

# Fear and Loathing in Sydney

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*Experiences of love, hate and reparation in groups and psychotherapy*

## **Abstract**

Experiences of both love and hate are never easy: often unwelcome and inappropriate, or so it seems; their arrival a shock, in itself enough to deal with; always begging the question if it is safe or useful to reveal these feelings, now or ever. This paper explores experiences of love and hate and their transformative power to connect, to understand the world and a life but most importantly to bring energy, intimacy and aliveness to situations that otherwise would be simply useful and comforting, affirming of what, safely and reassuringly, people and things seem to be.

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Quite soon into writing this paper I realised that what I was writing about was scapegoating and that it was about my capacity to scapegoat that I was thinking about. The papers before mine have made reference to difference and brought to mind my experience of being viewed as an alien by someone living on a little 'desert island' off the coast of Lombok, curious about the hairs on my arm, and full of questions about how my 7 month old daughter was born and how she was fed. The other experience where I both felt other and was to some degree scapegoated and which I thought of in the middle of the night last night was in Melbourne as a builder's labourer in the late 70's. They insisted on calling me Pom and not by my name and assured me that it was not personal and that wherever I came from I would be called Wop, Wog or whatever. I fell back to sleep and woke from a dream of which I remembered only the line: Take me to the cemetery. I'm hoping that whilst I have my own hopes for its meaning you might all help with an interpretation when you've heard my paper.

A number of things led to the paper: the realization that I have a Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD) that I use freely when I feel hate or under attack; that I have felt that hatred change into love, in groups, in my work as a therapist and in life.

The version you are getting today is one of a couple, the other makes use of the papers I have read over the last few years around intimacy in the

consulting room and the use of fantasies and the mutual sharing of them Celenza (Celenza 2010), Ehrenberg (Ehrenberg 2010), Dalal (Dalal 2012) and what group work and psychotherapy is about when you strip away the spurious attempt to be a science, Hugo Blick (Blick 2014) (Morgan 2011) and his work on discerning the truth and trust in the TV series *The Honourable Woman*, a paper that interviews an analysis of Bion's (Culbert-Koehn 2011) and makes reference to my own paper of 17 years ago a sort of paean to my father and a look at my struggles to come to terms with my masculinity and not being in the military (Johnson-Newell 2000).

I have always known these aspects of my self but as I become more at home with what William Blake (Blake 1794) in his poetry cycle calls Experience, the tiger, so I then struggle to fully make use of Innocence, the lamb. The tiger is my fierceness that is able to scapegoat and the lamb the alone, lonely, excluded individual trying to find warmth and comfort. This is the tale of some of those struggles. A tale that when I embarked on it I thought I might come out of it looking better than I do. I've discovered that instead, my capacity for self deception and projection are well deployed and that their unpicking has been sobering.

For the last few years I have been a member of a group of like minded people who are interested in groups, GIG. It formed out of a presentation to AAGP given by Stephen Arcari from the UK. Quite quickly it became a group and so in doing that it started to do what groups do, work on things, nudge away at things that the individuals and the group encounter in being together.

I found myself in this group with someone that I had met in a group in Melbourne in 1998 and over the years we had become friends / colleagues who met occasionally.

But quite soon I also found myself, almost every time, in the midst of something that is quite hard to describe. The fight seemed to be about structure but also about the way one is in a group. My argument, and it was an argument I pursued with force, aggression and at least annoyance. I felt so right and I thought my fellow group member, G, so wrong. I would feel that we were in the thick of a group process and G would seem to me to cut across it. Always I wanted them to tell us what they were feeling not what they thought we as a group were feeling. How dare they? What right was given to them to take this role? And anyway I didn't think we needed that role to be taken up.

Over time many / most were able to come to terms with G's role, saw it as an important part of the group. Intellectually I could see where they were coming from but in my heart of hearts I was just annoyed and angry and if truth be told, and I told this truth of mine, they were heading for being a scapegoat and certainly if G had been at my boarding school would have been scapegoated. It was as if G was purposely bucking the flow of the group standing up and being counter cultural. There was courage in what they did as well but it seemed to be a cursed courage, predicated on not belonging.

