

The Frame and its Vicissitudes

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My original training as a therapist was in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic therapy. In the 1980's I studied at a classical analytic institute, SPSR, the Society for Psychoanalytic Study and Research. It was an intensive program of three years with core and in-depth classes, weekly supervision and a personal analysis, mine was four times a week on the couch lasting four years. I'm not sure what I got out of the analysis but there was something deep about it. Analysts would say it touched deeply into my unconscious, Brainspotting therapists would say it touched deeply into my subcortex. I was in my early thirties, twenty years before my breakthrough session with the skater where I "noticed" the beginning of Brainspotting. As I lay on the couch every session, I looked at the intersection of two cracks in the ceiling, which provided me with a Gazespot, session after session. I was early in my development as an adult and a therapist. Analysis gave me a frame, and my free association was the precursor of focused mindfulness processing. Regarding maintaining analytic silence, my first supervisor playfully said he had imagined he placed a large sucking candy in his mouth that inhibited his ability to speak, that metaphor really "stuck" with me. My analyst occasionally spoke, so whatever he said landed with impact, even if I didn't understand what he said or why he said it. In his relative silence, I did feel he was listening to me intently. I had some odd, repeated associations including baseball player Willie Mays and his uniform number, 42. I guess you don't have to know what it is to know that it is. I often brought in dreams to session and occasionally dreams would come out through my associations. I made one discovery that I have carried over into Dreamspotting. I recalled a dream that I recognized had been a recurrent dream since my childhood, that I had never been aware of, until decades later, until its emergence during a session. The most powerful moment I remember in my analysis, which I can still feel now, was the recognition about the death of my grandmother during a summer when I was away as a camp counselor. My grandmother was the only grandparent I ever knew and the fact that "I never had a chance to say goodbye" erupted from me with a torrent of grief and tears. Only years later did I realize that I had made a connection that traced back to my early attachment trauma and loss. Since I concluded my analysis, 40

years ago, I've thought back on it many times, wondering how my analyst was doing. He provided me with an attachment figure who was always there, even if it was behind me. As part of my studies at the Institute, I purchased the Standard Edition of Freud's books, papers and speeches, a formidable compendium of 24 volumes. I keep it in my home office in my library, including books going back to graduate school, my analytic days and contemporary texts. So, I look at the Standard Edition regularly and occasionally pull one of the volumes for my perusal. I recently opened Volume 14 and out came the 1915 paper "Instincts and their Vicissitudes". I wondered if it might have any association with Brainspotting (how could it not?). The word vicissitude caught my attention as it seemed to be related to Brainspotting. The basic definition of vicissitude is a change of circumstances or conditions, often involving fluctuations, transitions, or reversals. For Freud, the "vicissitudes" of an instinct (or drive) refer to the *different fates, transformations, or developmental pathways* a drive can undergo in the psyche. This immediately brought to mind two aspects. The first was the how internal experiences, *interoception, proprioception, drives and survival instincts*, are mostly out of our conscious reach, as they are gated or filtered out before they come close to our awareness. The processes involved in these have parallels with Freud's vicissitudes of the instincts. The second connection I made, was to the flow of focused mindfulness processing manifesting vicissitudes with its reversals of emotion (love becoming hate and vice versa), turning around on the self (between self-empathy and self-attack and rejection found in parts in conflict), repression which we now see as dissociation (overly active sensory gating) and sublimation, seen in Brainspotting as maturation as the adult self takes over.

But my attention regarding the word and Freudian application of vicissitudes extended beyond processing to the frame. In the Neuroexperiential Model (NEM) we say, "in the face of uncertainty all we have is the frame" (the title of a new chapter in the second edition of the Brainspotting book I am currently writing). This gives the concept, and the reality of the frame, great prominence in Brainspotting. Accordingly, the frame is something we should endlessly ponder and debate. What is the frame? How does it form and how does it evolve? Is there a quantum aspect to the frame? What is the flow of energy inside and around the frame? How is the therapist affected by holding and shaping the frame with the client?

This presentation explores how the frame is constantly changing in response to the powerful, focused processing it liberates, and the fluid, dynamic, ongoing interactions between the processing and the frame, and between the frame and the processing, which are inseparable. This exploration attempts to move from the literal and linear perceptions of the frame, to the non-literal and non-linear realities of the frame. So, we can expand the idea that “in the face of uncertainty all we have is the frame” to “the frame is composed of the 1 to 4 quadrillion synaptic connections of the client and of therapist meeting together, flowing together and morphing together and as such is highly uncertain, dynamic and unknowable”. I know that is hard to fathom, so I will offer my reflections on what this might mean.

