

# Borders and boundaries

**Philippa Smethurst** describes the training she and a colleague devised to build volunteers' confidence in working with destitute people

**S**t Martin-in-the Fields is a historic Anglican church in Trafalgar Square, central London. The church has long had a commitment to social justice and offers support to marginalised and homeless people of all faiths and none.

In the past several years, the St Martin-in-the-Fields community has witnessed a change in the profile of homeless people in central London. Increasingly, foreign nationals from outside the EU have been coming into the church for sanctuary and rest. Some are waiting for the Border Agency to assess or review their immigration status and are, therefore, in limbo: unable to work, with no papers or right to remain in UK. Others have 'fallen through the cracks': their visas have expired, they have no official status in UK, they are not entitled to state benefits, but they are unable, for various, complex reasons, to return to their home countries. Because these people have no official status or rights, homeless charities, although able to provide them with support and facilities, cannot help them into housing or work. Some may be rough sleepers, but many do not 'bed down', instead walking the streets all night, using buses, internet cafés and drop-in centres. They are frequently considered a social nuisance, and can be scapegoated, shunned and overlooked.

Some of the St Martin's community began to wonder who these strangers were in our midst and how we might relate to them. The Sunday International Group was our response. The group has been running since autumn 2013.

More than 35 volunteers from the church offer hospitality to refugees and migrants for two hours every Sunday afternoon, on a rota system. Between 35 and 45 guests are invited to attend and are offered lunch, use of the washing machines and showers, and a space to talk and play games. A doctor and immigration lawyer are there to offer assistance to anyone who needs their advice.

## Psychological support

From the beginning, we have also wanted to offer psychological support. Our guests have traumatic histories and now live with risk, exposure and isolation, so their needs are complex. In January 2013, I ran a one-day introductory course for our volunteers in basic listening skills. The course included experiential exercises and was appreciated, but, on reflection, I realised I was simply giving them information about listening, rather than offering a reflective space where we could consider what we, as a fledgling project, needed in order to work effectively with this group. I needed to practise what I preached.

After the initial training, I got into conversation with another volunteer, Fran Middleton, an existential psychotherapist, and so began a creative dialogue about how best to support our volunteers in building relationships with this client group.

First, we considered offering our guests half-hour counselling sessions in a side room during the two-hour window. We piloted this and were dismayed when





our guests did not sign up. We thought again. Did our guests need to talk? Maybe not. Maybe they needed simply to 'be' for a couple of hours and attend to their more pressing practical needs? We also thought that the prospect of speaking to a stranger in a small room might trigger anxiety and bring back difficult memories for some. We experimented with a new approach: Fran and I would 'loiter' attentively, making ourselves available to guests and being quietly aware of any who might welcome our approaching them. The priest leader of the project would mention that we were available, as trained professionals, and we would have what we called 'bubbles of contact' - mini-conversations that were therapeutic but unstructured and impromptu.

This was an exciting breakthrough. It seemed to us that the openness to talk and engage had occurred spontaneously within and because of the safety provided by the larger group. Our sense was that many of the guests were hungry for engagement, but we also noticed a reciprocity in the encounters between guests and volunteers. The volunteers often reported that they felt more upbeat afterwards. Relationships were being built in encounters that appeared to transcend any initial motivations the volunteers had of 'making a contribution' or sacrifice. We sensed the volunteers were being enriched by their encounters with guests, and vice versa, and we decided our next step was to extend the reach and depth of these encounters.

GETTY IMAGES

We wondered how we might encourage volunteers to engage more fully with guests in the bubbles of contact. Volunteers undertake numerous practical jobs in the two-hour Sunday slot, from cooking rice to organising the use of the washing machines. We noticed that some of the volunteers tended to retreat to the safety of these more practical roles and could be reluctant to put them aside in order to be open to the guests for conversation. So we planned a series of training sessions, not in 'listening skills' but in 'relationship building', to acknowledge the reciprocal nature of what was occurring in our project.

