

An Autobiographical Fragment

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In this article, I attempt to locate some of the personal and professional roots of my identity as a psychoanalyst. Theoretically and clinically, I have arrived at what I think of as a “radical middle-of-the-road perspective” that includes both what I see as the most important and enduring sensibilities of mainstream Freudian thinking and what I see as the most interesting contributions of the interpersonal/relational tradition. Institutionally, I advocate a kind of cacophony that encourages respectful but most likely irresolvable debate among adherents of different points of view. My training, as a psychologist interested in psychoanalysis during the 1970s, was steeped in pluralism and conceptual heterodoxy. However, I believe that my personal history prepared me to seek out and to embrace this psychoanalytic world, which was at the time and to some extent remains slightly outside the mainstream.

YOU COULDN'T GROW UP IN BROOKLYN WHEN I DID, IN THE LATE 1940s and the 1950s, and not turn out to be at least a little bit of a Freudian. You might never have heard of Freud, of course, and I don't recall that I did. Joseph McCarthy, Jackie Robinson, and Elvis Presley more directly entered into and shaped my life. But, you'd be a little bit of a Freudian nonetheless, whether you knew it or not, because conflict and compromise were the stuff of everyday life. Roy Schafer

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(1976), in describing Freud's tragic vision, remarked that it sensitizes us to the "inescapable dangers, terrors, mysteries, and absurdities of existence" (p. 35). In Brooklyn, this was the air that we breathed.

What I mean by this is that, in those early years, wherever you looked, especially if you looked beneath the surface, the bad guys were winning.

Prosperity and peace were all around, and there was a great deal of relief about the end of World War II—a relief that seemed like some kind of distant adult experience because nobody born during the war could guess what the great danger had been. But the events of the day—the execution of the Rosenbergs, the conviction of Alger Hiss (in both cases, we all believed passionately in their innocence), the defeat, twice, of the cerebral, liberal Adlai Stevenson, and the ascent of the first Republican president to hold office since our parents were barely out of their teens—made it clear that, however much promise there was in the air, it must be for other people. Our own causes, our own passions, were doomed, and nobody outside our immediate community seemed to care.

And then there were the Dodgers who every year, with the regularity of the seasons themselves, brought tragedy home and reminded us unmistakably and unavoidably what life was all about. The tragedy of the Dodgers played itself out literally outside my window (we lived right next to the ballpark) as well as deep within my heart. The Dodgers—true heroes to a man, including, amazingly, their owner, who took it on himself to break baseball's color barrier just as I was becoming aware of the game—seduced us every spring and betrayed us every fall. Not only did they lose after coming oh so close, but they lost (usually) to the Yankees, that very embodiment of front-running, right-wing, mainstream dominance.

The message was clear: good things may happen, but they happen to somebody else. Our own passions are whetted, teased, and ultimately frustrated. Living repeatedly through the Dodgers' shortfall, I inevitably felt that I'd found a kindred spirit when I read Freud (1912): "however strange it may sound, we must reckon with the possibility that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavorable to the realization of complete satisfaction" (pp. 188–189). Desire by its very nature dooms itself to frustration, and it dooms those who feel it to disappointment. The man who wrote this would have felt entirely at home in my Brooklyn Octobers. In the tragic

vision, Schafer (1976) reminded us, time is linear and consequences irreversible (p. 36). Despite Yogi Berra's quasi-romantic reassurance that "it ain't over 'til it's over," by mid-October it was over, and only the winter lay ahead.

But I suspect that Freud would also agree with what I had more or less preconsciously concluded as I was growing up: knowing that disappointment is coming need not dampen the pleasure of the pursuit. To cite Schafer (1976) again, the tragic vision includes an appreciation of the way in which there are "elements of defeat in victory and of victory in defeat" (p. 35). So, our predictable defeat was, paradoxically, an affirmation of life itself. "Wait 'til next year" was the rallying cry for all of us, and we did wait, though we were aware of and enjoyed the irony. And then every April we believed that things were going to turn out differently. So, we loved the ride, even as the rumblings of distant thunder permeated every aspect of the experience.

