The Leelah Play
In the Lead Role: The Psyche
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Healing via Avatar – Meet Ferro and the Town of Portofino

Ferro is an Italian man in his early 30s, a member of the Strozzi dynasty. He was once part of the European aristocracy. He was born in Florence to a Christian mother and a Jewish father and played a key intellectual role in cultivating the "new music" of his city. He was a member of Count Giovanni de Bardi's Florentine Camerata. As an aristocrat, Ferro led a happy and vital life and was as free as a bird: he never cared much for finding a spouse or building a family. But Ferro's luck ran out. Being a careless and rash young musician, he lost all his money and, as a result, forfeited his noble title. Penniless and heart broken, he set out wandering and ended up living in a humble little neighborhood of a small town called Portofino, next to six other neighbors: *the town elder* – a nameless old man, with questionable sanity; *Mr. Jacob* – an able-bodied and sentimental construction worker; *Rory* – a hard-working and optimistic sheriff who is exasperated by his townsfolk; *Julietta* – an elitist and alienated artist who longs for companionship; *David* – a dark attorney who is looking for the light; *Sansey* – a graceful and light-hearted stylist who gets on everybody's nerves.[1] In this town, Ferro works as the king's messenger and makes ends meet through such menial tasks as lighting the street lamps or handing out tea and is even known to beg.

All these characters are at the starting point of the fascinating journey of a drama therapy group, which is undergoing a therapeutic process based on the *Leelah* model. This process took place at the University of Haifa School for Creative Arts Therapies and lasted an entire semester. The group had seven members, between the ages of thirty and forty, including myself, as the facilitator, in the role of Ferro. The group that came together was a heterogenous one: some members were single, some were married and some had families; there were secular Jews, religious Jews, Druze Arabs and new immigrants who converted to Judaism; the proportion of men to women was almost equal and some members played a character of the opposite gender. In this article, I would like to describe the group process we underwent, interlacing it with the presentation of the Leelah play paradigm and the roleplaying model derived from it – *Leelah – Play in itself.*

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[1] The gender of the players and avatars has been changed in order to maintain confidentiality.

Leelah is a Sanskrit term which captures existence itself as divine play. The Leelah paradigm, which was written as a theoretical doctoral dissertation submitted to the Bar Ilan University Hermeneutics and Psychoanalysis track, is divided into three parts. The first explores power-relations in play-therapy, the second discusses the concept of freedom in play-therapy and the third defines the identity of the playing subject in therapy. The study draws on terminology proposed by Michel Foucault and embraces his critical outlook on the world of therapy and its oppressive dynamics. The paradigm was written with in a manner that is mindful of situations of oppression in society and as an attempt to address them. For example, I avoid using the term "patient" because of its passive connotations and the particular relationship it implies with the active "therapist." In order to specify the type of therapeutic relationship I am proposing, I have chosen the terms "player" and "player-therapist."

The principles of this paradigm can be applied in various ways, ranging from verbal conversation to creative arts. The *Leelah* model is only one possible application, which is designed to illustrate and demonstrate these principles in action. *Leelah* is a phenomenological, narrative and long-term model, based on the popular *Dungeons and Dragons* roleplaying game and the ancient Greek polis or city-state. Once each of the participants has chosen a character at random, they portray it throughout the entire process. Much like a *Dungeons and Dragons* game, while each character develops and undergoes many changes, its ongoing narrative serves as a coherent and consistent axis. The overarching storyline is not predetermined or even known in advance. The town's global story emerges spontaneously from the way players choose to play their characters and the interactions between characters. Much like the Greek polis, which was a fully autonomous city-state, the basic assumption of this model is that the group has all the knowledge it needs to achieve self-healing. The role of the therapist is to maintain a safe and protected space in which healing can happen, while doing their best to avoid any form of intervention. It is the role of the group to bring about the healing.