#### SESSION ONE:

##### Trauma

In the first session, we offered some psychoeducation about trauma, using Janina Fisher's model of the 'triune' ►

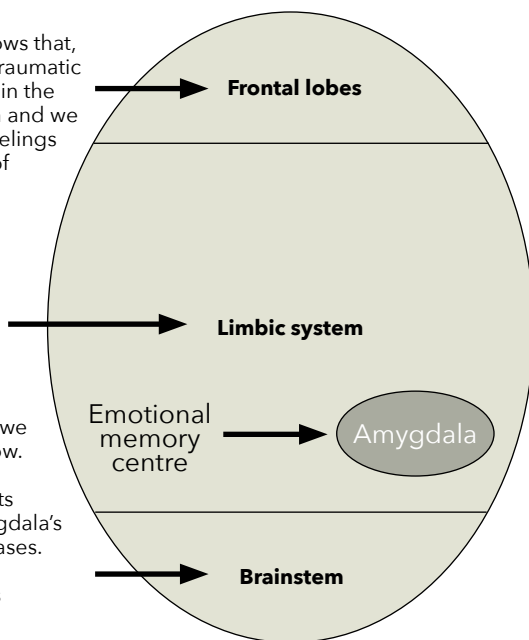
From the beginning, we have also wanted to offer psychological support. Our guests have traumatic histories and now live with risk, exposure and isolation, so their needs are complex

# How we remember trauma

Brain-scan research shows that, when we remember a traumatic event, memory centres in the frontal lobes shut down and we get overwhelmed by feelings and impulses, instead of recalling events.

The limbic system responds to memories with increased activity, especially in the amygdala, the brain's smoke detector and emotional memory centre. The amygdala 'sounds the alarm' as if we were in danger right now.

The reptilian brain reacts instinctively to the amygdala's 'alarm'. Heart rate increases. We stop breathing or hyperventilate. Muscles prepare for action.



REPRODUCED WITH KIND PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR: WWW.IANINAFISHER.COM

## This understanding from neuroscience helped volunteers understand why guests can be easily 'triggered' into a stress response

brain' (see above) to explain how we remember trauma 'with our feelings and our bodies'.<sup>1</sup>

This understanding from neuroscience helped volunteers understand why guests can be easily 'triggered' into a stress response, and why our group structures and boundaries, and the emphasis on safety, help mitigate this. We described stress and anxiety as being like water flooding over the top of a glass, and how our own behaviour can help regulate the high levels of arousal that our guests carry within them as a result of living on the streets. As one volunteer, Pete, observed: 'We can obviously expect the homeless to be frightened and frustrated and to react sharply, especially when we have not built relationships.'

We talked about ways to de-escalate arousal when conflicts arise between guests - for example, giving guests physical space so they do not feel cornered or trapped, and offering them a 'way out' when they find themselves locked in a position from which they might find it hard

to back down. We offered some grounding and breathing techniques for volunteers to practise to regulate their own anxiety (and possibly to offer guests).

I drew on my sensorimotor psychotherapy training to suggest physical and psychological tools for guests to try: for example, regulating anxiety by the bilateral stimulation of simply rocking from one foot to another. Life in a hostile world can mean that guests' minds are continuously hyper-alert to danger, and the consequence of this is an overstretched/over-aroused nervous system. We spoke about suggesting to guests that they explore their internal resources, such as focusing on breathing (particularly, lengthening the out breath) to reduce arousal, or visualising a place or a person where they have found safety in the past, and returning there in their minds as an internal place of safety.

### SESSION TWO:

#### Safety

In session two, we introduced the idea that the repetition of what we call our 'five-fold welcome' helps create a sense of psychological safety and containment. Some volunteers had questioned the use of the term 'boundary', which they saw as excluding. We discussed the significance of the ritual of the five-fold welcome: how the 'invitations' that are given to guests to attend, the 'gatekeeper' on the door, Father Richard's personal welcome, the giving of name badges, and the whole group gathering for welcome and prayer at the start and end of the meeting are all part of creating what Wilfred Bion called 'containment in space and time',<sup>2</sup> and help to establish the Sunday group as a place of safety and consistency.

We reflected on how the rules we create spring from our respect for the wellbeing of the whole group, and how the pitch, volume and non-defensiveness of our voices communicate safety and regulate anxiety. We thought about how we volunteers hold the tension between maintaining and monitoring the safety of the space through set ways of doing things, while simultaneously being open and sensitive to the particular needs of individual guests. We conceptualised the five-fold welcome as concentric circles containing the group, as a riverbank contains all that flows in the river, including conflict and dissonance.