My own journey to belonging to that group had been an ambivalent one. It seemed like a good idea, the group, and then I couldn't attend or rather it wasn't important enough for me to go to the lengths required to actually get there and then get home by long train ride and water taxi. But when I had settled and got my boat licence and boat I was able to return and found myself very quickly fully engaged in being in it. I felt it was a wonderful opportunity to be in a group that was sophisticated at many levels and just like any other group as well. I always felt excited to be going and enlivened at the end of it.

Back in August of last year G and I had one of our usual stouches and I allowed something that had been brewing for a few months to have its head at the end of it all, a feeling of shame and remorse in me, regret that I had been so harsh, said such harsh things, been someone I recognized but didn't much like, ugly. The words themselves don't seem so important but the hatred, the virulence of my feelings were disturbing. It all seemed so unrelenting and unchanging. I didn't seem able to control what unfolded. G and I were sitting next to each other and after the group finished I leaned over and touched their back and asked if they were okay and that I felt ashamed of the way that I had been. I suppose the implication was twofold: that I didn't understand it but that I had enough distance to begin to see it.

Up until then the thing that fuelled it for me was that I knew that I was right. I shudder to say that but there was a belief that if only I could get my point across and in a clear and logical way then G would understand and change the way that they were in the group. It was that thought that allowed me to keep hammering away, to perhaps make a complete fool of myself, certainly to be so reactive to someone who I actually like. When I had told G about the worst thing that happened in my career with PACFA, a few years prior to all this, over lunch, they were the only person who fully engaged with the enormity of what I had been through and actually seemed to understand what it was like to be shafted and publicly humiliated in an organisation.

What was most moving at that watershed moment after the group in August was G talking about feeling the warmth of my touch all up and down their back.

The next meeting, September, G wasn't there, away at a conference, and I missed them and talked a little about this blossoming of love that I felt after the last meeting and that I was really looking forward to their return.

Just before the next meeting in October a few of us were having dinner and witnessed parking rage. It was disturbing to watch something escalate so quickly as a man in a shiny new Audi was accused of taking a spot from someone in an old Camry, lit cigarettes were flicked, threats made. Neither came out well. And it was this event that was recounted at the beginning of the group. At that meeting I also spoke about what had happened between G and I and what I had felt and what I had said at the last meeting. Somehow, though, I felt rebuffed by G and hence hurt.

Later G talked of a feeling of sex and aggression in the group. That didn't fit with my experience of the group. Again we fell into our familiar fight and I felt that this was truly hopeless and G was just someone that I would have to learn to tolerate whilst always finding their manner and stance in the group jarring and irksome. But then G spoke, again, about the need for the group to take some responsibility. I don't remember who said what or how it all emerged but what did emerge was a much fuller picture of what was felt, not just hate, but also shame and despair about what happened and a horrible aloneness in it all as the group watched on. The group talked about how distressing it was to watch and how helpless they felt to do anything but also that it was sort of boring. It was just as we had experienced the parking incident. Drawn into something and asked to back up one party and not the other, helpless to stop it, not able to clearly say no to being involved and why nor able to take sides and certainly that the event was an example of humans at their worst.

It was in the last session of the year, in November, that something shifted. At this point I already felt free of something, most of it felt not to be my responsibility any more and I felt so relieved that G had been able to open this up in a way that had been tried before but had not really touched me.

I felt that I had found a way round the impasse that I felt intellectually. When G had said that they felt that there was sex and aggression afoot in the group during the last session I was able to understand that they were probably right but that it was possible that they were talking of something that was focused around or in themselves. I could then appreciate their perspicacity if not delivery. It's not possible not to feel, which I think was the assumption I had made about their concrete behaviour, and this crazy assumption was barely perceived by me.

And even this stratagem I am ashamed of, that I had to protect myself from my own feelings before I returned.

I've been struck throughout the group and now my writing by the strength of my feelings. It's as if the language I use in the group and now in writing is a portent, or the crust around the molten magma that lies within.

