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Broken Fathers/Broken Sons: A Psychoanalyst Remembers,
By Gerald J. Gargiulo. New York: Rodopi, 2008, 150 pp.

The subtitle is “A Psychoanalyst Remembers.” After reading this potent, poignant and moving, beautifully written memoir, we appreciate what the meaning is of the psychoanalytic idea of placing emphasis on remembering. This means trying to recapture the truth of the past experiences in their actual context, rather than act out distorted portions to preserve our own self-justifying pictures of the past in order to vindicate our own sense of injury. What is it we must remember? The title is *Broken Fathers, Broken Sons*, a picture of the familial trauma of conflict over generations. What’s presented is the pain of a particular consciousness struggling to come into being, so that we see an individualized version of the common experience of the effort to achieve the dignity of autonomous selfhood that we all can recognize.

Is there a particular virtue about the way a psychoanalyst remembers? As an individual he suffers; as a practitioner he knows the way memory is a “child of desire,” inevitably selective in any recall. The evocation and identification of the subjective element in Gargiulo’s narrative of the past is a marvelous feature of this memoir. The details of emotional abandonment and rejection are not spared, but questions regarding this accuracy of recall are constantly evoked, so that the exclusive view of one’s victimization slowly gives way to the resurrection of a fuller context. One’s parents may not have been available as one would have liked, but in other ways they were supportive. The broken relations experienced with them expressed their failings as well as one’s own turning away from them. So we need to tell our stories to others, so that we too might hear them for the first time, and be able to restore something of the objective reality—the reality that the others lived that is not excused but more completely understood in its impact on us.

One virtue of a psychoanalytic retelling of the situation is an open and honest exploration of all the details, to see their forgotten links and emerging coherence. We appreciate the psychoanalytic ethic of the obligation we all have to be in a continuous struggle for self-knowledge. A psychoanalyst recognizes what seemingly is a moral obligation to be responsible to himself for resolving his own conflicts. The telling of a life story is metaphorically similar to the progression of a psychoanalytic case

with the loosening of repression and the emergence of insight and self-knowledge. We play a role in creating and fostering what happens to us, and indeed one measure of wisdom is the ability to recognize the way we construct our own reality.

The life that's being described is a full and interesting one. It shows how middle-class stability and comfort are no proof against mental instability, familial disruption and dysfunction. It shows how the contingencies of fate are no respecters of the primacy and delicacy of our needs and hopes and stifle them indiscriminately. The father/mother/child triad is vividly recalled. Gargiulo had a strong-willed, hardworking and difficult father. He admired his father's work ethic but found frustrating his incapacity to relate to others "with any sense of vulnerability." His father yelled at him constantly, and his anger at the most haphazard things kept the young Gargiulo off balance, who could do nothing right in his father's eyes. The father became over time more loud and frightening, intimidating his mother as well as the writer and his older brother. The father's needs were the rule of the house. Anything could be a pretext for complaint, especially the serving of his mother's usually excellent meals. He would dash dishes to the floor and storm out the house to eat in a restaurant by himself.

As a consequence Gargiulo's mother developed depression and a drinking problem. His father would attack her if he thought she had been indulging, and the family physician sanctioned his behavior. She received a series of electroshocks as treatment, which seemed another alternative to her husband's rage.

The effect of this situation upon young Gargiulo was low-grade depression, difficulties in learning, frequent illnesses. During his adolescence his mother's mid-life crisis complicated his depression. He withdrew into a world of daydreaming. He movingly asks, later on, as he begins to understand his situation, whether his anger at his father was reflected in his daydreaming. It's a good example of the way reverie and remembering relate to each other, ruminating on one's pain vs. remembering its context, reviving the connection with an independent other whom we now remember, who was also shaped by forces beyond his control.

I want to elaborate further on the extent to which Gargiulo's life was disrupted. He speaks of how, by age 10, he was unaware of the seriousness of his injuries, the cost paid for daydreaming, alienation from his peers, his self-consciousness, feeling humiliated by not learning in school. He reveals how he couldn't tell time, tie his shoes, or write words appropriately. "Something inside me had called a general strike," he said, and he "didn't

know how to call it off.” The groping relations he has with other withdrawn or alienated school kids soften his isolation to an extent, and his family did recognize his need for help by arranging for him to see a helpful child psychiatrist. The father, however, though he was able to afford the fee, nevertheless stopped the sessions after a while, citing the cost. There were, however, interested teachers who proved to be of inestimable support in helping him come to grips with his feeling of being “tired of being ashamed of myself” (p. 9).

