

CHAPTER 3

The Heart of the Rondine Method

THE RELATIONAL APPROACH TO CONFLICT

Franco Vaccari

In the last two chapters, I focused on the ways that a student's experiences lead us to the relational aspects of conflict. As you read about that focus in this chapter, keep some key concepts in mind, most notably, the individual, trust, dialogue, attention, imagination, and cultural creativity. In the process, I hope you will see how and why we blend the philosophical–anthropological with the psychological–pedagogical strands of the behavioral sciences.

The Philosophical–Anthropological Strand

Human renewal is at the heart of the Rondine Method because everyone, everywhere can nurture a welcoming and caring approach to life. In the process of developing our model, we have also learned that any creative and lasting conflict transformation takes place most readily in an environment in which constant care and attention are given to everyone who takes part in a peacebuilding process.

How does such a renewal begin? Our young “former enemies” may come to us at Rondine thinking that they are ready to resist and even overcome the devastating impact of violent conflict. Nevertheless, freedom from victimhood is not enough to bear the brunt of relational shocks that come from face-to-face encounters with the former enemy. As mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, *trust in the dialogue with the other* person is rediscovered in a third or neutral space where young people have chosen to live in “close quarters” with each other for two years. As they deal with our relational approach to conflict, they both rediscover and come to rely on their own unique personalities and identities and, together with that of their erstwhile enemy, “give time” for their desire to stabilize their relationship to mature.

To get to that point, our research and extended discussions led the staff to synthesize the work of a number of prominent philosophers and anthropologists, which we went on to integrate into the Rondine Method.

Choosing to commit to others and accepting their diversity are the cornerstones of the many personalist philosophies developed by the likes of Emmanuel Mounier and Paul Ricoeur. For Mounier (1986), people manifest themselves in making a heartfelt commitment to society, while for Ricoeur (1990), decentralization of the individual is a decisive act every time one accepts to enter into dialogue with others, hoping to feel like persons who walk together in time.

The desire to understand and turn toward the world and toward others defines the individual. This person, materialized in a body and placed in specific historical contexts, accepts responsibility for the present without taking refuge in the past or fleeing into the future. Fostering one's true inner spirit opens social and political horizons beyond anything resembling conservative nostalgia or pseudo-revolutionary dreams.

During such an interaction, the person discovers their own and the other individual's uniqueness. In that moment, the "I" surrenders to a "You," an act that fundamentally forges the relationship because it is anchored in the willingness to converse, and where the human word becomes a nondominating protagonist. In *Zwiesprache (I and Thou)*, Martin Buber (1937) argues that the word dwells in the silent void lying between interlocutors. It is "in-between, in this liminal space," where the I gives the You the initiative to communicate on the assumption that the You is novelty itself, through and beyond all its words. Such a dialogue cannot be confused with a discussion, even a quiet one. It is hard for people who hold divergent points of view to collaborate or even have a rational dialogue. Dialogue requires listening in a way that takes both parties beyond the tangle of rights and wrongs toward a point upon which a true relationship can be based.

Similarly, according to Emmanuel Levinas (1983), the "face" is at the center of any relationship. Being face-to-face allows an individual to view and accept another beyond their social, religious, or any other affiliation. The individual's ongoing curiosity and discovery allows them to shed the illusion that a person's "character" is based on any such simple measurement or category. To the contrary, my fellow human must stand directly in front of me so that I can see our dramatic differences as well as the characteristics that we share. As he saw it, a stable relationship, by definition, includes what can be thought of as distance in mutual closeness in which people preserve themselves by giving themselves to the other.

The "appearance" of the other individual's face comes at the same time that the two parties psychologically surrender to each other. It occurs at a time when both of them leave behind the loneliness they have lived with for so long.

Levinas's thesis about the need and possibility to give each person the time to give birth to a feeling of the other as a neighbor brings to mind the importance of

truly listening and, better yet, paying close attention to one's interlocutor. Simone Weil (1950) expresses this idea with her idea of relationality through which one unconditionally listens to and concentrates on what another person says. This is only possible by being "distant in closeness," which can only take place when one turns physically toward unfortunate people who have been damaged by a war or in some other way. As she saw it, the act of asking questions like "what happened to you" allows one to know that other person as a whole and not simply as a member of a group of people that carry a label such as "unfortunate."