I was struck by Eigen in his chapter in *Teaching Bion* (Eigen 2015)

For Bion {referencing Transformations 1965 and Attention and Interpretation (Bion 1970)}, truth may nourish and lies, poison, but truth, also, is explosive. Like God, it can shatter personality if one sees it. Bion likens the sense of truth to a big bang at the origin of personality. To tame it is to lose it, but living its shock waves is impossible. He likens illumination to Messiah rupturing Establishment. We may not know what to do with the mystic-genius aspect of self, but without it life would be less inspired-inspiring.

For me this is not truth as I am right and G wrong but the truth about something inside me.

At the same time I was reminded of shame, my own, as I encountered myself railing at G and what to me seemed to be G's lack of shame, lack of remorse for taking up so much time, for, from my point of view, behaving in a consciously stubborn way, seeming to take no account of the rest of the group. This was so opposite to the way I view myself. I do know though that I am quite capable of taking up a lot of space in a group, but when I see G doing that I become fearful for them. I also know that shame and remorse are a big part of my experience of life but in particular part of the way I deal with my encounters with people in any situation. I tend to look first for what I have done or look first for what they have done. So in writing that I realise that there is a good deal of projection that has gone on, shipping off of shame or feeling another's.

During the group in October I recounted a vignette from my work with individuals, a father punishing his young daughter by putting her in the garage alone. The shame of suddenly finding oneself forcibly ejected from the family into a dark and bare outhouse for doing something unawares

I think being sent to boarding school at 11 was a similar experience for me. At some inner place I walked away from having a family at that point. I think it was that that led me to talk also about hitting my younger sister in that same group, she, probably three at the time, and me 17. I left a hand mark on her bottom and this is still talked about to this day by my sisters nearly 50 years on. I hated her and could barely have anything to do with her, a very different experience to that with my other sister, 3 years younger than me. She too did, as my younger sister did, things to wind me up, to get a reaction, but I was by 17 dealing with an accretion of resentment and anger and hormones that was explosive, for which my younger sister became the lightning rod and, which, furthermore, did not really resolve for another 15 years.

As I said just now I found myself exploring my own deepest shame after this group. For many men who go to war it is that they will be cowards under fire and will betray their fellows. For me it is that I am capable of cruelty, have been cruel when it was an easy way out at boarding school and that when push comes to shove I will betray. At the same time and elsewhere, I started to nudge into sexual shame, fear of impotence. I am buoyed by what Bion said around courage, so called, is it altruism, or more, as he said, "Whether you got court martialled after an action or got the VC depended on the direction in which one ran away." (Bion 1982) I knew I had run from all this all my life but I started to run the other way.

My experience of not running away is wonderful. By speaking about and facing these deep seated fears I find they are no different but that avoiding them makes them worse. There is liberation in rubbing up against what Bion called 'the thing itself'. Staying close to it, not trying to avoid it, pretend it isn't there but really being with it. As my supervisor put it: 'In my philosophical tradition we talk of the knower becoming the known.' I know so much about myself but to become the known, to be in who I am, that is something else.

The last group of the year was in November. I came to it much clearer in myself and hopeful about how I would encounter the worst that might happen, my love and regard for G not being acknowledged, of me being cast out again and my movement towards betrayal, my own or someone else's.

We talked of being in or out of the group and quite early on something that I said was picked up on by G and agreed with. This made a very big difference to me and seemed to be so different from our relationship in the past. It was if the experiences from the last group, of G and I being more aligned, carried on rather than this succession of Ground Hog Day like groups.

Not long after and in a way that made sense, G was asked if something in particular had happened in his family. I felt shocked and the speaker themselves surprised by this seeming out of the blue and intuitive question. G took the comment seriously and felt it had validity, talked of checking with their family. Whatever the result of their research was going to be, I felt that very suddenly the ground had shifted and we were in a group that was truly profound, where it was safe enough for people to emerge.

Prior to this experience, in 2013, prior even to the GIG group, I was a member of the inaugural Sydney Large group. This is a group that is becoming an annual occurrence. After the group and in the reflections group the following day I was shocked by a comment about myself. At the time I sort of laughed it off and used that to lessen the impact of the hurt.