The topic “The Frame and Its Vicissitudes,” has been developing in me for a long time, though the meaning of the word *vicissitudes* has evolved in my reflections and practice over decades. A vicissitude again, is a change, a shift in form or meaning, an alteration that occurs as something moves through experience and is reshaped by it. It suggests not only response but adaptation—something transforming under pressure or in reaction to new circumstances and challenges. When considering the therapy frame through this lens, it is seen not as a literal structure, but as a dynamic, responsive, organism. The frame moves, and is changed by the client’s processing. It changes in response to our own experience as clinicians. The frame changes in response to culture, science, (remember in the NEM culture comes before science) and the evolving understanding of the infinite nervous system that continually reveals itself, implicitly much more than explicitly.

Brainspotting, perhaps more than any other modality, is mindful of and built on the frame. It is the neurobiological scaffolding through which the client’s nervous system feels supported enough to reveal its deeply held patterns. The frame is not a static boundary around the session. It is the container that constantly evolves with the client. Reflect for the moment on your inner experience and process as you sit with the client, following their implicit and explicit processing. Your internal process is implicit and explicit as well. And moment to moment, your internal processes are flowing into and subtly altering the frame. The Brainspotting frame is the heart of the method, and understanding its vicissitudes—how it shifts, adapts, expands, contracts, and stabilizes—is essential to understanding Brainspotting itself.

To appreciate the Brainspotting frame, I again return to the frame that shaped me long before Brainspotting existed, the psychoanalytic frame. My years in analytic training were not simply an educational experience; it was an immersion. Psychoanalysis, in my experience, was not a set of concepts, but an environment, a rhythm, a ritual, a culture unto itself. Walking into the office, lying on the couch, hearing the analyst's voice behind me, exploring feelings, thoughts and an associations that arose from places I didn't understand, shaped the earliest aspects of my clinical identity. The analytic frame held me in a way I had never experienced before. It taught me what it meant to feel containment. In this manner there is a distinct dichotomy between analytic theory and practice. The theory, as vast and complex as it was, was prescribed. The practice was wide open, and this has distinct parallels with Brainspotting.

In the analytic frame, I learned to slow down. I learned to recognize the movements of transference, my own projections, my repetitions of early attachment patterns. I learned to notice resistance, not as opposition, but as my psyche's way of revealing what felt most threatening. I learned to feel the presence of repression, as the gateway to the traumas I had dissociated. And I experientially learned that the basic elements of the analytic frame, consistent presence, consistent space, and consistent following, had a profound effect on me. I felt heard and listened to as never before. Virtually all this experience was implicit, a precursor to Brainspotting.

Even now, as I write, I feel the imprint of the analytic frame. More than I ever know it was woven into my clinical DNA. This was not only in receiving analysis, but in providing it as well. It taught me to listen beneath the content of words, to hear the tone, the pauses, and follow the flow. It opened me to feel the relational field, the atmosphere in the room, the movements and counter-movements of connection and disconnection. It taught me to appreciate the power of the frame that holds, and yet does not intrude, and does not waver; a frame that is present without being directive, a frame that invites the emergence of what has been hiding in the shadows of the deep self.

In the moment with the young skater in my Long Island office, the psychoanalytic frame was implicitly with me. Even though I had subsequently studied relational therapies, EMDR and SE, my analytic roots were still with me, not as background, but as foundation. I noticed the wobble and freeze in the skater's eyes,

free of protocols, procedures or bias. I reacted and intuitively trusted my reaction. Yet nothing in analysis addressed eye position or the visual field as potential therapeutic access. Nothing in the models I studied attuned to visual processes. The skater's visual reflexes, and my stopping right there, created an instantaneous frame, neurological and subtly relational. And my holding this frame in place during the ten minutes of her hyper-processing, served to strengthen the frame. So, the analytic frame I was unconsciously carrying, both enabled the moment, and was forever changed by the moment. Something happened in the skater's nervous system that was unmistakable, as we entered new territory. The frame I held intuitively my entire career, underwent its first vicissitude, towards what became Brainspotting.

