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A piece of creative writing, like a daydream, is a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood.

— Freud

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On the Cover:
Holding the Rainbow / The Alchemy of Art
Malcolm Bucknall

Malcolm Bucknall is an English-born painter who works in oil, watercolor and ink. His animal-human images borrow visual passages from past masters. Besides 17 prizes in national and regional shows, special recognition includes a major NEA fellowship, 1985 – 1986, and inclusion in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art (one of 40 artists from the southwestern quadrant of the country selected in 1980 for continuing career documentation for possible historical interest.) Email: paintbuck@aol.com

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Murray Scher

Editorial

In the Guise of Fiction

Murray Scher holds the PhD in counseling psychology from the University of Texas at Austin. He is a past president and fellow of the American Academy of Psychotherapists as well as a fellow of the American Psychological Association. Widely published and a sought after presenter, he has long been in love with the written word as well as the intricacies of psychotherapy. He is currently in private practice in Austin, Texas, and Jonesborough, Tennessee.
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We are as much devotees of the written word in all its forms as we are of the various modes of artistic expression of which people are capable. These forms of expression have informed our lives and our work, and we have relished the contributions they have made to our well-being.

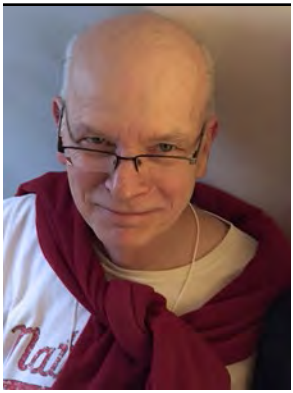
Therefore, when we contemplated the many guises in which imagination is expressed — which we chose to call fiction — it made great sense to look at the impact of those expressions on psychotherapy. And what we have to offer you in this issue of *Voices* is a cornucopia of articles, artwork, and poetry. We are a bit humbled by the excellent submissions we received, the best of which we are delighted to share with you.

Psychotherapy is a gorgeous deconstruction of the truths and myths we have woven into our lives and then wish to untangle and examine. Fiction can be enormously helpful in this endeavor as it strives to illuminate the myriad ways in which we dwell in the world and in ourselves. Great art, whatever its form, speaks to us when we reverberate to it and know some "low door in the wall" is pushed open.

Our clients tell us of books they have read which speak to them, of art exhibitions they have attended which mirror their feelings and conflicts, of poetry they have read which unlocked a hidden albeit familiar emotion, and we encourage them to seek more.

The work collected here illuminates the process and product of using fiction in psychotherapy, and in doing so draw us into the worlds and psyches of the writers to whom we are grateful for their willingness to share themselves generously. ▼

Tom Burns



Tom Burns, PhD, is in private practice and a long-time AAP member. Along the way, he collaborated in editing *Voices*, has developed a love of poetry and, reluctantly, group process. His new-sprung love is granddaughter Hattie.
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Child psychology hadn't reached Ireland yet... Seamus Moran, whose wiry black hair all migrated to his knuckles after he ate out-of-date tinned sardines, told my mother once that his son Peter was Special Needs. "You know, Authentic."

— History of the Rain, Niall Williams

Before becoming a believer in psychotherapy and authentic engagement, I had a couple of conversion experiences.

For two years, my 18th and 19th, I lived mostly in a dissociative state — part of humanity, but barely. Traumatic loss had sparked, I think, the Germanic part of my character. In headstrong fashion I was sad and deeply mistrusting of connection to people. By my reckoning, people turned out often enough to be other than who they seemed — intrusive, or dead without warning. So why bother.

Luckily, I met two people, important to my development over the course of the next few years, who roused me from my dissociative sleep. Both had their issues, but experiences with them taught me that connection with people — being exposed — could be safe. I was transformed in no small part by partaking in various forms of play with these friends, and so gained an inkling of feeling whole instead of apart.

One new male friend, Alec, loved two art forms: baseball and film. For a period of several months from a house in the heroin district of Detroit, we and other of our communards journeyed to baseball games, but also to foreign films. The lowly Tigers were not to be understood and seldom did I understand the meaning of the movies, usually oblique and darkly existential. It made no difference.

Bonding with Alec — usually within a small group, arguing, for example, about a particular managerial stratagem on the ball field or in another instance, discerning what Brando muttered in the opening scene of *Last Tango* — that's what mattered. With Alec and friends I was immersed in a cultured media where baseball and movies were the agar, and the developing organism was trust.

The other new friend, Dorothy, read novels and was part of a college dance troupe. For the first time, I watched modern dance, the currency required to be with this new woman friend. As Annie says about reading poetry to her boyfriends in *Bull Durham,* "a guy'll listen to anything if he thinks it's foreplay."

We also read books together, as when we plodded through and at times relished Doris Lessing's novel, *The Golden Notebook*. This seasoned our romance and put me in relationship with the novel's narrative, plot and characters — and more important, with myself. These relationships were transformational objects. With Dorothy and within the solitude of reading, I found a beginning self to be true to. I learned to love while being loved. Though unaware at the time, there also was the transformation that took place inside reading's quiet space — someone, the author, communicating with me but

not present, mirroring a connection I longed for with another absentee, my father.

More could be considered here, but the point is that it's been through film, novels, and even baseball that I've often enough found deep connection with others. There are many other ways to get there, certainly. *I and Thou* contact comes in all varieties and it's a collaborative affair — like therapy. But it was these conversion experiences that led me to explore my own interior space and to enter the exterior space between me and others.

* * *

Here and now, for this issue of *Voices* I've collaborated with another important friend, Murray Scher. Our play space, previously a woods for hiking, now is a computer screen and conference calls. Our Play-Doh of late has been a figurative stack of manuscripts, as well as texted and phoned check-in's. And another friend, *Voices* editor Kristin Staroba, has joined in the play, deftly guiding and supporting us, and editor-wise, doing heavy lifting herself. So we three, sharing a strong transference to the written word and the contributors within these pages, in the end, have shared one another. It's been a joy. ▼

> There is, Winnicott suggests, a need for nonsense that is every bit as crucial — and sometimes more so — than our need for sense and meaning.
>
> — Adam Phillips in *Promises, Promises*

Ulysses

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.
I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
For ever and forever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,
A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Ulysses. © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons

Ruby Allen

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Tennyson's *Ulysses:*
A Map for the Last Leg of the Journey

When I first encountered Tennyson's *Ulysses* as an undergraduate student of English literature, to say that the poem did not speak to me would certainly be an understatement. In the first blush of my newfound feminist ardor, what I heard from Tennyson was a glorification of war and a refusal to give up "the delight of battle" to live in peace. Being "strong in will" and striving "not to yield" were two macho characteristics that were symptomatic of all that was wrong in the world! Now I am nearing 80 and as Ulysses says, "the long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep moans with many voices." Some of these voices, most especially those of C. G. Jung and Joseph Campbell, have led me to a reconsideration of this beautiful poem.

My most recent work has been with hospice patients and as an ombudsman for nursing home residents. They have not been formal clients, which has been liberating in many ways. We were not on the clock, we did not have an agenda, and no money was changing hands. I have been in awe of the bravery and strength I have witnessed in this population of elders in the last phase of their life journey. Many were content with the daily round of activity, visits from family, and the consolations of their religious practice. Many others were still struggling to resolve conflicts and seeking to understand the meaning of their lives. What they all had in common (apart from those who did not wish to engage on any level) was a keen interest in unspooling the narratives of their lives to someone who was willing to truly listen. Many of the seekers relating their life narratives were intrigued by Joseph Campbell's idea that even the most ordinary life is a hero's journey

(Cousineau, 1990), though it often took some time and thought for them to recognize themselves as heroes in their own life stories.

Ed, a hospice patient with terminal cancer, wanted to tell the story of his life on tape so that his younger grandchildren (one about to be born) would know something of who he was after he was gone. I suggested that I give him a series of open-ended questions to consider about each phase of his life, and we agreed that after a thoughtful period of reflection on a set of questions, we would have a free-ranging discussion of them together on tape. He was, of course, free to veto any question he was unwilling to discuss.

At our first meeting, there was a book of poems on his bedside, and while looking through it, I came upon *Ulysses* for the first time in many years. It was a favorite of his and as he read it aloud to me, I suddenly understood it as an evocative and challenging map for the final stage of the seeker's inner life journey. We decided that during our time together we would explore this poem more deeply. Over the course of the 10 weeks and 30 sessions we spent together, many themes arose that resonated in Ed's life and in my own (and as I later learned, in the lives of many others near the end of the journey).

Ed first connected to those passages about age that have become the most familiar:

> Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
> We are not now that strength which in old days
> Moved heaven and earth, that which we are, we are;
> One equal temper of heroic hearts,
> Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

"That which we are, we are" would be the theme of our endeavor, as Ed was eager to know himself better and to be at peace with himself in the time that remained to him. We would return to this passage at the end of our time together, especially to the meaning of the final line for a man dying of cancer.

Ed began by talking about how disconnected he felt from the world around him as he aged. Two of his grandchildren were immersed in hip-hop culture, one granddaughter was a Goth, and he felt that these three in particular were slovenly in dress and manners and entirely too free sexually. However hard he tried, he knew that these aspects of their lives would never be acceptable to him. I shared with him how I had felt when I walked into a church for the first time in many years for the wedding of a colleague's son. I found myself appalled by the dress of many of the attendees: Flip-flops, see-through blouses with black underwear, and bare midriffs were the order of the day. As I told a friend later: "I just sat there and turned into my mother!" We laughed over our shared dismay and the laughter provided a release from the seriousness of the situation, as laughter usually does. We saw that Ulysses, too, experiences this alienation profoundly as he speaks of his people as a "savage race that hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me." Ulysses is, however, blessed with a child he respects and trusts to be "centered in the sphere of common duties" and "decent not to fail in offices of tenderness." As Ed thought more deeply he was able to admit that his grandchildren had shown him tenderness and care, even if not in the way he would have preferred, and that they did possess strengths and resources that might bode well for their future lives. He realized, as had Ulysses, that it was time to free himself of his over-involvement in their lives. He could only love them and let go. As Ulysses declares simply about his son: "He works his work, I mine."

And what is his work? For Ulysses, it is a literal journey into the "dark, broad seas." It is refusing "to rust unburnished." It is taking a final risk. He declares, "It may be that the gulfs will wash us down; it may be we shall touch the Happy Isles." For those of us who can no longer dare great deeds in the broader world, the inner journey into the dark sea of the unconscious may require a different kind of daring and heroism. Daring to explore what Jung (1964) called the shadow content that has not yet been assimilated into consciousness carries risks of its own. I asked Ed if he had any "rust" that needed to be "burnished" or any "gulfs" that he thought might wash him away. At our next meeting, he tearfully revealed that he had "rust around his heart." He had never loved his mother and he recounted how ashamed he had always felt of what he saw as his failure. He was still angry after 70 years over the way she had belittled and abused him emotionally as a child. He had always shown her respect even though he became physically ill whenever he had to spend much time around her. He felt only relief when she died, although he continued to give lip service to a devotion he never felt. After wrestling with his feelings for some time, he decided that although he could not think of any positive traits he had received from his mother, he had devised certain coping mechanisms in dealing with her that had served him well. He had learned to scope out areas of common interest with her, especially gardening and cooking, that had allowed him to be himself with her and occasionally even to enjoy her company. By extension, he had developed the trait of looking for commonality with people for whom he felt no affinity but with whom he found it necessary to interact in business and social life. He came to appreciate the grit and fortitude in the survival techniques he had developed to navigate the shoals of his childhood. When I suggested that there was heroism in his childhood response to this difficult situation, he replied, "Maybe… maybe so." Ed felt deep sadness that he had not loved his mother, but consciously acknowledging and owning his anger, and seeing his adaptation to his mother's indifference and cruelty in a new light, seemed to bring him a measure of relief.

Ulysses also begins to understand that the richness and wealth of his experience is a pearl of great price. He says:

> All times I have enjoy'd greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those that loved me and alone… I am become a name…much have I seen and known: cities of men and manners, climates, councils, governments…I am a part of all that I have met.

This passage was the most immediately evocative for Ed, and over the course of three taped sessions, he recounted the suffering in his family over the death of a young daughter, and the early deaths of his father and then his wife's father, who had been like a second father to him. His greatest enjoyment came with his participation in family events, travels with his wife, and his efforts on behalf of community and municipal government. He had even "become a name" since he had served several terms as mayor of his town, and he was justly proud of the expressions of esteem he had received when he retired. When we discussed the declaration, "I am a part of all that I have met," Ed was adamant that he could never have understood such an expression when he was younger and felt his differences with others most keenly, especially around religion and politics. It was only in old age that he understood his deeper connections with other people and saw that they, too, had lived through what Buddhists call "the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows." He felt that his commonality with others, especially other

elderly people, was much greater than his differences. He felt a "strange kind of bond" even with people he would never have noticed when he was younger. By looking at the depth, as well as the panorama, of his life experience, Ed seemed satisfied that he had lived a rich and full life, and his life review gave him great pleasure.

For Ulysses, however, it is not enough to bask in the feeling of a life well lived. He still has "a hungry heart" and yearns to yet be "a bringer of new things." He needs to "follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost bound of human thought." Ed had lived a thoughtful life and his desire to "bring new things" to his understanding had not diminished with his illness. He described several areas he was interested in learning more about, including the Middle East, problems in the American school system, relations with China and India, and the Baha'i faith, a religion one of his distant cousins had embraced. As he described his interest in these areas I did not feel that his "hungry heart" was truly engaged with any of them. I asked him to think further about what he really yearned to explore; what would be the "utmost bound of human thought" for him. Several days later he timidly announced that he "would really like to understand sex better." He felt confused and conflicted by the younger generation's attitudes toward sex and at the same time he secretly wondered if he had "missed out." He felt that most of what he heard on the media about sex was "hogwash" but he wasn't sure. His own sex life had ended some years earlier to be replaced by affectionate touches and embraces and he had "felt okay with that," but then what he saw and read sometimes made him feel guilty for not wanting more. He finally decided to take the risk of engaging with this fraught topic. Our explorations in this area were not taped and he was not always comfortable talking with his wife in the house, although the door was always closed and she had never come into the room during a session. I felt that Ed's struggle to be honest with himself about his sexuality was truly heroic. We held fast to the goal of individuation (without the use of the term) throughout. Ed wanted to be fully who he was, unswayed by what the media or so-called experts told him he should be. The phrase "that's just not me" recurred frequently and he eventually learned to give it the honor it deserved.

Ed's early and adolescent sexuality followed a pattern that was common in the American life of his time. Religious and parental prohibitions led to frustrations which were remedied by masturbation, same sex contact at summer camp on two occasions, and romantic visions of the perfect life with the woman of his dreams. He married at 22, after finishing college, and considered himself happy, sexually and in every other way. He had every reason to believe his wife felt the same. Sexual relations slowed down after the birth of his second child but he had many other interests and challenges in his life and he considered this the natural order of things. The deaths of a third child, his father, and his father-in-law, drew him closer than ever to his wife and they were, in Ed's words, "rock solid." Several of his acquaintances embarked on affairs in their 30s, but Ed was not seriously tempted to "upset the applecart with that kind of foolishness." After his children left home he and his wife resumed a more active sex life for a while but this finally ran its course and they settled into a routine of affectionate intimacy. His honest feeling was that they had both experienced a kind of relief when active sex was over. He valued the humor, comradeship, and sense of shared destiny in their partnership more than ever.

As Ed related his sexual history, I did not sense any deep feeling of regret for missed opportunities in his description of the way his sexuality had been lived. I asked him if my impression was accurate and I believed he was truthful when he said, "yes." So then, what had made him so angry and unsettled when he first raised the issue of sexuality? What did he mean by saying that he sometimes felt he had "missed out" and that he "felt guilty for not wanting more"? Ed took some time to consider this and at our next meeting he had reached some tentative conclusions. He began by saying, "I guess I feel like people have been sold a bill of goods." He felt bombarded in ads, television shows, and even by the advice of doctors and so-called "health professionals" in the media to pursue endless sexual satisfaction. "I think the anxiety I felt about sex shows how easy it is to be pulled into wanting things that other people are always saying you should want." Although he was not a conventionally religious man, Ed felt that sex had been robbed of its sacredness and turned into just another commodity and a most lucrative one at that. He felt that men and women both were pressured to believe that they needed to be sexually active "up to the day of death" to consider themselves alive and healthy. If they were not active, there were pills and devices aplenty to make them so, and as Ed said, "that's just not me." He felt that he should be able to acknowledge when his body was done with sex "without feeling like a walking dead man." He admitted that jokes about Viagra and renewed sexual prowess whispered with winks and nods at the Elks Club made him deeply uncomfortable. He felt that "those guys are on the wrong track."

As we continued with this exploration it became clear that Ed was mostly accepting of alternative sexual life styles, although he remained somewhat puzzled by them. His nephew had a friend who was gay and he remarked, "He's a really good guy." He remained unaccepting of promiscuity because it made sex "too commonplace," whereas he thought it was "a really special thing." I began to believe that it was not sex that was at the root of his anxiety, but a deeper angst and pessimism having to do with the culture he was leaving behind. Contemporary sexual mores seemed to be an obvious symptom of what he felt was a disturbingly degenerate culture. Ed still needed to be "a bringer of new things" to his consciousness.

I asked Ed if he could remember any of his recent dreams and suggested that he attend to his dreams and write them down whenever possible. It soon became clear that the recent dreams Ed remembered had featured themes of total destruction or as he put it, "Holocaust and Armageddon." He originally took these dreams to be signs of his imminent death but as he explored further, he realized that members of his family, friends, and even strangers were also destroyed in these dreams. He began to see them as evidence of his fear that the culture and way of life he was leaving behind were on an inescapable path to destruction. He had tried to be positive, or at least hopeful, about the state of the world, but he concluded that he was really "just kidding himself" because he truly believed that with the degradation of the planet and the failure of efforts for peace, life on earth could not continue much longer. He no longer believed it was possible to reverse the course of things. Bringing this pessimism clearly to consciousness was deeply unsettling to him and caused him great pain. I, of course, experienced anxiety over whether or not I should have pushed him this far so close to the end of his life, and I was tempted to try to "fix" it for him and restore his equilibrium. Of course, this was not possible and we sat with these feelings for some days as we completed the tapes for his grandchildren.

Interestingly, it was a program on astrophysics, narrated by Carl Sagan, that brought about a shift in his consciousness. He was reminded that in the endless course of the universe, life forms had come and gone, and cultures had come and gone, in numerous manifestations. There was every reason to believe they would continue to do so. He felt his spirits lift as he was able to acknowledge the finitude of any way of life, or any culture, however precious it might be to him.

Finally, we were able to return to the last line of the poem and speak of what it might mean in his life "not to yield." As a terminal cancer patient, he knew that the time would come when it would be necessary for him to yield his physical body and his consciousness, but he wanted to be able to do so with what he called "good grace," holding on to his love for his family and his life. He knew that he might not be able to die with dignity, but he did not want to die in despair. This seemed to hold the key. He would try not to yield to despair. It would be difficult, and maybe not possible, but perhaps the "work of noble note" that he could still accomplish would be a refusal to yield to despair.

Ed also found comfort in Ulysses' acknowledgement that his ability to understand the world was limited:

> Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
> Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
> Forever and forever when I move.

Ed saw that his need to understand himself fully would never be met in this life since the "fading margins" would always lead to more and more questions and possibilities. The important thing was that he had "set sail"; he had "pushed off"; he had faced "the thunder and the sunshine and the scudding drifts." In his lifetime he had done battle.

Ed died less than a month after we completed our work and his wife, Marjorie, reported that he had felt "ready" and that he had surrendered peacefully. I do not know if Ed "touched the Happy Isles" at the end of his journey, but I do know that his struggle to know himself as fully as possible was a heroic one, and I am honored to have shared the last leg of the journey with Ed, and with Tennyson's wise and valiant warrior, Ulysses. ▼

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Stephanie Spalding

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Tell Me Why

I'd been playing it on repeat, a song I hadn't heard since high school. Spotify had suggested it to me based on other music I'd downloaded, and I was getting to know it again. It's a powerful song, and I'd always found it haunting, but never like this. One of my favorite patients, a young man born three years after the song came out in 1984, was going through something scary.

He was waiting on the results of an STD test. It was the final one in a process that played out over the course of a week — a week that felt like a month, at least to me. He'd gone to a free clinic, where he was asked to come back three times, seeing a different doctor each time and being asked the same questions. How many partners? How many times a week? What protection, for which sex acts? They didn't seem to know what they were doing, and his symptoms persisted. Why was he being asked to repeat himself? Wasn't this all written down somewhere? As possible diagnoses were ruled out one by one, the doctors eventually began to consider the possibility of HIV.

