

EFT and Our “Self of Human” Work



Jay M. Seiff-Haron

Our EFT Tango moves conversations forward with empathy and attunement, even when content is provocative. Coronavirus, upheaval and mistrust are filling the world with reasons not to get close. The wisdom of the EFT Tango can help us be more antiracist, just as being antiracist can help us to better embody a human-centered, attachment stance. As a perennial EFT Supervisor-in-training who has been co-leading week-long antiracist retreats for 16 years, I've learned that attachment applies beyond the interpersonal. Key attachment moments live on within our bodies and relationships, and they also occur at intergroup and system levels.

Fifty years ago, John Bowlby wrote, “A measure of attachment behavior is commonly directed... towards groups and institutions... [that] for many people... constitute a subordinate attachment-‘figure’, and for some people a principal attachment-‘figure.’” (Bowlby, 1982/1969, p. 207)

Twenty years ago, an African-American friend is visiting from Texas. We enter a restaurant. His eyes scan the tables. There is one other Black man having dinner; they nod at each other. Later, we enter another restaurant with my friend's White partner. I watch as they both scan the room. A tourist couple, themselves Black and White, nod back. I don't yet realize that these moments are about safety, that the panoply of pursuit, withdrawal, separation distress, and proximity seeking play out not just interpersonally, but also in people's

interactions with whole rooms, families, communities and institutions. I ask, “Is this OK?” They explain that they always keep alert in public, making their own safety. Years later, a Black woman and I wait for a table. People pretend not to stare. Lunch feels antiracist, defiant, and conspicuous.

Antiracist conversations may raise concerns about safety. Questions may arise like, “Who here looks or sounds like me?,” “Can I be heard, without reprisal?,” or perhaps, “If I'm White and cisgender, how can I know what to raise for discussion about racism?” Like other fears, such moments provoke pursuit, withdrawal... or connection.

EFT is systemic. We know how to shift our focus between system levels. Sometimes we explore *within* and sometimes *between*. There are, however, more system levels than just the individual (a partner) and the interpersonal (their cycle). The three of us form a triad; maybe I work at an agency, in a city, in a country. When the focus shifts from *within* and *between* to *among*, we may need to scan rooms for safety, or not need to scan. How can the wisdom of the EFT Tango help us better foster safety, understanding and connection at intergroup and system levels?

EFT Tango – Move 1: Mirror/Reflect Present Process

Imagine yourself a tourist arriving on [Aoshima](#), one of Japan's “cat islands” where there are 6 cats for every human. Perhaps you tie up the boat, look for



the EFT community news

a restaurant or take photos. All the while, no one in your party mentions the sixty or seventy cats that scatter from your every step. That would be weird, right? Natural questions might be, "Anyone allergic to cats?" or even, "Y'all see the cats, right?"

For many of our BIPOCQ clients and colleagues, who is represented, who speaks to whom, whose forms of communication and interests are highlighted, seem... obvious. These "cats" are likely among the first things noticed, rather than the last. When not mentioned and when discussion about them is not welcomed, the cumulative result can be hurt and loss of trust.

I call this "the blind spot." The first move of the Tango begins there: Noticing the cats; being curious about whose experiences have slid into the blind spot and for whose convenience. Being willing to ask *whether* that's worth a discussion. Staying curious. Systemic racism causes us not to see our institutional "cats." We are used to framing topics in terms of White viewpoints and White patterns of expression, operating in systems that reward White folks and, less so, those who can code-switch into White patterns. Our collective failures to value and notice and voice concerns (or, worse, to scapegoat those who do) hurt people.

Just to take the risk of asking questions like, "Is that a cat?" or, "Would you like to discuss that cat?" is a risk we can take, akin to, "I felt like maybe I missed you a bit last week, is there anything to talk about?" Maybe the clients say yes; maybe they say no. Still, our interest and attention are reparative. Bessel van der Kolk described how we heal trauma by making implicit memory explicit; Selma Fraiberg, in her landmark *Ghosts in the Nursery*, described something very similar. Just as with cycles, everyone is better served when we have the courage to witness, notice and describe.

A White newlywed pursuer is introducing his African-American wife to his family in the EU. Trying to be polite, she asks him to back channel the family to please stop touching her

hair. He blows up, saying that if she wants to criticize everyone "who was just curious," she should do it herself. She feels unsupported. In session, he communicates his outrage at length. I reflect and accept to contain, and ask her, "What was your experience?" She looks out the window and mumbles, "It isn't just me." Oops! In Move 1, I wonder if it felt as if neither he nor I would understand, and repair with a collective reflection: I share that many Black women have told me about strangers touching their hair while traveling. After we name the system's differential treatment of the group "Black women," she re-engages.