On the way to the second day of the second large group in Sydney, a year later, I was hit with my rage. Because I had someone to talk to at the time, as we walked up the hill to the venue, I could both expand this feeling as well as begin to come to terms with its fact. In the group I began to talk about what happened a year before trying as best I could to focus on my experience. I realised that its memory had recurred for me quite often in the year.

For the rest of the day this event was taken up by myself and others in a sporadic way and by day's end I felt that it was over, resolved from my point of view. I could look at the person concerned and realised that they had played little part in the resolution of my feelings.

I wonder now what I had wanted, what had made me so angry and then what so upset me in the group. Also at the same time and really for the first time I had a particular experience of being in a group. I would say that I have had many group experiences, many where I feel buoyed, supported, held, belonging as well as, to a lesser degree, not part of and at times reviled. But this was different, a number of people came up to me with expressions of their love for me, overtly or in the way they were with me. One person who I have known and respect from a number of different settings expressed how warmly they felt towards me in a particular session. Myself and two others realised over breakfast how much we had in common in our food habits and the way we saw the world and sat as close as we could for the rest of the group.

I had the experience of feeling naked in what I was exposing of myself but also unclothed of my usual expectation of being right, and now I realise, therefore, an expectation of the group process leading to some kind of justice, for me. I'm not saying that was easy or even straightforwardly intentioned, I just knew that there was a better way to do this. Justice, though, was clearly not going to happen and in writing this I am shocked that that must be the corollary of what I had set up unconsciously and always had.

When I realised that I was struck by the similarity of that to what went on with my mother. For the last 8 or so years of her life my Mum and I got on really well. For the majority of my adult life, though, I realise I have been waiting for her to be contrite and apologise. That now seems ridiculous and I can easily say that I loved my mother, wholeheartedly for who she was, and in a way that is totally unfamiliar to me.

Just after that last GIG group of the year in November I was a member of a workshop that had as an element a group experience at the beginning of the second day. In the lead up to that and throughout we were also learning about and exploring theory around complexity, management and consulting to organisations. I found myself sitting in a circle at the beginning of the first day listening to the presenter and sitting between two people who began to talk across me as all of this was going on. I asked one of them to swop with me but continued to be distracted by their talking and my own anger about that. This continued all day, by then it was because they didn't seem to be connected to the group, their comments not related to what was being talked about, their examples not relevant and there didn't seem to be a way in to discuss or engage.

Already I could feel this antipathy leaking out, a sort of ganging up being engineered by me, a finding of support for my perceptions. I dropped hints before the group experience and then was very circumspect at the beginning of it. I was confronted about my style of engagement by the person who had sat on the other side of me at the beginning and also challenged to spit it, out whatever it was that I was hinting at. So I did. As you can probably tell it was very hard to put into words, nothing much had happened. Certainly the focus of my feelings was not particularly interested in engaging with the discussion. But the group was. Again, in a way that I still find somewhat mysterious, my feelings abated, I felt much more engaged with the group and at the tea break I went up to my bete noire and asked how they were, how we were. "Fine!" There followed a long one sided conversation. But at the end of it they said, "I've just done the same thing again, haven't I?" "Yup" say I and we both laughed. Later in the day people came to me and said that they were very pleased that I had attempted to deal with my feelings and that they had had similar ones.

This is going to sound very ordinary, trite even, but to deal with one's feelings is in some ways easy, let them out. But also in other ways not. Just letting them out is only the beginning. The way they come out is also important and the intention behind letting them out as well. These days, these days of science and rationality, CBT and evidence based, I think we tend to feel more

ashamed of our feelings, more befuddled as to what to do with them. There is a belief that if we understand them then there is no need to express them. So many people see their feelings as simply the result of past experiences and that you can draw a straight line between your infancy and the way you behave now. It is difficult for me to say this but I think I subscribed to most of that too. And yet my calling card has been a willingness to speak out and up about what is going on inside me.

At the same time, that didn't really deal with the irrational WMD that my feelings sometimes feel like, where I am afraid to reveal what I am feeling. I know a lot about my life, have examined it and experienced it within psychotherapy, analysis and as a psychotherapist and group conductor. However that straight line between my history and the way I behave now is only part of the story. I'm not just some poor helpless actor being done to and then stuck in a groove that has been carved for me. Rather I am trammled, yes, but why and how do I remain so. And even that feels too rational and linear.