In the language of Leelah, Ferro, the character I played, is called an Avatar. An avatar is a kind of alter-ego or imago that represents the subject in-play. The avatar resembles Kohut's notion of *selfobject* but differs from it because it is not an external other, but a temporary, alternative internal other, whose narrative the subject plays throughout the course of the sessions. Ferro was the character I adhered to in the sessions and which represented me in play. Ferro was completely separate from me: I was not him and he was not me; nevertheless, he was a part of me and I was a part of him. The subject is always situated above their avatar because they are the one creating and operating it. This means that Ferro and I were in a hierarchic relationship: I was superior to him. Still, our relationship was a mutual one: the

avatar resonates the subject and the subject resonates the avatar in a perfectly equal and mutual way, just like a parent-child relationship. The parent brought the child into this world and is charged with raising them. The child is hierarchically dependent on their parent, because the latter is the adult responsible for raising them. However, as Winnicott explained, without the child the parent would not have been a parent, meaning that it is if the child was the one who gave birth to the parent.

Based on the assumption of mutual resonance and on an awareness of power relations, all curative processes in Leelah take place through the avatar. The focus of this form of therapy is the avatar rather than the subject; meaning, the therapist is focused on the character being played rather than the subject playing it. This change in focus creates aesthetic distance and allows for profound metaphoric, rather than direct, work. Later on, we will see how such healing takes place in a way that is sensitive to the issue of oppression in therapy.

Meaning-Making Play or Authentic Play – Meet the Town Elder and Mr. Jacob

After our visit to the town is over and we leave our characters-avatars behind, we engage in sharing. Sharing can be performed through speech or writing, with each player discussing their avatar in the third-person, in order to fully distinguish themselves from the character they portray. Notice the richness and depth with which one of the players describes her avatar, the town elder: "the town elder is a very old man, he is over a hundred years old. He is twice widowed and has no contact with his children. He doesn't remember either his name or his past. He is always surrounded by birds, which he generously feeds with prime millet. His shack is located by the river and is covered with branches and leaves. Physically, he is weak, hard of hearing, low-functioning and only cooperates when he feels like it. He loves it when people come and visit him and listen to the fairy-tales he tells, like the one about the witch who eats babies. He ekes out a living by running an old antique shop. Fortunately for him, almost no one ever buys anything, because the objects he sells are like his family. Each tool, wooden spoon, box, etc. has its own story, soul and secret. He talks to them and keeps them safe, as if they were babies. The townspeople respect him but also make fun of him – they cannot live with him and cannot live without him. On the one hand, he is a symbol of the town's past; just like a monument, the history of the place is literally engraved in him. On the other hand, he refuses to fit in and keeps disrupting the order and disobeying the rules. Some people love him and make an effort to get along with him, while others think he is crazy. If you look at it from afar, the elder's life looks like a fairy tale."

As mentioned, sharing – whether in conversation or in writing – is done in the third-person, in order to fully separate the avatar from the player. In order to sustain the healing potency of the metaphor, what the player shared about her character, the elder, is strictly descriptive and devoid of any insights or conclusions. If she were to analyze his character and compare him to herself, this would break the spell of the metaphor, weakening the roleplay's capacity for healing. As a rule, the more a player is able to set aside interpretations and the more they are free to simply roleplay, their in-play expression become more complete and their healing process more profound and significant. *Leelah* defines three states in which play might collapse into a partial and oppressive constellation: when it has an external goal (for example, if the player sought to empower herself through the character of the elder); when there is an external audience (in Leelah, all those present in the room, including the facilitator, must be in character); when the avatar/role is analyzed and contrasted with the player. External goals, the presence of an audience and interpretation risk undoing the healing power of the metaphor. The metaphor works as long as we act in a manner that is spontaneous, free and unaware of the links between player and avatar. As soon as the player begins to analyze their avatar and become self-aware about it, they render the metaphor powerless and begin dictating moves that abolish the potency of spontaneous healing.

