

# Minding the Gap

by Jutta von Buchholtz

There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.  
That's how the light gets in.  
—Leonard Cohen

**P**sychotherapists and their clients are interested in gaps. We attend to what may emerge from another reality, from the unconscious. We understand that what lies below holds creative and destructive energies which propel us, seen or not seen, bidden or not, on our individuation journey.

Why am I writing about this topic?

At times we do not quite know why a topic or concept attaches itself to us—but we are inextricably drawn to it, and have to follow the lead because it won't let us go.

About three years ago I became fascinated by gaps, cracks, breaks, and openings. I felt compelled to follow this psychic Ariadne's thread. Only very recently was there an opening in my consciousness that explained my interest in gaps. Three years ago the relationship with a very dear person ended dramatically; she stopped communicating with me altogether and refused to help breach the gap between us. "Silence like a cancer grows," and with that grows the malignancy that now invisibly starts filling this empty space between us. But perhaps the very yearning for reconnecting could form the necessary invisible bridge? Psychologically speaking, a wound can also be understood as an opening to something that lies beneath the skin and could emerge through this fissure. And thus I started minding the ambivalence of gaps.

The word *gap* derives from the Old Norse for chasm, hole. It is akin to the Old Norse *gapa*, to open the mouth, and is a space between, a break in a barrier, a separation. To further enrich our understanding of the gap, the thesaurus offers the following synonyms: discontinuity, interval, opening, vacancy, break, lacuna, hiatus; and these antonyms: closure, nearness, continuity.

## **Minding the gap in everyday living:**

**R**ecently my friend Ann reminded me of what happens in London whenever you board or leave the subway: "Mind the gap" comes through the loudspeaker warning passengers of the deep crevice between the train and the platform. This gap can be treacherous: we might stumble, get stuck, fall, break bones, skin knees, and/or look ridiculous. We become an obstacle to the flow of commuters. A friend in Copenhagen reported that same warning is given to commuters there. With each opening there is a risk factor. An opening means change, which raises anxieties that something unforeseen might happen and challenge our illusory but cherished sense of safety, predictability, and routine. We can understand this psychologically as a warning that the safe, psychic structure of our persona might crack and that our protection of the fragile inner status quo is in danger. Often we project our fears onto our environment—onto people and objects alike. Our ego attempts to protect itself by erecting defense systems in the outer environment. For thousands of years, for example, we have built ever taller, bigger, thicker walls to protect and preserve the vulnerable inside of our nations, our homes—our psyches—from being invaded by dreaded foreign elements. Is a foreigner—or psychically a foreign new element—always a foe, never a friend? Are gaps only to be feared like dangerous chasms from which fire-spitting dragons emerge?

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A gap is an interruption in a repetitive action, for example, everyday drudgery. In Genesis we learn that God worked for six days and then took a break, a day of rest which Christianity and Judaism observe to this day. In academia, professors wisely take sabbaticals, to recharge the creative energies by slowing down, going deeper. Vacations serve a similar function; they are meant to break the drudgery of routine jobs and recharge us as we enjoy pleasurable retreats.

**And now a slight detour serving a further amplification of minding the gap:**

My friend Lia recently gave a talk to our literary group on whether laughter is indeed “the best medicine.” She addressed the pain-relieving properties of laughter by looking at what happens in the brain with the neurotransmitters, which are “not just important, they’re everything,” as her medical-student daughter pointed out.

She took us on an excursion into neurobiology. Neurons (nerve cells) have dendrites (branch-like structures), a body (soma) and an axon ending in axon terminals. They transmit information—but never touch one another. This gap is called a synapse and critical things happen in those “empty” spaces into which chemicals (neurotransmitters) are released from within the neuron. They allow neurons to communicate with one another. Analogously, Albert Einstein talked about how particles communicate at a distance and no one knows how. There is invisible linking across a chasm. Counterintuitively, it is the “empty” gap that fosters connection.

And how does this translate to relationships—which are our bread and butter as therapists? Does the gap provide the synaptic space for invisible emotions to flow? In a stroke of genius Lia reminded us of Michelangelo’s “Creation of Adam” (1512) in the Sistine Chapel. There the central captivating point of interest is also a gap! It is the space between God’s and Adam’s forefingers where something powerful but invisible is happening. It is “an empty space but hardly a dead one,” Lia commented. This empty space is invisibly filled with the longing to connect, there is energy there, life force flowing from one to the other. Michelangelo is drawing our attention to the invisible happenings. As in every meaningful human relationship the separateness rather than the enmeshed closeness, can provide the possible opening that makes communications possible.