It’s a dramatic picture of the way life circumstances can wreak psychological damage. The story of loss, alienation, reconciliation and gain reflect the trajectory of the psychoanalytic process. As Gargiulo says, “psychoanalysis has...taught us that one need not hide life’s injuries—they are our common lot. One of Freud’s most basic convictions was that there is universality to individuality; given that insight, he could write his *The Interpretation of Dreams*” (*Psyche, Self and Soul*, 2004, p. xiv). In other words, when we come to terms with what is hidden in us, no matter how shameful, although we resist such knowledge, we gain, paradoxically, a better experience of our autonomy. This applies to the listener as well as to the one telling the story. If the forbidden or disavowed is stated and experienced, it loses its power over us and affords us a power over it, with the release of more psychic energy and resources to empower us, forces which had before been held in repression.

However, the revisiting of wounding experiences is not the same as the confessional exhibitionism of them. The attempt to understand and master life’s hurtful dealings is to accept a commonality with others. We no longer resist a binding human allegiance to the need to confront the experience of being alive. Gargiulo thinks it is more than the acceptance of a “common unhappiness,” as Freud suggested. It has more to do with the acceptance of death, conflict and ambiguity in the ongoing task of integrating one’s personal histories. When we are able to arrive at such an emotional integrating, we have the *possibility* that the rift between our unrealistic wishes and/or ideals and our historical actuality can be bridged.

This cannot happen, though, until one acknowledges, and *shares*, the multiple ways in which the spirit has been wounded. Perhaps psychoanalysts in particular come wounded to their practice. As Theodor Reik suggested, they are more born than made by any process of academic training. They may possess, more than others, as Gargiulo suggests, a capacity for personal honesty; a capacity for cross-identification, issuing in compassion and civility; and a capacity for playful intelligence. I think that one of the great services Gargiulo provides of speaking of the multiple ways life inflicts

personal hurt and incapacitation is to bring into view a deeper conception of the reality principle. It involves not just acceptance and resignation in the face of life's travails but the achievement of the recognition of the truth of one's history, a history not inseparable from others' histories. "The reality principle does not refer merely to the recognition of external facts but even more to the truth of internal history. Free from repeating the past, Libido—the child of Eros—is able to love with minimal oppression from the superego" (*Psyche, Self, and Soul*, p. 132).

Gargiulo has indicated that the original title of his memoir was "The autobiography of Humpty Dumpty." This early title conveys the idea of how imperiled and fragile our development can be, but it didn't convey the process of the way parents, fathers, are internalized inside of us, and their "brokenness" has to be worked out in our lives. Gargiulo begins his memoir with a reference to the old English nursery rhyme, in which Humpty fell off the wall, broke himself up, and couldn't be put together again. Gargiulo seems to be making an allegory out of it regarding the difficulties of individual development and the threats posed to it. Also referred to, seemingly, is the idea of human separateness, being apart from others, from life processes and from nature, and our yearning to be part of a whole that is perhaps a unified and transcendent thing.

In an interview I conducted with Gargiulo, he stated that *on a personal level I'm saying that I had a task of not only healing a broken mind, but also a broken heart, and a broken heart is harder to heal. It was my father's apology to me that healed my heart* (News and Reviews, p. 8). Gargiulo narrates the continuous troubled relationship he had with his father. He was unable to relinquish attachment to him, though others, like members of his psychotherapy group, urged him to do so. But after a long illness, as his father lay dying, he asked to be forgiven, and forgiveness was granted, as the father died in the son's arms. Reconciliation had been accomplished, though a lifetime of bitterness and hard feeling could not be abolished. An urge toward mutual recognition and acceptance is hard to deny, even if in its accomplishment we still are apart and separate, as in Gargiulo's reference to Michelangelo's depiction of God creating and animating man, finger close yet worlds apart. Nevertheless, Gargiulo comes to see the context in which his father was a tyrant, in his response to Gargiulo's hard, cold and demanding paternal grandmother, "who had taken up residence in her son."