The appeal of a tragic vision of life drew me not only to Freud but also to the Greeks, who invented tragedy as a dramatic form. I studied ancient Greek history and philosophy in college, and classical plays and epic poems still constitute the bulk of my summer reading. What the Greeks knew, and what Freud learned from them and was able to apply to what his patients were telling him, was that a great deal of the drama of life goes on beneath the surface—fueling social structure but hidden from everyday view. Aeschylus's *Oresteia* tells the story of how the Athenian justice system—in fact, the human capacity to know and to act on what is just—emerged from hundreds of years of acts of greed, lust, blind ambition, parricide, child-murder, and revenge, all within the generations of a single family. Freud's borrowing of the Oedipus story (and his brilliant, world-changing, idiosyncratic reading of it) highlighted the hidden drama beneath the surface of every social organization from family to city state. Recall that the public Oedipus was considered by his subjects to be a wise, virtually godlike king and that Thebes prospered for many years despite his seminal crime.

Of course, it was not just life in Brooklyn, not even mainly my attachment to the Dodgers, that drove home the wisdom and poignance of the tragic vision. Within my family, there was an unmistakable but unspoken tension between the way things worked and the feelings felt. On the surface, everything was calm; desire seemed perfectly matched to available resources. As a result, I never sensed any lack;

what my parents wanted, they had. There was never a great deal of anticipation, and there was not very much talk about the future or about the past.

Despite the smooth operation of my family, widely acknowledged and appreciated by their friends and neighbors, the calm did not extend very deeply into my parents' experience. From what I was able to see over the years, disappointment infiltrated their self-consciousness like water that seeps into a wood foundation, eventually rotting it from inside. My father, a more than locally renowned athlete in his youth, was on the cusp of playing professional basketball—admittedly not the big deal in those days that it is today but nevertheless the thing he valued most throughout his life—when he hurt his knee and had to give up his plans. Trained as a lawyer, he practiced with little success for a couple of years during the Depression and then pretty quickly went into my maternal grandfather's small manufacturing business. He hated the business and for various reasons felt betrayed both by his father-in-law and by my mother. This I learned years later through the grapevine; although I knew perfectly well how miserable he was, I never knew anything about why. When he was in the hospital during his final illness (my mother had been dead for 10 years already), I had a chance to look at the chart that included the information he had given to the admissions clerk. My father had listed his occupation as *attorney*, a profession he had practiced for perhaps four years of his 30-year working life. It drove home to me, as none of our time together had, how wasted he felt his life had been.

My mother's story was, in many respects, not terribly different. Also trained as a lawyer—remarkable for a woman of her generation but never impressive to me, partly because so many other women in the extended family were lawyers, partly because she never expressed pride or pleasure about it—she too left practice early. For a few years, she worked in her father's business, and then she stayed home to raise me and to participate fiercely in school and community organizations.

So, my inclination to appreciate Freud's vision was established early on. Of course, as things have turned out, I am not a strict Freudian, and, in one particularly powerful way, I think Freud missed the boat. To explain why I think this, I have to skip 10 years or so—a decade in which my parents moved “up” and out of Brooklyn and in

which the Dodgers, after finally winning a World Series, did the same—to my first therapy experience. This was immediately after college, and I was feeling adrift and aimless, with a lack of structure weighing heavily on me. Going into treatment, with a senior analyst at the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute, was a difficult decision for me. I quickly found that talking about myself not only provided a welcome sense of relief from painful feelings but also opened up a sense of possibility and optimism about the future. It was transforming but not, as I think about it in retrospect, mainly because of what I learned about myself. Rather, what touched and moved me was that I had the chance to see my life through the eyes of a benign, fatherly man who seemed to be interested in my doing better than I was doing but who had no particular axe to grind about the direction my life might take.

There is more to say about my first experience as a patient that shaped my subsequent course as an analyst. Reflecting back on that time, I see that, though I was somewhat interested in myself—my mind and its workings—I was far more interested in my therapist. From my vantage point 35 years later, I recall, in a way that I couldn't quite be conscious of when it was happening, how attentive I was to his reactions and how his every response seemed to be a vote in a referendum on the way I was living my life. And, of course, I reacted to his reactions. When he seemed to be on my side—this didn't mean approving of my behavior, as I was pretty regularly screwing up—I was increasingly able to think about myself and to entertain the possibility of change. When he seemed more critical, I sometimes clammed up and became defensive. But consistently I watched him, and I went as far as I could, given the interpersonal atmosphere I was sensing.

