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Gurmeet S. Kanwal

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GURMEET S. KANWAL, M.D.

OUTSIDERNESS: A MEDITATION IN SIX VISIONS

Abstract. Life is not possible without outsidership. Outsidership is not possible without suffering. Is there a way to get inside of outsidership without either rejecting its existence or reifying its reality? How can personal, political and professional experiences bring us to a, still escapable, edge of this black hole?

Keywords: outsidership, insidership, otherness, memory, agoraphobia, stranger

The first question one might ask is, “Why visions?” Why not memories—the more usual fodder for psychoanalytic consumption? In general, vision evokes the future. Apart from some mothers and teachers who seem to be able to see what’s going on all around them, humans have eyes affixed only to the front of their heads. Sure, we can turn our heads and look backwards, as many of us psychoanalysts are fond of doing, but that is not what evolution intended. Eyes look to the front because they are for seeing where we are headed. Thus, they are sense organs of futurity. Yet we also know that it takes a great effort to see beyond what is conditioned by the past.

In fact, all the events I am contemplating here *are* from the past. Why shouldn’t I then say, “Outsidership in Six *Memories*?” Because they are not really memories. Not at least in the way we generally think of memories. Memory is associated in our minds with the notion of a time in the past. For an experience to be designated as memory, we have to be already outside of the experience. Once it becomes

Address correspondence to Gurmeet S. Kanwal, M.D., 275 Central Park West, #1W, New York, NY, 10024. E-mail: gkanwalmd@gmail.com

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memory, we can disconnect from it, forget it, even deny it ever existed. Moreover, memories are seen as information stored in our “me.” We think that is what makes “me,” “me.” We think of memories as the past of “me.” That notion comes from our deep Western cultural investment in the sanctification of the individual “I” as a closed, well-defined system that gives us our shape. Notice in fact the first two letters of the word: m-e, me, me-mory. But what if this is not the case? What if memories are stored within a relational “we,” not “me?”

I would like to suggest that we have missed something essential about the concept of memory in thinking of it as we do. And the reason that we have missed it is what I will term “outsiderness anxiety”—the anxiety associated with encountering what is outside of our “me-ness.” It is our “outsiderness anxiety” that prevents us from realizing the truth about the real nature of memories. We prefer to stay “inside” ourselves, each of us locked up in our own little island rooms, surrounded by a sea of others. Inside this room we think we can hoard all our treasured, as well as terrifying, experiences, safely ensconced in “me-mory.” I think we have it wrong. This is an illusion. If memories are actually stored outside the me, in the relational matrix of “we,” perhaps they are best referred to as, not “me-mories,” but rather “*we-mories!*” Close your eyes and think of all your memories. Then think of none of them as belonging solely to you. What does that thought experiment evoke?

I have titled this article as “Outsiderness in Six *Visions*” because, first, what I am writing about are not “me-mories,” but “we-mories.” And I hope to enlarge their “we-ness” by sharing them with you. Second, I refuse to step outside of them by relegating them to the past. They are as much about the future as the past. That is why I experience them as visions. Visions are the portal through which the past is transported into the future. The present is the threshold between the insiderness of the past and the outsiderness of the future. These visions are thus a present to me, made so by your reading of them.

And they are visions of outsiderness, not otherness. What is the difference between otherness and outsiderness? Otherness does not require more than two. Self and Other. Outsiderness requires at least three. Me and Them. In classical psychoanalytic terms, one could thus say that otherness is pre-Oedipal and outsiderness is Oedipal. I prefer

to say that otherness is about relationality, but outsidersness is about (not) belonging. It is about community.

Vision 1

Wednesday, October 31, 1984, New Delhi, India

9:30 A.M.: Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi walks out of her residence, down the manicured walkway to her car. Two of her bodyguards raise their rifles and shoot. She is taken to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, and at 2:20 P.M. is pronounced dead. Across the street in a different hospital, I am getting off from another day of my medical internship. My friend, Sunil, offers to drive me home on his scooter. On the way we see an agitated crowd of people in the middle of a road possibly surrounding someone. We later learn that hordes of Hindu extremists are roaming the streets looking for Sikhs. That man inside the crowd was a Sikh being beaten to death by Hindus. He had suddenly become “the outsider” because of the actions of those two Sikh bodyguards who shot Mrs. Gandhi. The bodyguards felt Sikhs were being treated as outsiders by the government.