When he announced this at the beginning of a session — practically rolling his eyes as he did so — my heart sank, and then started pounding. I couldn't believe it. And I couldn't believe his attitude. I could feel a little fear around the edges of what he was saying, but he seemed to find it ridiculous. His friends supported him in pooh-poohing the possibility. According to them, this was classic homophobia. The doctors were, essentially, harassing him — intentionally making the process scary and humiliating — and he had nothing to worry about.

I could certainly imagine this scenario. In fact, I think of it as common, even in a place like New York City. And

HIV did seem an unlikely explanation for his symptoms, but that didn't mean he didn't have it. He did have a fair amount of anonymous sex, and it was always under the influence of alcohol and drugs. He was the more vulnerable party in most of these encounters and he didn't protect himself well. He also hadn't been tested in a while. Holy shit, what if he were positive? The possibility alone was unbearable. Maybe I was being hysterical, maybe I wasn't. But the more he and his friends minimized the situation, the more fear and worry I took on, and I was taking it home with me. I was taking him home with me. That, I was used to. Some of our most important work happened in the psychic space that we held for each other outside the room. But this was different.

I *really* cared about this kid. Before meeting him, I'd been told that he was "super smart and super gay," and that he would need someone who could meet him in both places. Apparently I made the cut, and off we went. I found him sweet, hilarious, and absolutely brilliant — intimidatingly brilliant. (Thank God I'd read some Heidegger in college.) It was hard to get him out of his head sometimes, especially when I wanted to follow him there — he had a lot to say about things like "gesture" and "the melancholic." But we found our way and he came to trust the process as much as I did. We met three times a week and used the time well. He especially loved bringing in his dreams, which were like little works of art, and we talked a lot about our relationship. I was struck by my maternal feelings for him, and by how much discipline it took to contain them. He was easily suffocated and apt to wriggle away, so I had to be careful — especially this week when I was so worried about him.

I hadn't been aware of it at the time, but, with each round of testing, I got more attached to the song — a song called "Why?" written by a band called Bronski Beat. I listened to it while running, on my way to work, on my way home from work. By the time we were waiting for the last test result, listening to it had taken on a kind of urgency. The second the song ended, I needed to hear it again. I needed it to be a continuous experience so I could live inside it. I didn't understand how (and I was only partially conscious of it at the time), but it had become a way for me to hold him — and a way for me to be held — as we waited.

Near the end of an evening session, in the middle of that week, my stomach was in a knot and I decided to express some of the anxiety I'd been containing. I did my best to be careful and calm — I didn't want him to scare him unnecessarily — but I also wanted to make room for whatever he was keeping at bay. I wondered aloud if politicizing his experience of being tested was protecting him from feeling his fear, which seemed strikingly absent in him and strikingly present in me. There was a pause and a palpable shift. A record scratch. In a tone I hadn't heard before, what I got back was, "Have you had much experience with patients like me?"

"Why?" starts with a long, piercing, falsetto cry that has never once failed to send a shiver down my spine: "Tell me why! Tell me why!" (It feels ridiculous to type the words out — you really have to hear it.) Verse by verse, a gay man confronts a homophobic world with this question. The lyric I couldn't get over was: "You name me an illness, you call me a sin; Never feel guilty, never give in!" That's the one that now had his face on it, and it hooked me in every time. The song was written in the mid-80s, when, in record numbers, people who were named an "illness" also had an illness — as we all know, a deadly one. The concrete reality and the hateful narratives surrounding it were equally impossible to ignore, and, as I hear it, the song is spacious enough to hold both.

He and I had lost that luxury. Our working space, which had been fluid and expansive from the very beginning, with lots of room for curiosity and complexity, had all but collapsed. Was he really taking my concern as a sign of ignorance? Was he so scared that he was framing it as homophobic, even? I felt pushed away, and more than a little defensive. I had, in fact, worked with patients "like him." And I had waited, along with friends and patients, and with myself, for test results like these. I said some version of this, in case it would help, but of course it only helped me. Kind of. The session ended on a tense note — our first ever.

I decided to walk home. It takes about an hour, 20 minutes of which is over a bridge. I know it well, and I like to close my eyes for a moment here and there. In such a moment, and in the privacy of my own headphones, I returned to my musical obsession. It continued to work a kind of magic that's hard to describe. The space that had gotten so small and tight in the session began to open up, like lungs. I felt like I could breathe.

In the next session, we processed our tense interaction and the ice began to thaw a little. We didn't talk much about the test result he would be getting the next day. That fact filled the room, but in a quiet way, and we talked about other things for much of the hour. At the very end, after both of us had stood up, I had a powerful urge to let him know about the song, and what it had come to mean to me. It felt compulsive and self-indulgent. This was much more about me than him, and would be pretty hard to explain — especially since we only had a minute and he wouldn't know the song, let alone the lyric. The session would likely end on the note of "Never mind, you kind of had to be there." But I found myself lurching ahead, regardless: "This is kind of weird, but…I don't know why I need to tell you this…there's this song I've been listening to, um, a lot…and it has this lyric…this won't mean anything to you, but there's this band from the '80s, Bronski Beat…?" "I know Bronski Beat." I couldn't believe it. "Really? So there's this song 'Why.'" "I know 'Why.'" "And there's this lyric…." We locked eyes for a moment that was bigger than us, stopping to honor the power of the uncanny. As he walked out of my office, he said, "I'm going to go listen to it right now." I walked home again and, of course, so did I. In a way I couldn't have predicted, the song had become a place of meeting. Now when I enter that space, he's there, too. Apparently he had been all along.

The week of waiting eventually came to a happy end. He tested negative, and his symptoms disappeared as mysteriously as they had come. We brought our work to a close a few months later when he moved across the country to take a dream job. I don't know if I'll ever see him again, but I feel like I'll have him forever. "Why?" is now our song, and neither of us will ever hear it the same way again. ▼

Nicholas Kirsch

Nicholas Kirsch, PhD has been a psychotherapist in Washington, DC, for 25 years and counting. He thrives on the richness, intensity and self-awareness of the therapy encounter. Particularly exhilarating are the ongoing process groups for therapists which he leads. Nick came to fiction late, maybe because his mother taught high school literature, maybe because he preferred playing baseball. Now he can't get enough. He believes that crafting and sharing our stories heals and connects us. Novels, fables, myths, bibles, yarns, embellishments, fairy tales and other forms of fiction can teach us about life in ways that biography and history fall short of. While in the midst of a good book Nick finds that life yields more joy, beauty, and intrigue. AAP is his long-standing professional community and proving ground. He welcomes comments:
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A Dialogue Between a Writer and a Therapist:
An Interview with Lisa Alther

> Among other things, you'll find that you're not the first person who was ever confused and frightened and even sickened by human behavior. You're by no means alone on that score, you'll be excited and stimulated to know. Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them—if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry.
>
> — J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)

I am a psychotherapist; I am not a writer. Every time I write it's excruciating. However, the end product and my personal growth usually make the pain well worth it.

Many have analogized creative writing to the labor of childbirth, and I am in that camp. In spite of my painful writing experiences, I often fantasize being a writer of fiction as the idyllic life, getting paid for jotting down all my creative ideas and having people listen to my stories.

Since I can't/won't live out my writer fantasy, I jumped at this chance to have a dialogue with Lisa Alther and perhaps live a bit vicariously through her writer's life. J.D. Salinger captured my feelings toward Lisa Alther when he wrote,

> What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. That doesn't happen much, though.

Well, guess what, some wishes really do come true. One of the guest co-editors, knowing that Lisa's novel Other Women *was an all time favorite of mine, fulfilled my wish*

Lisa Alther

Lisa Alther is the author of six novels and a variety of other written work. Her new book, co-authored with the French artist Françoise Gilot, is titled *About Women: Conversations Between a Writer and a Painter*. A joint memoir of sorts, published in mid-November of 2015, it deals with the differences in growing up female in France versus the United States, the origins of creativity, and the nature of the creative process, among other topics. Alther was born in Kingsport, Tennessee, in 1944. She currently divides her time among homes in Tennessee, Vermont, and New York City.
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to befriend Lisa, first, by seating me next to her at a party, and second by inviting me to interview her for this Voices *issue. I got to talk to her about everything from writing, to growing up in Tennessee, to coming out in the '80s, our relationships, and her favorite art. We shared experiences and explored similarities and differences in our work as well as our understanding of what we do and why we do it.*

What follows is our dialogue, edited for clarity and brevity.

(For other interviews with Lisa and a listing of all her writings visit her website lisaalther.com.)

Nick Kirsch: Very early in my psychotherapy career your novel about psychotherapy, *Other Women,* was transformative for me. Now 30 years later, after reading scores of fictional and biographical accounts of psychotherapy, *Other Women* remains for me a masterpiece of experiential and relational psychotherapy. It brought together previously jumbled aspects of what it means to be a psychotherapist, and not only life in the office, but also in the life of a psychotherapist outside the office.

Lisa Alther: [In a cornsilky yet raspy mild southern drawl] Well, thank you, that's really nice to hear.

Kirsch: I don't know how much you know about our organization, AAP, but we are an experiential and relational band of therapists. We focus primarily on the therapist's experience rather than the heavy emphasis on the patient's dynamics like other therapy organizations.

Believe it or not, though the mainstream of our profession is catching up (or on) to us in some ways, our approach remains somewhat novel and fringy even to this day.

Alther: That's very interesting. Murray's mostly just told me how you like to be with each other and have a lot of fun.

Kirsch: Yes, very true. I would add that our organization is really about caring for oneself, caring for the therapist, which does includes having a lot of fun.

Alther: I guess you can be unselfconscious in a way you can't be in most groups where people are only seeing you as the therapist.

Kirsch: Yes. We enjoy dancing, stone sculpture, hiking, golf, all kinds of fun and creative stuff. But whatever we're doing, the encounters are deeply personal and authentic, unlike anywhere else in my experience.

The reason I've rambled a bit about AAP is that *Other Women* was a fabulous literary account of the very process we espouse. So much of the novel was about the therapist's self-awareness, her anxieties, insecurities, depression, and internal reactions to different clients. In other words, the self of the therapist. Consequently I'd always assumed that you'd done some kind of training or study of experiential psychotherapy. You brought to life the therapist's dark side, including addictions (cigarettes and booze), incomplete grieving, relational blunders, depression, lust, and stubborn self-righteousness; and portrayed how all of it flowed through the therapy, for better and for worse, as well as through her life outside of therapy. Even when therapists write about therapy, I don't find such an intricate accounting of the therapist's experience. And you did it so well — had you studied or trained?

Alther: No, I think it was a part of my own therapy that I had done with a woman in Vermont named Nancy. It had been transformative for me, really life changing. And being a novelist, I think I had to understand the whole process of this in order to digest it.

Kirsch: You were an adept student.

Alther: Thank you. We had ended the therapy for a while, but one of my friends was a publisher, and she had been hearing about my experience. She said, "Why don't you and Nancy write a book, a nonfiction book? She could write about her side and you can write about your side." I approached Nancy about it and she wanted to try it, so that's the way we began. But she wasn't a writer and it became clear this approach wouldn't work.

Kirsch: She was trying to write her side of the therapy herself?

Alther: Right, so we thought it over and I said, "How about I interview you and then I will write it from the two points of view, using what you give me as the basis for the fictional therapist." She was open to that.

Kirsch: Good for her, a lot of therapists wouldn't do that.

Alther: Yes, I now know, there is this traditional wisdom that says you shouldn't become friends with your clients.

Kirsch: Yes, good point.

Alther: So in the beginning, we weren't exactly friends, although we really liked each other. But we were working on this project together, so I would go in almost as though it was a therapy session every week, but with a tape recorder. It was a two-way thing. I would say, "When I said such-and-such, why did you say such-and-such?" I was trying to understand my own therapy process and the ways in which the changes I experienced came about, to see if I could systematize it. Of course you can't. But I did come to understand it better, through hearing her side.

Kirsch: Wow…wow. Did you take notes of your therapy sessions? A lot of people do that, not as novelists, but just journaling.

Alther: No, I didn't at the time. I didn't have any idea I would eventually write about it.

Kirsch: How much later, how much after the therapy was it?

Alther: I think about six months later. Then it took me three to four years to write the book, after I finished the interviews with her.

Kirsch: What do you think her motivation was?

Alther: Well, I know she liked me, so I think she liked the idea of working together. She had read my books and liked them, so with me writing a novel about therapy I think she was curious what I would do as a writer with what she gave me. So for her, it was like I was learning how to do therapy, to some degree, and she was learning what it meant to write fiction. In a way we were giving each other insights into each other's professions.

Kirsch: Funny coincidence, I have to admit I was thinking maybe that could happen in doing this interview. I totally love literature, so naturally I always wondered about the writing process and the writer's experience. And it does seem like there is some kind of common core between writers and therapists about understanding human nature.

Alther: Yes, the same goal, just different methods. Well you know, I don't think I could be a therapist.

Kirsch: I was going to ask you that, given that you studied it substantially for this book and came to understand it so well.

Alther: I admire it so much, but my mind doesn't work quickly enough to be a therapist. When I am talking to somebody, I am not able to respond on the spot like Nancy was, so that I felt she was really present and understood me. I have to go away and mull things over. Then I come up with what I think about something and can write about it. She was

so much quicker than I was.

Kirsch: I guess it's a different kind of creative process.

Alther: And writing is more oblique in a way, instead of addressing something head on you invent these characters that somehow enact whatever issues you're dealing with. In other words, I have a harder time going right to the heart of the situation. I have to kind of play around the outskirts of it.

Kirsch: How did that work for you while you were in therapy — was that your process in trying to understand yourself, being kind of oblique and indirect?

Alther: Yes, absolutely. I would kind of wander around out here and then she would make some comment that would go right to the core.

Kirsch: And that sounds like it worked for you?

Alther: It did, I mean I was shocked actually. I would say things about how my mother did this and my mother did that, and Nancy would say, "In other words, your mother was a snob." Then I would go away and think it over and… yeah, my mother was a snob. That wasn't all she was but that was one aspect of what I was telling her about.

Kirsch: Right, maybe you were telling her, but not telling yourself?

Alther: Right, right.

Kirsch: That's compelling to me, two brains working differently, towards the same goal. It could be enlightening if it works, if the connection is made; but a total flop if it doesn't.

Alther: Yes, she could just tell it like it was, maybe because she was a little bit outside, a little bit detached, so she could see it a little more clearly, while I was struggling with it from within.

Kirsch: Yes, that makes sense. And I'm intrigued by what you said about the way we are able to process spontaneously, in the moment. It may be obvious, but I'd never really heard it put that way, that it's a vital part of our craft. So I needed an outsider, you, to point it out to me; just like you needed Nancy to point out what you weren't seeing.

Alther: Yes, it is interesting to realize how many different types of intelligence there are. That's one type; creative intelligence is another type.

Kirsch: Absolutely, I often feel like we're cousins in some sort of way, writers and therapists.

Alther: I think that's true in a sense. You're not so much creating as eliciting and putting together the story of your client's life in a way that is coherent, the same way that a nov-

elist tries to do with a made-up character.

Kirsch: You know there's a type of therapy called writing therapy, or journaling therapy? It's kind of an amalgam of writing and therapy, perhaps a kind of an intersection of our crafts.

Alther: Like journaling dreams? I keep dream journals and I find that really interesting. It's fascinating to go back years later and read them and see the patterns.

Kirsch: Absolutely, it's clear that some clients can express themselves or some of their struggles and feelings much better in writing. There can be more free association and unconscious material and less repression.

Maybe the intersection of our work is something about an exploration of the soul, which we do by questioning, interpreting, and relating, and which you do when you are developing a character?

Alther: Yes, I never thought of writing so much as you make an outline and then fill it in. It is a process of discovery more like being a coal miner with a little light on your hat, and you are going down into the depths of the psyche of your character.

Kirsch: Edward Jones [Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Known World*], a fabulous storyteller, said his characters call out to him, begging to be written about, to have their story told. He feels to not write is a travesty, like he would be muffling these characters and depriving them and the world of their existence.

Alther: So it's character driven, you would say?

Kirsch: Yes, I believe he would say that. I thought you were saying that too, about yourself? But now I hear there's another thing driving your writing — exploration of the soul, and of human nature.

Alther: I think for me a novel or a story usually starts out with some situation that I don't understand, and then the characters come after that. There is the situation, then I drag in these characters who will interact and illustrate the situation for me, and as I watch what they do it helps me understand the situation better.

Kirsch: And create them more fully. Interesting, it sounds different from his process; he feels that the characters are inside, calling to come out. That's where I think he starts from.

Alther: Well for me, once the characters start to emerge then I do feel as though they are living inside me and are almost real, with their own agenda they want to act out. But they don't exist outside of me until I start this process.

Kirsch: It reminds of the difference I've always felt between Northern and Southern writers. Northerners are beautiful writers, but Southerners are wonderful storytellers.

Alther: Right, exactly. And you know, that may be the difference between therapists and fiction writers. One emphasizes clarity and beauty, the other creativity and messiness.

One reason I wanted to write *Other Women* was I was living in Vermont, I had lived there for almost 20 years, and it seemed to me that therapists in Vermont performed the function that preachers did in the South. In other words, that was who you went to with these basic questions: Who am I? Why am I here? and What does it mean to be a decent person? I thought I really needed to understand what the link is between a therapist and a priest.

Kirsch: So you went to a logical source, your therapist whom you thought very highly of. You know a lot of therapists wouldn't do that. Especially if they thought you might want to come back to therapy someday.

Alther: Well, I thought of the therapy as being finished, but I knew I could go back if I wanted to. But it seemed complete to me.

Kirsch: Then after you wrote the book, did you still feel you could've gone back and worked with her?

Alther: I don't know, it never came up. I felt so much better after the therapy with Nancy; I didn't feel the need for more. I doubt I would've gone back to her if I'd gone back to therapy. It would have been a whole new set of issues and I would have started out fresh.

Kirsch: [*Playfully*] Therapy is really not that bad. It can actually be kind of fun and interesting.

Alther: [*Smiling*] True. At one point, let's see, I ended a relationship, and my ex-partner and I did go to a male therapist in Boston to try and figure out how to part amicably. So I didn't go back to Nancy. I don't know, I think it was good for me in a lot of ways to have done that book, and to understand the process better and to some extent to then normalize the relationship. And in other ways, in retrospect, I realize maybe it was not so good for me, because there was a certain amount of money involved. In the beginning we were going to split the money equally because she was going to write half of it. But I took it over, and I realize in retrospect I should've said, "I'll pay you to be the consultant." But we left it as it was so she ended up getting half the money for the book. She probably should've said to me, "Look since I'm not writing it why don't you pay me for my time," or something like that. I ended up feeling a little bit exploited.

Kirsch: Was there a dialogue at all about that?

Alther: No, because one of my issues was that with my mother and also in subsequent relationships I felt I had to earn their love all the time, so I repeated that. I didn't know that at the time; I didn't know until years later that I had repeated that pattern with her. So the question came up, well if I hadn't earned all that money for both of us, would she have wanted to be my friend? Probably she would have, but you know it just muddied the waters.

Kirsch: Yes. That's one of the many complications for therapists and clients, if we have a relationship outside the therapy.

Alther: We didn't ever talk about it. Not too many years later, I realized that she was an alcoholic, and I was mad about that for a while. I thought, "What business does she have helping the rest of us when she can't help herself?" The conflict for me was that she really had helped a lot of people and me. Then I started thinking, "Well, the stream bed doesn't have to drink in order to convey water downstream." At some point I confronted her about her alcoholism, and she thanked me and basically said it's too late. She died, not long after I confronted her, of alcoholism. I was actually with her when she died, which was quite an amazing experience. So in a way that was a gift to me. Her children were around, they went out to dinner, and I was there with her in the hospital. She was in a coma and she just died. Her kids were really annoyed.

Kirsch: That they hadn't been there and you were there instead?

Alther: Yes, it was a very complicated story.

Kirsch: Did they know you were a former client?

Alther: Yes.

Kirsch: That's probably why they were annoyed.

Alther: Yes, I had to come. I was a good friend of hers, so I really should write a sequel.

Kirsch: Yes, there are always sequels, back stories, after stories, there's a lot of material there, absolutely.

Alther: Overall when I look back on the whole thing, it was positive for me; she really helped me through my recurring depressions. Who knows what will happen in the future, but it's held for 30 years now, so whatever her own issues were, she was a fantastic therapist for me.

Kirsch: Chalk one up for therapy. Speaking from the other side of the couch, I'm very flawed, but hopefully I still help a few people. That can be tough to reconcile. I'm the child of a flawed parent and have all these neuroses, how can I be a good model or guide for someone else? Like, who the heck am I telling someone how to be happy and content, when I'm so unhappy and discontent sometimes?

Alther: We're all flawed, it goes with being human. To actually have my therapist acknowledge her flaws was quite helpful to me, I thought. One trouble with studying history or with having authoritarian parents like I had was you see the historical figures, or your parents, only in their best light. You don't understand that it's an aspect of being human that you make mistakes, and have regrets.