To state the obvious, my attention to my therapist's attitude toward me was my transference, or at least an important facet of it. By my early 20s, I was quite convinced that things—interpersonal things, anyway—couldn't be taken at face value and that everything depended on the feelings beneath the surface. In turn, safety was possible only if you knew what was going on. But, as I suspect is more generally the case than most of us acknowledge, my transference, which reappeared in subsequent analyses and which I must admit was never very deeply engaged, shaped my analytic sensibility. I find my own needs in the needs of my analysands.

My early therapy ended, for a not atypical combination of clinical and logistical reasons, after about two years. During this time, and for

the next year or so, I worked at a number of odd jobs and waited to be hit by some good idea that would point me in a professional direction. Eventually, the idea did hit, and I returned to New York to go to graduate school for clinical psychology. As I prepare this autobiographical statement, I find it interesting that, by the time I entered graduate school, with very little knowledge of the issues that psychoanalytically oriented psychologists were thinking about, I was already deeply committed to two lines of thought. My personal history, reinforced and to a considerable extent validated by my reading of Greek tragedy, had given me a powerful appreciation of the way that hidden conflicts and their attendant disappointments shape our everyday lives. Along those lines, I had developed a fair amount of skepticism about the trustworthiness of conscious experience, or at least about experience that can easily be shared with others. But at the time, as a result of my treatment, I had come to believe in the important role that the nuances of the analyst's behavior have in determining how effectively the patient is able to use treatment. These themes are central to my thinking today; I return to them regularly, and I find myself reworking them at various levels of abstraction.

Decades later, it is clear to me that, though these two sensibilities are held central by the two theoretical traditions that have attracted me, neither tradition fully values both. Freud's tragic vision draws me to him, but Freud never looked very deeply at the subtleties of the analyst's participation. He wrote, at least in his more formal discussions of the workings of the analytic process, that the analysand would be deeply affected only by the analyst's correct interpretations. Freud did not expect that the analysand would scrutinize everything that the analyst said; incorrect constructions, for example, would roll off the patient like water off a duck's back (Freud, 1937, p. 261). No patient who, like myself, had so carefully examined his analyst's every expression could feel at home with that perspective. In fact, it was bound to feel intimidating, implying as it did that "analyzable" patients need to be able to pay attention to themselves, not to their analysts.

In contrast to Freud and his followers within classical psychoanalysis, interpersonal and relational authors focus minutely on the nuances of the analyst's behavior and on the way that small things can either facilitate or inhibit the work. This legitimizes my experience as a patient in much the same way that Greek tragedy

legitimized my experience within my family. At the same time, however, it is hard to find room for a tragic vision in contemporary relational views or in some of the more romantic branches of the American interpersonal tradition. There is a sense in these approaches that the analyst, provided he or she can muster enough sensitivity and flexibility, can get things right and thus create something that is more alive and more generative than the archaic experiences. There is an underlying assumption that time need not be quite linear, so that rectification and repair are possible. The romanticism, of course, doesn't sit well with me.

Despite my strongly (if preconsciously) held ideas about what mattered in psychoanalytic theory and practice, when I had to make my choices about graduate school I knew virtually nothing about what was actually going on in the field. Luckily and coincidentally (because my choice was dictated mainly by geography and serendipity), I wound up doing my graduate work in the clinical psychology program at New York University (NYU). At the time, the program was divided into two virtually independent factions, staffed by psychologists and psychoanalysts who represented the two intellectual perspectives that, unbeknownst to me at the time, reflected the themes that were important to me. On one hand, there was the Research Center for Mental Health, dominated before I got there by David Rapaport and now run by his students. Most of those students—George Klein, Robert Holt, and Donald Spence were full-time faculty, and Merton Gill was a visiting research fellow—were at work dismantling Rapaport's metapsychological edifice, but all of them were committed to a Freudian clinical sensibility.

