

Chapter One of “[Psyche, Self and Soul](#)”

Meaning and Metaphor in Psychoanalytic Education¹

It is more than an academic question if we ask, in the tradition of Theodor Reik, whether we can train someone to be a psychoanalyst or whether psychoanalysts are, in fact, born. Since we generally act as if we can train an individual to competently, and even occasionally to creatively practice this art form, I would like to focus on the latter alternative, namely, psychoanalysts are born. (This position might endanger the financial viability of most psychoanalytic training institutes, but for the present I leave such a consideration aside.) If we speak of analysts as born to be such, I am not implying some divine election or mystery cult priesthood. What I am wondering about is the implication, for our field, if we say that the capacity to practice analysis precedes any formal training, as such, and is, actually, a prerequisite for effectively and creatively using the training at all. By training I include the personal analysis, which although vital for any psychoanalyst to experience, is nevertheless subordinate to certain individual qualities: primarily, a capacity for personal honesty, a desire for cross-identification issuing in compassion and civility, and the possession of what we may call a playful intelligence. Unfortunately we have no way of guaranteeing the acquisition of these qualities, despite the length of any analysis.

The quality that I would like to emphasize is the need to possess a playful intelligence; I mention the other qualities, however, as a context for understanding my reflections. Much of psychoanalytic education has undervalued the need for these overall character traits as pre-requisite for practicing psychoanalysis, emphasizing, in-stead, content mastery and/or the completion of clinical /therapeutic requirements. To pursue that line of thought, however, would be a different paper.

I will introduce my thoughts about metaphor and meaning in psychoanalytic education by recounting a personal experience. Many years ago a colleague and I, both new to the field, were participating in a public discussion with a psychologist, a professor of phenomenological psychology, who was presenting his clinical work. At one point my colleague asked the speaker, rather pointedly, whether or not he believed in the unconscious. This was done, I suspect, to ascertain how psychoanalytically informed the presenter was. Although I thought I understood the thrust of the question, I was troubled by its turn of phrase. I had, a few years prior, left many years of

¹ Presidential Address (1977) International Federation for Psychoanalytic Education Conference.

studying and teaching theology. I wondered, upon hearing my colleague's question, whether I had stumbled, somehow, back onto an old route, a route where the personal acknowledgment of belief in the unconscious, or the Oedipal complex, for example, ultimately determined one's affiliation, or, more ominously, one's correctness. Such an approach is comparable to asking whether one believes that one's religious scriptures are a product of divine revelation.

Over my years as a teacher and student of psychoanalysis I have heard, in various garbs, the same kind of formulation. Not infrequently I would hear colleagues talk about the acceptance of the oedipal complex as the core of neurosis, as a defining prerequisite for practicing psychoanalysis. Another shibboleth by which to prove whether one is a true psychoanalyst is the acknowledgment of a particular formulation for the concept of transference. I do not wish to beg the question by isolating certain religiously toned words and to question their usage. The problem is more troubling. I understand the personal yearning we all share for a body of know-ledge, for something to know with certainty. Although such knowledge has some functional usefulness, it is, in fact, both intellectually and existentially dangerous.

Dangerous, because psychoanalysis is primarily a metaphor perhaps a key metaphor for understanding many of the other metaphors that comprise our intellectual, cultural and personal lives. Although we speak of psychoanalysis as a theory of the mind, a mode of investigation as well as a clinical technique, without under-standing it as a metaphor we are in danger of knowing a great deal while understanding very little. Any theory or model of the mind, separated from its grounding as a living metaphor is, in effect, an Eden laden apple, more seductive than the rise and fall of our libidinal fantasies.

By metaphor I do not mean exclusively a figure of speech but rather as a primary route to the experience of meaning. The metaphors of psychoanalysis, in either their traditional Freudian formulations, or the other various alternative or complementary formulations, can either be experienced as discoveries, that is, Freud discovered the unconscious or transference, or as creative formulations meant to evoke and suggest an interesting way of organizing human experience. I do not believe that one discovers the unconscious or transference comparable to discovering the bones of *Homo habilis* in the layered mud of Africa, or a purposefully hidden treasure. It is more useful to speak of the unconscious and transference, for example, as phenomena that are experienced as they are interpreted. They are created by interpretation. Even our understanding of the dynamic unconscious, with its notion of force/counterforce and the return of the re-pressed, is, obviously, not comparable to the forces/ counterforce in a gas-driven engine. It is a metaphor, among many, indicating our paradoxical capacity to know and not know, to be aware and to turn away from awareness, the latter being the road to illusion.

I am speaking a commonplace when I say that artists and poets, not infrequently, create the unconscious more effectively than we analysts; particularly to the extent that psychoanalytic education does not encourage playfulness with language and with theory. That Western consciousness, for a major portion of the twentieth century, was resonant to Freud's metaphors is well known. They have been profoundly useful for human reflection; hopefully they can continue to be so, only, however, if we understand that what Freud gave form to is what we have to give form to. The reality is that if we are not constantly recreating psychoanalysis we are, in fact, killing it.