Vengeance is always an act of selfishness.

I realize when I get home that it could have been me caught in that crowd. The next four days are spent in hiding. No lights, no noise. Depending on the goodwill of Hindu neighbors to not reveal that there are Sikhs living in the building, in spite of the pressure of interrogating mobs. In many of the elegant neighborhoods of New Delhi, fires could be seen demarcating the homes of Sikhs from those of non-Sikhs.

Flaming, rageful outlines defining outsidersness like words never could.

An estimated 10–17,000 Sikhs are killed over the next 4 days across the country. I am clearly not one of them. Except: *being killed is not always an all or none equation.*

February 20, 1985: I leave India, taking an economy class TWA flight into the eternal sunshine of outsidersness.

Somewhere, while flying from India to the United States, I crossed a special line. No, not the dateline, not the prime meridian either. It was a line I had no idea I was crossing. I did not know then that such a line even existed. It was the line between being an insider and an outsider. I did not know that my airplane was like a lysosome inside a cell. Lysosomes are intracellular structures that engulf a particle inside the cell, swim to the surface boundary of the cell, and then extrude the particle outside the cell, never to be returned again, never to belong to the cell again. Little did I know getting off the airplane at Los Angeles International Airport that night, that I had just been extruded into a strange new extracellular space. I had irreversibly migrated from insiderness to outsidership.

I ask myself now, in the words of the Indian poet, Gulzar (2012):

What land did I seek
outside this house
that I have become a stranger
in my own house?

Why must we contemplate outsidership? For one, because outsidership can be lethal. People lose their lives and livelihoods because of it. Amitav Ghosh (2005) writes “It is when we think of the world the *aesthetic of indifference* might bring into being that we recognize the urgency of remembering the stories we have not written” (p. 203) (emphasis added).

An “*aesthetic of indifference*.” Take a moment to feel the shudder that phrase sends down your spine. How real has the “aesthetic of indifference” become in our lives today? No, I am not just talking about Trumpian politics. I am talking about the indifferent corporate representative on the other side of your phone; the doctor who barely touches your body; the enlisted soldier in a Ground Control Station who fires a Hellfire missile on a child in Yemen, the White man who pushes a Black woman onto a subway track because she is Black.

The aesthetic of indifference has become our culture. It has become us.

Vision 2

Jill (pseudonym), who sees me for psychoanalysis, comes from a family of professional parents with a father who is passionate, outgoing,

and prone to affairs; and a mother who is stoic, distant, and efficient. Jill has fun times with her father when they are both engaged in the father's artistic hobby. Later Jill decides to pursue that hobby as a vocation. When she seeks her father's blessing to do so, she is told that she should stick with something more practical and that she really does not have the talent to be successful in a creative field. Jill is devastated, but proceeds anyway. Years later, when Jill runs into obstacles in her career, she becomes quite depressed. This is in spite of having achieved significant success by all objective measures. In her analysis, she comes to understand that she has always set herself up to be an outsider in her field. Her work takes up themes that are marginal. Even when she is working on something more mainstream, she takes a perspective that pushes the limits and brings her into conflict with the mainstream agenda. She shies away from creating relationships with mentors or networking with influencers, but is shocked when her work is rejected. She gets depressed by the consequences of being an outsider but resents and avoids the need to be an insider.

Outsiderness can become a conflicted compulsion, fulfilling a prophecy of failure while attempting to defy it. An inescapable black hole of doomed ambition.

Another patient, a gay man with a history of early trauma at the hands of a bipolar father, becomes depressed and paralyzed when he finds that the family he had clung to is increasingly seeing him as the "problem" family member. This new experience of being an outsider in his own family terrifies him, partly because it pushes him into the dangerous space of becoming identified with his outsider, abusive father. He cannot see how he can possibly live other than being inside of his family. He is literally not able to leave his house and go outside.

Here's a new definition of agoraphobia: *It is the condition of not being able to tolerate outsiderness! Agoraphobia is outsiderness anxiety.*

Outsiderness is not some exotic plant to be found on an expedition to the Amazon or the Antarctic. It is not walking around the streets wearing turbans, kimonos, or hijabs. It is not the prerogative of the neurotic or the insane, or the poet and the painter. Outsiderness is all around us, among us, and within *all of us*. If we see it only in the other, it is only because we deny it in ourselves.