On the other hand, linked fragily to the research center through mutual ties with a two-person administrative faculty was a group of clinical adjuncts whose orientation was largely interpersonal with some influence from the early British object relations theorists. As things worked out, I took courses from the research center faculty while having supervision with the adjuncts. That experience, in retrospect, was less perplexing than it might have been. In fairness, I should probably say "in retrospect only" because at the time the multiplicity of voices was confusing to me, as it is to all newcomers. The theory stood as an impressive edifice within which clinical exploration could take place, safely and (at times) confidently. In most areas,

Freud seemed to me to be asking more of the important questions than anybody else did. And, in an academic environment in which Freud's answers were being systematically deconstructed by the most powerful authority figures, it seemed possible (in a way that it probably was not anywhere else at the time) to think about what my own answers to those questions might be.

In supervision, I gained some understanding of the sensitivity to interpersonal nuance that I had felt in my own treatment. My supervisors were interested in exactly those areas in which Freud was least informative—the nature of the analyst's experience, the origin of the analyst's feelings and their impact on the patient, and so on. Over the course of a number of years, it began to make sense to me why I had been so involved in what my therapist had been thinking and in how he had been reacting to me. According to my supervisors, this was at least one central way of understanding the essence of an analytic process.

By the time I finished graduate school, I had any number of voices in my head—Freud's questions, his answers along with their deconstruction, my history of personal sensitivity to my analyst's feelings (reinforced now by similar reactions to a very different second analyst), supervisors' opinions to the effect that analysts do in fact have consequential reactions to their analysands, and a still unarticulated personal relationship with a tragic vision of life.

With all this, I began my psychoanalytic training at the William Alanson White Institute, an institute committed to a pluralism organized around the centrality of the interpersonal approaches of Sullivan and Fromm. My supervision at the White institute developed, for the most part, the sensibilities that had been formed in my own treatment and that had grown through my work at NYU. At White, though, I was more exposed to the conceptual grounding of interpersonal theory, which added another voice to my musings.

In a supervision group during my third year of graduate school, I met and became friendly with Steve Mitchell. Steve had graduated from NYU two years before I had. When he graduated from White, a year before I did, he began teaching a course in interpersonal and object relations theory at the National Institute for the Psychotherapies (NIP). The year I graduated, the instructor for NIP's course on Freud and the ego psychologists left New York, Steve recommended me for

the position, and I was hired. From then on, our ideas about teaching our respective courses became a frequent topic of conversation. Steve found that it made no sense to teach interpersonal thinking in isolation from the classical theory to which it was in many ways a reaction. Similarly, I felt that the evolution of Freud's thinking, and certainly of the thinking of the ego psychologists, was to a significant extent a reaction to "outside" pressures—from Adler, Jung, and other dissenters (in Freud's case) and from the interpersonalists and the Kleinians (in the case of the ego psychologists).

One thing that emerged from our conversations about these issues was our book, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (1983). This book is, of course, an exercise in comparative psychoanalysis. When we conceived and wrote it, it represented a way of sorting out the voices that (as a result of our common training experience) clamored inside our heads. Our agenda was to clarify what seemed to us a confusing array of differing perspectives on a set of converging problems. Because of personal preferences, Steve gravitated to the thinking of theorists of what we called the *relational model*; similarly, my history led me to respect authors working within the tradition of Freudian drive theory.

As things turned out—and quite surprisingly to us—the book, along with contemporary events, was part of a dramatic shift in both the politics and the conceptual structure of psychoanalysis in the United States that began in the 1980s and that continues today. Remarkably, three other important radical books were published within a year of ours—Donald Spence's *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth* (1982), Merton Gill's *Analysis of Transference* (1982), and Roy Schafer's *The Analytic Attitude* (1983), a follow-up to Schafer's earlier plea for a "new language" for psychoanalysis. Each of these works critiques the epistemologic or metapsychological status of classical psychoanalysis, each immediately became popular, and each pushed us toward an increased appreciation of the role of the analyst's participation in the psychoanalytic process.

Probably not coincidentally, three of these four books were written by psychologists, though Mitchell and I were the only authors who were not members of the American Psychoanalytic Association. And at the same time these books were appearing, political attacks on medical hegemony were becoming more frequent and more effective. A lawsuit filed by psychologists against the International

Psychoanalytic Association, the formation of the Division of Psychoanalysis (Division 39) within the American Psychological Association, and the creation of a group of autonomous training institutes for professionals excluded by American-affiliated institutes all helped open the field to new voices that were not socialized into traditional ways of thinking about psychoanalysis.