What does recreating it mean? Minimally we can say that unless we are constantly refinding the metaphorical aspect of our knowledge, we can, all too easily, slip into a literal, concrete understanding of it. Any theoretical formula or model that does not impel us to wonder and reflection becomes a dead formula. If we speak of transference, for example, it is important to recognize that knowledge is always provisional, just outside our reach, a little beyond our grasp. Such awareness can help keep our reading of the situation between patient and analyst modest. Minimally we should keep in mind that there are many selves that we all bring to the moment. When we speak of transference, therefore, we are isolating in order to appreciate complexity. Great literature shows us that it is only in the poetic or fictional re-creation of reality that we even get close to it. No wonder Freud said that Dostoyevsky was a better psychologist than he! Transference is one such metaphor for our capacity of re-creation; it is pathological when a particular mode of expression overshadows the whole of our many selves, our many varied relationships. To the extent that we do not recognize a metaphorical reading of transference, to the extent that we do not teach it, we are destined, I believe, to fall into what Alfred North Whitehead (1929) calls the error of misplaced concreteness. That is, mistaking an object as an ultimate reality rather than as a point of reference; attempting to understand a particular event separate from the whole context of its occurrence.

A metaphor is, as we know, that which evokes something else, a use of analogy to promote a depth of meaning and emotional resonance, as when we speak, for example, of the evening of life. Just as a metaphor points to something else, locates the center of meaning some-where else, we must remember that ultimately there is not, nor can there be, one definitive center of meaning. By the very nature of our capacity to use metaphor we are guaranteed continuous new meanings. Rather than ask whether a person believes in the unconscious, for example, we would, today, be more interested in what enables a person to believe in anything. To identify something as unconscious, for example, is to attempt to context an individual's self-understanding. When we say that the unconscious is revealed or found *as it is interpreted*, we are describing an aspect of self-knowledge that comes in many guises. Knowing oneself is also to experience not knowing oneself, turning our eyes away from, or even refusing to see, oneself.

How can we speak of such paradoxical knowing? We can effectively use the model of the unconscious as long as we recognize and help our students to recognize that we are neither accepting a psychoanalytic dogma nor postulating a *deus ex machina*. In this sense the unconscious is always a metaphor for the inevitably hidden in human discourse and experience, for the hidden that we both actively perpetuate and are arbitrarily subject to.

The metaphorical nature of the unconscious is equally true of such concepts as resistance, transference, idealized self-object or transitional space, *inter alia*. We can also speak, in a Lacanian framework, of desire itself as a metaphor for the other. That is, the other as culture, the other that germinates desire within us; even the prohibition of desire is the other as superego. If we forget such considerations and proceed as if we can analyze desire as a singular possession we are in danger, as analysts, of mishearing. In this vein I am reminded of what Italo Calvino (1974) wrote in his masterful *Invisible Cities*, namely, *it is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear* (p. 106). We need poets, midwives of metaphor, to help us hear what a patient is saying.

Further, if we proceed as if we can analyze desire as singular we are also in danger, as Winnicott (1958) has written, of confusing mind and psyche. As I (1997) have written elsewhere, when we speak of mind we can avoid limiting our understanding by not reducing it to brain, or imagination, or memory, or thinking in terms of problem solving; mind is more than singular, more than an individual's personal possession. Without understanding its communal base, as particularly but not exclusively exemplified in our use of language, without appreciating how we are given a sense of *I-ness* by the particular culture we live in, we can easily premise individuality and be blind to what mind stands for, in all its metaphorical referents.

In a different context Otto Fenichel (1945), a master of Freudian theory, was acutely aware of the danger of analyzing the singular, of concretizing the individual, when he wrote:

Neuroses are the outcome of unfavorable and socially determined educational measures, corresponding to a given and historically developed social milieu and necessary in this milieu. They cannot be changed without corresponding change in the milieu (p. 586).

Are we doing a service to the truth, and to our students, if we teach about defenses, about transference, about being alive, and talk as if we are describing phenomena solely locatable within individuals and expressed simply by that individual's personal history? If we can speak about the "I" as a cultural/imaginative construct, is not the "I" then a metaphor for that culture and all the forces - intellectual, economic, artistic, religious, and philosophical that constitute that culture? Just as the transitional space between mother and child is the ground source for civilization and culture, so the transitional

space between analyst and patient should not be reduced to a figurative place inhabited by forgotten teddy bears, or a haven for solipsistic phantasies; it is the ground bed out of which, together, human beings, analysts and patients, locate their ever changing center. A center, which is a ground space for meaning.

Meaning, as Erik Erikson (1963) has observed, is relative to our life experiences, a point he noted when describing the achievement of human wisdom as manifested in one's capacity to pass on life knowledge while simultaneously recognizing its actual historical relativity. Such a position goes a long way toward modifying one's narcissistic need, both as teachers and students, to know, to have found the way - the Gnostic promise to be counted among the enlightened.