Ivan Illich (2009) sees himself in this paradigm when he suggested the idea of *philia* in which free spirits encounter each other "beyond the set automatisms of recognition and self-recognition." Illich himself suggested that when you listen respectfully and unconditionally, you bow yourself to that person's otherness and give up looking for emotional barriers separating the two of you. Paradoxically, when we take away those artificial bonds, two people can start a real relationship.

The Psycho-Pedagogical Strand

The Rondine Method is partially based on "the constructive module of psychological consideration [which] brings different perspectives into dialogue," which, in our case, are combined with a number of psychological and pedagogical perspectives (Trevi 1987, 93). From this angle, the human being is seen as part of a *self-re-creation* process in which guided development and what we call self-training extend throughout the traumatized person's lifetime.

Our approach to psychosynthesis is "humanistic" and is thus holistic rather than fragmentary and is meant to bring out each person's potential. It is inspired by a Jungian principle in which one's personality is built around a *unifying center*. Psychosynthesis is a method of psychological development and self-realization for those who refuse to remain the slave of their inner phantasms or of external influences, who refuse to submit passively to the play of psychological forces that is going on within them, and who are determined to become the master of their inner kingdom (Assagioli 2018).

Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974), the founder of psychosynthesis, loved to integrate it with contributions from other psychological schools of thought to the point that, today, it represents a kind of intellectual eclecticism that can be used by just about any practitioner. From the relational approach to conflict theory, we have identified a few authors whose work can be integrated with the essentials of psychosynthesis, including Erik Erikson (1950) and Donald Winnicott (1971) for trust and relationship with one's environment as well as Jung (1916/2003, 1967) and Winnicott again for the relationship between creativity and imagination in the real world.

In more recent years, some psychoanalysts have chosen to examine “interpersonal relationships” in conflict settings more closely:

- Because therapeutic practice involves *listening to pain*, it is hard to understand the causes of a person’s trauma without losing one’s sense of distance and identifying with the patient.
- Any reflection on their condition invariably takes them beyond the individual’s personality.

The theoretical contributions of these schools of thought have to be included in any understanding of a relationship in which two people from opposite sides of a dispute agree to enter into a dialogue with each other:

This statement by an Italian proponent of *bi-personal psychoanalysis* who rethought the therapeutic setting in the light of a paradigm of relationality was taken even further by another Italian colleague.

The analytic field is not the *sum* of two internal situations, but something new created *between* two people in the unity that they form together in the session. (Lingiardi 2019, 62)

The Rondine Method extends these ideas beyond a formal psychotherapeutic setting, most notably when a young adult takes part in an emotionally difficult dialogue (cf. Corbella 2005, 16). Other *relational psychoanalysis* research was inspired by two psychiatrists who broke away from the Freudian matrix in the 1920s—Harry Stack Sullivan, who pioneered the relational approach to the interview, and Ludwig Binswanger, who researched how a patient experienced time as part of a clinical practice. In more recent years, this work was brought forward by Stephen Mitchell, who created New York University’s Relational Track in its graduate program in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.

TRUST AND A FACILITATING ENVIRONMENT

This takes me back to chapter 1 where I introduced Erik Erikson’s notion of “basic trust.” He argued that human beings can only fully reach their potential if they can build a positive image of themselves in the world at that stage in their development. That, in turn, allows them to develop a sense of independence and interdependence through which they can take initiatives in all aspects of their lives.

The “trust-facilitating environment” is one of Donald W. Winnicott’s unique contributions. Every psychological progress—from young children to adolescents (and adults, including patients in therapy)—depends on a potential

space of experience, which facilitates trust in free interactive play, regulated by simple physical presence.

Winnicott (1971) took these ideas further when he wrote about trust in a “fulfilling environment.” Whether you are talking about young children, adolescents, or adults, every psychological development in therapy (or elsewhere) has to be based on expanding what he called a growing space in which the individuals add to their reservoir of trust in an environment that encourages safe play and other forms of interaction. As he saw it, no one ever fully comes to grips with reality because there is always some tension between the “external” reality and how the individual perceives it. Parental care can provide that for children. Adults often turn to art or religion to create a meaningful connection between the self and the “real world.”