In most cases, the person playing has a clear notion of how their avatar should behave and act, what would do them good and what processes they need to undergo. This notion often stems from social convention and ideas inculcated in us by our culture. Under its influence, the player may end up manipulating their avatar and directing it. Foucault called the manner in which we apply power to ourselves the technology of the self. In other words, we discipline ourselves, even when no external force is there to act on us, in the belief that it is for our own good. In order to illustrate this idea, let us now meet Mr. Jacob and consider his interaction with the town elder.

This is how Mr. Jacob was depicted by the player playing him: "Mr. Jacob is one of the town's older residents and is over 60 years old. He is a very healthy man, even though he often smokes a pipe. He has been married for many years and, much like his relationship with the other townspeople, he maintains a respectful – though not intimate – relationship with his wife. He has two grown up daughters who have moved out, one of whom is married. He spends most of his time working in construction and has no hobbies. He leads a simple and modest life, likes to look at the town's buildings, chat with his neighbors, visit his good old friend – the town elder, read the newspaper and smoke his pipe. After a long day spent around the town, he prefers to stay at home and have a good bowl of soup all by himself. He is a very practical and

pragmatic person. His notion is that 'he's fine,' that everyone is okay and does not dig any deeper than that. Even though he is a rather typical example of masculine indifference, he does have some emotional qualities and is the sentimental type."

This is what she had to say about his exploits (note how absorbed and devoted the players are to their roleplaying): "one morning, Mr. Jacob went out to meet some of his neighbors. He was cool and distant, as usual. He met an old friend, with whom he had spent part of his childhood – the nameless elder. Jacob is supportive and sympathetic towards the elder, out of respect to his senility. Mr. Jacob exchanged a few words with Sansey the stylist and Sheriff Rory and tried to figure out Julietta the artist's true nature. His old friend sold him a bowl of soup and, in exchange, asked for his hat. On his part, Mr. Jacob had no intention of giving up his precious hat and therefore offered his friend a new hat, that he would make for him for next week. Julietta, who was present when the deal was made, tried to cause a fight between the two by claiming that Mr. Jacob was taking advantage of the elder's senility and had no intention of actually delivering the promised hat. Because Mr. Jacob did have the elder's best interests at heart, this confused and hurt him and he could not understand why he is being accused." At this point, the player reported the collapse of her character: "I felt hurt, wronged, misunderstood and that I wasn't Mr. Jacob anymore but myself. I felt a need to turn to the person who played Julietta, share my feelings with him and ask him why he accused me."

This is a moment in which the avatar, Mr. Jacob, broke down because he became merged with the player, who adhered to the set of values that guided her real life conduct. In *Leelah*, players are free to play with, explore and revisit their sets of values. The player's need to adhere to values such as "keeping the peace" or "decency" is part of her everyday conduct and, as such, unrelated to the roleplay. It therefore represents a process of self-disciplining on her part. Bringing this value to bear on the roleplay constitutes the kind of social regulation that we seek to avoid. The *Leelah* model creates a playful space that invites us to be free and act in ways that are not necessarily considered ethical. Through Ferro, the therapist-player, I invite Mr. Jacob to conduct his inquiry in-play. Off-play, I invite the player to resist identifying herself with her character and to allow herself to feel hurt, offended and confused as well as to express these feelings within the town setting. Avatars are allowed to feel hurt, angry or betrayed. All emotions are welcome and there is no desire to keep to positive emotions, as dictated by society. Healing may occur precisely through the encounter with diverse emotions and by working these through by means of the avatar – and not by avoiding them and defining them as irrelevant to our development.

The safe space for play is created through authentic roleplaying and not as a result of external direction. One example of the kind of external force that may be exerted on the roleplay is when parents intercede with the therapeutic-play process. I often come across parents who explain to me that their child should not be allowed to invent their own rules for roleplay, because then they refuse to obey the rules at home. What they want is for their child to play by the rules, so that he or she will learn to obey rules outside of therapy. In other words, they are asking to utilize the roleplay as an act of enforcement and supervision regarding their child's behavior. In Leelah, however, the only rules that apply are those that stem from the roleplay itself. This is how *Leelah* allows the individual to develop independent thinking, creativity and mental flexibility. Lo and behold, in my experience, Leelah players are fully capable of handling social rules and even know how to use these for their own benefit.