In the consulting room many therapists sit facing their clients—an empty space between them. What happens there? Is this exchange not in some humble way analogous to what happens between God and Adam in Michelangelo’s painting? The space is empty but very alive with invisible exchanges between two persons, with projections, with transference and countertransference. These are the thoughts and fantasies that can typically people the space between client and therapist:

“I wonder what she thinks of me?”

“He does look like my father when he was angry with me.”

“Does he care for me, really, or is this just a financial arrangement?”

“God, this hour seems long.”

“Why do I have to go back to my childhood?”

It is in this gap that reverie and transformative exchanges can take place.

Ovid’s rendering of the myth of Philemon and Baucis may serve as an example of the critical importance of the space in between. As a reward for their hospitality to Zeus and Hermes, who appeared to them disguised as bums, the old couple are given the boon of being allowed to die at the same time so that neither will have to mourn the loss of the other. At the moment of death they are morphed into two trees standing side-by-side, their branches and roots touching while their trunks visually form a mandorla, the almond shaped place of apparition: a gap.

In the iconography of the Middle Ages, Christ was often shown emerging from this vaginal almond-shaped opening. Something transformative and new can emerge from any opening—in concrete manifest reality as well as the spiritual realms.

A gap can be formed from the breaking apart. To return to the beginning of this paper, the heart-breaking break-up of a relationship, can also serve to strengthen and define an individual’s personality. I am reminded of raising teenagers who worked diligently and with astounding accuracy at repeatedly breaking my heart while freeing themselves from my maternal constraints. Their birth toward their own personhood happened through these woundings that were the openings for their fledgling personalities. As parents we desperately hope that all goes well for them as we provide containers for the onslaught against being contained.

In Eugene O’Neil’s play “Mourning Becomes Electra,” the children’s containment in the parents lives tragically stops the development of the children. In this play parents and children are inextricably enmeshed, with tragic consequences for all. Son Orin cannot free himself emotionally from his mother whom he jealously guards as his beloved object. Mother and son become husband and wife as do father Ezra and daughter Lavinia in a dreadful symmetry. As psychoanalyst W. R. Bion would posit, neither parent is the kind of containing object, one capable of providing the kind of gap that would encourage alpha functioning. Tragically these parents do not provide the openness to accept and transform primitive, early emotional experiences. Neither parent could tolerate attacks on linking, which would mean separation between parent and child but would provide the openings which could help create space where development could take place. The atmosphere in their home was emotionally violent—there was intense threat and hatred—confusion and horror. In the end there are two suicides, a murder, and Lavinia, O’Neil’s Electra, becomes a living corpse entombed in the ancestral house.

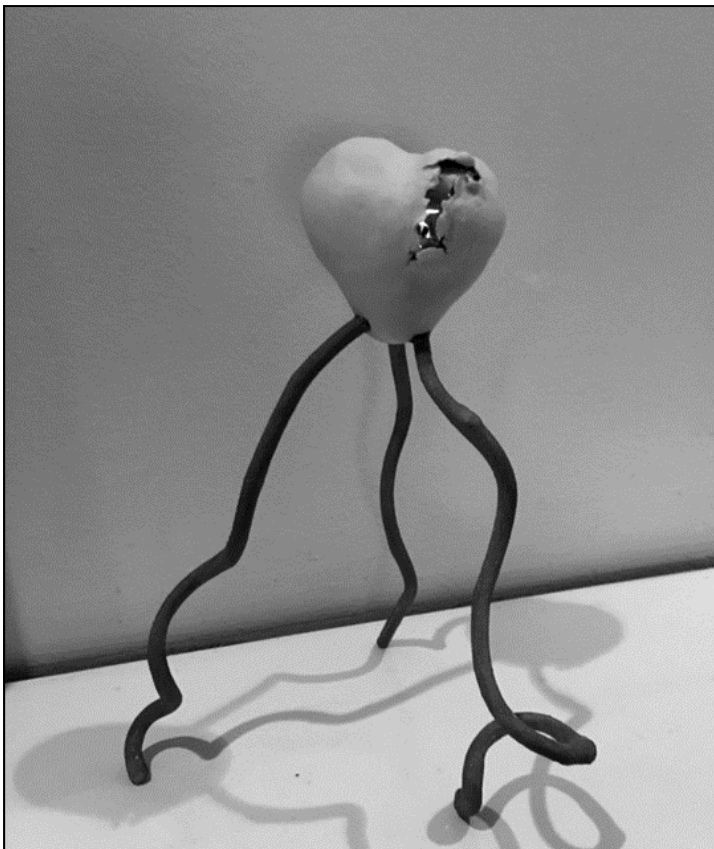
The break-up of the Freud-Jung relationship is an example of the intimate friendship of two remarkable men—with a very different result from the enmeshed relationships in the O’Neil play. Initially these two great men were very close. Were they perhaps too close? Was there not enough of a gap? Their letters to one another testify to their intimacy and desire to stay close and together. They spent precious energy avoiding a break-up. Once the break-up occurred, which caused Jung to dive deep into his personal and from there to the collective unconscious, both emerged firmer, sturdier. The break-up became an opening through which energies could be freed that each used to create their individual, separate, sturdy identities and their psychological systems.