As Brainspotting developed, first through the sessions in my office, then in the experiences of therapists who experimented with it, I began to realize that the nervous system was far more unknowable than I had been taught. Years later I read the newspaper article, exploring how the nervous system is comprised of 1 quadrillion synaptic connections. This information brought the Uncertainty Principle from the realm of the implicit, to the reality of the explicit. It is impossible to know what is happening in the nervous system at any given moment, but again "you don't have to know what it is, to know that it is." This aphorism defines and illuminates the Uncertainty Principle.

The Brainspotting frame is never a set of protocols or procedures. It is always an organic, evolving, relational, neurobiological entity. The frame is the neurobiological context that supports implicit, subcortical, somatic processing to emerge, which we observe as healing in real time. With perspective, we observe and realize that the frame, and the processing, are inseparable. The frame and the processing are the double helix of the healing trajectory.

At the core of the Brainspotting frame, is what I eventually called the dual attunement frame. At first, the emphasis in Brainspotting was on technique; the neurological access of locating eye positions, first Outside Window, then Inside Window, then Gazespotting. With the passage of time, my background as an analytically trained therapist reemerged, and returned my attention to the relationship. At a training in Boulder, my friend and trauma-informed neurologist Robert Scaer, observed and reflected "the exquisite attunement" of a demo that I conducted. Bob's words struck me like a lightning bolt, which presenting the concept of dual attunement. The attuned relationship, combined with the attunement to the

neurobiological processes, led to the conceptualization of the Dual Attunement Frame. Years later, within the Neuroexperiential Model (NEM), the frame evolved into the process of mindfully receiving, holding and shaping the frame brought by the client to every session.

In psychoanalysis, free association, along with dreams, were considered the royal road to the unconscious. In Brainspotting, focused mindfulness processing is the portal to the neuroexperiential self. When the client holds their gaze on a brainspot, their nervous system opens doorways into deeply stored experience. These portals are not metaphorical, they are neurobiological. They access the implicit memory networks, the interoception and neuroception, encoded deep in the limbic system and brainstem. In the NEM, we conceptualize the ocular nervous system, central to the frame, as accessing the unrevealed, unprocessed, trauma configurations held in the entire nervous system, comprised of the other seven nervous systems: autonomic, central, peripheral, enteric, cardiac, sensory and motor. The ocular nervous system is seen as not only accessing to the seven other nervous systems. It is seen as holding trauma configurations itself. This is all in the context of the relationship, the dual attunement and the dual attunement frame.

This frame must be capable of holding the dynamics of processing. The frame must constantly adapt, moment to moment, to the movement within the client's nervous system, providing both groundedness and flexibility. When activation rises, the frame takes on a stabilizing presence. When the client drops into quietude, the frame organically expands providing space for the system to explore possibility. The frame is never a rigid container; it is a responsive organism. It contracts and expands in resonance to the client's rhythmic processes. The frame is primarily the client's, and secondarily the therapist's. The therapist is mindful of the ubiquity of their limbic countertransference, as it can be negatively infused into, and distort the frame. Nothing is ever perfect, but the therapist's mindful, empathic, dedication to the client's healing processes dynamically flows into the frame.

It is striking how these shifts occur at an autonomic, reflexive level. A slight shift in the client's respiration, an imperceptible narrowing of the eyes, a subtle alteration of posture, all reflect the flux and the flow of the processing. Brainspotting therapists are trained to observe the nervous system with high levels of attuned presence, and *the frame in response, fluxes and flows in harmony with the processing*. The

therapist's internal regulation provides a stabilizing force as emerging, implicit, developmental experience subtly, and at times profoundly, destabilizes the client in the moment. Within the frame, the client's nervous system takes over in its own time and way, processing through experience previously undiscovered and unprocessed.

The vicissitudes of the frame are not only the responses of and to the client. Brainspotting requires a level of presence that brings the therapist's own nervous system into communion with the clients. The therapist feels echoes of the client's development, tracing back to attachment, intrauterine and generational experience. Within the frame, the therapist feels the gravitational pull of the client's dissociative processes, and the traumas that created them. The therapist registers the shifts in their implicit world, through their own felt sense. This traces back to Freud historically identifying countertransference, although in Brainspotting it includes additional neuroexperiential dimensions. The therapist's whole body is available as an instrument of attunement. And just as an instrument must be repeatedly tuned, the therapist must regulate their own activation, to maintain their ability to steadily hold the dynamics of the frame.