Establishing Developmental Spectrums – Meet Sheriff Rory

The way in which avatars are accompanied in their process within the town is informed by awareness of the power relations in play-therapy and derived from the paradigm's definition of the identity of the person who is playing in therapy. The Leelah paradigm draws on the form of the triple spiral (৪৹ - the Triskelion, an ancient Celtic symbol) as representative of the psyche of the person at play. Each of these three spirals is a spiral staircase (diagram #1).
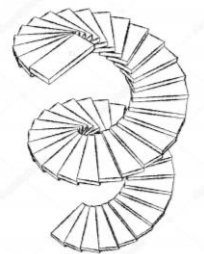

Diagram #1

Each stair represents a linear component and the spiral structure in which they are embedded represents the cyclic component. In *Leelah*, therapy works by establishing three developmental spectrums for each of the three spirals. This is illustrated through the character of Rory and his interaction with the townspeople.

Rory is a 32-year-old bachelor, who was born in the town of Bagsu and, until recently, lived with his two elderly parents. He had studied physics but dropped out and chose to become sheriff so that he could take care of his parents. 18 months ago, he finished his sheriff training

and was certified. Recently, the monitoring authority stationed him in Portofino. This meant that he still had to move far away from his parents. Unfortunately, since moving, he does not see them very often, but is able to stay in touch. Rory has been able to establish relationships with the townspeople and has joined a weekly archery class. When the townspeople listen to him and everything is in order, he is optimistic, tolerant, highly motivated in his job and enjoys life. When the townspeople do not listen to him, he sinks into despair and grows withdrawn and intolerant.

This is what the player reported about his avatar: "just like in previous weeks, Rory started his day in low spirits and reluctant to meet the townsfolk. David, the attorney, walked up to him and said that it looked like he was upset. Rory shared with him his feeling of despair about the way the townspeople were behaving. He decided to muster up his courage and tell David that he found it quite problematic that he has been walking around with a club, seeing as no one but the sheriff was allowed to carry weapons in this town […] David reacted with a kind of excuse, saying that he was using his 'stick' for exercise. Rory didn't know how he could uphold the law and show that he understands David's actual need for protection at the same time."

In light of all this, I wanted to construct a first developmental spectrum for Rory. The spectrum is structured as a linear oxymoron (diagram #2), which contains contradictions and paradoxes.
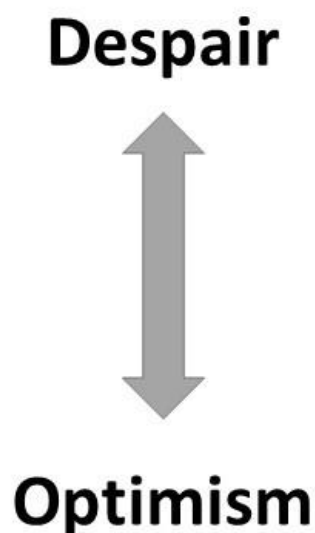

Diagram #2

In this structure, movement is subjected to the Aristotelian law that states that movement occurs between relevant opposites. When an avatar is preoccupied with a certain theme, the opposing theme is also necessarily relevant to them, even if it is not tangibly manifest at first. The player's report suggests that Rory is exasperated and disappointed in the townspeople, who are not listening to him or obeying his rules. Therefore, his first spectrum is "despair-optimism." On the one hand, Rory is failing at his job, on the other hand, he is not losing hope (for example, he is still asking David to give up his weapon). In order to identify the other two spectrums, let us return to the player's report.