I never shared the outrage that many psychologists and psychoanalysts felt about either the dominance of the medical establishment or of the American Psychoanalytic Association. With my being from Brooklyn, or at least my corner of Brooklyn, exclusion from the mainstream had always been something of a badge of honor, an affirmation of a peculiar kind of specialness. I wanted recognition but was (and am) indifferent to membership. Let the Yankees be the Yankees, or let the American Psychoanalytic Association be the American, I thought—my own strivings seem more interesting than their successes.

Nevertheless, broad acceptance of our *Object Relations* book had an impact on the institutional climate. In 1991, Mitchell and I were invited to participate in separate panels at the American Psychoanalytic Association convention. During the floor discussion of Steve's panel, Merton Gill, who had befriended and generously encouraged us from the time when we were writing the *Object Relations* book, stood up to remark on the occasion. Psychologists had appeared on panels before, he said, but this year there were two on the program. And moreover, he noted, "this is the first year that we have invited *traif* psychologists!" As I look back on that, there could be nothing better than being both included and *traif*; neither would have been as satisfying without the other.

When Steve and I were writing our book, neither thought of it as serving political purposes. Our intention in undertaking a study in comparative psychoanalysis was to try to sort out (largely for ourselves) some of the themes that ran through the work of authors working in the different traditions to which we had been exposed—mainly ego-psychological and interpersonal, with occasional nods to Kleinian. Only fairly recently did I recognize the political impact of our book, and I take issue with some recent authors (notably Arnold Richards and John Gedo) who have characterized the work as political in its intent as well as its effect.

In retrospect, I have come to believe that, if history is written by the winners, comparative psychoanalysis is most likely to be written by the losers. In 1983, when our book appeared, the American psychoanalytic establishment was solidly controlled by the ego psychologists; interpersonal thinking was never acknowledged in their journals. Moreover, there was apparently tacit agreement between the ego psychologists and adherents of the most important dissident group, Kohut and his followers within self psychology, that both groups would be best served by developing their thinking in isolation from each other. Evidently, mainstream analysts believed that any psychoanalytic vision worth pursuing could be contained within the conceptual structure of classical thinking.

So comparative psychoanalysis, which sets itself the project of defining the scope of each model's approach and thus highlights their limits, by its nature makes room for previously marginalized points of view. This is why it is likely to be undertaken by the marginalized—that is, by those who believe that their own point of view adds something, something valuable and genuinely psychoanalytic, to what has already been said but has not been heard.

This was made clear to me in 1986, when Mitchell and I, surprised and gratified, were invited to appear at a “Meet the Author” session of the American Psychoanalytic Association. One discussant said of our book, “The question is not whether it is well done, because certainly it is. The question is whether it should have been done at all.” Although I was initially taken aback by this stark comment, its meaning quickly came through: the very project of comparative psychoanalysis is based on the assumption that there are phenomena that cannot be adequately theorized within the structure of an evolving ego psychology. This assumption undermines the completeness and perhaps even the coherence of the received metapsychology and thus damages the psychoanalytic enterprise. Solving conceptual problems within the terms of the existing model strengthens the hegemony of that model; suggesting that there is a need to go outside the model inevitably weakens it. And we were pointing to legitimately psychoanalytic perspectives that had been developed outside the mainstream.

Now, two decades later, it would be jarring to hear anybody say that a psychoanalytic book shouldn't have been written. This is not,

of course, to say that rancor has disappeared from our debates or that groups organized around particular ideas are not practicing exclusionary politics. Political integration is fragile, because it tends to create circumstances that fracture it. Broadly based organizations encourage the emergence of new voices and new ideas, but these voices and ideas are not always warmly received by the established membership, even when the organizations are reasonably open-minded. Ideas are criticized, feelings are hurt, and it often seems as if the path of least resistance is to break away, to start a new organization. Those who break away from organizations hope to create a structure within which new ideas can be expressed without the fear that their proponents will have to accommodate them to what comes to be thought of as “outside” criticism.