Ultimately, then, it makes no sense to believe in any-thing if that means forgetting the metaphorical nature of knowledge. Sir Peter Medawar (1982), the English research biologist and philosopher, is not alone when he reminds us that even in the empirical sciences *a hypothesis is an imaginative preconception of what might be true* (p.122). In this vein we can no more believe in psychoanalysis than we can believe in cybernetics. I do not mean that as a pejorative comparison. The only way we can practice psychoanalysis is, I believe, paradoxically, to recognize our need for a guided praxis while at the same time acknowledging the primacy of perspective over content. That Winnicott or Kohut, for example, have offered alternate perspectives, alternate metaphors, does not negate Freud's perspective. We simply have alternative ways of approaching what we choose to call content, for example, Oedipal desires. Each new perspective is ultimately an act of creation, revealing more by placing what we are addressing in a wider context. Winnicott's (1958) famous dictum that *there is no such thing as a baby* (p.99) grounds oedipal desires, for example, more forcefully than any five-year-old's phantasies. Under-standing the metaphorical basis of knowledge frees us of the Herculean burden of finding the truth. We can, instead, settle for a truth, or should I say several truths. Most of what I read about today, from those who feel that they must kill Freud off, is their belated discovery that he did not possess the truth. Unfortunately in the history of psychoanalysis other Ur analysts have walked this path. When Winnicott chided Melanie Klein for her insistence that those who recognized her contributions should use only her language, he was arguing for the use of personal metaphors over collective allegiance, for a commitment to a humanistic science rather than a conversion to a new religion.

We may choose to describe what occurs in the space between couch and chair as transference, or we may choose to describe it in terms of developmental lacunae leading to the formation of what we can call either an "I" or a *persona* as long as we understand that such *realities* are, as I have mentioned above, imaginative/cultural constructs subject to the same ebb and

flow of insight which time guarantees. When we understand transference as a metaphor, as I have mentioned, we are attempting to elucidate how we are contextual creations, made up of our many histories and our many desires. We can appreciate that when patients are, for the psychological moment, their forgotten childhood dreams, fears, hopes, or expectations, they nevertheless encompass more than meets the ear, at that moment. Transference, in this context, is a metaphor for memory, for our need to speak the language spoken to us, for the ambiguity of desire, and sometimes the absence of desire, as well as the different selves desires evoke. That we are formed by our history, and by what we do with that history, is not intrinsically a statement of pathology but of the dilemma of self-understanding. A transference neurosis, consequently, with its narrowing focus on who the analyst is, or is to be, comes about, I believe, precisely because the patient has lost the capacity to know the analyst as metaphor for what the patient needs. The patient collapses into the literal and thereby eclipses the metaphorical.

Finally, in the context of understanding psychoanalytic concepts metaphorically, I would like to briefly comment on the concept of regression. Thinking linearly promotes the image of regression as a back and forward phenomenon, as if measuring ego functions on a ruler. Thinking metaphorically allows us to know that there is always another reading, always another affective memory that we can experience; all of which helps us appreciate that personal integration is not simply a landmark developmental achievement so much as an operative goal with constantly varying manifestations. Consequently how we conceptualize the notion of regression will either tie us to concrete thinking or enable us to grasp the complex simultaneity of human functioning. It is a truism that we live on many levels at once. The concept of regression can be productively understood as an ongoing attempt to capture the obvious complexity of our human functioning, paradoxically, by narrowing our focus.

Now if we come back to our question of education for psychoanalysts and its possibility, we can again try to understand Theodor Reik's thought that psychoanalysts are born and not made. Another way of saying this might be to state that one must, in some way, be a psycho-analyst before starting any formal training, if one is to benefit from such training. I believe Freud (1926) was thinking in this vein in *The Question of Lay Analysis* when he wrote that analysts should have a *kind of sharpness for hearing for what is unconscious and repressed, which is not possessed equally by everyone* (p. 219). He went on, as we know, to recommend that individuals with a back-ground in history, literature, or the psychology of religion undertake the study and practice of this new science.

By intellectual discipline and/or life experiences one must be able to transcend the immediacy of the present, the immediacy of the concrete. To be able to appreciate the intrinsic arbitrary selectivity of awareness that any

language or cultural modes provide is to experience our symbolizing capacity and to set oneself loose from the illusion of certainty. To love the world and to experience personal competence, to value oneself and to be committed to the surprise, again following Theodor Reik's lead, of finding out who we are with honesty and humor, these are the qualities needed for the study of psychoanalysis. To study whatever insights a psychoanalytic perspective can provide, knowing, without depression, narcissistic injury, or intellectual cynicism that we are not able to hold truth except as a point of reference, such are the qualities we need if we are to find ourselves as psychoanalysts.²

Winnicott had such issues in mind when he wrote that our first task as analysts is fostering a patient's capacity for play. If we do so, if we encourage the play of metaphor, in all its ramifications with the self, the other, and the world, we will have done more than we can possibly know. To use an old religious and philosophic metaphor, we will have freed the soul from the body, that is, we will have made life possible, free from living in a world of the concrete, the concreteness of things, the concreteness of thought.

Psychoanalysts are not only midwives of memory but also harbingers of a new future. We can experience our profession as playfully expansive rather than tediously repetitious, as we understand that we live in a sea of meanings, as we understand that we live with a multitude of metaphors.

² Note Freud's (1926) observation, in the Socratic tradition: *only a man who really knows is modest, for he knows how insufficient his knowledge is* (p.232).