The sociologist Alain Caillé agrees that one needs an environment of trust to truly foster a culture of “giving” in human relationships. Indeed, trust and giving are inseparable in a number of ways, ranging from the instrumental to the contractual as well as the emotional. In his words, “human beings are endowed with the capacity for initiative, independence, and gift” (Caillé 1998, 104). Human relationships are filled with ties that are not simply economic or contractual but in which we trust one another without any expectation of any kind of immediate return, which amounts to the “gift” of mutual trust (Godbout 1998, 22).

FANTASY, IMAGINATION, CREATIVITY, AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Even though they never worked together, both Jung and Winnicott stressed the key role that imagination and a creative mindset play in helping people dream about the future and then helping them share those visions with other people. Here, two key points overlap.

First, imagination and fantasy are not the same. Imagination is a psychological phenomenon through which an individual arranges “images” into potential new realities. By contrast, fantasy produces images that are disconnected from the reality at hand. As Winnicott saw it, children who begin to play invest reality with their own meaning. For Jung, fantasy was simply unreal, a ghost, or a fleeting impression, while imagination carries with it both creativity and a goal one hopes to reach. The two, however, do overlap because imagination can help bring fantasies to life under the right circumstances.

Jung believed that individuals have to develop the possibilities that seemingly random images and dreams can take them to. Imagining and dreaming have a logic that we can see if we are careful not to interrupt the flow of our unconscious. He focused on the “dynamic connections” between the self and the

unconscious so that a deeply disturbed patient can (re)integrate those images and dreams and return them to an effective life (Trevi 2012, 24).

Winnicott stressed that dreaming and fantasizing routinely help children under the age of eighteen deal with space and time. What happens in their minds takes place immediately, whether it happens that way in reality or not.

In individuals' psychological life, creativity occupies an intermediate space and forms a kind of matrix that gives their dreams and fantasies a kind of cultural relevance. When and if a maturation process begins, the individuals imagine a new outline of a "shape," which can only fully take form and become visible when they share it with others. Therefore, we speak of transformation as an end product because development or maturation can only occur through a kind of dialogue between the self and the real world.

Creativity can, therefore, be understood as the way symbols are converted from libidinal drives into some higher and more useful form. That said, not every transformation involves a radical change that leads to a definitive outcome. Instead, creativity should be seen as an ongoing and lively process that helps us fill in the blanks when we interpret reality.

The idea of cultural creativity brings Winnicott's and Jung's work together, albeit with some nuanced differences. For Winnicott, fantasy and dreaming remained raw impulses that did little more than incubate new understandings of reality. By contrast, "imagin/action" can keep creativity alive because it brings two people together and begins a new kind of cultural connection. At the end of the day, dreaming and fantasizing are simple individual need, while imagining is a desire to "move with" and share one's inspiration.

Jung believed that individuation consisted at least of a creative dialogue between the self and a symbolic version of the collective "so that a society's historic values are neither suffered in silence nor ignored, but lived critically and responsibly" (Trevi 2012, 62). Thus, the individual is not simply a single being but is also a by-product of actual social interactions. In that sense, individuation need not lead to isolation but rather a more intense and society-wide solidarity.

The Relational Model

While writing this section of the book, I often found myself returning to Jung's well-known intolerance of our tendency to schematize everything we humans do.¹ Indeed, any attempt to develop a theoretical model suggests that we have to follow a linear sequence that seems to convey a certain logical certainty. However, such a view is at odds with the more fluid and circular reasoning that one finds in persuasive arguments anchored in our lived experience. Therefore, we have sought to create a relational approach to conflict that starts with a few basic

steps and gradually adds more complicated issues. In our case, that first meant deciding whether we should start with the interpersonal relationships or the conflict itself, which was not an easy choice to make.

When we dealt with that dilemma, we decided to focus on the trauma that prevents two young, former enemies from coming together. From what they told us in their applications and other statements, I realized that those relations reach their nadir when the conflict and the associated hostility are at their peaks. At Rondine, the students can mistakenly believe that they are already befriending the other when the image of the enemy suddenly reappears and turns that real person back into a stereotype. We need to understand that this step “backward” occurs as a result of an intrapsychic experience *during* the encounter with the other as a result of the kind of relational shock discussed earlier. Therefore, our challenge is to identify ways of finding the possibilities for *renewing* the relationship before it falls apart. In this kind of circular or at least nonlinear reading of events, we at Rondine keep coming back to the “during,” to the crucial moment when renewal can occur.