In this sense, the Brainspotting frame supports not only the client's process, but the therapist's presence, as they breathe, ground and orient themselves. They track their own internal states with the same attunement they provide the client. The frame holds both nervous systems, allowing both to be present without losing their distinct contributions. I call this *dual containment*, the containment of the client with the containment of the therapist, providing the profound strength of the Brainspotting frame.

Another dimension of the frame's vicissitudes arises when we consider how Brainspotting is practiced across cultures. *Culture comes before science*, and healing is always shaped by the cultural context. Cultural norms influence how people express emotion, how they engage with silence, how they perceive suffering, and how they receive attunement. When Brainspotting began to spread internationally, it was clear that the frame could be adapted to different cultures while retaining its essential elements. In some cultures, relational attunement is manifested with vocal or physical expression. In others, attunement is conveyed internally through restraint and subtlety. In some cultures, silence is felt as deeply supportive, in

others, it is balanced with an active presence. The Brainspotting frame accommodates all variations, as attunement is not a single behavior; *it is essentially a way of being*.

Culture shapes the client's relationship to their nervous system. Some cultures value individuality; others prioritize communal experience. The Brainspotting frame honors cultural layers, adjusting its stance while maintaining the core principles of relational and neurobiological awareness. This adaptability is not a departure from the method, it is an expression of its inherent flexibility. It demonstrates that the frame is not a technique but a living, responsive environment, emerging through the interaction of therapist, client, and cultural environment. Culture is also relational, as both client and therapist infuse their cultures into the frame.

As processing deepens, the frame becomes more essential. Clients enter states that are difficult to express in language, states that are somatic, sensory, emotional, and at times esoteric. These states may involve implicit memories, survival instincts, early attachment patterns, or dissociated parts. The frame provides the safety for these states to emerge, without being interrupted or interpreted. The therapist's presence anchors the client as they navigate their internal landscape. The frame allows for the emergence of vulnerability, intensity, and transformation.

This is where the Brainspotting frame differs from other therapeutic structures. In Brainspotting, the frame is not external to the process, it is inextricably woven into it. The frame is not something the therapist sets at the beginning of the session and then leaves untouched. It is something the therapist inhabits together with the client, throughout the session and in every session. The frame shapes and is shaped by the relational and the neurobiological fields simultaneously. It breathes with presence, pacing, tracking, and responsiveness.

In the deepest moments, the frame must hold steady, as everything in the session becomes either frozen or charged, by emerging flashbacks, often held in parts. The client, or their parts, may be in a place beyond words, narrative, or conscious comprehension. The processing may be so subtle that it would be imperceptible to anyone not trained to perceive it.

I emphasize a truth about the Brainspotting frame: it is not a technique. It is a way of showing up, a way of receiving, a way of being. It is the stance we take with the nervous system. It is the respect we show for the client's internal world, and capacity to heal. *The frame holds and shapes the process, but the nervous system provides the change.*

The vicissitudes of the frame reflect the vicissitudes of healing itself. Healing is never linear. Healing is always unpredictable. Its trajectory oscillates, spirals, pauses, surges, retreats, and then reorganizes. The frame fluxes with each of movement. It remains steady without becoming rigid. It remains flexible without becoming unboundaried. It adapts in ways that are both subtle and profound, responding to the needs of the moment, while anchoring the intention of the work. This is why we call it the "*process frame*". The frame not only facilitates the processing, the frame also processes in response to the dynamic movement it liberates.

The frame is shaped by the relational field, by the wisdom of the nervous system, by the discoveries of neuroscience, and by the lived experience of thousands of therapists and clients across the world who have followed the process with respect, curiosity, humility, and presence. Brainspotting is not a method built from theory downward; it is a method developed from the bottom up, shaped by what clients' systems reveal when provided the opportunity.

Brainspotting is a method that does not require accessing traumatic material explicitly. It allows the nervous system to process at the level where trauma was implicitly encoded and held. It signals that the therapist's nervous system is available for co-regulation.

