted that had I not met my partner? Quickly followed by a curious yet naïve fascination with the idea of the glory hole itself. What do men do at a glory hole? If I were at the glory hole, what would I do? What is it like to meet another man's body part but not the man himself? Why do men do that? I was excited, confused, challenged. I knew that John's experience had nothing to do with me, but my mind was noisy with this stream of questions and associations. Only afterwards, in my silent self-reflection, could I begin to articulate all of this to myself and recognise this aspect of my confusion and distractedness in the moment with John. I had to return again to the dynamic tension I feel between the choice I have willingly and lovingly made to relinquish sexual exploration into territories such as the glory hole, and my hankering after the sexual and erotic experiences, pleasures, and self-knowledge that I have thereby foregone.

Purity and dirt

In the moment with John, I experienced a complex admixture of fascination and disgust, attraction and repulsion, admiration and disapproval, and it took me some time to trace the origins and sketch in the detail of these feelings and thoughts. As I worked through this complex range of responses and reactions, I realised that my confusion about how to position myself in relation to the glory hole was not just connected to how it interacted with my own sexuality – explored, relinquished, fulfilled, and unfulfilled – but also my personal values about sexuality more generally. I pondered on what I came to see as the paradoxical mix of purity and abjection in the glory hole experience and the knotty questions raised for me about the moral dimension of sexual practices. I do not mean morality in the sense of some abstract concept of absolute right or wrong, with reference to a moral code, but rather in relation to the emotional well-being and psychological health of the individual involved. While recognising I had no authority to act as arbiter over anyone else's sexual choices, I nonetheless found myself identifying a process of evaluation of the extent to which pursuing certain sexual experiences is actually good for someone. I knew I needed to address that if I were to create an open and facilitative space for John to return to the glory hole with me.

On the one hand, I recognised the simplicity of engaging with the sexual parts of another man without his body, face, gaze, any sense of his

personhood, of giving oneself over entirely to a sensual, physical relation to the body part itself, what it does, and what can be done to it, through the limited space of the aperture. In that space, two men become two 'its' represented only by the sexual organ or orifice that they choose to present to the other. In doing so, they achieve a spare and simple exchange, an exchange between two equals, a bartering of touch and sensation between self-objectified fetishised selves, unencumbered by the complexities of personhood and social relation. I saw a transcendence in that, a liberation, an accomplishment of the enactment of pure sexual desire. Seen this way, the glory hole struck me as an honest space of direct access to an unadulterated physical and sensual act, with no pretence of attraction to a person, their looks, the body's shape or size. It cut to the chase of penetration and orgasm. It distilled the essence of the objectifying force of lust.

Simultaneously, the therapist in me, perhaps joined by the sexually continent lover and the residual good Catholic boy, questioned the psychological health in this practice and the wisdom of pursuing it. To turn oneself into a sexual object, to present oneself to another as this body part, this act alone, to be known only for this bit of self and what it does. Conversely, to choose to engage only with the bit, the sex part, the act offered by another's body part, which one knows belongs to another man, yet another man whom one will never see or contemplate *as* another man. That struck me as a form of self-abjection, a deliberate debasement of sexual subjectivity. I could even go so far as to conceive of this as a sexualised form of self-harm.

As these thoughts developed, I experienced discomfiting collisions between my therapeutic assessment of healthy sexual development and my queer political commitments. The former is attuned to the knowledge, gained from both personal experience and everyday clinical practice, that not every sexual thing we choose to do is good for us, nor every experience an act of liberation, nor every choice a wise decision taking us forward to greater personal flourishing. The latter prizes and honours diverse sexualities and people's right to choose what they do with their bodies, with whom, where and when, to define for themselves what is good for them or not. It celebrates therapy's powerful potential to contribute to sexual liberation and human happiness through the gift of a non-judgmental relationship, freed from the stranglehold of conventional sexual morality.

I spent the intervening week chewing over these tough questions, examining each, reading into the conceptual and practice territory that John's glory hole disclosure opened up for me. I reached no firm conclusions, but a tentative reconciliation in which I recognised the validity in both trains of thought and the necessary co-existence of both my political and therapeutic commitments. I saw what I was doing as ethics work in which I needed to hold in dialogue and balance the principle of respect for autonomy, my client's right to self-determination, and the principle of beneficence, my obligation to attend to my client's well-being and health.