In short, people are able to see that conflicts can be transformed if they come to trust one another and if they believe that the bonds between them can be strengthened over time, especially when they meet each other face-to-face. Jointly experiencing joy as well as pain during the two-year residency in Rondine can reduce the distance between them through collaborative interactions, whether work related or not, and in turn, allow them to share their deepest feelings with acquaintances who become true friends.

We have also learned that we cannot equate the terms war and conflict if we want to build sound relationships. In the next chapter, I will spend more time on why we should stop using the two terms as synonyms. The key here is to see that the heart of the matter for our purposes lies in the fact that conflict can change reality for the better, in part, because it can help us get beyond some of our most stubbornly held values. Here, it is useful to consider the Latin root of the word conflict. *Confligere* literally means to irritate. In that sense, how we deal with the friction that the irritation produces determines everything. It doesn't have to take a conflict in an aggressive or destructive direction. Conflict can also point us toward a positive, creative, and constructive path.

THE THREE LEVELS OF A RELATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The Rondine Method grows out of insights that we have reached over the last twenty years on three levels. As you will see, they start with concrete actions grounded in students' cognitive and social reality and then dig farther into their subconscious and more deeply held values.

The first deals with real behavior that is physical, direct, and immediate. It covers the ways people interact everywhere—at home, school, work, play, in conversation, and more, including texting and talking with each other on our phones and other devices. In this first interaction, there is no screen, only a face as in face-to-face encounters as Levinas or Buber would see things.

The second level is in our subconscious and the ways it shapes our emotional reactions. As you know, we can think of the subconscious in many ways. For some, it is simply a catchall term for describing pain, as in Freud's notion that pain never disappears. For others, like Jung, the subconscious can also propel us forward. More recently, psychologists have come to think of it as a magma of thoughts and emotions that can be called to the surface through regular practice.

The third level is explicitly creative and occurs when two people commit to experiencing each other. That is when their images and dreams can influence each other at a particular place and time. This is the "space" in which they can explore their hopes and dreams while acknowledging their joint expectations. As a result, this third level always involves real-life situations as well as abstract discussions.

Together, the three levels allow people to achieve what we call "psychological accommodation." Operating on all three of them gives people something akin to a powerful lens that sharpens the way they see the world and brings the objects in it more clearly into focus. In that way, psychological accommodation becomes the concept through which subconscious thoughts and creative ideas can be transformed into concrete behavior for people on both sides of a divisive issue.

Psychological accommodation also ensures that the individual can shuttle across the three levels through what we call a process of self-adjustment. Rooted in reality, each individual can now become open to ongoing change without fear of becoming separated from the other. Because there is trust, the "lens" adjusts the psychological distance between people on both sides of a dispute. In psychological terms, it orients people toward a common target—strengthening their relationship.

I should add that the words "distance" and "separation" do not mean the same thing. The former is merely a measure of space, while the latter can only be understood through personal experience. Thus, we can feel a person who is physically close as being very far away. By contrast, we can be in what feels like intimate contact with a person who lives on a different and distant continent.

Operating on all three levels helps the individual find the sweet spot between closeness and intimacy on the one hand and separation and estrangement on the other, which defines what we think of as the relational experience. Psychological accommodation thus self-adjusts what can be thought of as the "near" and "far," both of which are in constant motion in ways that we cannot hope to measure (see Vaccari 2018a, 24).

This kind of truly shared experience opens the door to lasting change that goes beyond a vaguely conceived common future that resides solely in the mind of one of the participants. Through dialogue, cognitive skills allow people's creative potential to take center stage while minimizing the likelihood that either party will aggressively discredit the other and again distance themselves from each other.

When all is said and done, this is the conceptual turning point. Relational habits develop because two people use face-to-face interactions to share what had been private beliefs in what would have once been seen as risky encounters. Therefore, next we need to understand the paradox that underlies everything in this chapter. By taking risks in a stable environment, like the one we have created at Rondine, we can create the common or shared space that seems so elusive in today's digital world.