EFT Tango – Move 2: Explore and Deepen

In EFT, we center emotion not content, hurt not conviction, connection not right or wrong. Sometimes we lean towards the pain that is familiar in our couples, as Nalini Calamur suggests, and lean away from unfamiliar pain. Taking an antiracist stance compels us to attune to emotional experience that may be unfamiliar to us. So many communication skills – I-statements, naming feelings, active listening – seem to assume that the "ground" on which we meet is level. Other than centering clients, there is no emphasis on who should speak first among partners, family members, or friends. I was never taught to center the voice most affected, to listen *first* if I were not the one more deeply pained by the topic. Say, if a woman were telling me about sexism, or a person of color were describing an experience of racism.

Ahmaud Arbery was an African-American man, shot and killed by his neighbors while 2.23 miles into a jog around his neighborhood. In May, award-winning actor Sterling K. Brown jogged 2.23 miles to commemorate Mr. Arbery's birthday and murder. After his run, Mr. Brown recorded a [video](#), in which he said, "There is this thing you have to do sometimes as a black man who tends to negotiate largely white circles, where in order to be heard you must first appease or put at ease the people with whom you want to have authentic communication... The mask that you wear sometimes as a black man in this country is like, 'Hey, there's nothing to fear here. I'm

just like you... Let's find the common ground. Hey, let's have fun... Sometimes [we] get tired."

Experiences such as these "tilt" the ground underneath the conversations, as one party works to make others feel safe. This crops up in Hollywood films as a [fantasied trope](#) over and over, clearly named by Director Spike Lee in 2001. That is, the trope of Black supporting characters who come to the aid of White protagonists, often by virtue of special insight or mystical powers: Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost*, Morgan Freeman in *Batman Begins*, Donald Glover in *The Martian*. Whether the quotidian experience or the fantasied Hollywood archaism, systems not noticing when one is holding the other(s) can be fraught.

I am sitting with a couple as the pursuer tells her withdrawer husband about how, despite her trust in his good intentions, he sometimes corrects her grammar or interrupts in ways that other men do. She names this as "unintentional sexism" and suddenly, he shoots a bullet. I interrupt, saying "Talk to me..." and suddenly, her husband is interrupting her and so am I. Then I think, "But when catching bullets, the therapist is supposed to interrupt..." Oops! I apologize and ask him to hear her out. She proceeds as the new factor – a man acknowledging the dynamic – levels the ground.

When I came out of the closet to my parents, we had two rough years. It was good for all of us. As BIPOCQ therapists, we may need to be excruciatingly patient as people begin encountering and coping with moments about which we have felt longstanding pain. Holding space for clients and colleagues may feel like, once again, "putting at ease the people with whom you want to have authentic communication ..." at first. We need to consider what kinds of support we can offer, that also feed our own souls and not only theirs.

Moreover, White/straight/cis therapists may need to co-regulate and manage reactions to demonstrate receptivity. As Dr. Annette Holloway points out, to instill hope we may need to show *repeatedly* that we

will listen, hear and value what we are told; tolerate pursuit and anger; and won't move too soon to counter or explain away pain we *haven't* experienced. Repair is possible when we *actively* try to level the ground.

A Latina-White cis/hetero couple tells me about a day trip to a nearby town. Like another Latina-White cis/lesbian couple that I worked with years before, a cycle is in progress because the White partner liked the town, but the Latina felt exposed, that "everyone who looks like me is working behind a counter." In both couples, the White partner couldn't empathize, asked the Latina not to be sensitive, wanted to just enjoy the day, noted that she passes for White. I mention, "Oh, it is a lovely place," remembering a pleasant time there with my own husband. Oops! I've taken a side in the content as a White person. I invite repair by naming that and we co-create level ground (Move 2).

Leveling invites deeper conversations and affective coherence. As Audre Lorde (1984) wrote decades ago: "Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos... and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged... The failure... to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower."

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This column summarizes parts of a forthcoming [webinar](#) on EFT and Antiracism. To be continued with Moves 3, 4 and 5 of the EFT Tango (including shame reactions) in a future issue of this newsletter.