"Rory and David joined the town meeting that was called by Ferro. Rory refused to sit down, because he did not trust Ferro. He noticed Ferro groveling before Sansey, while she was paving new roads around town, and this repulsed him (a snake who sheds its skin is still a snake). While Ferro was praising the new roads, Rory remembered why he was still a bit fond of Ferro the beggar; his sense of initiative always held the promise of abundance and wealth that could greatly benefit the town. It appears that the road Sansey paved did not reach all the houses, which made some of the people very angry. Mr. Jacob tried to offer a compromise, but Rory was too impatient to be able to talk things over. When he was asked for his opinion, he said very clearly that he did not understand why Sansey hadn't consulted him in advance – which could have prevented this whole unpleasant affaire. Other than that, he didn't really care." In light of this report and given his attitude towards Ferro, Sansey and the other residents, one could say that Rory's second developmental spectrum is "tolerance-contempt." For example, he both scorns Ferro and still has a soft spot for him. In order to find the third spectrum, we turn to the end of the report.

"During the conversation, Rory notices Julietta and something in his heart called out to her. Very spontaneously and quite unlike himself, he asked her if she wanted to come over for some tea. As they sat in his watch tower, Julietta asked if Rory had any alcohol. He replied that he was not allowed to drink when he was on duty, but then, in second thought, took off his sheriff's hat, set aside his sword and poured some whiskey into their tea…

At some point, all the townspeople came to the sheriff's house and Rory felt impatient about their unwelcomed presence and their problems. Nevertheless, he was surprised to find out that they had been able to solve the road issue without having to call on him. This was a pleasant surprise, which may have happened because he was able to sit back and allow things to resolve themselves."

In light of the report, one may say that Rory's third developmental spectrum is "flexibility-strictness." Rory is able to find a way to leave the town meeting in order to spend time with Julietta. During their time together, he relinquishes his strict adherence to the rules, sets aside his weapon (as he previously asked David to do) and allows himself to spend a pleasant moment in good company.

The three spectrums remain the same throughout the therapy. They accompany the avatar during every session and constitute their key characteristic. The only person consciously aware of them and monitoring them is the player-therapist. Within each oxymoron, the paradigm defines four types of movement that portray the dialogue between its two poles: (1) blocked: ⤯ (for example, when Rory is only desperate or only optimistic); (2) inverting: ⇄ (for example, when Rory is tolerant one moment and scornful the next); (3) hesitant: ⤨ (for example, when Rory is in a process of exploring and studying the range between the two ends of the spectrum); (4) harmonious: ⟳ (for example, when Rory moves harmoniously between flexibility and strictness). At the end of each session, the therapist uses these icons to mark the relevant type of movement on their *developmental spectrums tracking sheet*. The therapy seeks to allow each avatar to become acquainted with all four movement types. All four are equally important for development and are not in any hierarchical relationship with one another. The spectrums are designed to disrupt any oppressive dynamic by which the player-therapist favors the "positive" pole over the "negative" one and directs the player towards a particular point on the spectrum. The paradigm wishes to move beyond the linear-hierarchic view and replace it with a circular-spiral view. As a therapist, I observe the developmental spectrums in light of Jung's notion of the unity of opposites and in correspondence with traditional worldviews in which both ends of a spectrum are mutually important. To me, both ends, being equally desirable, form a circle. Rory's despair, contempt and strictness are just as vital as optimism, tolerance and flexibility. Any subject who tried to escape the "shadow" of such qualities will end up being persecuted by them. Accepting them allows both ends of the spectrum to meet, granting it a circular shape. This encounter between opposite poles creates a spinning structure (diagram #3), which sparks yet another revolution of the endless spiral.
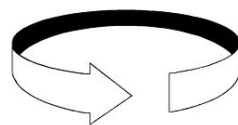

Diagram #3

The linear outlook is a hierarchical product of Western thinking; straight lines do not exist in nature. The proposed model seeks to neutralize the tendency of both therapists and players to create one-dimensional subjects – empowered, lively, happy, functioning and productive – and allow the full range of the avatar's qualities to be expressed in the roleplay. From my perspective, each quality, when proportionate, is appropriate and desirable for the development of the playing person. By formulating developmental spectrums and understanding the importance of opposites, we are able to follow the avatars and accompany them in a tolerant and phenomenological manner, that is, to offer a clean, interpretation-free description of an experiential process. The final stage, in which the avatars say goodbye to the town, will serve to illustrate Rory's development process.