Kirsch: Yes, yes. Actually I was impressed that in *Other Women* she was, for a therapist, pretty upfront about mistakes and flaws.

Alther: She was, yes.

Kirsch: She deserves credit for this. And you deserve credit for understanding this, at least intuitively, and writing about it back in the old days. You were prescient. Some therapists work this way, but I think most don't do it nearly enough. Due to shame, or ego, or rigid adherence to theory, most therapists don't sufficiently acknowledge when they've missed something or said the wrong thing. It's somewhat of a cutting edge in our field, recognizing that therapists taking responsibility for hurting a client's feelings, or neglecting an important detail is crucial to creating an environment of trust and openness and triggering clients' deep memories and hurts. It's very subtle, but this process also affects a client's motivation. If a client isn't trusting the therapist to acknowledge her own foibles, he's not going to be motivated to share his own. Clients often aren't able to put words to this, but they become wary of the process. It's not intentional, but in their bodies or souls, they just become closed to the therapist. And, sadly, this condition often gets blamed on the patient.

Alther: Yes, and they are judged.

Kirsch: Exactly. What I continue to learn about doing therapy is there are countless threats to building trust; everything that happens relates back to trust. But therapists being able to acknowledge mistakes, being able to acknowledge frailties or weaknesses, is a huge part of building trust. But then how to do that? Because if you come across just as a dithering mess talking about your mistakes all the time, no one is going to trust you then either. They need to idealize you to some extent. It's like raising kids — it's not good to tell them all your insecurities and mistakes, they need to think you're a competent authority. But over time, as they get older it's important to let them know you make mistakes and sometimes they know more than you do. It's the same for a therapist. Timing is key.

Alther: Well, my parents were wonderful in a lot of ways, but they were that old school, Victorian type of parent and they were always right. You never questioned them. If you did you got slapped down, so they were always right. In a way it was wonderful for me to have Nancy acknowledging all of her issues, because for a long time in therapy I thought, she's got it all together and I'm a mess and what help can I give anyone. But gradually I began to see her feet of clay, because she showed them to me. I thought, well she has all this suffering — because she had a house fire one Christmas Eve and three of her children were killed, and I think a lot of her drinking was a result of that — but I thought, here she's dealt with all that and she's come out of it a functioning human being, so there is hope for me after all. In essence it was very good for me to see what her issues were.

Kirsch: Yes, and I loved in *Other Women* where therapist Hannah, in her reverie during or after sessions, acknowledged how she thought she was not helping many of her patients and that her work was shit. She even went so far as to express uncertainty whether

she was ever helping any patients at all! That part was brilliant, and so realistic. I see this as a hallmark of many good novels, the depiction of character flaws that make the characters so real and relatable. They're not superheroes or godlike. They have self doubt and insecurities, they are self-indulgent and self-absorbed, i.e., they are human. And therefore I can identify. And you do this with all your characters, even the peripheral ones. You dive into what they're really thinking and feeling about themselves. You lay it all out there, the good, the bad and the ugly. As a therapist reading about a therapist, that was so refreshing to me, like yeah, this is real, not the typical caricatured "hero" psychotherapist.

Alther: Well, I was just thinking that maybe that's one reason why so many American writers are from the South. There is such a skin of social propriety in the South and then underneath it everyone is all messed up. If one of the goals of a fiction writer is to get through that surface presentation, there is a lot more surface to be gotten through in the South. In the North people at least make an attempt to be genuine; in the South it's a virtue not to be genuine.

Kirsch: I don't know if I'm saying the same thing, but in the North people kind of believe their goodness more. It's the puritanical piece, they believe their morality, and then they're in trouble. Not so in the South. When I think of Southern storytellers, in addition to fiction writers, I think of the blues and country music, where the songs and ballads are about what a mess I am, and how screwed up my relationships are. They cut right to the chase and can laugh at themselves.

Alther: Southerners are much more passionate and emotional. Tennessee is the number-one state in violent crimes, gun crimes. East Tennessee is very violent. On the other hand, Vermont has very little gun violence, despite having no gun laws and people carry guns wherever they want. But Vermont is one of the highest states in depression and suicide. So you know, Vermonters turn it in on themselves instead of going out and killing someone else, which is kind of an endearing quality [*chuckling*].

Kirsch: In your more recent book *Kinfolks*, I so appreciated how you were on this 10-year quest, and it was fun and exciting and incredibly painful, a little scary, and yet you ended up in the same place you started.

Alther: Yes, right, with no answers.

Kirsch: Yes, no answers, exactly. But more depth to what you knew, more intricacy, more questions. Not only did this work for me it, was like, "yep, that's just like therapy." T.S. Elliot has that wonderful quote, it's hung in my waiting room, "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

Alther: Right, it's like a spiral but with a little more trajectory.

Most of my books I end with something fairly ambiguous because that seems to be more true to life. You can't really type in something *fait accompli*. Like the indetermi-

nate way *Kinfolks* ended, you can reach conclusions, but the story's continuing so you can't really end it.

Kirsch: I love it. I'm curious, is that something writers talk about or study, like in writing classes, or is it kind of an unspoken rule that you tie things up with happy endings, because that's going to sell better? Or if not you'd better have a damn good reason?

Alther: No, I never heard anybody talk about it. I think it's more that an author knows the trajectory of the story and you have to end it in a certain way to be true to the story. Different writers, having different personalities, would choose different endings, but I never heard anybody say, "End cheerfully so that it will sell better." Although, that may be true, that the happy ending sells better.

Kirsch: I imagine if you're writing screenplays for movies and TV shows, you just have to do that.

Alther: That's the problem with writing screenplays, it's like a group effort. You have the marketing people checking in and telling you what you need to do in order to get better ratings. The nice thing about being a fiction writer is that you can work by yourself until you have to turn it in to a publisher. But I have never had a publisher say, "This is too dark, you've got to lighten up so we can sell it."

Kirsch: Reminds me of the difference between a therapist working for a managed care company that comes in and says, "Ok you've got to wrap it up in eight sessions, write down your goals before you proceed." As opposed to being an independent therapist where you don't have to turn it in for review.

Alther: That's why I think it's nice for writers these days to have a day job so they don't have to kowtow to anybody.

Kirsch: How'd you make a living — you said it was about 14 years before you made any money on your writing?

Alther: Richard, who I was married to at the time, and I lived in Vermont and we kind of went back to the land. I asked one older writer what he advised for younger writers, and he said to keep your overhead low, so we did our best to keep our overhead low. I wrote journal articles and for magazines. I wrote catalogue copy and any kind of writing job I could get. Richard worked in advertising. When I was 30 I had *Kinflicks* published; it was a bestseller, and I made a lot of money for the first time. Luckily, I wanted to buy a Jaguar, but instead I invested it and have pretty much been able to live off that. My first three books sold quite well, better than subsequent books. I always wanted to have enough money put away so I could pay myself a salary and wouldn't have to have an outside job. I did teach for a couple years and did some lecturing and reviewing that I got paid for.

But the other thing is, with publishing, it's like a horse race — they don't really know what's going to capture people's enthusiasm, it's mysterious. But they try to quantify it

and bring in the sales and marketing and PR people, and they think they can engineer a best seller. But they really can't.

Kirsch: As a non-writer it seems to me the ones that make the *New York Times* best-seller list are formulaic.

Alther: There are certain writers who are the mega bestsellers who really do keep writing the same book over and over again. But for the so-called midlist books, the ones that don't sell very well, there is no telling. Some of them take off and others that they think will, so they heavily market, just don't.

Kirsch: Kind of like when I get a new client or especially couples, people are always like, "Can you tell if they're going to get divorced?" or "are they going to get better?" I have given up trying to predict because some of the ones I thought, "Wow they're in deep trouble, they're not going to make it," do beautiful work and build something. I am seeing a couple now, they have been with me for two years and are making huge strides; I didn't think they would last two months. And then other couples I thought, "Wow this couple is great, we're gonna do great work," and they blow out of therapy way prematurely.

Alther: Isn't that interesting?

Kirsch: Probably like novels?

Alther: Yes, you can't foresee in advance what the plot will be; that may be one reason why they can fail.

Kirsch: Some therapists think they do know the plot. I guess some of them have success, but I don't understand it.

Alther: That would be like trying to put something in a box, as opposed to having a river, a flowing river.

That may be one reason why Nancy was willing to do the book with me, because she felt I was one of her success stories. I felt and feel that I was too. I will always be grateful to her.

Kirsch: Yes, it sounds clear that it was.

Alther: When I'm writing a book I have visual images, not like a dream, not like a picture postcard, but a sense of what the opening scene will be. Then I have a sense of what the closing scene will be. But what I don't know is what goes in the middle. I do have some sense of working towards a particular ending.

Kirsch: That has some coherence?

Alther: Yes. If I can look back at my therapy and say that, yes, there was a certain theme

that was most important to me — like what I just said about, "you can't control what happens to you but you can control your attitude about what happens to you" — then that must mean there is some kind of end point, right?

Kirsch: Yes, I think so

Alther: But I didn't realize that until a long time after I finished therapy. What would that feel like for you? Do you know when a therapy has reached the end point?

Kirsch: Occasionally I do. It's kind of a paradox for me. The kind of therapy I do, depth therapy, there's always another layer. There's an arbitrariness to when it's over, and I tend to rely more on the client than on myself to make that decision. There are times when it's clear that when they say they're going to stop, it is really some kind of resistance. Resistance to dealing with something that happened in their life or in therapy.

Alther: And you would point that out?

Kirsch: I would try. Sometimes, as you said about your therapy with Nancy, in a roundabout way; sometimes with a straight arrow. Again, that is part of the craft rather than the science or "technique" of therapy. But yes, there are times when it is clear that therapy ended too early.

I liked the part in *Other Women* when the therapist Hannah was reflecting on her personal therapy. Six months into the therapy she was leaving a session and she asked suggestively, "Am I almost finished?" And her wise therapist, Maggie, responded, "We are just getting started here." I *definitely* feel that way a lot. When the client first suggests terminating, I think "*Good, we are finally getting started*," or "*YES*, now we can have a real relationship, not just a surfacey caretaker relationship." Sometimes I will say that out loud and sometimes I contain it or say it more gently. But in cases where therapy has gone well for a while, and we've evolved a real relationship, I really feel it is the client's call whether they've had enough. I will do my best to help them explore all of the pros and cons of ending, what's still open for them, and I'll encourage them to keep working on that. The work of therapy is not over when the therapy ends.

These days it's very common for people who work for a bunch of years and then stop, to then come back sometime later, possibly for a short spell, a "tune-up," or for another long spell of deeper work.

Alther: Would you ever say to them, "I think we need a break," or "I think we have gone far enough"?

Kirsch: Yes, often it will come in the form of, "You know it seems like we're in a lull," or, "There are things we're not working on that we should be, let's try to explore that." Or (more confrontationally), "You're doing lots of acting out in your life, but not processing in therapy, what are we doing here?" Sometimes that will open up something we have been avoiding, but other times it is like, "yeah, that's where it's at," so we will stop. It's hard because you cause injury if you say, "Hey, this isn't working maybe we should stop," while unbeknownst to you the patient is actually valuing the connection.

Alther: Yes, and it's just another abandonment.

Kirsch: Right, but I do really enjoy working 15-20 years and longer with somebody. Even when in terms of their initial goals they could've stopped long ago, but they want to keep going deeper because of the intimate knowledge and dialogue that can only happen in a long-term therapy.

Speaking of endings and transitions, *Kinfolks* is all about people uprooting their lives and transitioning to different places. And I loved how *Kinfolks* demonstrates that separations and diasporas are really just part of the natural course of humanity. They can actually be viewed as opportunistic, exciting, adventurous, adaptive, and beneficial — not purely awful events.

Alther: Well that's America isn't it? Everybody's from somewhere else.

Kirsch: Even if the reason for exodus is forced expulsion, persecution, war, slavery or other horrific forces, these are part of human evolution. The scattering of people is like seeds being carried thousands of miles in a bird's gullet and getting pooped out so plant life can spread and diversify.

Alther: And the freedom that it gives when you're away from the culture you grew up in and away from your family, it's different.

Kirsch: You can create your own thing.

Alther: That's a lot of what's driven my books. As far as the ending of a book, I know when something's finished. I could have written *Kinflicks* for the rest of my life. I finally just get kind of sick of it, say, "fuck it," and that's the book. Then I write the next book, or a continuation of the previous one, so it's like a 20-year therapy.

Kirsch: Possibly it's like switching therapists after 10 years? Not always such a bad idea.

Alther: Yes, like starting a new book.

A lot of what has driven my books is this whole question of identity, trying to figure out who I am. Because my father was a southerner, my mother a Yankee, those two cultures were clashing in my head the whole time I was growing up. I struggled with that for a while and then I was married, I had a child, and I had a sexual world, and then I discovered I was gay. So I had those two cultures clashing, heterosexual and homosexual. Then I discovered I wasn't really a southerner, I was an Appalachian, and the differences in those cultures were going at it. So it's been this constant struggle to try and find my way through.

Kirsch: That is so interesting. Maybe that's the deal with growth. There needs to be clashing of ideas and ideals, psychological conflicts, to induce us to explore, learn, and grow. Now that you mention it, this is the basis for most developmental theories.

Is there something now that is clashing, that you're struggling about?

Daphne. 1991; oil on canvas. By Françoise Gilot

Alther: Not really. I am writing a new book, but I don't quite see where the struggle is; it's a little bit too easy.

Kirsch: The book about the Hatfields and McCoys?

Alther: No, I finished that one. I have a book coming out in November, it's called *About Women: Conversations Between a Writer and a Painter.* I wrote it with my neighbor, Françoise Gilot, who painted that [*pointing to a beautiful* avant garde *portrait*]. She's French. So in a sense we discussed growing up as a little girl in France. French culture vs. Appalachian culture is perhaps a kind of a struggle too. We disagree a lot, but pleasantly.

Kirsch: She sounds like she has become a friend?

Alther: Yes, she is. She is 93 and paints every day, and she's amazing. She was Picasso's partner — they had two children — and then she married Jonas Salk. We became friends when the French psychoanalyst, publisher and art gallery owner Antionette Fouque, invited me to her gallery in Paris where she was publishing *Other Women*. Françoise was having a show in her gallery, so we were at parties together, talking and liking each other, and we have been good friends since then. So anyway that's another example, us kind of defining ourselves by clashing with each other.

Kirsch: Any one clash you can cite as an example of that between you two?

Alther: One of the main things that I became aware of as we talked was how differently French culture views woman, as a kind of divination. They are really seen as something special. She talks about how that came into being and what you have to do as a consequence as a French woman. In contrast to me as I grew up, I went to babysitting classes and cooking classes and sewing classes.

Kirsch: Nursing was a major aspiration?

Alther: Yes, and charm classes, where you learn how to put on make-up and how to walk and all that. It's compelling to see how very different French culture is from American culture in that regard. Their attitudes towards sex are much more relaxed and playful then here in the States, where it's much more earnest.

Kirsch: Her view on sex doesn't sound to me like a clash between you and her. The way you write about sex, it's not earnest, it's fun. It's silly, refreshing, provocative and, of course, evocative. *Kinflicks*, your pioneering book during the women's liberation movement, was a hilarious, witty, fun, and very erotic sexual adventure.

Alther: For purposes of this conversation, though, I took a more puritanical point of view. Now I've started writing another novel and I haven't found the conflict yet. I mean I am enjoying writing it just because I love to write fiction, but it hasn't totally grabbed me so far.

Kirsch: I bet there's a conflict in there?

Alther: I'm dancing around the outside right now. I think actually the conflict is going to be death. I think it's going to have a lot to do with being 70 years old soon and mortality setting in.

Kirsch: A conflict with accepting death versus going gracefully?

Alther: Right, I haven't figured out how it's going to go yet.

Kirsch: [*Turning again to the painting*] I love this painting.

Alther: Thank you, I do too.

Kirsch: It's got me thinking, painting is a whole other way to create characters.

Alther: I wanted to learn about painting through Françoise the same way I wanted to learn about therapy through Nancy. And Françoise wanted to learn about fiction writing through me, so that was the core of our dialogue. This painting is Daphne from Greek myth. She is being pursued by Apollo, who wants to rape her, and Demeter, the goddess of earth, turns her into a laurel tree. The painting portrays her in the process of turning into the tree. That yellow represents Apollo trying to tie her up and rape her and then her arms are sprouting leaves.

Kirsch: It's so disturbing, but also so beautiful.
Does Françoise still live in France?

Alther: No, she is just directly next door. This whole block was built right around the turn of the 20th century by Europeans who wanted artists and writers and musicians to have buildings where they could live but also work.

Kirsch: Does she still paint?

Alther: She's 93. She paints every day, so she is a real inspiration to me.

Kirsch: Do you write every day, do you have a discipline like that?

Alther: No.

Kirsch: Think you will be writing when you're 93?

Alther: Oh God, I don't know! I tried to retire recently, and then I found I was writing another novel.

Kirsch: So, it's sort of like therapy, you never quite know when to end. You can end and restart.

Alther: Yes exactly. I guess the nice thing about being in the arts is you don't have a boss so you can start and stop as you want.

Kirsch: So, we're talking about death and retirement, maybe it's time for us to wind down? I feel like I could do it much longer, or come back and do it again, but it also feels like a good place to stop.

Alther: Yes, so thank you, it's more interesting than most interviews that tend to be more biographically oriented.

Kirsch: Well thank you, it's been lovely and you've been so gracious.

Alther: You really made it interesting for me. ▼

I hardly know which is me and which is the inkstand... The confusion in one's *mind* doesn't so much matter—but when it comes to putting bread-and-butter, and orange marmalade, into the *inkstand*; and then dipping pens into *oneself*, and filling *oneself* up with ink, you know, it's horrid!

— Lewis Carroll (on being a writer)

The Arbor. 2015; photograph. By David Pellegrini

The Arbor

David Pellegrini

For Don and Sal, on the wedding of their youngest son
Lake Namakagon (Cable, Wisconsin), August 15, 2015

It has finally come to this
At last—as it should be
This joyous moment, as surely you
must have dreamed it

The youngest son, standing tall as the
lakeside trees
That shelter this gathering of family and friends

This young bride, nestled beside him
as on a limb
In the cooling shade of the arbor

Poised for this one brief moment
Between childhoods past and a future
Unfolding just beyond the safety of
these trees

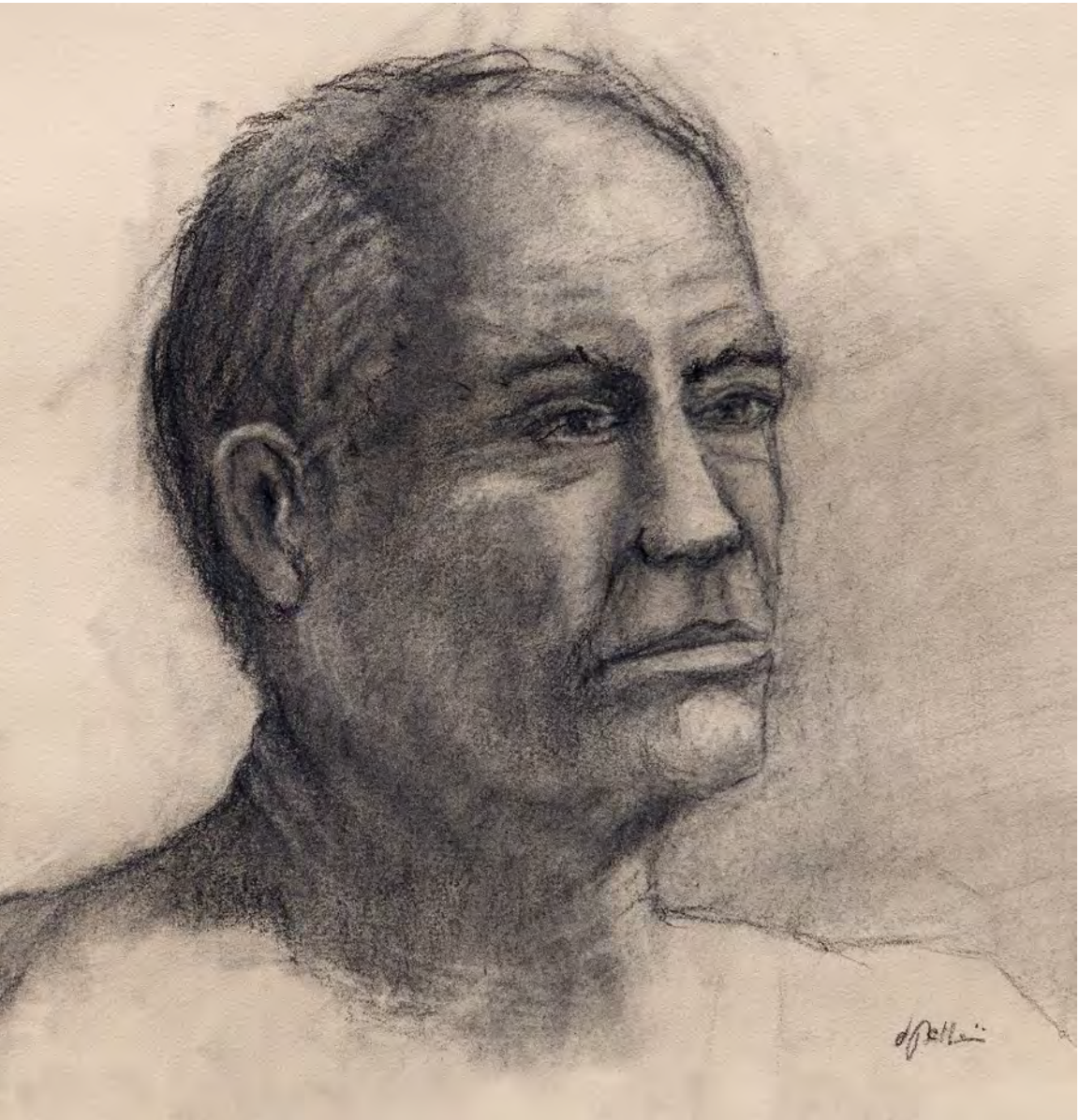
Not just a moment, really
More a process
Whose passage goes nearly unnoticed, til suddenly
complete

Those trees above them
Do they sense the roots
Still digging in,
just below their feet
Even as they stand,
still with anticipation?