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (2007) writes,

... We need to return to being two
to embrace each other more. There's no name for us,
when the stranger stumbles upon himself in the stranger!

Julia Kristeva (1991) writes, "Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself" (p. 1).

It is our outsider anxiety that creates outsidership reality. *Anxiety creates reality, not only the other way around.*

Warren Poland (2008) calls outsidership "an aspect of essential human nature" (p. 596). Yet, outsidership is not the same experience for everyone. It is not something we can universalize and bond around. It begins at different times for different reasons, in different ways, for different people. And outsiders are not one kind of people. Some react to their outsidership by unleashing destruction on who it is they perceive to be insiders (think Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, and Stephen Paddock, the Las Vegas shooter); whereas others, like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi or Martin Luther King, respond creatively and constructively to the experience. What determines who goes down which path?

Vision 3

Gray trousers, crisp white shirt, a well-knotted tie with slanting green and yellow stripes, all wrapped around a slender kindergartner—a little brown kid walking into an Irish Catholic school in recently decolonized India, where the most senior teachers are White, Irish Christian brothers in long white robes, and the lesser teachers are local Indians. A colonized mind walking into a leftover colonizing machine.

Some kid, an Indian kid of course, teases me because I am a Sikh, sporting long hair tied up in a bun on my head.

Fast-forward a decade and a half. Western-style capitalist corruption leads to the downfall of the U.S.-backed monarchy of the Shah of Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini comes to power and 52 American hostages are taken and held for 444 days, from November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981. I am in medical school in Pune, India, 1,000 miles away from home, busy with books. Iran–America relations are not big news. Remember there is no internet, no TV screens on every wall, and making a phone call home means booking a call and waiting for hours for

it to get through. In December 1980, I visit the United States for the first time.

I am walking on a street in Pasadena, California, newly arrived, turban and all, and some White men in a car driving by roll down their window and yell, "Hey, Ayatollah, go back to Iran!"

I have no idea what they are talking about. Except I do know that I am not from Iran. "That is not *my outside*," I want to scream back. "At least send me back to the right outside!"

Outsiderness is not just about being exiled from, but also where you are exiled to.

Actually, their geographic error is a lifesaver in the moment. It allows me to label them ignorant, and it saves me from seeing the truth. A truth I may not then have been ready to bear. One that took many years of living in the United States to fully comprehend: The truth about outsiderness.

Truth can be like a spouse-battering alcoholic, traumatizing the one closest to him or her, over and over, and over again.

Where is inside and where is outside? Where am I? The outside is inside my head, and what should be the inside is driving me into outsiderness. If they had been better informed, I might have been spared the truth of being unwanted. If I had been better informed, I might have been spared the illusion of belonging. I am an outsider inside my own head

An enactment of ignorance, theirs and mine, traumatizing and protective at the same time. This too is a relational memory, a "we-mory."

Vision 4

Was not Oedipus the quintessential outsider? Born from a drunken impulse of his father who then decided to have him killed in order to save his own life; sent away by his mother to die by exposure to the elements on a mountain top; brought up in a family that was not his own; and then shamed by destiny for committing unintended incest? When Oedipus blinds himself in both eyes, it is not because he cannot

bear to see, it is because he cannot bear *to be seen*. It is the only way left to him to manage *how* he is seen. As Jay Greenberg (2005) beautifully elaborates in his article about the middle-voice form in ancient Greek, the tragedy of Oedipus is born out of the conflict between agency and destiny. To the very end, even in blinding himself, Oedipus, outcast by destiny, is struggling to assert his agency.¹

Outsiderness can feel like an intolerable spotlight, only to be escaped by hiding from others, which then reifies the reality of the experience.