The Story's End

As the process was drawing to a close, the avatars began their preparations for concluding their visit to the town. In the following excerpt, one can note Rory's developmental movement, which became possible through the support he received and the acceptance of his full range of qualities.

"Rory took the bread (which he baked for the townspeople) out of the oven […] and invited David to join him in giving it to everyone. They met Julietta and Mr. Jacob, who had some bread with jam. Rory offered some bread to Ferro […] and then to Sansey and the elder as well. All the residents stood in a circle, conversing. Rory felt a deep sense of warmth, feeling that they were like a family. As the townspeople started talking about the place they are planning to move to, Rory mustered up his courage and stated that he had no intention of leaving and that he suggests that they should all prepare for a rebellion (this may be the first time that Rory voiced such a clear-cut opinion in the town forum)." One can notice the spontaneous reconciliation between Rory and the townsfolk and the shift towards the pole of optimism. Rory the avatar's developmental movement was facilitated by the discovery of different types of movement along his own spectrums. In other words: the presence of supportive, protective and non-judgmental conditions made it possible for him to become acquainted with additional forms of movement and the character was able to undergo a process of self-regulation and spontaneous healing.

The player continues his report: "it suddenly occurred to Rory […] how great it would be […] to leave his exhausting role as sheriff and maybe go back to his study of physics, which he had abandoned. This thought, which he shared with David, filled him with a comforting sense of nostalgia as well as sadness over all the things he is about to leave […] once again,

the delicious memory of the cookies his father would make came to Rory's mouth […] Ferro's curiosity [also] felt pleasant, because he felt his intentions were good. […] When they sat around the bonfire, Rory was once again overwhelmed by a strong feeling of warmth. […] all the townspeople ate and enjoyed themselves very much. […] Julietta asked Rory if he was starting a new career as a baker […] Rory wasn't sure if he could make it as a baker, but knowing that he can take care of himself was empowering and comforting." This also illustrates developmental movement towards the pole of tolerance. However, I wish to stress that, as a therapist, I have no preference for the "positive" pole, that is empowered in this particular illustration. In actuality, even during the process of termination, Rory was still moving back and forth along the spectrum and dealing with issues that belonged to the "negative" pole – which made his process both profound and authentic.

The reports made by Rory and the other townsfolk, the drama therapy group, indicate that the experiences that emerged in the roleplay were rich, diverse, significant and held a good deal of curative potential. The establishment of a self-contained environment for play, without an audience, external goals or interpretation, creates a safe and secure social laboratory. This environment allows players to bring up important clinical material. The formation of developmental spectrums creates a mental structure that neutralizes external judgment and oppressiveness and facilitates acceptance, exploration and discovery. Players are accompanied by a player-therapist and this accompaniment is informed by the four types of movement that occur along developmental spectrums. The therapist's presence is clearly not a dominant one and is rather focused on maintaining and holding the healing space. Throughout my years as a drama therapist, I have had the good fortune of visiting several such towns; each and every one of these experiences was both profound and wondrous. I am forever grateful to all those devoted players with the lives of whose characters I was fortunate enough to interlace the life of my own character for several months. These towns are always with me, treasured in my heart.

I conclude with the second poem from the book of Dao:

People through finding something beautiful
Think something else unbeautiful,
Through finding one man fit
Judge another unfit.
Life and death, though stemming from each other,
        seem to conflict as stages of change,

Difficult and easy as phases of achievement,

Long and short as measures of contrast,

High and low as degrees of relation;

But, since the varying of tones gives music to a voice

And what is is the was of what shall be,

The sanest man

Sets up no deed,

Lays down no law,

Takes everything that happens as it comes,

As something to animate, not to appropriate,

To earn, not to own,

To accept naturally without self-importance:

If you never assume importance

You never lose it.

(Lau Tzu, 1986, p. 32)

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