Liberated from the bitterness of childhood, Gargiulo is able to appreciate his father as a wounded and broken man and not just a tyrant. This helps him understand the angry, narcissistic, coercive behavior of his

father. Does it mitigate the ruinous effect it had on his son? It seems to make it more possible to live with it. The posing of such questions makes his memoir so interesting.

The universalizing of the Humpty Dumpty story is a theme running through the memoir. It refers personally to the author's struggles to overcome a conception of himself as a broken child and adult, with Humpty's disintegration paralleling his own. Reference is made to the author's difficult early years. The narration continues during adolescence with relations with peers and his mother's emotional crisis. He came to realize that he had been looking for an ideal by which he could define his life, so at 18, one year into college, he entered a Roman Catholic monastic order, the Carmelites, with the intention of preparing for the priesthood. This lasted ten years, with disciplined study, respectful peer companionship, sensitive and caring teachers. All of this, the author says, was reparative for his sense of self, but it did not provide the foundation he sensed was needed, so he decided to leave prior to ordination, with the help of a sensitive psychiatrist he had started seeing. The author spent eight years as a lay professor of religious studies, during which time he married, started a family, undertook doctoral studies, completed psychoanalytic training, and opened a private practice.

Fascinating accounts are given of the similarities and differences of the commitment to the religious life and to psychoanalytic work. In speaking about his fellow religious initiates, Gargiulo says that they had all been injured in life and were searching for wholeness, in a way reminiscent of psychoanalysts. The initiates sought an "integration that would assure them of their own loveableness," and the relinquishing of sexuality seemed a small price to pay for such personal identity (pp. 30-31). In the quest for God, Gargiulo began to feel that the spirit of God was in the doing of godly deeds. As the 13th Century mystic Meister Eckhart said, imitate Jesus rather than worship him. This was similar to Freud's notion of our making the world real by loving it. As Gargiulo says, "...when we are free from corrosive narcissism we can experience the world as good enough to captivate both our interests, our care and our desires" (p. 37).

Gargiulo appreciates what the church gave him, but also what it took away, viewing the taboo on sexual awareness and expression not as evidence of a special calling but as a powerful control mechanism. The church's difficulty with aggression is seen in its view on sexuality, with the emphasis on the controlling mechanism of guilt as a means to enforce morality, diminishing responsible adulthood. Gargiulo contrasts this with Freud's idea that in order to make more ethical, personally responsible people, we should

seek to build in them a personal sense of competence rather than exploit their fears of transgression.

So there is always a need for spiritual awareness, as in an autonomous need for respectful personal agency, in a world in which we experience our contingency and aloneness. The beginnings of the self involve spiritual questions. Another way to put this is Gargiulo's frequent reference to spirituality as a quiet response before our perception of the absolute silence of unlimited possibilities. The coming into being of each individual is a momentary actualization of the natural transcendence of unlimited possibilities. There are many ways to speak of this un-limitedness: the unknowable, the transcendent, the unconsciousness—the power of the unknown that grounds our lives. It should evoke a sense of our own unimportance and our contingency, being dependent on forces we cannot understand. This is what Freud meant by emphasizing that we are not masters of our own house. This open wonder before the depth that is within and without should engender a reduction, for both psychoanalytic and religious advocates, in the narcissistic import of the self. The result should be greater self-awareness, compassion, civility, justice. Our experience of essential aloneness—where the self leaves off and the not self begins—should make for greater reverence for life. There is the intuition that every living thing embodies something that is transcendent to the immediacy of its historical actuality.

Both psychoanalysis and spirituality explore internality, aloneness, the solitariness of being open to both oneself and the world. Gargiulo sees this as the bedrock of psychotherapeutic, psychoanalytic practice. Is it true that to know and understand oneself is to know and understand others? What does the vital emptiness yet depth of the self tell us about the world, the similar experience of all and our need to connect across the chasms of separateness? I think Gargiulo is saying that living the experience of this separateness, and sharing a sense of oneness with others as we attempt to bridge the separateness, are the things that constitute transcendence. Embracing the emptiness within is the basis for the infinite possibility of choices to be made for connection.