In one ancient Indian myth, King Hiranyakashipu is a malignant narcissist ruling the land and insisting that everyone worship nothing else but him. His own son, Prahlada, refuses to comply, and like King Laius, Hiranyakashipu wants his son dead. Even though the gods are on Prahlada's side, all attempts to destroy the king keep failing. This is because Hiranyakashipu has been given a boon by Lord Brahma² such that he cannot be killed by man or woman, during the day or at night, inside or outside. Eventually he is killed by a being by the name of Narsimha, an avatar of Lord Vishnu, who manifests as half-lion/half-man. Narsimha kills King Hiranyakashipu at twilight, when it is neither night nor day, right on the threshold of his palace door, neither inside nor outside.

Thick green curtains separate my parents' bedroom from the rest of the house, creating an inside and an outside. It is neither night nor day. I may be 4 or 5 years old, and hence culturally classified as a child (genderless) rather than an (adult) man or (adult) woman, standing right by the curtains, neither inside nor outside. If I am to take my lesson from the Indian myth, I am in a dramatic space where the unthinkable and impossible can happen. I am petrified, yet seduced by the sensation of fear. Are they having sex? Are they fighting with each other? Unfortunately, more likely the latter than the former. Warren Poland (2008) writes, "Feeling oneself not part of a united group of others, the distressing sense of being excluded rather than included, is a part of childhood Oedipal experience instantly familiar to any psychoanalytic clinician" (p. 595).

¹Thanks to Sarah Schoen for drawing my attention to Greenberg's "Oedipus."

²Brahma is one of the Trinity of Indian deities: Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver), and Shiva (destroyer).

But I decide to stay out rather than go into that room. Being included in certain parental configurations can be as traumatizing as being excluded from them. The love–hate ambivalence is not the only fundamental tension we find ourselves working with as clinicians. An equally powerful one has to do with insider–outsider. Neither is necessarily safe, and either can be filled with perils. The existential dilemma is not always the Shakespearean “to be or not to be.” Sometimes it is “to be part of, or not to be part of.”

Outsiderness can function as a refuge.

Had Oedipus been content with being an outsider, he might have saved himself, and psychoanalysis, from a dreadful fate.

Vision 5

It is some ungodly hour of a jet-lagged day, dragging its feet behind me from one transit gate to another in Singapore’s Changi International Airport. Having flown out of the world of White people, I am in excited anticipation of being both visible and invisible, and each in different ways than in the United States. As I get to the security check, I see every single one of the staff seems to be of Indian origin. A grin breaks across my face, my heart quickens in spite of its sleep deprived exhaustion. I blurt out, to the first person I encounter (somewhat uncharacteristically, driven by the wave of insiderness washing over the cramped folds of my brain), “Namaste, looks like everyone is from India here!” I am obviously in insider heaven! But it’s not exactly how one greets harried TSA officers at any airport at any time of day, let alone 5 in the morning. The man doesn’t quite know how to respond. He seems to be trying to decide whether to be polite or feel offended, or ignore the whole thing. Finally, he mutters under his breath something like, “Well, we are all Singaporean here.”

Bam! Instantly, I am in outsider-land again! Ashamed, embarrassed, and stunned by my own reactions, I gather my wits and the spilled-over contents of my psychic need, along with my carry-on bag. Gripping my passport a bit more tightly, I move on.

A few days later in India, I am sitting amidst a bunch of my medical school friends and their spouses, along with my (White, American) wife and kids. Everyone is speaking in English. Lulled by the

comfortable cushion of insiderness, I fail to notice for several moments that—without any conscious decision—we have all lapsed into conversing in Hindi. I notice it because I become aware that my wife and kids can't understand most of what is being said.

Bam! Outsiderness intervenes again. Not mine, but theirs. But they are my inside place, my family. What a confusing line of division between insiderness and outsiderness!

Insiderness and outsiderness are constantly tripping and tumbling over each other, transforming into each other, and quarreling with each other, in our psychic-cultural worlds.

The fluidity of these experiences is what makes it necessary for those of us doing psychotherapy to be deeply vigilant. Like Bromberg's spaces of dissociative experience, bridging those gaps in awareness allows us to address the shame and anxiety that prevents us from seeing the possibilities of creating insiderness as well as the possibility of realizing the liberating potential of a fully acknowledged outsiderness.

Vision 6

Day 1 of Life, Planet Earth, deep in the murky waters of a primal ocean.