Do they recall, in this moment
The bracing of those sturdy trunks?
Sometimes a shelter
Sometimes something useful
to push against
to resist

Do they hear, in the murmur of their private thoughts
and prayers
The whisper of the summer breeze coming off the lake
Stirring this leafy canopy
Just above their heads
Bringing news of yesterday
and tomorrow?

The Widower. 2015; charcoal drawing on paper. By David Pellegrini



Barry Wepman

Barry J. Wepman, PhD, lives in Washington, DC, and has been practicing psychotherapy and supervision for nearly 40 years. He fell in love with poetry in junior high school, and with psychotherapy about a decade later. Only gradually did he become aware of how much they had in common. It gives him pleasure to share some of these insights with *Voices* readers.
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Reflective:
A Meditation on Poetry and Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is about the search for the real and the genuine; about inner experience and about the value and solidity of that experience. Much poetry similarly values aliveness and prizes freshness of language. Look at this fragment (1973) from "Song of Myself" published by Walt Whitman at about the time of Freud's birth:

> Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess
> the origins of all poems
> You shall possess the good of the earth and sun...
> There are millions of suns left
> You shall no longer take things at second or third hand...
> nor look through the eyes of the dead...
> nor feed on the spectres in books,
> You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take
> things from me
> You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself.

The idea that through a relationship one can learn to trust one's own truth is quite consonant with the tenets of depth psychotherapy. There is much, in fact, that is common to poetry and psychotherapy, and much to be learned by looking at psychotherapy as a poetic endeavor.

My goal in this paper is to examine how poetic listening — listening for the poetic meanings in our patients' utterances (and in our own) helps us to keep focused on the yearnings, on the hopes and fears; on the deep interplay of emotions; on capital L love, capital W work, (and capital P play) in our patients, in ourselves, and in our sessions.

In his textbook, *An Introduction to Poetry,* the poet X.J. Kennedy (1966, p. 271) says about poetry that the

poem requires us to read, "more perceptively, thoughtfully, and considerately, with more attention given to sounds and connotations," than does prose. The reader of poetry, he says, expects to arrive at a "different order of awareness" than does the reader of prose. When comparing a therapy session to an ordinary life interaction, one might well use a similar set of descriptors, that is, the listening is done "more perceptively, thoughtfully and considerately," in a therapy session, expecting to arrive at a "greater level of awareness" than in our ordinary life interactions. Kennedy (p. 272) goes on to state that poetry "touches the unconscious to a greater degree than prose. For when we finish a good poem we cannot explain to ourselves all that we have understood." Again, isn't this true of the therapy session, where much of what we "understand" is below the level of consciousness? Just as it may take many readings of a poem to come to a fuller, although still incomplete, understanding of it, so in our clinical work may we have to encounter a pattern (in ourselves or in our patients) many times before beginning to make sense of it. We might have to think about a particular interaction or discuss it with a patient many times before beginning to be able to grasp its meaning, complexities and ramifications.

In poetry, as in depth psychotherapy, understanding is, of necessity, incomplete: always there remain the unknown and the unknowable. This is one thing that makes poetry seem so daunting in this literal-minded era of ours: Poetry isn't a once-over-lightly medium. This is also one reason that so many find psychodynamic psychotherapy hard to understand, and that there is so much resistance to it. To understand this enterprise it is necessary to embrace the notion that many meanings are possible and equally valid, that many levels of truth can exist simultaneously. It is in the experience of all of us connected with the analytic enterprise, as patients and as therapists, that there is always more to learn. Ideas and experiences that we may think are fully explored and understood, may suddenly yield to a new insight, and acquire a whole new set of meanings. Robert Frost (1969, p. 362) suggested this poetically:

> We dance around in a ring and suppose
> But the secret sits in the middle and knows.

I find that this couplet often stops me, or at least slows me down, with its simplicity and its central image. As I associate to it I'm drawn to thoughts of difficult sessions, when an unknown truth was calling the tune as I danced, my patient danced, an entire group danced — and for some reason, as I pause, I'm able to feel more relaxed and to smile at myself. I think that Frost can have this effect because he was a good poet and also because there are similarities in the concerns of therapists and poets. There are also similarities in what works for them in their crafts, and in the shared aspects of poetic and psychodynamic language.

Thomas Ogden (1977), a contemporary psychoanalytic thinker and writer, describes the process whereby a therapist can decode the countertransferential feelings engendered by a patient's projective identifications and use them to advance the therapy. He says (loosely) that it often takes quite a considerable period of time before a therapist may begin to suspect, from her internal awareness of feelings unusual for her to experience in a psychotherapeutic setting, that she has become part of a projective identificatory process. This awareness may require many repetitions of the pattern in question. The therapist will likely then require additional time to understand what is being communicated by the patient and how her own dynamics are involved, and then to put words

to the feelings aroused in a way that may be useful to the therapy. This is similar to the situation with much of the poetry we read, where we may be enthralled by a powerful unconscious evocation, and it may take time and repetitions for us to make conscious our trains of associations, and many repeated readings before we can put words to the feelings evoked.

For most of us life is prosaic: We live in a world of what the Buddhists call *maya* (Baba, 1987); that is, we treat the external, material world as if it is the world. To the Buddhists this world is an illusion, and the reality that lies behind the illusion is the eternal and transcendent. To live successfully in our culture it is pretty important that we live in the external world most of the time. The social contract and our assumptions about each others' behavior are based on our actions in the material world. For example, I want my surgeon or the pilot of the airplane I'm flying in to treat the material world with great importance! Our language is adapted to this in-the-world style of living, and most of the time we talk to each other in what the philosopher Philip Wheelwright (1962) calls "steno" language. Steno meanings are "digital": they carry little, if any, symbolic weight, and have a generally agreed-upon meaning. Steno language is language adapted for the general case. "Chair," for example, is a word whose meaning is generally agreed upon. If I say, "Would you bring that chair over here," I'm not saying anything about the chair as a unique object. Presumably that chair is interchangeable with many other chairs. Chair in this case is different from "my grandmother's favorite rocking chair." This last, as a phrase, is a step toward naming the unique, and may suggest a set of associations and feelings both for the speaker and the listener, although, importantly, these associations may be different for each of them. This is an example of expressive language, which, by contrast to steno language, contains the possibility of creating, revealing, and naming hitherto unnamed pieces of what is. The power of expressive language to open up perception may be illustrated in this passage from an early poem by Adrienne Rich (1984, p. 4):

> Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
> Find even the ivory needle hard to pull
> The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
> Sits heavily on Aunt Jennifer's hand.

The expressive language in this passage gives a richness, a texture, and an emotional weight to the scene that would be very difficult to convey in prose, even with a much longer statement. Seemingly without effort, it gives a picture of a person and her life that would translate clumsily into a clinical description. Further, it requires that the reader become actively involved in the passage and supply a set of meanings and associations that provide an intimate link between reader and author. So, while logico-scientific language is useful, even necessary, for dealing with the world in a functional and instrumental way, expressive language provides a deeper, richer view of relationships and emotions.

One of the tasks facing the therapist is to help the person who first enters the office become a therapy patient. Winnicott (1971) says that in order for any meaningful therapy to take place, the patient has to be able to play, and if he doesn't know how, it's the early task of the therapist to teach him. This can also be seen as helping the patient move from the use of steno language to an appreciation and use of expressive language. This shift is illustrated in a patient's ability to tune in to the associations that lurk beneath

the surface of statements that, taken at face value, would appear to be merely factual.

Some years ago, a patient in a group was saying that, when he was a teenager, his parents let him come and go as he pleased, and that this was a sign of their trust in him. I was aware that this was most likely not the whole story, and when he made this statement, "My friends had curfews, but my parents let me come in whenever I wanted, they didn't care," I asked him to repeat the end of the statement. He did so, and as he repeated the phrase, "they didn't care," his jaw slackened, he hesitated, and he began to weep. We later were able to explore an area of feeling that had been closed to him since the beginning of our work.

In a way there is nothing particularly remarkable in this episode. It is relatively standard in our work that we use such devices as multiple meanings, analogies, and metonymy to help us decode the clues to the unconscious elements in our patients. The most self-evident situation in which we, as therapists, need to resonate to the poetic elements in our patients' utterances is in dream analysis, but, clearly, there are symbolic elements that are no less meaningful in other material our patients present.

Just as in our work there are moments that ring with a crystal clarity, such as the one I described above, there are such moments also for the poet. Rita Dove says that she writes for "those moments when something happens in a poem." She identifies these lines that she wrote, "He used to sleep like a glass of water/ Held in the hand of a very young girl," as such an occasion for her, even though she has said that she doesn't know exactly what those lines mean (Harrington, 1997). The well-known poet, Stanley Kunitz, says about the line "The night nailed like an orange to my brow," that he, for years, walked around in the fear that someone would ask him what it meant (Harrington, 1997).

How strange these notions are. That there can be moments in the work of the poet or of the therapist that are defining, that provide an answer to the question, "Why on earth do I do the work I do?" Ofttimes we cannot fully understand these moments ourselves, much less explain them to others. Clearly in these situations we are talking about language used differently from the language of computer manuals, or that of the deed to my house, or, I might add, the DSM, of whatever numeral.

An important aspect of expressive language is its ability to hold in tension complementary tendencies, opposing tendencies and even paradox. This is the tension that keeps the mind open, and encourages meaningful exploration. See what happens with a line from a Robert Frost poem (1969, p. 222):

Nature's first green is gold.

The linguistic tension here is easy to apprehend and understand, it takes a little work, and it creates a loosened mind-set for the rest of the poem.

Now a more complex example, By A.R. Ammons (1977, p. 53), that provides the title for this writing:

Reflective

I found a
weed
that had a
mirror in it
and that
mirror
looked in at
a mirror
in
me that
had a
weed in it.

Can you let yourself wrestle with this playful bit of mind-expansion a little? It may well shift for you as you read it through several times.

Since most of our daily lives take place in a steno world, it takes effort, concentration, and vigilance to keep from slipping out of an expressive, associative mind-set when working with patients. I would say that this is especially true at the borders of sessions, at the very beginning and end of sessions as a patient is entering or leaving. An important part of our therapeutic work is to keep ourselves open to the associative nature of speech, both our own and our patients'.

I walk out to my waiting room to greet my first patient of the day. I begin my clinical day at 7:00 in the morning, and this is a day in late October. In the waiting room he says, "It's pretty dark out." In truth, he's right, it is getting darker at that hour of the morning, and it would be natural to agree and to let any other possibility alone. But, I recall that in the last session he'd gotten emotional about his father's recent heart attack, and when he continues his opening remark by talking about the shortness of the days I have a strong feeling, later verified, that this talk of the weather is an encoding of the deeper issues of loss and death. As I broach the subject a few minutes later, he pauses to reflect and begins to tear.

So, it is in tension that language is most alive, and it is in this tension that we might look for that which is most alive in the work with our patients: here we may look for the contradictions that invite the curiosity so necessary for psychotherapeutic work to proceed. These contradictions and double meanings, such as the one I mentioned from my patient earlier, may arise in our patients' statements, or they may arise from our own internal dialogues as we listen to our patients. The ability to free associate to our patients' material while we sit with them in session requires great courage, and the ability to craft our associations into material useful to our patients' enterprise requires great skill. In many ways these parallel the poet's task. The first of these — the ability (and the willingness) to free associate with our patients — is inordinately difficult! It requires that we live courageously, that we cast off the armor of our steno lives and live in the raw experience of existence. As I said, to live in the world of expressive language is so difficult, no wonder there is such a strong movement toward steno existence (and the steno language of the DSM, the bottom line mentality of "# of sessions until the attainment of treatment goals," the steno therapy of the behaviorist approach). But to resist and to live in our work, open to the moment, is an enormous challenge.

The poetry of Rilke is filled with the admonition to keep attending to those elements

in each of us that are deep and important. *In his Letters to a Young Poet* (2004, p. 35), Rilke advises, "be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. The point is to live everything. Live the questions...." He goes on, "There is only one single way, go into yourself."

T.S. Eliot (1975) describes the function of the poet like this:

> When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for his work, it is constantly amalgamating his disparate experiences; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and those two experiences have nothing to do with one another, or with the noise of one's typewriter or the smell of the cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.

I would be amazed if most people reading this didn't immediately identify *amalgamating disparate pieces of our patients' experiences into new wholes* as one of our functions as therapists; a task that we each perform with our patients every working hour of every working day. To stay open to this way of being is a daunting task, to constantly and consistently require of ourselves the task of free association, to hire ourselves out as receptacles for the unacceptable or containers where our own and our patients' primordial elements combine in the hope of creating compounds never before brought to existence, is almost beyond thought.

John Keats (2009) called the state that the poet must enter, "negative capability," and defined it as, "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." While this sounds like what we've been talking about, it also sounds to me much like Freud's (1912) notion of "evenly hovering attention." And it also feels familiar as I sit in my office with a patient, sometimes very lost, trying to resist the temptation to gain a measure of control by interpreting I-know-not-what, or by trying to figure things out with an "irritable reaching after fact and reason." This place of emptiness feels difficult to talk about: I know it as a place of potential, yet the unboundedness of it makes it difficult to tolerate; I know it as a place of fertility, yet the period of fallowness is frightening; I know it as a place that is the base of genuine aliveness, yet the stillness of it brings terror.

It is quite consistent with these ideas that good therapy (like good poetry) contains material that is strange and surprising even to its author, and contains imagery that emanates from those "depths of feeling into which we cannot peer" (Eliot, 1986, p. 148). I'm sitting with a patient, a woman in her mid-30s, who's talking about her relationship with her parents. Whatever they give her seems pushed onto her and she pushes it back at them. Whatever she accepts makes her feel queasy. "They may mean well," she says, "but nothing ever feels right." As we talk I become aware of a feeling of mild nausea that soon spreads as an achiness to the rest of my body. I'm beginning to feel awful, and, although I'm not sure why, I begin to suspect that it's related to what I'm hearing. I get an image of a colicky baby, and when an associative opportunity arises I ask my patient if she knows of any feeding trouble she had as a baby. "Why, yes," she says, "strange you should ask. When I was very young I was quite sick, and it turned out that I was allergic to my mother's milk." She seems perplexed and amazed at my question, but, in truth, she is no more amazed than I. ▼

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> An analyst said I'm not demented because I still know "The Waste Land" by heart. My mother said to memorize many poems: "It will be good for you in prison."
>
> — David Shapiro

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Fiction

Shōji

Chi puo dir com' egli arde è in picciol fuoco.
[He who can say how he burns with love, has little fire.]
—Petrarca, Sonetto 137

Daniel woke to a view of a cockroach perched above his head. It hung effortlessly on a slate-gray ceiling, antennae twitching. Though it was painful to think, he tried to remember where he was. He could taste the rankness of alcohol. Pisco. Lima. Kevin, his closest childhood friend, had married Natalia the night before. Daniel had been the best man, and the newlyweds had gone to a resort in the mountains for two nights.

Daniel had stayed at Natalia's home, a one-bedroom apartment sandwiched between other domiciles. The building was in a desperate part of town. Dogs ran loose along dirt roads. There was no auto traffic with the exception of motorcycle-powered taxis whose engines ripped through otherwise quiet streets. The sound of footsteps approached, then stopped. He felt eyes watching him.

"Daniel?" called a whisper. "Daniel? *Perdón.*"

He lifted his head to respond. It was Milagros, though she had asked him to call her Mila. *Milagros*. Miracles. She and Natalia were friends, and the newlyweds enlisted her to keep Daniel company until they returned. Mila didn't understand English. Like Natalia, she also had married an American, Chris, who was now in Texas. They had met their husbands while the men studied abroad in Lima. Mila's papers were in. If she were lucky, she'd be in Texas in less than a year.

"Hola," Daniel replied. *"Buenos días."*

Mila wore black jeans and a turquoise V-neck sweater.

She had Spanish features—light olive skin and auburn hair she'd cinched in a ponytail. He could smell Nescafé that she sipped from a cup.

"¿Cómo te sientes?" she asked.

He replied, *"La verdad...tengo una cruda. Tomé demasiado anoche."*

"Poor thing. Listen, Daniel, we're spending the day together. Take a shower and we'll go to lunch."

He sat up and the cockroach scuttled across the ceiling. "Lunch? What time is it?"

"11:15."

Minutes later, Daniel was in the bathroom. He showered, washed his hair, and brushed his teeth. As he dressed, he heard a peculiar sound. A scratching or rubbing, just for a few seconds, and then it was gone. For a moment, he wondered if it was his imagination. He waited in the silence and then the sound briefly returned. It seemed to be coming from the other side of a wall. Perhaps in the direction of the adjacent apartment but he couldn't be sure.

Mila suggested they visit her neighborhood. Daniel thought they might take a taxi but she insisted on walking everywhere, which was fine with him. Her neighborhood was more inviting than Natalia's. Every few blocks there was a small plaza, each filled with flowering plants, palm trees, and benches to sit and take in the scene. Couples seemed to be everywhere, holding hands or kissing. Affable shopkeepers welcomed patrons, and people generally appeared unconcerned with the troubles of life.

For lunch, they arrived at one of Mila's haunts, a famous *cevichería*. She ordered for them and the two dined on plates of sea bass, chilled baby octopus, and raw oysters. To drink, they had pilsners with lime wedges.

Daniel thanked her and raised his glass in a toast. He went straight for a fat oyster, tilting the shell, and the briny mollusk fell into his mouth. Mila tried the fish and raised her eyebrows in approval as she ate. It was at this moment that he noticed the fine curves of her eyebrows. They were stunning arcs that not only drew him to her eyes, they were the highlight of each.

Mila stopped eating. "Is something wrong?"

Unaware that his staring had become obvious, Daniel shook his head in surprise. "I'm sorry, it's just that—I was looking at your eyebrows. They're elegant. I noticed them because they're expressive when you speak."

She beamed. "That's a nice thing to say. As a matter of fact, I spend a fair amount of time on my eyebrows. Mind you, I'm not obsessive about them. It's just that I believe you can tell a lot about a person based on their eyebrows. Some people pull the hairs out, leaving empty patches, while others shave them off entirely. Some let them grow wild." She paused and took a breath. "I keep mine neat. Don't let anyone with bad eyebrows judge you. If they can't even muster the effort to groom their eyebrows, for heaven's sake, then they have no business telling you how to live your life."

He narrowed his eyes, contemplating her curious philosophical slant.

"Why should that be odd, Daniel? You might think it arbitrary of me, or just plain superficial, but a woman should have a code, and that's my code. One of them, at least."

Mila asked him to tell her about himself.

He thought for a moment, then took a drink. "I finished college two years ago, thought of medical school, even considered law school but couldn't decide. So I got a job instead. I work for a publishing company and write activities for high school Spanish

textbooks. Eight hours a day in my cubicle. Still, I like the idea of being a professional of some sort, and getting paid.

"After a year with the company, I became bored with the work. I'd fantasize about doing something different, and I found any excuse to escape my cubicle: running to the bank, carrying out errands for executives, scheduling doctor's appointments. One day at lunch in the company cafeteria, a colleague told me how she went to weekly psychotherapy."

She nodded with interest.