Eros enters stage left

It was not just arousal at the thought of the glory hole, and what men did there, that so unsettled me, it was arousal at the thought of being there with John.

Where previously we had spoken of sexual matters in rather oblique and abstract ways, using terms borrowed more from sexual health textbooks than from the walls of the public toilets that men frequent for sex, John retained his place in my mind as this new young client to whom my feelings were largely professional mixed with a healthy dollop of the paternal. With the glory hole disclosure and the little I knew of his sexual preferences, I was suddenly thrust into seeing him as a sexed body occupying graphic sexual positions. First, I had a bird's-eye view of him at the toilet stall aperture waiting for the next man's cock to arrive through the hole. This was quickly followed by the disturbing idea of me being that next man, taking his place in the next-door stall, to present myself in the way he was seeking. That is the moment when I broke contact with John and took flight from the story he was trying to tell me, silencing him with my intellectualisations and bland assurances, filling the remainder of the session until I could call time and escape my discomfort.

Even as it happened, I sensed the multiple layers of shame under which I was drowning: firstly, shame at the sexual thoughts and images that so forced themselves into my mind's eye; secondly, shame that here I was thinking of my client, this troubled young man who had come to me for help and care, in this degrading and exploitative way; and thirdly, shame at my abject therapeutic failure. In taking flight from the scene, I was failing to help him and, as importantly, failing to honour the courage that it must have taken him to bring me this story so early in our work together. Dwelling in this complex, multifaceted shame was the most challenging focus of the personal work I did in the week that followed. Even to write of it now powerfully re-evokes it.

Days of reflection, self-examination, and reading ensued. I returned to a group of men whom I have never met, yet who feel like friends and mentors. They are openly gay relational analysts based in and around New York, and they write with refreshing candour about their therapeutic practice with gay men in several psychoanalytic journals. With the help of their stories of struggle and dilemma, I came to know and accept my own experience and prepare for my return to the next session with John. Eric Sherman (2002) helped me recognise and accept my fear and avoidance, yet find the courage to enter the challenging terrain of the erotic in the room. Steven Kuchuck (2013) showed me I was not alone in struggling to contain my experience of the erotic and how essential it was to accept my experience and use it in the service of the work. Martin Frommer (2007) reminded me of the tangled web of self and self-other experience implicated in erotic subjectivity and how all lust and desire entail an objectification of the other and the self.

With the support of their professional wisdom, I came to see the obvious and the inevitable: that a client's talk of sex brings the therapist into the sexual scene, certainly as witness, and when working as a gay man with another, also as a potential fantasied sexual partner. I realised that the thoughts, images, and words that came to my mind in the glory hole moment were not signs of my unprofessionalism, my degeneracy, my exploitative use of my client for vicarious sexual gratification. On the contrary, they were an inevitable consequence of joining my client in the exploration of his experience, a necessary corollary of embracing the manifestation of the erotic. Far from being deviant and dangerous, they were required elements in the therapeutic work; to avoid them was a deviation from the therapeutic task to which John had called me.

As Eric Sherman (2002) argues, to enter the sexual scene in thought and word raises the erotic and emotional temperature within the room which, in turn, necessitates a sensitive, delicate balancing between potential seductiveness and hyperarousal on the one hand and defensive flight into the avoidance of intimacy on the other. In the glory hole moment with John, I automatically reverted to the latter, hiding behind the professional façade of uttering intellectualised abstractions on sexuality. While apparently still commenting on matters sexual, we both knew that I had fled the scene of the four-letter acts that are consummated in the glory hole. I had retreated to the ivory tower of psychosexual theory. As I knew from long experience, when I start quoting Freud, as I did in my very first statement with a reference to the 'polymorphous perversity' of sexuality, I am floundering and clutching at straws. Eventually as I worked through my reactions, I came to laugh at this farcical moment of intellectual grandiosity. Really, *who* did I think I was kidding? I was like my adolescent self, imagining he was fooling everyone with his lofty bookish pretensions, a classic case of 'the lady doth protest too much'.