In Gargiulo's speaking about his personal life, his struggles to achieve identity and wholeness, wonderful use is made of the conception of the metaphorical nature of psychoanalytic concepts. We see this as he talks about his personal analysis, work with his patients, relations with his peers, and conflicted interactions with his parents. Some of the passages are powerfully moving in their depth and beauty. The intellectual rigor with which he talks about such things in *Psyche, Self and Soul* now gives way to

pictures of the difficulties of interpersonal relations, and yet their fulfillment of a basic need, that are nuanced, perceptive and stirring. They are also rendered in clear, un-psychoanalytic language that sacrifices nothing in precision and rigor. We appreciate how metaphor is a primary route to the experience of meaning. As Gargiulo has said, for example, transference and the unconscious can be seen as discoveries or as interesting ways to organize experience. They are created by interpretation—the unconscious, for instance, representing the idea to know and not know, a metaphor for the inevitably hidden in human discourse and experience that we both actively perpetuate and are arbitrarily subject to. When we say that the unconscious is revealed as we interpret or experience it, we're speaking about the effects of self-knowledge—quite an interesting way to put a much-discussed idea! Our thinking should always not be far from a state of wonder. Otherwise, as Gargiulo says, reflection becomes a dead formula. The knowledge that we say constitutes transference is always provisional, just outside our reach, beyond our grasp. We bring many selves to the moment, and transference interpretation is to isolate in order to appreciate—and be able to talk about—complexity. The center of meaning is always located somewhere else; our knowledge is therefore metaphorical. Transference can be a metaphor for our capacity for recreation, becoming pathological when a particular mode of expression or expectation overshadows the whole of our many other selves in their modes of relating.

Our task is to liberate ourselves from the determining factors of fate and circumstance that diminish the self and limit options. The objective is not to acquire free will but increase the likelihood of being able to more frequently experience Edward Glover's idea of "freed will." But the will has nevertheless been compromised, and no man knows what the realization of his full potential would have been had he been optimally nurtured and protected in a way that facilitated it. Gargiulo's vision, like Freud's, seems tragic, yet it promises hope. Rifts within and between us can be bridged. Pathologies, from narcissistic to neurotic disorders, can be ameliorated. The coming together within oneself and with others is a possibility and a healing worth striving for. Such a healing, for analyst and analysand, as Gargiulo indicates, would demonstrate a capacity for vulnerability, compassion and civility.

The Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme is the metaphor for the possibility of man's fallen state: being broken into pieces, replicating what we all feel as human beings, separate yet somehow intimately related to each other; a yearning for reunification and therefore a struggle with our

separateness; the fear of punishment for the presumption of even trying to be at all, to be individuated; the impossibility of being whole and the ongoing attempt to keep trying.

In my interview with Gargiulo, I asked him what he made of the fact that Humpty was an egg. His reply was, *As a young kid I felt there was something vital and alive inside of me. I didn't know how to break out. I couldn't break out, but a few people helped me to get a feeling that there was another world out there that was like the 'yolk' inside of me, a world that I could love, that's not going to oppress me, or break me, the delicacy of the emerging self, like an egg, that can be so easily broken* (News and Reviews, p. 8).

We can see how the special anxieties of Gargiulo's personal situation reflect those we all feel about entering into the world, living in it competently, being treated respectfully. Humpty is the *image* of the destruction of the possibilities of integration and selfhood, the anxieties and fears that undo all hope of autonomous, self-sufficient living, perhaps even a fantasy of the destruction attending a child's falling out of the womb. It's also an image of the precarious foothold we all have on the maintaining of our selfhood,

as we struggle to achieve it early on and fend off the assaults that would undo do in adulthood.

At the end of his memoir, Gargiulo speaks of how tired Humpty was of fighting to keep the self intact, and of how, in spite of the pain and suffering of Gargiulo's own undermining, he could nevertheless say that "life has been generous with me." This gives him the authority, as a psychoanalyst, to "stand vigil" for the dreams of all the Humpty Dumpties, as analysts do, since they know personally how imperiled such dreams are. The author also includes a series of lovely poems in his work which reflect on the themes presented.

All of this is summed up when Gargiulo says, near the end of his memoir, that what he has "learned is that a broken Humpty can be a bridge to others, a fallen Humpty a sign of our common fragility and an aware Humpty a hope that one need not pass on what was done to us more out of ignorance than design" (p. 131).

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