Most days I am able to compare the way I feel at that moment with the way I feel when I am truly alive and loving. For most of my life I have avoided examining that place, that place where love is not, bemoaned its paucity, querulous about its anxiety, terror even, felt ashamed of my inadequacy and uncertainty, inability to act. However if I do what Bion suggests and stay close to this, the thing itself, I find words to describe, my heart sings just from the reflective space created, my feet touch the ground of what is and I, the knower, with my active and quick mind, become the known, heart open and alive.

But even that is complicated, as Eigen puts it according to Bion (Eigen 1998):  
One accesses *jouissance* (orgasmic pleasure-bliss-ecstasy) through convolutions of a Moebius strip/booelean ring unconscious mind, in which primary repression and castration are constitutive structures. The very fact of symbolization is already a kind of castration at the heart of the real. No matter how joyous our joy, it is through a glass darkly.

As a client put it to me recently: "The trouble with you Tim is that you make the fantasies concrete and that takes away what they are, their life and meaning. It's good that you are willing and brave enough to put words to them but it squeezes the life out of them as well."

What I saw in those three other humans in those three groups was an absolute certainty about their rightness and a lack of concern about others. I envy that and want to destroy it. My concerns for G were concerns that I would destroy them not that they would be scapegoated. I want them to feel as vulnerable as I. I watched the other month as I started to feel in me the desire to scapegoat. When I feel attacked or am told I am wrong then I fight like a tiger. It is that tiger that I have had to look at and be with and it scares me and at the same time I have spent a life time taming it or trying to, rather than making use of the power in it.

And as I write that I remember something from my 30's when I confronted my mother about the way I was choosing to dress. She became so upset and I think so angry and frustrated with me, that I was not going to dress for the wedding of one of her sister's children in a way that suited her, that she became apoplectic. My sisters, as did my mother, thought she was dying or in the end having some kind of seizure or heart attack. No wonder I fear my own sense of truth.

All her life she was able to be brave and rise above her background but she also never seemed to embrace it.

Eigen in *Teaching Bion* (Eigen 2015):

Bion sees faith as the psychoanalytic attitude, a state of being without memory, expectation, understanding or desire, radically open. An ideal, of course, but a path, a way, a practice. He feels it necessary for the repair and growth of intuition. Since one of his special interests is psychotic experiencing and function, the O of the moment may be intuited via catastrophic impacts. O as ultimate emotional reality is sometimes characterized as a catastrophic Origin, in which case a sense of 'catastrophe' cements or binds personality.

Bion's contribution to our work (Bion 1970) (Eigen 2015) was acknowledging how we would sometimes rather destroy our capacities than bear psychic pain and that many of his examples are of situations with no solution, no way through where they simply have to be borne, grown through.

In the group now I am able to watch myself more closely. I feel something, a difference, an annoyance, a not fitting in and I begin to build a case inside myself and then build a case outside myself that is destructive of the other and their credibility. In relationship I feel it even more keenly where I am coming to realise that I know how to fit in and appear to belong here in Australia, in GIG, on the planet, as a man but at the same time there is something that is not so certain, not as certain of my right as someone who appears to me to be almost willfully not trying to fit in.

Then I become interested. It is not like my not feeling I belong is a problem and I should feel like I belong but that I mask not belonging. It's something I've always played with: passing Scottish bank notes in England; wearing a Drizabone in UK; courting being scapegoated by people who will aid me and abet that, Australians borne and bred who are able to find my chinks and poke in there until I say ouch. G then becomes something that is the reverse of the coin of who I am. Fitting in by not fitting in.

Bion in *Epilogue Memoir of the Future* (Bion 1990, p.578)

All my life I have been imprisoned, frustrated, dogged by common-sense, reason, memories, desires and - greatest bug-bear of all - understanding and being understood. This is my attempt to express my rebellion, to say 'Good-bye' to all that...I cannot claim to have succeeded. All these will, I fear, be seen to have

left their traces...hidden within these words; even sanity, like 'cheerfulness', will creep in...Wishing you all a Happy Lunacy and a Relativistic Fission.

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