Daniel continued, "I immediately found the idea intriguing. I imagined lying down while a gray-bearded man sat behind me transcribing important psychological material that we would process. Also, weekly therapy would be a sure way to free myself of the cubicle, even if for an hour. A month later, I entered therapy with Al, an ex-hippy who wore oversized dress shirts with mismatched ties. What he lacked in fashion he made up for in listening ability and interpretations. I felt a calmness when he spoke about my life, and accepted what he said as if it were gospel."

Mila slid a plate aside, finished with her meal. "You mean you never disagree with Al? That doesn't sound therapeutic."

"It's hard for me to explain," he said. "Sometimes, I'll admit, he's a little out there but that's part of why I stuck with it. He challenges my beliefs. Consequently, I think more about how I view the world and my interactions with people."

"I've never been in therapy myself. But what about your restlessness? Did therapy cure you?"

Daniel laughed. "It didn't but it did allow me to realize I need to return to school. I hope to go to medical school next year. Unfortunately, there's another restlessness I have to face."

Mila waited for him to continue.

"I'm here for Kevin's wedding but there's something else I need to do. I have a friend—Maria—whom I met in college. She recently returned home to Lima and took a job at a consulting firm."

"Would you like to visit her?"

"I would but the problem is I don't know what to say. I've had feelings for Maria for a couple of years but we never dated. When she was single, I was with someone and when I've been single, she had a boyfriend. Now we're both single but she left. We went to dinner the night before her flight."

Another round of beers arrived. Mila waited for him to continue.

"That's where I get confused. She was talking about coming home and she just started crying and told me she would miss many things in Texas but would miss me the most. It's always seemed like there's something between us. She's been on my mind since."

Mila considered what he'd said, then sipped the foam at the top of her beer. "Do you love her?"

"I do. I just don't know if it's the right kind of love. Maybe I'm confused and I just love her deeply as a friend. But why would I think all the time about a woman who's just a friend?"

"What do you want to do, then?"

"Maybe tell her what I just told you. I'm afraid she'll think something's wrong with me."

"Ah, Daniel, she might but don't you want to know how she feels? Go to her and tell her how you feel. Does she know you're here?"

He gazed at his beer and wiped sweat from the glass. "She knows I came for Kevin's wedding and offered to meet me. I'm supposed to call her but haven't figured out a plan."

Mila fished some change from her purse and placed it in his palm. "There's a phone outside. Why waste another second?"

Later that afternoon, Mila brought him to an open-air market. She'd insisted on preparing a home-cooked Peruvian meal. They walked along stalls that seemed to offer everything from nature's bounty: fresh-slaughtered hens, potatoes of all shapes and colors, fat sacks of rice, and ice chests filled with shrimp and silvery fish. As they strolled, Mila checked items off a list.

"I don't mind taking you to her house and waiting nearby," she suggested.

"Nonsense. Please come with me. To be perfectly honest, I'm nervous about the whole thing."

Mila nodded. "Okay, let's go together. But you need to face her alone and tell her how you feel. When the time is right, I'll excuse myself or step out."

They stopped at a stall that had small baskets of chili peppers. An elderly man rested in a chair, his head tilted downward, arms folded. Mila began to pick curved orange peppers and dropped them into a bag.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Daniel said. "I heard a scratching sound when I got out of the shower this morning. I think it was coming from the neighbor's apartment. Do you know anything about the person who lives there?"

"That's odd. I didn't hear anything." Mila paused. "On that side…only what Natalia's said. Some guy, lives alone, but she thinks he's into something shady."

"Shady?"

She returned to the peppers. "He comes and goes in the middle of the night. I saw him once. The look he shot me—he had these cold, dead eyes. I'll never forget it."

"Maybe he lacks social skills."

She pursed her lips. "Maybe."

That night, Mila prepared dinner while Daniel reclined on the sofa and read. He'd offered to help but she flatly refused. Just as he was beginning to nod off, the scent of cooked garlic and onions woke him. Mila said dinner was ready and offered him a beer. Daniel came to the table, thanked her for her efforts, and the pair dined on a chicken stew.

"This is heavenly," he said. "Now your turn. Tell me a little about yourself."

"Let's see." She considered his request. "You saw my neighborhood today. I've lived there my entire life. My mother died of cancer when I was eight. My father raised me and my older sister. We all live together in our family home. I work at a department store selling makeup, when they give me hours. My father's depressed and hasn't worked in five years. My sister's a library clerk. And I'm married to Chris."

"I'm sorry about your mother."

"I hardly remember that time. My dad used to take me and my sister to visit her on the cancer ward but they wouldn't let us kids inside. We'd wait in a room, then my dad would come out. Every time we left the grounds, I'd look up and see a figure in a window waving down at us. I think it was her."

Just then, they both heard a scratching sound on the other side of the wall.

"Did you hear that?" Daniel asked, and walked over to the source. He remained still while Mila watched. The sound came through again, faintly. This time, though, he also heard a squeak. "What can that be?" He paced and then held his ear to the wall.

"Daniel, please sit down," she requested.

He sat. "What do you make of it?"

"I don't know but we should leave it alone."

"What if it's a person? Maybe they're hurt."

"We can't interfere with that guy's life. It's probably just rats."

Daniel frowned.

"You can't be concerned with other people's lives and let your mind fear the worst. It's probably nothing. Worrying about these things isn't a good way to live. Have you read the novel *Shōgun*?"

Daniel thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"You should read it. It's about feudal Japan, with samurai, princesses, swordfights, betrayal, and love. My favorite character, Mariko, is unhappily married to a samurai and in love with Blackthorne, an English captain. One day, she tells Blackthorne how the Japanese are able to live in such close proximity to one another, and despite having paper walls—or Shōji—they still maintain privacy."

"How do they do that?"

"They learn to compartmentalize. If they allowed everything to come into their heads, they'd be miserable. I know you're worried but trust me, this is a country where some secrets are best left alone. To pry could be dangerous, and it's not worth it if something happens to you."

She leaned over and laid her hand on top of his. They exchanged a silent glance that lingered for a moment. Finally, Daniel said, "You're right. I'll leave it alone."

"Thank you." Mila removed her hand.

"Tell me. Why is Mariko unhappily married?"

"Her husband doesn't love her. And he mistreats her."

"Mistreats her?"

"He beats her. In one scene, I thought he was going to kill her."

"Does he?" Daniel asked in a concerned tone.

She replied, "You should read the book."

The next day, they set out for Maria's. They walked for half an hour, then took a bus to Miraflores. Once they got off the bus, Daniel scanned the area. Three-story houses lined boulevards, many with manicured gardens. Smartly-dressed people walked pedigreed dogs. The sea was so close Daniel could smell salt in the air. They turned down Maria's street and arrived at the address. There was a large wooden fence around the property and a footpath from the street led them to a locked door. Next to it was an intercom.

"Daniel," Mila said. "I'm sorry but I changed my mind. I'd rather you visit her alone." A worried look came over her face and she avoided eye contact.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'll be at the café we passed on the corner. Take your time." She held her purse tightly and walked away, her shoes slapping cobblestones underfoot. Daniel's gaze followed her until she neared the end of the street and disappeared. He let out a sigh and

turned to the intercom and pushed the button.

An hour later, Daniel arrived at the café. Mila sat at a corner table and sipped coffee. Next to her was an ashtray with three crushed butts. He stood at the table.

She looked up at him. "Well?"

He collapsed into a chair. "Can we go to a bar?"

"They serve alcohol. What do you want?"

"Something strong."

"Sure, let me get her attention." Mila hailed a server and ordered two double piscos. In less than a minute, the server returned with two glasses and a bottle of pisco. She filled the glasses, set the bottle down, and walked away.

Daniel downed the pour in one large gulp. He set the glass down and coughed.

Her mouth was agape. "Why did you do that? You'll get drunk."

"It's fine with me," he said, and poured more into his glass.

"Let's go outside. I want to smoke."

Outside, the sky had become darker as the unseen sun was setting. A chill swept along the street. They both sat at a small table. Mila produced a cigarette from her purse and placed it between her lips. She then held a small gold lighter, pressed a button, and cupped her hand as the flame lit the cigarette. She exhaled a satisfying cloud of smoke.

"I didn't know you smoke," he said.

"I'm not proud of it. Now, tell me what happened."

Daniel rubbed his eyes. "Tell me first why you left."

"I'd rather not. I'll just say I was uncomfortable going and I knew you would be okay without me. Tell me what happened."

He took another drink, this time a shallower one. "I guess I was confused. At least that's what she told me. When I left, she kissed me on the forehead. Maybe she felt sorry for me. *I* feel sorry for myself." Daniel's eyes filled with tears.

"Daniel, why do you hurt?"

"I feel ashamed because I shared my heart with the wrong person."

The wind blew hair across her eyes and she brushed it aside to get a good look at him. "We all make that mistake. Isn't that the point of life, to love someone? Don't give up. I like your fearless heart so don't let this change you."

He wiped his eyes and thanked her. "We should probably get back soon. I think Kevin and Natalia will be home in a couple of hours. I still have to pack."

Mila put out her cigarette in a tin ashtray. They finished the pisco, paid their tab, and took a cab.

An hour later, Daniel was sorting clothes and arranged them neatly in his suitcase. As he did this, Mila paced in the kitchen. She held a glass with red wine and stopped to refill it. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her digging a fingernail into a wooden cabinet. She took a deep breath.

Daniel laid a pair of socks in his suitcase. "What's the matter?"

Mila sat down next to him on the sofa and offered him her glass. He accepted it and took a sip. "There's something I want to tell you, something I haven't told Natalia, not even Chris."

Daniel waited patiently and handed the glass back to her. She drank from it then wiped tears that had formed in her eyes. "I didn't go inside with you to visit Maria be-

cause I'd been on that block before. Not her house but one next door. I went there for work. I'm ashamed to tell you this. I used to sell my body for money."

Gently, Daniel asked, "You mean you were a—"

"A whore, yes Daniel, I was a whore." She set the glass down and laid her forehead on his chest, sobbing.

Daniel looked down and saw her hair splayed against his chest. She was warm and her scent was a concoction of wine, powder, and smoke. Without thinking, he wrapped his arms around her and the two sat there in a silent embrace.

After a moment, Mila raised her head, her lips parted. "Chris can never find out. He'd kill me."

"Kill you?" he asked, alarmed.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he hit me, and I'd probably deserve it."

Daniel shook his head. "No one should ever hit you." He thought for a few seconds. "Has he?"

She turned away. "All couples fight. Keep this just between us, ok?"

"But you can't let him hit you. I'll talk to—"

"It's none of your business," she said firmly. "I have to get out of here and start a new life, even if it means I'm married to a violent man."

Daniel leaned back on the sofa and sighed. Suddenly, the scratching came through the wall again. His heart began a steady thump. He walked over to the wall and pressed his ear against it, listening. There was a rustling for several seconds followed by crying. Hairs stood erect on his arms and he backed away from the wall.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

Mila just stared, her face pale.

"I can't take this anymore!"

He marched out the front and went to the neighbor's door. He knocked, then folded his arms and waited. Nothing. He knocked again, this time pounding. Again nothing. He came back into the apartment and headed to the backyard, Mila following him. He began to climb the wall dividing the yards. When he got to the top of the wall, he gripped the edge and his hand came down on broken shards of glass, instantly tearing his flesh. Daniel screamed in pain though became even more determined to get across. He freed his cut hand, felt carefully, and with the other hand, pulled his body up, and leapt to the other side.

The neighbor's backyard was a bare lot of dirt. Daniel went to the back door, turned the door knob, and was surprised that it was unlocked. In the other yard, Mila paced and yelled for him to come back right away. He ignored her, his body pumping adrenaline, and opened the door. Immediately a foul odor came rushing to him. Inside, it was completely dark. He felt along the wall and found a light switch. He flipped it on and a lamp glowed to life. The apartment was oddly furnished; stacks of boxes occupied most of the living area.

Daniel called out to see if anyone was home but there was no reply. A few feet in front of him was a large plastic bin filled with brown pellets, and it was covered in scratch marks. He knelt to get a better look and noticed, in his peripheral vision, a large mass. There laid an emaciated Rottweiler. The dog yelped at Daniel's presence and he tried to get up but couldn't. There were feces and urine beside him. A water bowl sat empty against the wall.

Daniel went to the dog and scooped him up in his arms. The poor canine did not protest. He carried him to the front, unlocked the door with a free hand, and brought him to Natalia's. Daniel stood at the entry, blood dripping onto the floor as he held the limp dog.

When Mila saw this, she held both hands together as if she were praying and brought them to her mouth, aghast. *"Por dios,"* she muttered.

* * *

Daniel leaned back on the sofa and drank from a paper coffee cup.

Al sat across from him in an armchair. "Six years of weekly therapy and not once did you mention this story."

"I forgot it was there," Daniel said. "In my memory."

"How did it come back to you?"

"Strangest thing. Or maybe it's not strange. I was in a session with one of my patients and she mentioned something that made me think of Mila."

Al rubbed his chin. "Isn't that incredible, how our minds lock away memories? How long ago was this?"

He took a deep breath. "Almost 20 years."

"What happened with the dog? With Mila?"

Daniel closed his eyes and was quiet for a moment. Then he opened them and said, "The dog made it. When Kevin and Natalia returned, they had a neighbor who was some sort of witch doctor. He helped the dog recover—I don't remember how but he did. And Mila." Daniel stopped and seemed that he was incapable of speech. "Milagros died a couple of years after she came to Texas. Chris shot her in a drunken argument. He sits rotting in Huntsville or some awful place. I never saw her again. I should have..."

Daniel covered his face with one hand and sobbed. He gasped for a breath and repeated, "I should have—"

"Saved her?" Al interrupted.

He nodded and continued to weep.

Al leaned forward and squeezed his arm. ▼

Brad Sachs

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Jubilant Songs from the Ruins

The poet's obligation is to be a voice for all those who have no voice.

—Pablo Neruda

Having identified and envisioned myself as a musician and poet long before I became a psychotherapist, I have always tried to listen for the music and poetry nesting in the province of my patients' tumbling narratives. In a way, it should be no surprise that psychotherapy patients speak the language of poetry, because the wellspring of both poetry and therapy is the unconscious. The therapeutic experience and the creative experience rely upon a similar loosening and softening of the boundaries between inner and outer life, past and present, certainty and doubt, dream and awakening—both serve as bridges between what is revered and reviled, what is sought and abhorred, what is desired and discarded.

I do not take notes *during* clinical sessions, but I always reserve time after each appointment to write up a page or two of comments. This documentation summarizes the clinical content and lays the groundwork for the following sessions. However, I always try to conclude my note-taking by composing one poem—even a very short one—that, to me, captures an important facet of the patient's experience.

Sometimes, the poem that results simply transcribes a fragment of the patient's actual words during an appointment. Sometimes, the poem distills a much longer narrative that the patient has spilled out, pared down to (what is in my opinion) its elemental meaning. Sometimes, the poem is composed of words that the patient never actual-

ly spoke, but that I imagine she *wanted* to speak, and *would have* spoken had her internal editor or censor not interrupted the flow of feelings, shut the wires down, and buried the signal beneath thick layers of emotional batting. Sometimes the poem is a reduction, a written crystallization of what the patient was revealing to me, and/or to himself, through the course of several separate sessions, or even the entire course of treatment.

When I first began conceiving these poems, I believed I was essentially playing a passive role, one akin to a ventriloquist's dummy, manipulated (albeit in the best sense of that word) into articulating the patient's truest, purest voice, the one that yearns to be spoken and longs to be heard—and without any observable effort or authorship on my part. But in re-visiting them and reflecting upon what I'd actually composed, the process began to seem more complicated than that, somewhat mysterious and elusive, not quite so easy to pin down.

Somehow, when the patient's inner world and mine experienced a kind of encounter that was both observable and invisible, collision and embrace, mesh and clash, something important passed between us. The poem—or at least the germ of the poem—until then lying silent and dormant, revealed itself. An intimate encounter with an Other stirred me to my depths, and a poem *insisted* that it be written, a therapeutic tale *demanded* to be told. Somehow the words that were regularly exchanged between my patient and me were alchemically condensed into literature, and it was as if the two of us had uncannily co-authored a chronicle that I transcribed, one that made us both feel more connected and more human, better able to sense a better way of being in the world.

Regardless of how they arose—within *me*, within my *patient*, or, perhaps more accurately, within the sacred space created by and residing between the two of us—these poems in each instance represent a small vignette of the human predicament, one that reflects and refracts both the wondrous darkness and the difficult light that lie beneath all of us.

When I lead workshops for clinicians on dipping into poetic waters when conceptualizing effective therapeutic treatment and documentation, I am usually asked whether I share these poems with my patients. The answer is I never have, even though I have been tempted to. Keeping these poems entirely to myself might appear to run counter to the motivation for undertaking this verse-making in the first place—after all, aren't I limiting its potential impact on the therapeutic encounter if I never share these lyrics with my crucial co-author, the patient?

I have thought about this long and hard. The main reason I have chosen not to is to circumvent its potential hazards. Any form of therapist self-disclosure runs the risk of distracting a patient from her own gleanings, explorations, and insights, and making the therapist more of a focus than the patient. As I have gradually discovered, these poems are not just about my patients, they are as much, if not more so, about *me*, and bringing them into the treatment conversation might unintentionally but unavoidably shift the spotlight away from her and onto me, a transaction that can quickly negate the power of the therapeutic relationship.

A "disclosure" of this sort might also create a certain self-consciousness that would impair the free flow of thoughts, ideas, and associations that is necessary for therapeutic work. We want our patients to be less concerned about what they're thinking and saying, not more concerned, and if they become too distracted by or alert to what I make

of their words, it could hinder their spontaneity. They need to be asking questions like, *Who am I? Why do I do what I do?* and *Who do I want to become?* rather than *I wonder if what I'm saying is going to turn into a poem?* or *Why was this material not interesting enough for you to create poetry out of?*

But shared with the patient or not, the adventurous enterprise of poetry is one that not only augments and enhances the strength and efficacy of psychotherapy, but ultimately unmasks hidden truths and helps us to understand more about, and come to terms with, what it means to be human.

What follows are several examples of these poems, along with a line or two of accompanying commentary.

* * *

In a sense, all stories begin with someone or something dying, and all healing is inaugurated by loss. The magnitude of the losses that each of these patients had experienced simply staggered me, and prompted these three pieces that struggle to illuminate the enduring, infallible grace of grieving.

THESE ARE THE THINGS

The never-ending red light near my office
The itchy throat during allergy season
My wife's fake smile
The tangled phone cord
The missing socks
The interrupted television show...
These are the things that bothered me
Before my son died

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Our son died back in August
On New Year's Eve
We got call after call
From friends and family
Wishing us a good year
Wishing us a better year
Fuck 'em all, and their good wishes
Not one of them was my son

A LONG TIME

My husband came home with four large cans of shaving cream
On sale at Walmart, he happily announced,
Two days later, he's dead of a heart attack
For weeks I've stared at the four cans
Which he left on the bathroom sink—
He never puts stuff away—
So last night I took the four cans
And emptied each one into the bathtub
Takes a long time
And then I took off my clothes
And sat in the tub
Filled with shaving cream
I didn't cry
I didn't weep
I didn't wail
I just sat there in the dark
In the shaving cream
Quiet, quiet,
Everything so quiet
In the foam
Then I stood up
Showered off
And watched all the white
Wash down the drain

* * *

With time and experience, we learn never to underestimate the complexity and intensity of our patients' feelings towards us, the kaleidoscopic slurry of passions that seethe and eddy at the stones that lie at the foundation of the therapeutic relationship. Here are three poems that endeavor to depict these figments and fragments.

DUMP

I've got nothing to talk about today.

I should warn you, however,
That I did take a dump in your bathroom
And now I think the toilet might be clogged,
You better check it when we're done in here
I thought you should also know
That your toilet paper is a little on the rough side
All this money I'm paying you
You really ought to invest in softer toilet paper
My butt's still sore

That's about all I have to say today.

WHY AM I TELLING YOU THIS?

Stuck at home all weekend after that blizzard
My kids were driving me crazy, fought the whole time,
My husband didn't want to do anything
Except watch poker on TV
I made brownies, batch after batch,
Ate more than all the kids combined
Must've gained 5 pounds in 2 days
Feel like a whale, now,
Like a beached whale...
    Why am I telling you this?
    You don't care,
    You just go home,
    Cash my check
    Fuck your wife
    Play with your perfect kids
    Not a goddamn care in the world
    You don't have a goddamn care in the world,
    Do you?

RATTLED

Does anything rattle you?
I had a dream that I sat here in your office
And started unbuttoning my shirt
And your eyes grew big
And you came over
And buried your head in my breasts
And I held your head in my hands
And pressed it against me,
Saying, "There, there..."
And I woke up all wet
And now you're rattled,
Aren't you?

Our patients' slips of the tongue often bring splashes of light to the dark waters of their poignant tales, and may subtly direct us with lapidary precision to the elemental source of their anguish.