The Psychological Accommodation of Words, Images, and Emotions in the Relational Habitat

While it is helpful to use the image of a powerful lens in describing the psychological accommodation of words, images, and emotions, bringing something into focus does not always mean the same thing as shortening the distance between two objects. In psychological terms, there is no way we can shape the equivalent of a physical lens. It is more important to think metaphorically because a person can clearly see and interact meaningfully with the other who might physically be far away using phones, faxes, and other new technologies.

Our relational approach seeks to integrate experiences but not overcome dialectical and other deep differences. The psychological accommodation envisioned by Jung can be created in a supportive environment like Rondine's by strengthening the "us" without eliminating or even papering over the "I" and the "thou." That leads us to the definition of psychological accommodation as a unique product of the imagination in action that consolidates a relationship that could otherwise be blocked when painful memories resurface.

As in Gestalt theory, the "us" or "we" is placed at the center by (re)structuring the relationship itself. The individual moves into the background but not out beyond the edge, because each individual returns to the center of the psychological stage by closely paying attention to the words, perceptions, beliefs, and emotions of the other. We can all gain from practicing how psychological accommodation takes place because we can come up with new ways of connecting with one another through the interplay of fresh ideas and new experimental

practices. This is one of the areas in our work in which recent discoveries by neuroscientists have been particularly helpful. Scientists no longer make a clear distinction between the roles played by the two hemispheres of the brain. That means that our minds are capable of:

[f]orming mental images, of recombining them in a sort of continuous kaleidoscope, inside of which both logical and imaginative associations take place. Imagination, based on grasping possible or impossible connections, implies vast knowledge and experience, even non-specific, since the broader they are, the higher the probability of perceiving relationships and consequently imagining solutions. (Oliverio 2013, 98–99)

THE FUNCTION OF FOCUSING ON THE OTHER PERSON'S LANGUAGE

We have seen relationships stabilize and grow when we can help individuals reach three end points through a series of dialogues:

- Discovering some common ground
- Accepting that differences exist between any two people let alone larger groups
- Acknowledging that there are limits to mutual understanding

A simple gesture might be enough to reach either of the first two. Areas of common ground and points of disagreement are both normal parts of everyday life that can easily coexist without compromising anyone's core identity. It is much harder to get to the third realization without also jumping to the conclusion that it is a negative, depressing, or even delusional outcome. Also, rationality won't help us here. Instead, we need a sensitivity to the other person's most intimate and cherished beliefs.

That leads to another question. Why is it so hard for people to call their cultural norms into question? Why does that lead to so much pain and strain? Students living at Rondine have asked us to answer these questions in ways that go far beyond their professional or political lives. To see what I am driving at here, consider these words from Maria, a former Armenian student at Rondine, who now serves as a member of her country's Parliament:

If our words shape the world, our words also shape us. In my opinion, language defines and builds the world. This belief helped me tremendously when I started studying the transformation of conflicts,

and I started to deal with dialogue between people that are different.
(Vaccari and Simeoni 2019, 97).

Here, it is worth considering the difference between translating and understanding. If people truly want to respect others' worlds, they have to fully "tune in" to the others' language in all of its dimensions. That can even be the case between two people who live in the same culture and literally speak the same language. In fact, we all know that the word "language" is not simply a reflection of the individual words, phrases, or sentences an individual says aloud or commits to print. Language is an entirety that is learned in families and in other psychosocial environments.

Why then are understanding and translating from a foreign language not the same thing? The answer lies in the "fabric" that makes another tongue "foreign" and therefore "alien."

Everything from another language's syntax to the nuances its speakers convey to the way it is spoken can be disconcerting. They can evoke a wide variety of unconscious feelings and emotions, including stress and pain. At the same time, oral translations are always easier to make sense of than written ones because we can "hear" and "see" more of those emotions because we are sitting face-to-face with another person.

In other words, it is never possible for us to provide a truly faithful and literal translation of something another person says or does, especially when the writing is filled with what could be called connotative poetry. No matter how experienced a translator is, poetry and the like remain impossible to translate—at least in the literal sense of the term. The same applies to all dialogues, even among people who are at least superficially alike. Each person is unique when it comes to language, and in this sense, everyone's prose has a creative or poetic side that renders literal translation or complete understanding impossible.