A few atoms in random Brownian motion have accidentally joined hands to become molecules. These molecules, with their carbon arms flailing around as they try to keep themselves afloat, experience a profoundly mystical moment of linking themselves in a circle, enclosing a few scraps of ocean and debris within. Their eyes turn inward in the first attempt at navel gazing by a single cell. Mesmerized by what they see, like Narcissus, they may never look out again, until they die of auto-hypnotic hunger. From that moment on, their knowledge of their singularity begins to grow and their knowledge of the communality begins to diminish. They even forget that they were a "they." They-ness becomes a distant Me-mory.

These are my ancestors. And yours too. Confirmable by 23 and Me.

Over and over again, we repeat this ontogenetic compulsion, reenacting the very beginnings of life. Cell walls become home walls, which give rise to tribal walls, which lead to nation walls. Over and

over again we act out the primal illusion. Forgetting the us and becoming a me. But over time, we lose more and more of the semi-permeability of biological membranes. That essential feature of all biological life. We have progressed to impermeable concrete and steel. Materials that create an architecture with “an aesthetic of indifference” (Ghosh, 2005).

Let us not fool ourselves though into thinking that all the badness lies in some exotic or oppressive outside. To project all the badness outside, and keep our insides clean creates strangers where there may be none. What if the outsider is not such a stranger? What if he is “the hidden face of our identity?” What if I am the stranger who “stumbles upon himself in the stranger?”

That is the realm of psychoanalysis: investigating the defensive use of outsidership.

Every time “me” is separated from “not-me,” there is the danger of what should remain a semi-permeable membrane becoming an impermeable wall. Every time that happens, what follows is alienation, extremism, and what Ghosh (2005) calls, “supremacism”: “the belief that a group cannot ensure its continuity except by exerting absolute cultural and demographic control over a particular set of geography” (p. 128). I would add that the geography can be physical or psychic.

So, what then of outsidership? Are we outsiders destined to wander around for years like Odysseus, or Prince Rama who was exiled for 13 years from his father’s kingdom? Are we to be stuck at the anxiety-ridden edge of this black hole where all space for experience gets reduced to a tiny overweight point of massive gravity? Not if we can discover that there is another side on the other side of black holes, as pointed out to us by another outsider, Stephen Hawking (2014). On the other side of the black hole we find that:

Insiderness, is by definition, limited, bounded, separated, contained.
Outsidership is that which is unbounded, undivided, and free to spread.

Although the world today is in flames, fueled by the desire of insiders to protect their insiderness, it is in the “sublime madness” (Niebuhr, 1932) of the outsider that a rebellious hope continues to assert its right to exist and change the status quo. As Newton made

evident, it is only a force from the outside that can change a body's state of inertia.

In the world as well as in our offices, we often encounter the painful and alienating consequences of outsidersness. But this pain is never too far from the possibility of parole. If you are outside banging at the door to be let in, you experience outsidersness as a painful, humiliating, diminishing place. If you turn around and look at the vastness of the world that is denied to those stuck inside, you are suddenly free, expansive, and on a voyage. If you have never experienced outsidersness, my sympathies: it is only in outsidersness that one experiences infinity, the absence of boundaries and limits, the communion with the entire variety of being and experience. Outsidersness is as real as life itself, and as much of an illusion as the notion of an individual self. Outsidersness is stranger than fiction, more real than a feeling, and yet more unreal than a dream. It is a vision of the future excavated out of the sediments of the past. It lives in us as "we-mories." Outsidersness is nothing more than perception, and nothing less. It can haunt us like a ghost, or free us from our ghosts. It is, to borrow a phrase from Stephen Hawking (2011), "the dreams that stuff is made of."

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Gurmeet S. Kanwal, M.D., is originally from New Delhi, India. He is Supervising Psychoanalyst and Teaching Faculty at the William Alanson White Institute, Past President of the William Alanson White Psychoanalytic Society, and Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Weill Medical College of Cornell University. He is also a Fellow of the College of the International Journal of Psychoanalysis and a member of the Editorial Board of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* and the *Journal of Psychoanalytic Discourse*. Dr. Kanwal is coeditor, with Dr. Salman Akhtar, of *Bereavement-Personal Experiences and Clinical Reflections* (Karnac), and *Intimacy: Clinical, Cultural, Digital and Developmental Perspectives* (Routledge). Dr. Kanwal is in full-time Private Practice in NYC.