FEATHERS

I've slept with 25 guys this year
Because I like the loss of control
I make sure I don't have control
By drinking myself into a stupor
Shot after shot
Oh, the guys love me
They wait for my weave and stagger
My slurred words
That's when I know I'm ready
I'm on my back in no time
Thinking about fathers floating down...
Did I say fathers?
I meant feathers...
Thinking about feathers floating down
I always think about feathers

Time rushes over all of us like a howling wind across a prairie, and in response to this gale we may find ourselves rocking back and forth to the dulcet rhythms of regret—which is an essential psychological achievement because without regret, we have no choice but to regress and watch the tendrils of the soul slowly wither.

STARTS

Here are some of the letters I tried to write to my first girlfriend:
Dear Kelly, I have been meaning to write to you for a long time...
Dear Kelly, You won't believe what I am about to say...
Dear Kelly, Do you remember me?
Dear Kelly, I know this comes out of the blue, but...
Dear Kelly, If only I could have written this letter 30 years ago...
Dear Kelly, I am sitting alone in a restaurant in a hotel in Cleveland...
Dear Kelly, This letter may be a mistake...
Dear Kelly, How are you?
Dear Kelly, If you are reading this, after seeing the return address,
then I am already hopeful
Dear Kelly, Where to begin?
Dear Kelly, What comes to mind when you think of a blue Buick?
Dear Kelly, I hope this letter finds you doing well
Dear Kelly...

PAYBACK

This one's my payback child
She's paying me back
'Cause I drove my mom crazy
Some moms say,
"What did I do to deserve this child?"
Well, not me—I *know* what *I* did—
I made my mom nuts
And now this one's making me nuts
Meanwhile, my mom's gotta be laughing at me
Up in heaven
Laughing at her daughter's ass getting kicked
By her darling little *grand*-daughter
Hell, they're *both* probably laughing.
I wish I could hear my mom laugh.

Murray Scher

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Me, Poetry, and Psychotherapy

One of my most serious lacks has been a knowledge of and appreciation for poetry. I just never could get all that interested in it despite best efforts of some fine teachers and some erudite friends. I made various essays at it but somehow it never took until…

This past summer at the session after a particularly powerful session my therapist told me he had been reading some poetry and thought of me. He read me two poems but the one that really stuck and struck was Mary Oliver's "And Bob Dylan too." It is in the collection *A Thousand Mornings*. I was touched and inspired so I bought the book and began my current love affair with Oliver.

Some time later one of my clients talked about the death of his dog the day before. I read him Oliver's poem, "When Percy First Came Back" about her beloved dog. Both of us wept and felt somewhat better.

I have branched out to other poets and finally understand the appeal poetry has for so many. I find the immediacy, imagery, and wisdom inescapable, not that I want to escape its thrall.

Recently, I read some poetry to my therapist. It was a lovely and touching moment and one of connection and depth.

So as Professor Berall from English 4 in college, reading from "the divine William," as he called Wordsworth would have intoned:

And now my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Art as Liberator and Guardian

I bristle when novels are characterized as escapism, as if I should be healthy enough to stay with reality. I think the whole three-dimensional thing is unnecessarily limiting. I consider fiction, like any art form, to be a portal into the vastness of my internal space. As an early teen, I would bike to the library to check out novels about minor league baseball players. My reading made me a journeyman player dodging beanballs meant to eliminate me from the lineup. I would lie on my bed and listen to a recording of classic New Orleans jazz or *Peter and the Wolf*. I disappeared into the jazz clarinet in the French Quarter and I tingled as Peter and I advanced into the forest. I was keeping the portal to my inner life open and my inner artist alive. Of course I had no idea what I was doing other than allowing a little pleasure into my miserable existence.

Art allows me to fly, nullifying my human boundaries. It lets me explore being a god and a devil, a bird and a tree, a murderer and a saint, brave little Peter and a duck quietly quacking inside the wolf's belly. It opens me to possibilities: lofty, as in Michalegelo's depiction of God touching man, or terrifying, as in Picasso's "Guernica" and the hell of war. I can connect with my joy or sadness when listening to Joshua Bell's violin or squirm when recognizing a cruel inner demon while watching *A Clockwork Orange*. Oscar Wilde said, "It is art, and art only, that reveals us to ourselves."

In its guardian role, art helps me avoid plunging into a pit of horror. I can imagine and symbolically act on inner urges without creating havoc for myself or others. Stephen King comes to mind as a man who has learned to safely and profitably celebrate yet contain his inner demons.

Jim Bird

Jim Bird, LCSW, says, "Since the late '70s, I've been a member of AAP, where I've received a lot of my growth. I practice therapy and dance enthusiastically in Atlanta, where I live with my wonderful wife and two spectacular cats. I also love being a grandparent, known as Pepe."
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Allowing the art of others to illuminate my soul is certainly liberating, but I transcend my human boundaries to a fuller extent when I allow my inner artist to blossom, when I become the creator. I was bound up with self-loathing as a younger man. Miserable and frozen in body and spirit, I was convinced I didn't have a creative bone in my body. The first major crack in that self-entombment came in my junior year of college, the period of my life when I was at my lowest, a lost soul indeed. Possibly as a divine stroke of intervention, my B.A. degree required me to take a semester of fine arts, including a section on modern dance. To my surprise and horror, this was a participatory class. I had to create and dance as part of a group, as part of a couple, and, most frighteningly, all alone. I ended up enjoying that course and feeling a strange new sensation nudge at my soul: joy. Many years later, after working long and hard to throw off my chains, I rediscovered that joyful sensation when I began taking dance lessons, dancing many dance forms, and, eventually, teaching dance. I am an artist. "The artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist" (Gill, 1934). ▼

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> After twenty years I still remember the response of a psychotic patient of mine when asked to distinguish between a river and a canal. Without hesitation he responded: "A River is Peace, a Canal is Torment," a line worthy of Blake.
>
> — Iain McGilchrist

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Mark A. Adams is a psychologist in private practice in Austin, Texas, and also works part time for the Austin VA Outpatient Clinic. He grew up in a suburb of Syracuse, New York, attended Colby College, McGill University, and Teachers College Columbia University, and completed his PhD in counseling psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, a postmodern excavation of heterosexual men's relationship with pornography. He does his best to cultivate and maintain a mindfulness meditation practice, loves design, especially mid-century modern design, and could be described as a "foodie."
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What I Talk About When I Talk About Fiction

In a 1989 *New York Times* piece,[1] Anatole Broyard wrote that D.W. Winnicott "[is] the only major therapist I know of whose language would have pleased a poet.... Winnicott read Henry James, and perhaps everyone should ask his analyst if he has read Henry James." Broyard, a writer and literary critic, opined on the insufficiency of the terminology and the language of theory, diagnosis, and case studies in psychotherapy. He argued that those who come to psychotherapy deserve a more imaginative "literature of the self," a rhetoric of psychotherapy that is animated by the poetic, the lyrical, and the sublime, and that touches our yearnings for transformation, transcendence, and transfiguration. In this essay I will offer a personal reflection on this perspective through a selective rendering of my education and intellectual formation, my books, and at times, my idiosyncratic fascinations, as they have and continue to animate my just-over-a-decade practice of psychotherapy.

I discovered Winnicott in an undergraduate course on the philosophy of literature, a course organized around the major novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, from *The Insulted and Injured* to *The Brothers Karamazov*; a formidable reading list for a single semester that I inevitably did not complete, that I still have not completed. I was 20 years old, it was winter in Montreal, and I wore a long black, thrift store coat. My brother observed that I perhaps looked a bit like Raskolnikov, the main character in the novel that moved me the most that semester, *Crime and Punishment*.

1 "About Books; Does Your Analyst Read Henry James"

Newly transferred from a small liberal arts college in New England, where I learned among many other things, that Dostoevksy had a rare form of epilepsy that made him more preoccupied with religious and metaphysical themes, I was now an undergraduate psychology major in a department committed to the scientific study of human behavior. During the Dostoevsky course I was also in the midst of a multi-term course on abnormal psychology/behavioral problems organized around a curated collection of articles from professional psychology journals with a professor who was bearded, cigar smoking, and an expert on alcoholism, substance abuse, and addiction. In that collection was a fascinating *American Psychologist* article that I was especially drawn to, "Behavior Therapy and the Ideology of Modernity." Citing Frankl and several philosophers including Kierkegaard and Sartre, Woolfolk and Richardson (1984) wrote, "there are inherent difficulties in any attempt to fashion a meaningful understanding of existence in terms of the moral and epistemological categories provided by scientific culture" (p. 782).

The philosophy of literature professor, an expert on moral philosophy and Kierkegaard, as well as a poet, used a rich array of secondary sources to read what the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) characterized in Dostoevsky's work as *polyphony*. A beautifully evocative idea borrowed from music theory, polyphony means a chorus of unmerged voices, a plurality of perspectives, a non-linearity held together in an engaging atonality within the form of a novel. Drawing from literary and art criticism, especially painting, moral philosophy, poetry, and psychoanalysis, the professor drew attention to the multilayered ways of reading Dostoevsky.

One of those was to read Dostoevsky novels as extraordinary psychological case studies in the form of polyphonic novels. It was in this way of reading that the professor used John Bowlby and Winnicott to talk about psychological damage, a kind of Dostoevskian developmental psychopathology. In Dostoevsky's world, characters encounter other characters in ways that reveal and change them, but not explicitly. They are changed by who the others are, how they live, and what happens between them. This theme lingered in my mind, and raises the question of how to understand what happens when patient and therapist encounter each other, talking in the places and spaces where psychotherapy is conducted, over and across time.

My encounter with Winnicott in these lectures led me to read *Playing and Reality* (1971). My copy is a trade paperback with an illustrated, slightly tattered teddy bear on the cover and an opening dedication: "To my patients who have paid to teach me."

I learned in an interview with his wife, Clare (Rudnytsky, 1991), that Winnicott voraciously read the novels of Henry James when he was a medical officer in WWI, and that he and his wife read fiction aloud together. I always thought that a lovely idea. Winnicott played piano and wrote poetry, and, towards the end of his life, he was "permanently listening" to the late quartets of Beethoven and still rode his bicycle, coasting down hills with his feet on the handlebars. Reflecting on those who encountered Winnicott, Rudnytsky wrote, "My quest for Winnicott has taught me how many people's lives were changed by having come in contact with this remarkable man" (1991, p. xvi).

I read *Playing and Reality* with great fascination, stimulation, and delight; it was unlike anything I had ever read in the field of psychology or psychoanalysis.

The prose was poetic and the theory and concepts read and moved like a kind of modern dance: mirroring and the mother-infant matrix; the dynamic between me and not-me; the emergence of the self and the construction of the false self; paradox and the

acceptance of the paradox; transitional objects, transitional phenomena, and potential space; a theory of play, creativity, and the location of cultural objects and experience. According to Winnicott (1971), "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self" (p. 63). My copy of this book is heavily underlined and marked, the pages worn and faded. There are three ideas in *Playing and Reality* that emerged as a kind of classic jazz trio that came together, played, and created a soundtrack for my development and practice as a psychotherapist.

First is the idea that psychotherapy is located in *potential space,* the space between the therapist and the patient, between their respective inner psychic realities and each other, an intermediate area of experience created through "the overlap of two areas of playing" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 44), an intersubjectivity. The therapist's work is animated by his or her own capacity to play, designing a "holding environment" with reliability and trust, and facilitating and caring about the patient's capacity to play. The psychotherapist is "directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play" (p. 44), because for Winnicott, playing is what makes life worth living. Psychotherapy is in this way a dialectical relationship that aspires to create a space where both the patient and the therapist become more personally and interpersonally playful, imaginative, spontaneous, and enlivened, to find their own prose and poetry. Part of my encounter with the humanities was a desire to engage in creative work and expression in more traditional forms, like writing fiction, writing novels, or perhaps painting, as I am especially fascinated by the expansive canvases of Abstract Expressionism. And while I did not pursue the work and life of an artist for many reasons, I saw myself as a kind of displaced artist looking for a medium, and finding that medium in the practice of psychotherapy.

Second is the idea that part of the therapist's process is to listen to, see, and evoke the patient's "unintegrated state of the personality," as it is here that individual creativity resides and can appear, "if reflected back, but only if reflected back" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 75). For me, this idea reverberates with Bakhtin's polyphony, with the reading of novels, with listening to music, and suggests conceptualizing the patient as polyphonic. The therapist listens, gathers, gives shape and form through language and tone to the atonality, the non-linearity of the patient's presentation and suffering, and with attention to timing, reflects back to the patient these unintegrated aspects of the self. In Winnicott's theory, these are the constituents of a genuine and authentic self and thus inextricably linked to the recovery and discovery of the patient's capacity to play, to have a more imaginative and creative, flexible and spontaneous relationship to self, others, and the external world.

Third is Winnicott's idea about health. "It is of first importance for us to acknowledge openly that the absence of psychoneurotic illness may be health, but it is not life.... we have yet to tackle the question of what life itself is about" (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 117, 116). This a humbling and incisive idea that is vital to my practice of psychotherapy and my development as a clinician. I strive to create a spaciousness that includes the reading and study of fiction and a broader engagement with the humanities, not as a separate endeavor, but as a substantive part of my psychotherapeutic vocation. This idea has also become more alive for me in recent years through a growing interest in mindfulness meditation and Buddhist psychology, especially the books of Mark Epstein, who also

draws on the poetics of Winnicott in his own unique perspective on the deficiencies of spirit and the spiritual in Western psychotherapeutic traditions and practices.

Weaving these Winnicottian threads, I recall a patient many years ago, a painter and combat veteran, who after several years of treatment, asked if he could give me a small antique Turkish rug with a dominant red and black color scheme. He imagined it on the floor between the patient and me, capturing in concrete form that which is ephemeral, the intricacies of what happens between patient and therapist over time. He also loved fiction, always reading and being affected by novels, often enthusiastically sharing and reading quotes and passages in session.

Novels are rich artifacts of Winnicott's potential space, of culture, and at its best, the novel does tackle the question of what life itself is about. The semester before the Dostoevsky course in my undergraduate years, I took a lecture course on the 20th century novel. One was Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* a powerful and slim volume that came alive again many years later when I found myself at the Veterans Administration treating Vietnam veterans and, later, veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. During the time we were reading *Heart of Darkness* in that course, a line from the novel was spray-painted on a brick wall in my neighborhood, known as the student ghetto, near a pizzeria and my favorite used-book store, The Word, that specialized in literature. The phrase was the culmination of that novel and of the film *Apocalypse Now:* "The horror! The horror" (Conrad, 1971, p.79). For some 10 years a central feature of my work as a psychotherapist was listening and gathering trauma narratives and finding ways to work therapeutically with veterans' stories, their suffering, their horror, and their damaged relationship with self, others, and the world; and sometimes, their own heart of darkness.

This course was also my introduction to Henry James. We read *The Ambassadors,* and I remember perhaps for the first time in my reading life that I felt a significant grief and loss when I read the final page. These characters and the prose of Henry James were no longer part of my everyday life, as I needed to move to the next novel on the syllabus. I still have my Norton Critical Edition of this novel, the spine now broken in several places, the pages also heavily underlined, and excavating this artifact from my books and reading history for this essay made me smile. A pervasive and central theme in many of Henry James' works, and inevitably, in his own life and personality, emerges early in this novel in a passage where Lambert Strether, the middle-aged American through whom the story is told and who travels to Paris, gives a speech to Little Bilham:

> Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what have you had?.... I see it now. I haven't done so enough before — and now I'm old; too old at any rate for what I see (James, 1964, p.132).

The speech goes on for at least a page with those beautiful Henry James sentences, his liberal use of the semicolon and dashes, drawing on description and metaphors, unpacking, expanding and deepening, moving back and forth into the interior of the characters, back into speech, dialogue and action. It has been more than 25 years since I first read this passage, this novel, and now I am closer in age to Strether than Little Bilham; and with that, I experience a deeper poignancy, a reflectiveness about what it means to be open to this life, about aging and regret. Henry James became known as "the Master" for his depictions of the psychological subtleties of the inner life, giving language to inner monologues and their tensions with action, relationships and the out-

side world — the very stuff of Winnicott's potential space.

Reading and studying Henry James and Dostoevsky led me to another American in Paris, someone who, like Winnicott, immersed himself in Henry James novels and had a signed photograph of the John Singer Sargent portrait of Henry James hanging above his writing desk (Leeming,1994). My next great fascination was the novelist, author, and public intellectual, James Baldwin. I read both *Another Country* and *Giovanni's Room* during this period in my life, the latter on breaks during the summer I worked the night shift at the GM factory my dad worked at all his adult life, making plastic parts for automobiles. These Baldwin novels are also extraordinary psychological case studies about love, sexuality, race, cultural conventions, depression and suicide — and, the question of what life itself is about. Baldwin's psychological approach to the novel is articulated and given context and form through his prose and style in part developed through the language and tones of preaching, his voracious reading and study of the literary canon, the improvisational music of jazz and the blues, and complex vicissitudes of his own personality and character in the social, cultural milieu of the 1950s and 1960s.

Baldwin had an unfinished essay on *The Ambassadors* (Leeming, 1994). "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to," is a familiar theme in literature and popular culture, as well as psychotherapy, but what gives the Strether speech its power and force is being contextualized in a more than 300-page novel, a narrative created through James' own psychological style and aesthetic of story, plot, and characters. In his 1927 lectures *Aspects of the Novel,* E.M. Forster (1970) articulated a new and emergent language for talking about literature and the novel, which included a discussion of *The Ambassadors.* Borrowing the terms "pattern and rhythm" from painting and music, Forster favored the idea of the rhythmic relation of story, plot, characters and causality in the novel as a whole, an aspiration to model itself after musical forms, that the novel is "not completion. Not rounding off but opening out" (p. 170), into something larger, perhaps something beautiful, strange, and new. Forster, an accomplished novelist who was fascinated and influenced by music and music theory, also co-wrote the libretto for Benjamin Britten's opera *Billy Budd,* transforming the Herman Melville novella into music.

A contemporary British novelist and essayist, and perhaps a literary heir to James Baldwin, Zadie Smith (2006) lectured about the reader of fiction and novels at *The New Yorker Festival,* "A novel is a two-way street, in which the labour required on either side is, in the end, equal. Reading, done properly, is every bit as tough as writing — I really believe that." In Smith's analogy of the reader as an amateur musician, he or she must play the sheet music that is the composition, the novel, must bring to life the rhythm and tempo, the musical phrasing, the style and aesthetic of the novel's story, plot, and characters. For me, reading and discovering great fiction is an art to cultivate; it is "about the need to discover and explore the secret pleasures of the self through reading and thinking" (Toibin, 2004, p. 151). This is what I discovered: reading novels is an act of the creative imagination that enlivens my relationships with myself, language, others, the outside world, and my practice of psychotherapy.

However, our patients are not novels, works of fiction, or poems. They come to us suffering, and I believe we have a duty to help. The history of psychotherapy is in part about the different ways we think about helping our patients, this is what ties all psychotherapists together. This is also where we find the tension between science and art in the field of psychotherapy and its practitioners. In my work, I have had to confront my aversion

toward the scientific study of human behavior, toward empirical research on psychotherapy, and the word cluster descriptions that have come to dominate talk about psychotherapy: empirically validated/supported treatments or evidenced-based treatments.

I have been trained in cognitive processing therapy (CPT) and prolonged exposure for PTSD, and I have found them, if lacking in poetry, compelling and useful. But in many ways, these treatment models bring us back to Winnicott's question about health. The reduction of PTSD symptoms on various self-report measures may be health, but it is not life. Working with veterans I have developed a critical irreverence toward manualized treatment models and the social construction of evidence-based treatments. Having used them, I see both their value and the broader ethical imperative to actively evaluate and develop treatments, but as with Zadie Smith's analogy of the novel as sheet music for the reader to play, these treatments, these research based narratives of psychotherapy, still have to be played in session. It is in the playing that I can find my own poetics, pattern, and rhythm.

I took yet another undergraduate philosophy of literature course with the Dostoevsky professor, and I wrote a paper on the E.M. Forster novel, *A Room With A View*. I wrote about Baedeker travel guidebooks in Lucy Honeychurch's first visit to Italy, to Florence, and how the Baedekers can present a most narrow view of a place, of what to see and pay attention to, of deciding for you what is important and why; and, how living through a travel guidebook inhibited personal discovery, risk, spontaneity and serendipity in travel, in seeing a place, the presently experienced place beyond the one carefully constructed in the Baedeker. Manualized treatments feel, in part, like travel guidebooks for the practice and provision of psychotherapy.

Reading great novels, fiction and poetry, nourishes, cultivates, and opens up my sense and use of language, the primary vehicle of exchange in psychotherapy. And as E.M. Forster (1970) envisions the novel aspiring to be like music, "a type of beauty which fiction might achieve in its own way.... Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out" (p. 170), I also aspire to create such a language in the practice of psychotherapy.