### SESSION THREE:

#### Territory

In the third session, we considered how space and safety can be compromised and violated. Volunteers experimented in pairs with how they felt when they stepped over each other's territory, and noticed with some surprise the visceral way in which they responded when someone crossed their own physical or psychological space. We reflected how a guest who has experienced trauma is likely to have had frequent boundary violations and would be easily triggered in interactions with us.

We discussed our particular cultural norms around boundaries. For example, we noticed that some guests are anxious about anyone else touching their clothes or other possessions. An example was when a guest was waiting with his plastic bag of possessions on the steps outside our building. The bag was blocking the entrance, and a volunteer, who had begun to form a relationship with the guest, moved the bag to one side. This triggered an angry outburst from the guest. For our guests, their clothes and possessions are all they have, and essential to survival. For this client, his bag of clothes was an extension of himself, and he experienced anyone touching it as a violation of his territory. We reminded ourselves of the need to check out with guests when we touched their possessions: for example, if offering to help them use the washing machines, we should tread carefully, step by step, to minimise the risk of triggering anxiety.

#### SESSION FOUR:

##### Bubbles of contact

In session four, we thought about meeting someone we don't know, with whom we have no obvious point of contact, and what blocks engagement with that person. We discussed how our fear of 'getting it wrong' might lead us to make assumptions about them and retreat to the safety

of our volunteer role. We discussed stereotyping and how it can be deeply unconscious and yet manifest itself in the way we talk about 'people like that', and how we can also, from a place of fear, unconsciously create a wall between us and another person. We discussed the importance of taking time to notice our fears, as they may not be 'top-level'. We introduced the volunteers to meditation, and how it can be helpful in managing fears triggered by relationship. Pete wrote: 'During the training, we were opened to the use of meditation to rid ourselves of concerns for our own lives and calm ourselves, in order to be fully attentive to our guests, so we can best appreciate their feelings, empathise with them, and sense and abide with their fears, isolation, hopelessness, vulnerabilities and frustrations. The use of meditation was new to me and has led me to think I may be able to use meditation deeply and usefully.'

We suggested that relationship is by definition risky and that the risk is greater if we think we may 'get it wrong' or cause offence, or be rejected or met with silence. We talked about how the more we are open to awareness of these internal dialogues, the more we are able to understand and bracket these internal responses and widen our internal window of tolerance. This then increases our ability to be open to encounters with our guests. ►

## BUBBLE OF CONTACT

**This is a fictionalised example of a typical bubble of contact that demonstrates how thinking, focusing and noticing inner experience can be used to de-escalate a situation and 'win time' before reacting.**

**GUEST:** When I can't sleep at night, what can I do? I am so eaten up inside. This person last week really wound me up... T has had a thing against me from the beginning and was needling me.

**PS:** So this guest really wound you up and you still feel wound up? Would you like to think about this, and think about your part in it a bit more?

**GUEST:** Yes, because I haven't been able to think about anything else all week, and I nearly didn't come back today.

**PS:** So, when T was needling you, when you

recall what happened, can you think about a moment when you felt the needling was really getting to you?

**GUEST:** Yes, I can, yes.

**PS:** So, if you can, press rewind and go back to that moment. Either look down or close your eyes, if that feels OK... Are you OK with this?

**GUEST:** Yes, I am there; I am remembering it...

**PS:** When you remember that needling, what do you notice in your body and mind? Is there a thought, memory, sensation or impulse?

**GUEST:** Yes, I notice a picture. A fire!

**PS:** OK, you see a picture of a fire and, when you see this, what happens next?

**GUEST:** I feel a tension in my stomach.

**PS:** So, you notice a tension, like the fire is in your stomach... Do you think that tension is telling you something?

**GUEST:** Yes, like I am really angry with T and that I want to explode.

**PS:** So, it's an explosive feeling in your stomach, and that is what you did last week when you shouted and it got out of hand with T. But now you are not shouting - you are tolerating the feeling

and noticing it. What is it like to notice it and maybe to use your out breath to count and 'give you time'?

**GUEST:** It feels good - quite like I am powerful.

I have the feeling and I am counting and not blowing... and... I am still thinking!

**PS:** Yes, you are still thinking, and you are here. Notice how that is if you experiment with doing this for a few seconds more.