While an imagining of therapist and client engaged in sexual activity together conjures up a transgressive boundary violation and, at face value, looks like the first step towards professional ethical misconduct, in the work of therapy with gay men, and with all clients where sex and sexuality are relevant themes, the opposite is true. Whether emanating from confusion or doubt, from fear of excitement and arousal, or from anxiety that thought will be translated into deed and boundary transgressions inevitably ensue, a therapist's refusal to contemplate and work with the sexual scenes that the client's account evokes is an act of withdrawal and professional negligence. It abandons the client to his concerns and distress. To do so in work with gay men is to reinforce the long-held message that their sexuality is shameful, their desire repellent, not to be spoken of in polite circles. It communicates that they must handle their desire alone, in the dark and hidden places of their sexual fantasies and encounters; it tells them that not even their therapist can listen to this dirty, disgusting stuff. In this way, the therapist's flight from the sexual and erotic that emerges in the work is just another

re-enactment of the homophobic violence that is perpetrated every day on gay men's sexual subjectivities. That, to my mind, is the real act of professional ethical misconduct.

Repairing the rupture

When John returned the next week, I took the opportunity presented by a lull in the conversation to bring him back to the glory hole moment from the previous week. While not revealing all of what I had worked through in the intervening period, I disclosed that his statement had taken me by surprise, and I acknowledged that I had not responded in an open and facilitative way. I suggested that, now that we had more time, we could go back to his glory hole experience.

John took up this offer, and we worked together on this particular dimension of his sexual life, what it meant for him, the needs that were met, the questions and concerns he had in relation to it. There was a sexual charge through our conversation, relieved at times by the comic aspects of particular stories of meeting men's cocks through the glory hole window. However, I was not troubled by sexual arousal or any concern that I was seeking, whether wittingly or not, vicarious sexual gratification through encouraging him to tell me about his encounters. The details were explored in the service of meaning-making and the sexual was exposed in order to access the emotional. The everyday sexual acts of the present were described in order to trace the unfolding story of his sexual life, linking back to the past and early sexual development and casting forward to the future and where he was going, articulating the kind of man he was becoming.

Reflections on this story

Elsewhere in this volume authors argue for the importance of de-emphasising the 'sex' in 'homosexuality'. They encourage a prizing of everyday lives that goes beyond a focus on the sex lives of gay men, or the simplistic equation of gayness with sexuality, and thereby resist the colonising force of a myopic sexualised medico-scientific gaze. At first glance, my writing may seem to be supporting a converse position: that at the heart of the therapeutic encounter between two gay men is a meeting of sexually desiring minds and bodies. Yet I would contest that 'Going back to the glory hole' is not so much a story about sex as it is an account of a gay man (the therapist) overcoming his shame and pain and internalised homophobia in order to meet another gay man (the client) in an ethical space of intimacy and care.

In psychoanalytic practice, the journey towards psychological health is characterised by a process of owning and integrating 'split-off' elements of self-experience: the thoughts, feelings, and actions that cause shame, anxiety, guilt, or fear and which we tend to avoid, forget, or pretend do not exist (see Leiper and Maltby, 2004, Chapters 1 and 2, for an accessible

introduction to this core concept). The everyday work of therapy is about finding safe and creative ways to bring the split-off out of the closet of an enforced enclosure, to dial down the shame, and expand acceptance. For gay men in particular, the toxic legacy of homophobic hate and early humiliation has often blighted the capacity for loving the sexual self. The everyday work of the therapist is to find the courage to travel with each client into this potentially arousing, confusing, and shame-inducing terrain, aware of his own troubled past and present challenges, yet secure in his motivation to meet the client in a non-exploitative relational encounter founded on an ethic of care.

As this story exemplifies, such work is not a once-done thing. It is not the case that, once mastered, the capacity is securely attained, the therapeutic competence accomplished. Conversely, and paradoxically, the task is undertaken anew with each new client. Each new therapeutic relationship, as Chris Jaenicke (2015) observes, throws up new areas for self-reflection, or old areas to be revisited afresh, and the therapist works as much and as hard outside the therapy room, after the client has departed, as he does inside it when the client is present. To meet the client in his shame and doubt, his excitement and arousal, and his meaning-making struggles, the therapist travels the same terrain within himself, facing his own developmental tasks and challenges, including his demons, ghosts, and closeted skeletons. The unravelling of shame is a lifelong work in progress, the development of sexual embodied subjectivity, a never-ending process in which I, as therapist, accompany my clients, as they do me, in a joint endeavour of mutual encounter and relation.

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