Conducting a psychotherapy is like reading a novel. Empathy and warmth are correctly discussed as qualities of the therapeutic alliance and development of the psychotherapist, but what about imagination? We begin with a polyphonic patient's presenting concerns and through inquiry and clinical process, through what the patient says and does not say, through the emergence of Winnicott's "unintegrated state of the personality," we contextualize our patient's suffering into a larger narrative of the very stuff of novels: story, plot, characters, and an evolving sense of the architecture of causality; we must imagine the patient's life, bring alive a developmental history, a present life lived outside our office. In her 1957 memoir, *On Not Being Able To Paint*, the psychoanalyst, writer, and dear friend of Winnicott, Marian Milner wrote:

> Certainly seeing with one's own eyes, whether in painting or in living, seeing the truth of people and events and things needed an act of the imagination; for truth was never presented whole to one's senses at any particular moment, direct sensory experience was always fragmentary and had to be combined into a whole by the creative imagination (p.14).

A psychotherapy also has its own "pattern and rhythm" weaving back and forth from the past to the present; in the narration, talking, dialogue, and inquiry, where themes, images, metaphors, relationships, and the patient's unconscious emerge

in repetition and variation; in the reflections, interpretations, silences, and spaces between sessions; all these given power and force by the form of psychotherapy collaboratively constructed by therapist and patient, in Winnicott's potential space. And like a novelist, a poet, a painter, a composer, a chef, a psychotherapist cultivates a style and tone, a rhythm and tempo, a language that is his or her own, cultivated through his or her own character and personality, as a self and a psychotherapist, distilling various influences and experiences.

Like a meditation practice, I read fiction as part of my development as a self and a psychotherapist. In a recent *New Yorker* article on bibliotherapy at The School of Life, a London-based collective committed to the education of the emotions through the humanities, Ceridwen Dovey (2015) quoted the British novelist and author, Jeanette Winterson: "Fiction and poetry are doses, medicines. What they heal is the rupture reality makes on the imagination." Updating, or perhaps postmodernizing Broyard's query about Henry James that began this essay, one might ask, perhaps one should ask, does your therapist read Haruki Murakami? ▼

COMMENTARY

While first reading this essay, I recalled the initial sessions with a then-freshman named "Emily," a college student with whom I have worked for the last three years. Emily introduced herself by declaring a passion for literature and an intention to become an English major. To the former English teacher in me, her love of literature and poetry was endearing and notable; however, soon her poetic language and focus on literature began to fog up the picture. After a few sessions, my countertransference was slight irritation and a growing impatience to meet "her." I had a similar experience in relationship to this author. Initially, I was grabbed by the opening paragraph and excited to read the author's thoughts on literature, and how influential writers had informed the process of "transformation, transcendence, and transfiguration" in his experience of psychotherapy. Yet as the essay progressed, I found myself slightly irritated, but also noticed I was hungry for more. The irritation was related to the sheer amount of literary references, and the hunger was wanting to get to know the author as therapist and how his passion for art and artistry showed up in the consulting room.

The essay is, at different turns, a retrospective on the author's educational path, a distillation of ideas that have influenced this author, and a musing on the ways that being an artist and a psychotherapist merge. This is an ambitious task and it created a wish in me to have a conversation. Yet, a conversation implies a degree of informality, and I could not quite tell if the author wished to have a more intimate or more formal relationship with the intended audience.

On second reading, I grew less irritated and more appreciative that the author identifies a number of great writers, and draws the connection between favorite pieces of literature and how these works of art shape his work as therapist and supervisor. I am left thinking that there may be two potential essays lurking, one a more formal, didactic essay, and the other a more personal story. My personal preference would be to read the latter. For example, after the discussion on Winnicott's "classic jazz trio," I want to know more about the author's work with the combat veteran who wanted to give him a small Turkish rug. I would have been interested to read how the author related the concepts of "potential space," "the dynamic unconscious," and the question of "what life itself is about" to this particular patient.

At the end, I felt that the author and I shared an important perspective: that conducting therapy can be like reading a novel. However, I had never put this concept into words the way the author does: "we contextualize our patient's suffering into a larger narrative of the very stuff of novels: story, plot, characters, and an evolving sense of the architecture of causality; we must

imagine the patient's life, bring alive a developmental history, a present life lived outside the office." At an instinctual level, I knew that being an English teacher was a natural precursor to being a therapist, however this author puts that abstract knowing into words. My initial association with Emily remains salient; I find myself hoping I will get to meet this person.

—Diane Christie Shaffer, PsyD

* * *

As I began reading this essay, I immediately reflected on the author's courage in calling it an "essay" and insisting that articles on the psychotherapeutic enterprise ought to be not just personally revealing, but more literate, poetic, even playful.

Although intuitively alerted that I was possibly going to be treated to an exceptional intellectual enterprise, I was unprepared for what followed: a long and complicated prose poem integrating the author's intellectual development — especially through literature but including art and music — his way of conceptualizing and practicing his work as a psychotherapist and educator, and his life as a person.

This essay ought to have a short forward warning that it is written for the serious reader, to be studied, not perused or approached casually. It is probably an essay to be read several times.

I am most often impatient with articles that go on and on, telling me more about "woodchucks" than I will ever find useful. Brevity usually can be good enough, but my marked copy will show underlining especially when the writer describes his efforts to think about and integrate his cognitive-manual-science style with his dynamic-unconscious side, and when he advocates playfulness as an essential ingredient in the good life, well lived.

One of his heros, Winnicott, illuminated the importance of the "good enough." This essay is more than good enough. It probably belongs in the *New York Review of Books,* but it is an important kudo for *Voices* to have it appear first in the journal celebrating the "person who is the therapist."

—Vin Rosenthal, PhD

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Special Section

Perspectives from the Consulting Room and Beyond

In a time lacking in truth and certainty and filled with anguish and despair, no woman should be shamefaced in attempting to give back to the world, through her work, a portion of its lost heart.

— Poet Louise Bogan

The theme of this issue, Fiction and Psychotherapy, led me to ask a selection of therapists, writers, filmmakers, and artists to respond to the editors' inquiry, "how have images, associations, interpretations, motivations, themes and characters from fiction influenced your work?" Borrowing from the idea expressed by theologian and author Frederick Buechner that "...most fiction is at its heart autobiography," these contributors describe the sources of their creative impulses and share their productions. Whether in the form of a painting, photograph, film, psychotherapy hour, or lifetime of reading fiction, they describe the visionary and imaginative influences that have conspired over the years to impact their evolving artistic visions.

— Hallie Lovett, PhD

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Demystifying Dream Work and the Unconscious

The first time someone asked me about the connection between art and fiction I was an undergraduate, taking an etching course at the Art Institute of Chicago. In that period of my life, I read constantly. Whenever I wasn't doing something that required both hands, one hand was holding a book, almost always Russian fiction. So, while I waited for the acid bath to bite into one of my plates, or absentmindedly warmed a lump of soft ground to coat another, I would read. Around me, a crowd of students busied themselves etching plates, chatting, boasting, and declaiming artistic manifestos, but I was undistracted. The instructor was a vague presence issuing instructions. For me, the only sharp realities were in the pages of my novel and on the surface of my plates. I never thought to draw a line between them.

One day the instructor appeared at my elbow, looked over my shoulder at the page I was reading and asked if there was a connection between my book and my art. At once utterly surprised and completely stumped, I found the question baffling. He might as well have asked if there was a connection between what I ate and how I breathed. Both reading fiction and making art were, for me, basic needs. I consumed fiction; I produced art. And although I was an apprentice intellectual, neither of these activities were things I *thought* about. I *thought* about political philosophy, history, and mathematics, but I *lived* in fiction and in art. In short, I said no.

Reflecting on this question many years later, I answer again, like my reflexive response so long ago, that there is no direct connection between my reading of fiction and my art. While both are essential to the life of that fictional entity I call *Me*, there is no direct, causative, link between the two. Indeed, for me, on the rare occasions I feel a tangible connection between the written word and the painted surface, it is more likely to be found in nonfiction than fiction. For example, I once came across an article by Oliver Sacks and was riveted by this paragraph:

> The Magnolia flowers, when ripe, would be crawling with tiny insects, little beetles. Magnolias, my mother explained, were among the most ancient of flowering plants and had appeared nearly a hundred million years ago, at a time when "modern" insects like bees had not yet evolved, so they had to rely on a more ancient insect, a beetle, for pollination. Bees and butterflies, flowers with colors and scents…would develop…in infinitesimal stages, over millions of years. The idea of a world without…color affected me with a sense of awe (2008).

Me too.

Inspiration. 2012; 20" x 24", oil on linen. By Elizabeth Torak

The thought that the world of black and white preceded the world of color, as drawing precedes painting in the development of a work of art — that every time an artist makes a preparatory drawing that develops into a painting she is mimicking the evolution of life on the planet — sent me spinning into the studio. At the time, I was working on a major figure piece and the walls of my studio were covered with dozens of my black and white drawings tracing the evolution of the figures and composition. Sacks' paragraph was neither the basis of that work nor any of my works, but it seemed to come from a consciousness so deeply allied with my own, it felt as if it had sprung from my own mind. That experience of connection charged me with creative energy.

Yet, even at its most intense, reading informs my art only indirectly. Without doubt, the fiction I read finds its way into my unconscious, like all other of my experiences, but I could no more draw a line between a particular experience of fiction and a painting than between the broken eggs from New Year's Day brunch and the tomato I harvested this morning. The real inspiration for my work comes from nature, from my imagination, and from my observations of everyone and everything I have contact with. ▼

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Looking and Listening… Seeing and Hearing

You're always working at the margins of what you don't understand. That's the only exhilarating place to be. To just illustrate what you already know is condescending and a waste of your time.

— Emmet Gowin

My serious involvement with photography began a short time after my life as a psychotherapist began in earnest. There were parallels between these two disciplines that were not simply chronological, however. While Emmet Gowin, whom I quote above, is a photographer, his statement could equally apply to our work as therapists. Similarly, he said, "Photography is a tool for dealing with things everybody knows about but isn't attending to."

In the mid-'70s, my first significant photography teacher, Joe Cameron, at the Corcoran College of Art, taught me to look in a different way. At that time, his photographs came from glimpses of scenes — the kind of partial vision one often sees out of the corner of one's eye. These pictures draw attention to ordinary things we see all the time and focus attention on them — things we see in passing to which the photographer gives center stage. I began to see in new ways — paying attention to half-scenes, to what might catch my eye for only a second, and then staying with it.

At the same time, as a therapist, I was experiencing the importance of the offhand remark, the slip of the tongue, the dream image. These also are things that are easy to run right by, but paying attention to them changes the work and can lead to therapeutic pay dirt — to scenes, if you will, of great emotional import.

After my summer break, a young adult male patient returns to my freshly painted and re-carpeted office and jokingly says, "No one consulted me *on this." This is a person whose family moved five times before he was 10, and who never felt there was any way to express his feelings of disorientation. I say to him, "I guess that feels familiar." With surprise, he looks at me and begins to talk about how alone and unseen he felt in his family.*

The task of the photographer is to draw our attention to scenes or people in ways that alter our relationship to them. Think of the grandeur of Ansel Adams' portraits of Yosemite or of his *Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico,* or

of the iconic portrait that Annie Leibovitz made of John Lennon and Yoko Ono in bed together. It was impossible to ever think of John Lennon in the same way again. By this portrayal, Lennon had been altered, made vulnerable, human, and multi-dimensional.

The act of making a photograph demands presence. The photographer must decide to look, and every photograph involves a consciousness, however slight, of that act of looking. There's always a decision to frame an image in that particular way, from that exact point of view. The degree of consciousness may be more or less, particularly now, in the digital age. Yet, whether it is Ansel Adams lugging his huge camera to Yosemite or you, whipping out your phone to snap something, present is an intent to capture an image.

A photograph is a moment in time, frozen. It gives us a view that we could have by no other means. The viewer sees that particular moment through the eyes of the photographer. Each photograph implies a relationship between the photographer and the subject, whether landscape, street scene, or portrait. Why was that moment chosen? What moments surrounded it? There is a famous portrait of Winston Churchill, when he was prime minister. The moment before he snapped the picture, the photographer, Yosuf Karsh, had reached over and plucked Churchill's cigar out of his mouth. In the picture, what one sees is Churchill scowling at the camera. In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger writes, "Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights." We are aware that we are looking at what the photographer has chosen for us to see.

Take the picture here, for example. I took it on the day that the Supreme Court was deliberating the gay marriage case. There were many demonstrators in front of the court

Steps Toward Equality. 2015. By Molly Walsh Donovan.

that day — on both sides of the argument. This picture shows the imposing court building, the law in the form of a guard, and the protestors asking for a simple thing. Can you imagine what there was about this particular scene that compelled my attention? In fact, I had captured many moments. Why do you think I chose this one of all the possibilities? Think about it for a moment.

In the book, *Spectral Evidence,* the philosopher, Vilem Flusser, is quoted as saying, "The gesture of photography is the search for a standpoint, for a world view; it is an ideological gesture" (Baer, 2002). Deciding to make photographs and to do that in a deliberate way is to embark on a journey of exploration. This venture also reveals much about the photographer, sometimes to herself as well.

Several years ago, as I looked back at my work from a certain period of time, I noticed that the images I selected were scenes with no people in them. There were traces of people, you could tell people had been there, but no figures were in them. This was a time after the sudden death of a friend, and my photos reflected my reaction to that event. Reflecting on these photographs helped me discover something about myself that I'd known, but until then, hadn't put into words.

These aspects of photography — the presence demanded, the consciousness, the decision to pay attention to a particular detail, the act of altering the relationship to the image, are all familiar to us as psychotherapists. They are the necessary tools of our work as well. As we listen, we're attuned to the phrasing, the detail, or a pattern that has meaning. We draw our patient's attention to an element of the story that he may have overlooked or interpreted in a particular way, and we suggest another meaning, which alters the story. In doing this, we are looking at the picture he presents from a different angle, focusing on a different aspect, and, as a result, changing the narrative. Together, we are constructing and restructuring stories — whether photographer and viewer, or psychotherapist and patient — and we human creatures need to have stories. ▼

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Sculpting the Personal Story

Every person has a reservoir of stories — ancestor stories, origin stories, stories from childhood—that, whether any particular individual knows it or not — shape the defining narrative of his or her life.

— Arlene Goldbard (2005)

Our personal fictions start with narratives we encounter as children and continue throughout life.

— Thomas Burns (2014)

FOR THIRTY YEARS I HAVE BEEN TELLING STORIES: Stories of women workers in a costume jewelry factory who assembled jewelry while fashioning creative ways to resist oppressive conditions. Stories of understaffed nursing home workers who had to fight hard just to get the time to hold the hand of a resident as he passed away. Stories of a Jewish teenager in Poland who lost everything in the Holocaust except her memories. She went on to create works of art 50 years later, remembering in minute detail not only the horror, but the beauty. Real stories of real people whom I met in my years as an anthropologist and documentary filmmaker.

I was aware, or so I thought, of the forces that drove me to the stories, for example, of low-wage workers. I had a well-developed political consciousness that collective action was the key to having a voice in the workplace and a means to economic equity. I was also fascinated with the ordinary in everyday life, especially what people did at work, all kinds of work. I was aware of the power of consciousness in reinforcing or transforming ideas about power relations — between classes, races, ethnicities and genders. I also thought that I recognized the deep psychological forces within us that shape our human interactions and our search for connectedness and beauty — natural, human, and spiritual.

What I wasn't aware of was the force of my own upbringing as the second daughter and middle child of a father who contracted polio as an infant in the epidemic of 1919. My father always walked with a cane and a brace. He married my loving, strong and socially-conscious mother who also cared deeply about the human condition. I didn't realize that the pain of seeing my beloved father belittled by others when we were out in public, when I was as young as four or five years old, made me angry. I realize more deeply now, that I wanted to *cry out* and give

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TO VIEW NINA'S DIGITAL STORY "OPENING": Nina'sDigiStory 2015Final.mov https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2SS_2ygYNhSUUl-mQ19NeHliWG8/view?pli=1

voice to his personhood, and mine. This pain, coupled with the sweetness of my childhood, opened my heart to *the other,* to those who society deemed "different" by virtue of their race or ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation, disability, or work uniform. I felt their dismissal, invisibility, exploitation and persecution. Their *otherness* made me want to speak out.

While I knew I had a passion for the kind of work I was drawn to, I didn't realize that my own origin story had framed my professional work as an anthropologist and filmmaker all along. My deeper inquiry began with a probing question from a close friend, who happens to be a psychologist. In my 50s, she asked me what drove me to make the film about Holocaust survivor and artist Esther Nisenthal Krinitz. After struggling for 10 years to raise funds and make the film, she wanted to know what accounted for *my passion* about my work and the intensity I brought to it. At first, I didn't understand her question. What did Esther's story really have to do *with me?* But the more I thought about it, I realized that all my professional life, I have been interested in telling the stories of those who were dismissed, overlooked, laughed at, marginalized, turned into the *Other.* Gradually and surprisingly, I came to understand that my urgency began as a little girl and has continued throughout my life.

At the time that I was exploring this insight, I was teaching documentary filmmaking to anthropology and film students at American University as a filmmaker in residence. I had created a community storytelling initiative in which my students learned to capture the stories of residents of Greater Washington whose voices too often go unheard — people of color, immigrants, poor people, gay and transgender people — people of the *Other* Washington (http://www.american.edu/soc/communityvoice/). I was particularly interested in training my students in the method of digital storytelling.

A digital story is a four-minute video narrative written and directed by a first-time filmmaker that combines one's recorded voice, still and moving images, music and other art into a short digital film. Here, the *subject* of the film is actually the lead *participant* in the production. The power dynamic shifts from the traditional documentary model that privileges the role of the director to shape the story. Now, the subject tells his or her own story with the help of a trained practitioner, and learns digital storytelling skills in the process (Hill, 2008). Because of their authenticity, these digital stories help break down a sense of otherness and let us hear community stories, *unfiltered*.

My students must complete their own digital story before they start working with community members on their digital stories. This experience sensitizes them to the difficulty of finding and telling one's own story and the responsibility involved in bearing witness to another's. It became clear to me that if my students and community storytellers were going to dive deeply into transformational moments in their lives, I should too. The stars aligned and this became the opportunity for me to share my own origin story, freshly unearthed, with others. ▼

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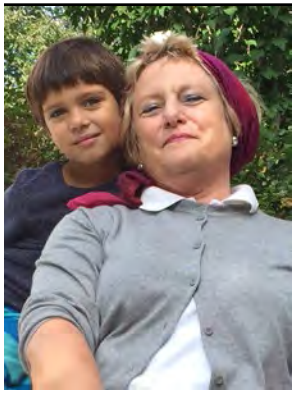
Doris Jackson



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One Halloween about ten years ago there came to our door, among the princesses, monsters, and *Star Wars* characters, a little girl about nine years old in a gingham dress and prairie bonnet. I held out our bowl of candy and asked, "Who are you dressed as?" "Oh," she said, in a weary voice, "You wouldn't know. It's someone from a book."

* * *

Reading fiction is a great way for us shy, bookish types to meet other people. Not only do we meet them, if we choose to, we become their close companions. At the flick of a page we are speeding through the English countryside in a railway carriage with Holmes and Watson. We're on a first name basis with Pierre and Natasha, taken in to their secret dreams and despairs. At Hogwarts we hang with the coolest kids: we are right there under the invisibility cloak with Ron and Harry; we know the secret words ("wingarium leviosa," anyone?), and we are privy to pretty much everything that the Ministry of Magic is trying to keep under wraps. With the Swallows and Amazons, we embrace the motto "Better drowned than duffers" — whether or not we have any idea how to sail a boat and we never have to reveal that we don't really know Morse code.

In the novels I love, several elements are combined, but the first thing that comes to mind is the creation of a world. I love books that carry me away and let me live somewhere else for a time. But the writing has to be good enough; otherwise the book is irritating or worse. A bad attempt to create a world, be it a tired imitation of Tolkien or a phony and condescending picture of olden times, is dreadful. Successful ones include the *Wolf Hall* trilogy, a miraculous work of historical detail about Henry VIII and his murderously scheming courtiers, imagined and brought to life by a great writer, Hilary Mantel. She doesn't explain anything, she just takes you there. JK Rowling's imagined world of the *Harry Potter* series has such satisfying layers, including the names, the rules of magic, the families and histories, the portrayal of the Dark Side, and the author's insistence, from the first, on addressing the issue of death and our all too human wish to undo it.

My third top pick in this "take me to another world" category is the Aubrey-Maturin series by Patrick O'Brien. These 20 linked novels are based on a trove of historical records — ships' logs, memoirs, and official documents of the British Royal Navy. The development of the two central characters gives deep satisfaction, humor and meaning to the many adventures, as does O'Brien's comfortable use of period language and sailing terms. For honorable mention in this "create a world" category I will add Precious Ramotswe's Botswana, as evoked in the *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* novels by Alexander McCall Smith. Sometimes you need to leave your real life and go somewhere gentle.