**GUEST:** I like this. It's good to breathe out and count and decide what to do next. I never knew I could do this!

Our hope is that the psychological support that is still evolving at our Sunday International Group allows volunteers and guests to find new and creative ways to come alongside one another and be mutually enriched through our common humanity

We did role-play exercises, imagining a guest sitting alone with their head down in the corner, or the usually quiet guest who is behaving in an agitated manner, or a conversation between two guests, or a guest and volunteer, that starts to get angry or abusive. In each circumstance, what might we think or feel? What might be going on for the guest? What might we do or not do in each circumstance? We discussed how to interpret signals from guests, and how to 'test the water' by trying an approach or intervention. We also thought about being alongside a guest who gives out a clear message that they don't want to talk but may be open to sharing a companionable cup of tea. We spoke about how not all bubbles of contact need to be active, and how relationship can deepen through the medium of a shared activity, such as washing up, or a game of dominoes, or finding a mutual interest. We spoke about bubbles of contact operating on different levels, with no hierarchy of value.

**SESSION FIVE:**  
**Resourcing ourselves**

One of the key concepts in the training that appeared to have an impact on the volunteers was that of finding a 'still point within'. We suggested that monitoring and paying attention to our internal world might be directly linked to our capacity to be open to the other person. We experimented with widening our field of awareness to encompass a vertical axis (internal noticing) and horizontal axis (focus on the other), and this has now become a central idea in the training. We devised meditative exercises that would help us 'go inside' and pay attention to sensations, thoughts, feelings, images and impulses, and practised developing a capacity to be curious, without judgment, about the flow of information from our internal world.

Volunteers have since noted how internal monitoring has improved their ability to monitor and regulate their own anxiety levels and has become a reflective space to which to return. Some volunteers have, as a result, renewed their commitment to a regular 'gathering' meeting before the guests arrive at 2pm, to support themselves and their encounters with guests.

An image that emerged during the training was that of approaching the relationship with another like an

empty vessel, offering our attention and focus for use in the service of the other. This reminded me of Josephine Klein's concept of our being a climbing frame, to allow the other to discover what they feel and think by being in relationship with us.<sup>3</sup> We also considered what the cost might be to us of being used in this way. Is being in relationship sacrificial, difficult or hard work? Does being in relationship deplete or enrich us?

We agreed that engaging with another fully or deeply is intense (and therefore hard work) and needs the discipline of energy and attention, and we also thought about our own self-care, and how we supported ourselves after the Sunday International Group. But we also discovered that part of the richness of an encounter with another is the unexpected, such as moments of tenderness or joy. We shared an image of a relationship figure of eight in which what we communicate is transmitted to the other, enters the other and comes back as a response, and is fundamentally unpredictable, exciting and enriching. Volunteers all reported feeling better after coming to the Sunday International Group and engaging in these encounters, and we wondered if this reciprocity might be part of the reason why.

**SESSION SIX:**  
**Concluding session**

In reflecting, through the training, on the purpose of deepening our relationships with our guests, we concluded that we are hoping to offer snapshots of good contact. We cannot 'change the video' for people such as our guests, who have such complex needs and backgrounds. However, the snapshot experience may still be beneficial. As we don't know what the impact might be on ourselves and on the other, we are freed to enter into every encounter/snapshot with openness.

Another of Bion's ideas was to be open to another without preconception, and in the process endeavour to free ourselves from the wish to fix or change them.<sup>2</sup> The goal in the snapshot is simply to be alongside, with no agenda. Our hope is that the psychological support that is still evolving at our Sunday International Group allows volunteers and guests to find new and creative ways to come alongside one another and be mutually enriched through our common humanity. ■



**Philippa Smethurst**  
About the author

Philippa Smethurst is an integrative psychotherapist with recent training in body awareness and trauma through sensorimotor psychotherapy. She has practices in south-east London and Banbury. Since 2013, with Frances Middleton, she has developed listening and relationship-building support for asylum seekers and refugees at St Martin-in-the Fields. She welcomes contact from other practitioners who might be interested in getting involved. [pippacouns@aol.com](mailto:pippacouns@aol.com)

REFERENCES

1. Fisher J. Psychoeducational aids for treating psychological trauma. Oakland, CA: Tennyson Institute Press; 2010.
2. Bion WR. Learning from experience. (First published in 1962.) London: Karnac; 1984.
3. Klein J. Our need for others and its roots in infancy. London: Tavistock Publications; 1987.