This was Freud’s strategy early on. At his Tuesday evening meetings, papers were presented without discussants because Freud believed that the criticism inherent in the discussants’ presentation would inhibit creativity. When he created a committee to decide which points of view were legitimately psychoanalytic, it was because he felt that it would be distracting to those who were developing psychoanalysis to have to respond to ideas that were too far afield.

So, political integration in psychoanalysis, which has been difficult to achieve, is perhaps even more difficult to sustain; centrifugal force is always at work. At the same time, another tendency—to believe that political integration should lead to conceptual integration or at least to some kind of convergence—works against the best interests of the field. Many analysts sympathetic to the goal of opening organizations to new voices also subscribe to one version or another of what Leo Rangell has called a “unitary psychoanalytic theory.” I don’t believe that a unitary theory, however general, can or ever will serve psychoanalysis well. There are, simply put, too many interesting ways to hear what our analysands have to say, and too many potentially facilitative ways to understand their experience, to force our listening or our understanding into the conceptual structure that any single theory has to offer.

Coincidentally, while writing this autobiographical fragment, I finished a draft of a paper that represents my first attempt to conceptualize a substantially new perspective on the origins and role of intrapsychic conflict. A few days earlier, I showed the draft to a friend and colleague who is identified with a classical version of

contemporary conflict theory. In a brief phone message, he let me know that, to the surprise of neither of us, he disagreed with a great deal of what I had written—and he suggested we talk about it. I am, at this moment, waiting for his follow-up call. As I wait, I have two thoughts. First, I hope that my friend isn't too critical of the way I have represented the point of view he espouses. I don't mind if he feels a bit misunderstood—that is the inevitable and potentially generative result of an “outsider” commenting on a point of view that others know from “inside”—but if he feels I've missed the boat in some important way, I'll have to rethink my presentation.

My second and more important thought is that I won't be bothered if my friend is critical of the new ideas I'm developing. In fact, I would be a bit disappointed if he is not. Any disagreement that the two of us will have is likely to lead to an interesting conversation, as long as neither of us is too wounded by it. I have no hope of convincing him that the theory to which he has subscribed for decades has been languishing until my emendations of it came along. And I doubt that he has any hope of convincing me that I am wasting my creative energies trying to modify something that has long since been perfected. But, the conversation, if successful, will probe the dark corners of what each of us believes in a way that discussions with colleagues more in agreement never can, and it will enrich our thinking over the long haul, no matter how vehement each of us might become in the moment.

The hope that my work will stimulate and sustain this sort of conversation lies at the root of my participation in the institutional life of psychoanalysis. This hope itself is deeply rooted in my history of being excluded from what were certainly the most important conversations in my family. So, predictably, I want to participate. But I do not expect and would not welcome the kind of agreement that would lead to consensus about a unitary psychoanalytic theory. Consensus about anything interesting seems to me utopian at best; more deeply, I am afraid that consensus is usually the outcome of some sort of coercion. Therefore, I feel most myself and most creative when I can enjoy the generative tension that open disagreement offers. This is the best atmosphere for us as psychoanalytic thinkers and, ultimately, for our analysands.

Familiar tensions continue to haunt me when I think about psychoanalytic ideas. I remain impressed by the powerful ways in which our

private lives shape (not only are shaped by) our social experience. I am drawn to a tragic vision of life and so to the Freudian emphasis on the ubiquity of conflict and on the inevitable elusiveness of full satisfaction. But I can never forget how attentive I was to the reactions of my first analyst or, for that matter, to those of my subsequent analysts right up to the memorable final minute of my last treatment. So, in my work I continue to search for a middle road. I used to think that, if I could find a middle road, the solution would have broad appeal (itself a romantic idea, based on a belief in or hope for particular kinds of happy endings). Now, I have come to see that middle-road solutions simply add one more voice to the cacophony—and that the middle road is as radical as any of the extremes.

But I am sure that a certain level of cacophony is for the best. I have traveled a road that began with a resigned sense of exclusion from the psychoanalytic establishment and that has led to inclusion in what I think of as its most interesting conversations. I'm still intrigued, however, by the idea of being a *traif* psychologist. Even though the meaning of being *traif* and the meaning of being a psychologist have changed dramatically over the years, I value the freedom that comes with the role. As I have always believed, being a Dodger fan is much more fun than rooting for the Yankees.

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