### Minding the gap—tending to the chink in the armor:

Carl Jung's focus on the shadow and the complexes can be understood as valuing the cracks in the armor of the persona. It leads us to focus our attention deeply onto that which is broken, unacceptable, and faulty—the darkness of the gap. Jung sees the gold in the shadow complex. It is this unacceptable aspect of our psyche which can connect the person to the creative unconscious and connect the person to the vital libido, psychic energy available there. The ego feels the dread of dissolving, falling apart, "of death stepping in."

An analyst can assist in the opening of the client's heart and help welcome shadowy material that can carry vital psychic energy up from the unconscious. Unwelcome personal, complex, and shadowy material then enters the space between analyst and analysand—as fantasies, imagination, dreams. And if God is present, may enrich and enliven client and analyst alike.

I understand the Japanese art form of kintsugi to draw attention to the fissure, by gilding the gap so to speak. It is creating art out of broken things. The artist takes the shards of a bowl, for example, and mends the pieces together with gold. Looking at the mended pieces, the breaks or cracks stand out—they are valued. The brokenness and mending become a gorgeous expression of relationship. Both brokenness and gold belong to the alchemical opus, indestructible and awesomely beautiful.



Recently an artist friend created a series of porcelain hearts on wobbly legs. Each heart had a crack—a bit of skin peeling off, revealing a shiny layer of gold underneath. Understood symbolically, these cracks become the gaps that make it possible to see the gold underneath. Psychologically they can be understood to

symbolize the incorruptible value of the mysterious, deeper, unseen layers of psyche—the pure gold of the Self.

Can minding the gap repair a broken relationship? Or can minding the gap, understood as tending to and valuing that which is invisible, lead to deeper self-exploration, and become a building block in our individuation journey? For some of us Jungian analysts this seems to apply.

The aliveness and importance of the gap to connect to further visions, fantasies, and emotions can also be experienced in the arts and music, where empty spaces or pauses give another layer of meaning to the experience. These considerations cannot be included within the limits of this paper.

I would like to conclude with one more analogy to minding the gap—acknowledging the emptiness that is filled with invisible creativity and potential.

Archaeology and depth psychology have some traits in common. We unearth and connect to the past in order to understand the present. Years ago archaeologists would take shards of ancient pottery, connect them with clay, and paint on it a copy of the missing pattern. That way the broken vase gave the illusion of being intact. Then their approach changed. The broken pieces of ancient pottery would be held together, mended by clay to reconstruct the shape of the original vessel—but the added clay would remain blank. That way it was obvious that the vase had been reconstituted. Now there is a third approach. Archeologists erect a central column around which they arrange the shards on extensions. The ancient shards float freely around a center pole leaving an empty space between them. Now the eye and imagination of the spectator can complete what once was an intact vessel. In this way not only is there space for the imagination which longs to complete the connection—but there is also a view of that which holds it all together. It's as if these pieces dance around their lodestar. Psychologically there is an opening, a gap, which invites creative fantasy around a center which can hold.

In this paper I have attempted to demonstrate with examples from everyday life, literature, psychological perspectives, history, and architecture the ambivalence of the gap and the value of minding the gap. I hope it has raised awareness of the interplay and importance to individuation of the danger and growth potential inherent in gaps. Gaps are everywhere—it is up to us to interpret and value them.

#### Post script:

As I was completing this paper, I learned that Chris Williams offered a lecture "Minding the Gap: Touching Time with Winnicott, Jung, and Lacan" in Bath in 2006. This lecture explores the dynamics of presence and absence in the psychotherapeutic experience.