Accepting this logic might seem to suggest that we can never truly understand another person, which can leave us unwilling and/or unable to interact with the other because what they see would seem incomprehensible on some important level. The ancient Greeks understood this when they coined an onomatopoeic word to use as the equivalent of the English word "barbarians" because they thought people who didn't speak their own language were simply uttering incomprehensible phrases like "ba, ba, ba."

As we see it at Rondine, acknowledging the limits of what we can hope to understand should not be confused with powerlessness. Wanting to start a relationship can help one discover the joys that can come from being connected to someone on the other, "dark," anxiety-inducing side of things because we can find ways of sharing common spaces and common moments, which, under the right circumstances, can lead to our renewal.

THE PERCEPTUAL ACCOMMODATION FUNCTION

If translating involves processing everything and not just the spoken or written word, understanding calls on what I earlier called psychological adjustment in which we use our two eyes to balance the three levels at which we have to engage—the concrete, the unconscious, and the creative. That balancing act reaches its peak when we are able to reach a Zen-like detachment and our real vision of the other begins to come together. At that point, our in-depth understanding also becomes a forward-looking one in which we “adjust” the mental distance between ourselves and the other.

We all have had firsthand experience of the gap between the real and the subconscious. How often have we heard simple and not very worrisome statements like “I was listening to what he was saying, but it took me a while to figure out what he was thinking”? On the other hand, there are also times when the subconscious content overwhelms us to the point that we can’t tell where a daydream ends and reality begins. Our students, for example, follow some idle thoughts and end up mentally drifting out of the classroom while still looking at the teacher, not realizing that they have wandered onto what amounts to a different planet.

The same thing happens at professional conferences. A presentation might start off being interesting but soon becomes hard to follow once it sparks and then interrupts an internal “dialogue with ourselves.” By contrast, in a real human interaction with another person, the alternation between people talking makes a creative exchange possible.

Those discussions can then take on a serious tone. For example, while focusing on trying to understand, rather than simply translating the other, a speaker can make progress by stopping and asking their partner a simple question like “Are you following me?” when their body language suggests that they are confused or not paying attention. Once those distortions occur, our insights can become so blurry that they lead us to make mistakes because we lose the ability to see all the contours in what they are trying to tell us. It is as if we are being blinded by the sun while walking on a glacier in the middle of winter. It is at such a time that we need our powerful mental lens to provide the psychological adjustment that allows us to clearly see both things that are near at hand and things that are physically or emotionally far away.

In that kind of “near–far” practice, we are likely to develop some discomfort. That’s why we always have to pay attention to and maintain the relationship so that we can see clearly and productively into the future, a point we will return to in the next chapter.

The Final Opening: Nurturing Emotional Intelligence

It is always a good idea to compare your own interpretations with those of people you disagree with because doing so allows you to bring those subconscious values and beliefs into the open. In that respect, I surprisingly found myself in agreement with the well-known American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2001), who has been exploring for the last twenty years or more the relationship between what she calls upheavals of thought and emotional intelligence. Because her title, *The Upheavals of Thought*, makes sense, I find it useful to paraphrase and add on to her words that our thoughts and ethical judgments are invariably shaped by our emotions. Upheavals of thought can also be thought of as having effects comparable to the jolting shocks of an earthquake, as the English term *upheaval* implies. Emotions such as pain, fear, shame, love, and *compassion* are an integral part of a philosophy pervaded by the *pathos* of knowledge, as has been the case throughout recorded history.

From her perspective, emotions can be seen as appraisals or value judgments, which can have a huge impact on our well-being. Like many of the others on whom Rondine's work is based, Nussbaum focuses on the formative years when each child or adolescent has to figure out their own limitation and, therefore, dependence on the other.

Like Winnicott, Nussbaum agrees that emotions are a lens through which we interpret our cultural norms and much more. We can see that in the ways that the arts stimulate creativity in all realms and can make our shared space one in which we can all grow. And that takes us back to the entire life cycle since, as she suggests, an adult's emotions cannot be understood without first understanding their childhood or adolescence.

Given what we've seen so far, psychological adjustment must seem like an abstract concept. We will, however, turn to how it can be put to practical use in the next chapter.

Note

1. Late in life, Jung made the case that while every aspect of reality is understood through psychological mechanisms, not everything can be explained solely through the use of psychological dynamics. For more, see Morelli (2019, 39).