The frame deepens when considering the role of the eight nervous systems, identified within the Neuroexperiential Model. Each system contributes a different dimension to the client's experience. The autonomic nervous system shapes both activation and regulation. The central nervous system processes perception, memory and cognition. The peripheral nervous system communicates interoception. The enteric nervous system conveys gut-level responses. The cardiac system influences emotional tone and rhythm. The sensory nervous system translates the felt sense into conscious awareness. The motor nervous system holds patterns of tension, action, and inhibition. And the ocular system, the part of our

somatic systems that Brainspotting uniquely pays attention to, spurs orienting, neuro-visual processing and provides access to the integrated neural networks of the other seven nervous systems.

These nervous systems do not operate in isolation. They communicate in complex, nonlinear ways that defy simple explanation. When an activated client locates and maintains gaze on a brainspot, the ocular system links to the subcortical networks. These networks activate the autonomic system. The autonomic activation creates sensory and motor signals. These signals evoke somato-affective responses accessing memory networks. And the frame holds the movement across all eight nervous systems with steadiness and flexibility.

A rigid frame cannot accommodate the fluidity of these ever-present dynamic interactions. The frame must be both firm and elastic in its boundaries. It must support the client's autonomy, while providing the relational context that makes autonomy possible. It must hold time and place simultaneously, allowing the nervous system to reconfigure its patterns from the *then and there* to the *here and now*.

In the face of uncertainty all we have is the frame. And the frame and uncertainty are in a constant dance, affecting and shaping each other throughout the client's processing. In this sense, the Brainspotting frame provides a philosophical stance. It is an acknowledgment of the mystery inherent in healing. It is a willingness to sit with uncertainty, to allow the nervous system to lead, and to accept that healing always unfolds in a nonlinear yet deterministic fashion. This stance is not only therapeutic; it is essentially human. It invites us to approach our own internal worlds with compassion and curiosity, to trust our own nervous systems, and to honor the infinite complexity of being alive.

At times, the frame must contract. When the client's activation rises sharply, when dissociation, dysregulation and flooding become take over, the flux of the frame flows toward contraction that provides containment. This is not rigidity, it is responsiveness. The therapist becomes more interactive, providing an in the moment attachment figure to the client, who is overtaken by primitive forces and parts. The frame is firmly and empathically held at this level, until regulation lowers the activation, supporting the frame to gently expand back to a comfortable size and shape.

These oscillations, contraction and expansion, containment and openness, are the *vicissitudes of the frame*. They mirror the oscillations of the nervous system itself, the sympathetic to the parasympathetic, the hyperarousal to hypoarousal. They reflect the dynamic nature of systemic change.

Looking to the future of Brainspotting, the frame will continue to evolve. Every time a therapist sits with a client and remains attuned to their nervous system, the frame is shaped anew. Every time the method is used across cultural contexts, the frame expands its reach and versatility. Brainspotting is an organic method, and the frame is its organic structure.

In this sense, the frame is not only therapeutic; it is developmental. It supports the reorganization of the nervous system in ways that mirror early attachment processes. The therapist's attunement mirrors the support that caregivers ideally provide to infants and young children. The frame supports the emergence and healing of parts fragmented by trauma.

In reflecting on the future of the frame, it is important to recognize that the frame will continue to provide challenges for us. It will ask us to deepen our presence, to cultivate our internal regulation, to explore our own parts, to examine our assumptions, and to remain open to what we cannot know. *The frame always invites us into a dynamic relationship with uncertainty.*

This is where the frame intersects with the philosophical core of Brainspotting. The frame is an expression of humility. It embodies the recognition that the nervous system is too complex to be mastered, too mysterious to be reduced to a single model, and too dynamic to be approached with fixed expectations.

The frame communicates trust in the client's nervous system, especially when it is crouched in survival mode. It reassures the client that they do not have to face their internal world alone. It communicates that the therapist is present, regulated, and available as a confident, curious resource. This trust allows the client's nervous system to explore territory that once felt too threatening. It allows implicit memories to integrate.

The frame is the vessel through which the therapist communicates, "I am here with you. I am following you. I trust you. And I am holding this time and space with you."

The frame is the place by which the nervous system can find its way home.

The frame reflects psychoanalytic roots as well of the contributions of myriad healing methods.

The Brainspotting frame is not a tool. It is not a technique. It is not a set of rules.

The frame is a living, organic presence.

It is the heart of Brainspotting.

And it is the guide that allows both client and therapist to process together through the deepest layers of human experience.