In addition to visiting another world and living by its codes, when I read fiction I want to meet characters who grow and change. I want the author to take me inside their hopes and disappointments and make me come to understand their choices — good and bad. Two of my favorite fictional people, Emma Woodhouse and Dorothea Brooke, are both privileged, intelligent, well-intentioned white girls. About Emma, Jane Austen famously wrote that she had created a heroine "whom no one but myself will much like" (Austin, 1815/2015, p. xxiv). That's because Emma, when we meet her, is so self-satisfied. She thinks she can see into other peoples' hearts, and that she can "help" all her friends by matchmaking for them. In reality, she makes terrible blunders and misreads almost everyone around her. (The wonderful movie *Clueless* was based on the plot of *Emma*, transforming our heroine into a 1990s Hollywood high schooler.) Emma can't even see that her own true love is right under her nose — until she receives three or four major come-uppances and a chastening lecture from a family friend. After she is thus humbled and made aware of herself, she acknowledges her faults, tries to make amends, and becomes more worthy of the happy ending the author has in store for her. This is a good character for an aspiring know-it-all psychotherapist (I name no names) to keep rereading.

Dorothea Brooke, in *Middlemarch*, is blinded in a different way. Impatient with the trivial pursuits open to young women in the 1840s, and thinking she will devote her life to a high-minded man of the church, she makes a disastrous marriage to a much older man who turns out to be petty, narcissistic and controlling. After she recognizes her mistake and sees that her hopes of helping her husband write his "great" book will never be realized, she seeks other ways to make her life count for something — only to be told that she is behaving improperly. By her great art, George Eliot shows Dorothea growing up and becoming a sadder, wiser woman, capable of a transforming compassion for others, even when she is wounded. Another *Middlemarch* character, the idealistic young doctor, Lydgate, who (the reader sees) would have been the perfect match for Dorothea, also blights his life by an ill-considered marriage and then gets disastrously tangled in local politics. Lydgate has to renounce his hopes of founding a hospital and pursuing his passion for medical research, while Dorothea lives trapped in her privileged doll's house, longing to do good in the world. George Eliot resists the temptation to bring them together through some authorial machination. Instead, she lets us, the readers, ache for them, while they try to make the best of their lives.

Another way reading fiction lets you meet people is through connecting with the mind of the author. The books in my top picks have plot twists that delight me or break my heart each time I reread. But plot alone is dead. I want to find in the voice of the author someone I trust, with whom I feel I am in conversation, who tells me new things or makes me understand old things — someone who is smart and funny and does not

condescend to me. Sometimes that authorial voice is so strong you could pick it out of a crowd — Dickens or Virginia Woolf — and sometimes it amounts to poetry. In *Riddley Walker* (1980), by children's author Russell Hoban (of *Bread and Jam for Frances* fame), the author creates a post-apocalyptic Britain where the English language has been all but lost and has to be patched together from fragments of nonsense and half-remembered stories. He creates a new language and makes us learn it as we listen to his young protagonist.

And finally, there is a special joy in connecting with other readers who love the same books. For many years I took part in a weekly group which met at the home of friends for the purpose of reading aloud. We met not to discuss the books but to listen to them, eagerly awaiting the next chapter of *David Copperfield* or *Bang the Drum Slowly* or H. Rider Haggard's *She*. We learned, in the process, so much about each other. I never would have read *Riddley Walker,* that strange and compelling masterpiece if it had not been chosen and read aloud by one of our group. Hearing Hoban's language was like being chanted into someone else's world, whether you wanted to go there or not. As Riddley says:

> The worl is ful of things waiting to happen. Thats the meat and boan of it right there. You myt think you can jus go here and there doing nothing. Happening nothing. You cant tho you bleeding cant. You put your self on any road and some thing wil show its self to you. Wanting to happen. Waiting to happen. You myt say, 'I dont want to know.' But 1ce its showt its self to you you wil know wont you. You cant not know no mor. There it is and working in you. You myt try to put a farness be twean you and it only you cant becaws youre carrying it inside you. The waiting to happen aint out there where it ben no more its inside you. (p. 201)

For years afterwards we would use phrases from the lingo Hoban created — "trubba not!" — as a code to connect us to those evenings of listening and bonding.

* * *

Which brings me back to that little girl on our doorstep, on Halloween. I squatted down so I could look her in the face. "Is it Laura?" I asked.

I don't know who was happier, that child or me, to know that because both of us had read and loved *Little House on the Prairie,* we could, just for a moment, understand one another. ▼

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Revisiting Monhegan

Monhegan is a small island about 12 miles off the coast of Maine. Its beauty is held within little more than a square mile. The name derives from an Algonquin word meaning "out to sea island." In the mid-19th century, artists were drawn by the raw energy of the place and it continues to host a thriving art community to this day. Famous artists, from Robert Henri to several generations of Wyeths, have traversed the trails, sandy beaches and cliffs in search of inspiration.

Some of my earliest memories are from a trip I took with my parents when I was five years old. We ferried over to Monhegan for a weeklong vacation. I remember sitting near the noisy, diesel-smelling engine room on the ferry, trying to stay out of the wind, but almost passing out from the fumes. The weather was cold and dreary the entire time we were there and I don't think the sun peeked out once, but I loved the place! We stayed in a very dark, rustic barracks-type building, where they served huge pancake breakfasts and hot lobster dinners. I went fishing with my father and we hiked along the 150-foot cliffs on the northern end of the island. We walked through Cathedral Woods where little fairy houses magically appeared along the trail. These tiny nature houses were barely noticeable as they blended in with the landscape, adding to the mystical charm. How did they get there? Who built them? What were their stories? Even as a little girl, these questions excited me. Last week, 52 years later, I returned to Monhegan for a five-day *plein air* painting workshop. For me, this was truly a dream come true.

I grew up with art all around me. My mother was a painter, and my father a sculptor and art professor at the local university. While I knew by high school that I wanted to become a therapist, over the years art continued to call to me and I decided to pursue painting as well. For me, painting is about the process of taking an image, often from nature, capturing a moment in time, exploring the play of light, shadow and color, and the challenge of translating this to canvas or paper. A painting is a story in the making where it is up to anyone seeing the painting to use his or her imagination to personalize it and make it theirs, synthesizing input from my image with what is called to mind in each viewer.

In my current life, I wear many hats. There is the recently-divorced-parent hat, navigating how to simultaneously

The Monhegan Museum. Summer 2015; 12″ x 12″, oil on linen. By Kate Rooney Miskovsky

mother and release three young adults as they find their own paths in life. The adult-only-child hat has me figuring out how to assist my aging parents, as their health issues become more serious. I have felt throughout my adult life that I have always worn two career hats — those of the mental health therapist and painter. My therapy work is with a local community mental health agency where I am a school-based clinician in a combined elementary-middle school. This model is highly effective, as I have my office in the school building itself and am able to work with children who might otherwise never receive treatment. My clients range from kindergarteners through eighth-graders, and sometimes I include their parents or guardians in family therapy.

As a therapist, I often encourage my clients to follow their creative impulses. There are so many potential avenues to be taken in the creative process: the fine arts, music, journaling, dance or even cooking. My student clients often find their time with me the main doorway into the world of creative healing. The possibilities set in motion by their imaginative powers are often exhilarating and grounding for both of us. Their

developing trust in me and in the creative process helps to promote a more solid sense of self to take back out into the world. Our work together nurtures them as they figure out what their story is and can become as we create a space together to make this kind of storytelling possible. It is, sadly, often the only thing in my young clients' lives over which they have a sense of control. One of my clients, a first-grade girl who has a severe trauma history, complicated family life, and great difficulty managing her emotions and behavior, is able to take great pride in her drawings. In this one area of her life, she has a beginning sense of mastery over her own life story and a healthier sense of connection with herself and others.

As I journeyed back last week to Monhegan, I was eager to see how my memories would fare against my new perceptions. Would there still be fairy houses, were the cliffs as high, would it be rainy and dreary? I was delighted to discover that the island was, once again, almost magical. When the ferry arrived at the dock, three pick-up trucks, the only vehicles on the island except for a few golf carts, were waiting to transport our suitcases and easels to our respective lodgings. We passengers were left to find our way on foot along the still unpaved roads. Over the course of the week I came to experience first-hand that the imaginativeness the island stimulates is still palpable. Everywhere I looked there were people writing, sketching, painting, photographing, and thinking.

As I walked the trails of Cathedral Woods, I was delighted to see that little fairy houses still peek from hidden spots along the sun-dappled paths. I trusted that they would once again spark the imagination of a passing child, and I wondered what stories they would create. I left this tiny island filled with a renewed sense of how essential and transformative it is for each of us to pursue our unique creative story. ▼

Grandma, What Did You Do When You Were a Little Girl?

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We'd all have been better off to have read half as many books, twice.

— Dick Cavett in *By the Book*
(*New York Times,* 12/21/14)

The ability to imagine the inner life of another person is essential to the work of the psychotherapist. Another necessary ingredient is the capacity, now and then, to be able to put into words a sense of what has happened in the patient's life and what is happening in the healing process of psychotherapy. These are also the goals of a work of fiction, the gift of the imagination of a fellow traveler who can accompany the reader in a life that often feels disordered, painful, and mysterious.

I cannot imagine a better grounding for myself as a reader than the one I received in a family of six in a small town in Vermont. The memory of my first library card and the cards in the back of the books reminding you of the date of return is both visual and olfactory. The entrée this card provided to The Bennington Free Library, the most venerable institution in our village second only to the numerous churches that dotted the valley, changed my life. Here was a place of both richness and freedom, with its vast reservoir of books and the opportunity to sit there in peace and quiet, unbothered by siblings, parents or responsibilities for hours on end. Since we were one of the last families on our street to get a television in the mid-1950s when I was eight, I grew up listening to my father and mother read to us. I still remember snuggling down together under a heavy comforter on our well-worn sofa on a cold winter evening, waiting for the magic to begin. "Tell us a story about the war, Daddy," one of us would intone. He would comply, with highly edited tales that could combine kittens and Howitzers, rivers of mud and the camaraderie of his platoon mates. These stories would often end with a gently elided moral like, "I hope I never see a hungry child again in my lifetime." My dad had come of age in an era when schoolboys and girls took great pride in memorizing long classic poems, and hearing him recite the opening lines of *The Ballad of William Sycamore* brought a shiver of delight at the prospect of the excitement that was to follow. We would make requests — *The Song of Hiawatha, Casey at the Bat, The*

Between Sessions. 2015; photograph. By Ray Lovett

Ballad of Paul Revere — or wait to be surprised. Along with my mother's best friend and a beloved bachelor uncle, our small family library was supplied with many a Caldecott winner. I remember especially, and still have, a beautifully bound volume of children's classic verse illustrated by Maxfield Parrish we received for Christmas one year from our Uncle Tom. The early imaginative play that my two brothers, my younger sister and I exuberantly choreographed off the stories we heard was an early experience of group therapy, as we learned to take turns being Gunga Din or the elephants, or The Lone Ranger or Tonto, or "the bad guys." A surprisingly eclectic parochial education featured reading contests, and being read to by the nuns was often a prize for good class behavior. A highlight of 4th grade was the doling out to a raptured audience of sections of — ironically — *Peck's Bad Boy,* read by the particularly strict Sister Rose Mary. Never was a next installment more eagerly awaited! On my very first sleepover around the age of 9 or 10 at my friend's farmhouse in the country, a little homesick and unable to fall asleep in a strange bed, I remember now, almost 60 years later, trying to imagine what the Hardy Boys would do in a jam like that, and I soon fell asleep, no longer alone with my anxiety and fears. I had the great good luck of having two inspiring and erudite high-school English teachers and several in college as well. Mostly friendly reading competitions with a gaggle of high-school buddies, great (in hindsight) summer reading lists, oratorical contests (e.g. *your favorite colonial woman*) and that refuge of every lonely child and teenager, reading late at night in bed, all fertilized my love of narrative and story. Early recommendations of particular books at particular times now seem so clearly linked to developmental stages — *Heidi, Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates, To Kill a Mockingbird, The Red Badge of Courage, The Catcher in the Rye.* They made the work of trying to grow up while troubled and uncertain less lonely, as I discovered how other people dealt with the same things that threatened to sink me.

A lifetime of reading grew to include a love of the theater and its dynamic capacity to imagine others' lives. This led to membership in a small theater group composed of therapists who explicitly link the interpersonal interactions of plays with the processes of group therapy as a way to teach group psychotherapy. When traveling I try to read fiction set in the locale I am visiting. Many years ago I read *Death Comes for the Archbishop* while visiting friends in Santa Fe, where Fathers Latour and Vaillant came to life in a very different way than I imagine they might have on the East Coast. For the first time, I have joined an official "book group." This lively group of women chooses books I might never read on my own initiative.

Looking back, I can see how all these threads have fertilized the development of an early and continuing interest in the lives of other people, how they lived, what they thought about, their feelings, successes and failures. The capacity to sit quietly and wait observantly, the comforts of repetition and reliability, and the ability to tolerate being scared, have all been nurtured by the worlds of fiction. As much as any of the case histories I have accumulated in the course of almost 40 years of doing psychotherapy, these fictional companions have been friends, supervisors and alter egos. They have profoundly influenced my work as a therapist by encouraging me to slow down and to listen to the development of character that is revealed in every single session. ▼

The opportunity to inhabit another self, to experience another consciousness, is perhaps the most profound trespass a work of literature can allow.

— Eula Bliss

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Book Burning

I always looked with horror at the burning of books until I found it useful to do it myself. I was confronted with closing my office of some 40 years and did not know how to do it in a way that would leave me with little regret or longing. So I sought a ritual, a kind of rite of passage, which would enable me to move from one practice location to another.

While cleaning out bookshelves I happened upon a paperback copy of Robertson Davies' *The Rebel Angels.* I had wanted to reread it for a long time and although the book was yellowed and the glue on the spine deteriorating I read the book and, of course, found more in it than I remembered. I could not donate the book nor did I care to keep it. So, I turned it into a ritual object.

I stood before a roaring fire and slowly tore the book apart. With each segment that I threw into the fire I remembered some poignant and powerful moment that had occurred in that office and consigned it to the ether. By the time the book was reduced to a few ashes I was finished: relieved and renewed. I have not looked back to that office, which I loved, nor to the power it had absorbed.

Fire can be most cleansing.

Carla R. Bauer

Kyra: **Book Review and Reflections**

A Novel Challenge to Boundaries and Structure

To change the structures of people's inner lives, you had to change the outer structures as well. (Gilligan, 2008, p. 38)

I had told Anna that it didn't make sense. You go to therapy to work through your feelings about people who have left you, and then the therapist leaves you. (p.130)

It's one thing to take apart a structure, another to build one. (p. 205)

Described as a love story featuring an inspired architect determined to break out of old structures both personally and professionally, *Kyra* is also a novel about the therapy relationship. In the midst of an innovative project to design a new city on a previously unoccupied island, Kyra explores how structure functions to separate or integrate internal and external experience, to shape self-identity and one's perceptions of others. She seeks to build a new city with permeable boundaries that integrate life and bring people together, different from traditional structures separating people from each other, internal experience from external. When her vision inspires an opera director, she brings her creativity to a new stage, designing sets for an unusual structure to break down barriers and draw the audience into the emotional experience.

In her parallel personal life, Kyra resists and then succumbs to falling in love again, confronting her sense of loyalty to her deceased husband. When love again brings pain and challenges her perceptions of what is real and what in her experience can be trusted, Kyra cuts herself in an attempt to slice through the surface, to see beneath, to discover what is real. This act leads her into therapy, where

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Book Review

Kyra
by Carol Gilligan
Random House
New York
2008, 237 pages.

she experiences the power of the healing relationship, but also the familiar experience of structure imposed on real feelings in a way that recreates the old wounding experience. She ultimately questions the therapy structure that builds in an ending, a termination that seems to defy the very work that she is there to do — working through feelings about people who have left her. When her therapist responds to her challenge to acknowledge her own real feelings and to consider a more permeable boundary at the end of their work, together they explore the impact of a shift in structure on shared experience.

The novel draws parallels across the fields of architecture, opera, academia, and psychotherapy in exploration of the roles of structure, transparency, boundaries, and relationship in forming and transforming internal as well as external experience — and the impact of each on the other.

Gilligan's (1982) seminal work in developmental psychology from a woman's perspective clearly informs her novel. Women's roles in work and in relationship are a central theme, as Gilligan explores how women have learned to adapt to structures not of their making, but also to challenge them and change the frame. Exploring these same themes, her novel pulls the reader in at a different level than her nonfiction, much as it gives the author greater freedom of exploration.

This novel richly illustrates the power of fiction to reach into the deeper places within us, integrating and informing internal and external experiences, impacting and changing relationships to self and others. With Kyra, we are able to explore the therapeutic frame, as well as other structures in our lives and those of our clients, and how the frame both supports and perhaps limits the healing relationship. The novel resonated deeply with my own experiences on both sides of the couch: struggling as a new therapist to find the therapeutic balance between blank slate and self-disclosure; struggling as a long-term therapy client to accept boundaries on such a primary relationship in my life or to imagine its eventual termination.

* * *

When I reflect on therapeutic boundaries and the therapy relationship, I differentiate between boundary violations and crossings in service of the client and the work. We can all agree on the critical boundaries: e.g., don't sleep with your client. But in the vast gray area between violations and crossings, what happens if we, with Gilligan and Kyra, experiment with the sacrosanct boundaries of our frame and entertain a more permeable structure? Fiction allows us to explore where we otherwise hesitate to tread.

No question, our boundaries and frame are important. Boundaries work to keep out much that could interfere with the therapeutic process: judgment, personal triggers, inappropriate enactments, knowledge about us that might foreclose on a client bringing up something contrary, potentially leaving an important part of the client out of the room, limiting their work. The same boundaries hold in or contain much that is essential to making the therapy room a safe space that can hold the client's whole person, for the work of integrating facets alienated in the world outside. But if the key to successful therapy is the therapeutic relationship, the one thing agreed across theories and modalities, we can't be all blank. How can a blank slate be a person in relationship? This has been a particular challenge for me as a new therapist, trying to synthesize psychoanalytic training with the experience of interpersonal, relational therapy, all while figuring out how to be a therapist in the first place. Boundaries and structures are especially important at this stage, provid-

ing an external roadmap that only becomes intuitive and nuanced with experience.

I remember when my therapist's life was confined to the walls of her office, if not to the hours of my sessions. A client recently jested that the same was true of me. That illusion plays a significant role in the early process of finding our way into the room, daring to share intensely personal parts of self with a stranger, overcoming self-censure, trusting in the safety, and learning to hear our own voice as it is spoken and reflected back. The unique healing relationship that develops is based more on being met where we are, with acceptance, than on reciprocal knowledge. It could not develop the same without the boundaries that support the frame.

As this relationship deepens, it is often experienced as one of the most powerful and intimate relationships in the client's life. But how do we reconcile that deep emotional investment with a built-in ending unlike any other relationship, certainly none so intense? Here is where Kyra's challenges come in. Must the boundaries be so rigid? What would be so damaging about some ongoing relationship after the work is done? How is the pre-determined termination not damaging to the very work being done? What is the real relationship within the therapeutic one?

While my story is different from Kyra's, the potency of fiction helps to unlock my own experience, as her struggles with the boundaried relationship resonate in me. Reading, I found myself reflecting on my own experience: becoming a therapist myself several years into therapy, my world newly overlapping with that of my therapist, beginning to have friends and community in common, sitting across the room in an AAP community meeting. Certainly the therapy relationship and frame become more complicated, as boundaries, though still important, become inherently more permeable. Some things get let in that weren't there before as interactions expand beyond the session walls. Occasionally it gets messy. But that is grist for the mill, also bringing in a new depth of work that would have been hard to get to otherwise. Only in that deeper place is it possible to pose my own vulnerable questions, some echoing Kyra's. What will this relationship's end mean for me? How do I prepare for such a painful loss? Must it be absolute? What do boundaries look like, post termination, in a shared professional world? What might an ongoing relationship look like? What would be lost, what at risk? Anticipating such an eventual loss, posing those questions and talking about it in therapy, may be some of the hardest work we'll do together, but the struggle takes the work — and the relationship — still deeper.

Permeable boundaries feel much harder to navigate on the other side of the couch, as a new therapist still trying to find my intuitive feet. My longest-term client pushes at the boundaries, wanting to know more about me and increasingly reaching for a connection between sessions, even as she cringes at the thought of a chance encounter outside, not ready for me to exist outside the frame. My "I'll answer your question, but I'm curious about what brings it up in this moment" gets eye-roll, but sometimes our exploration yields returns. I tread cautiously. Grist for the mill only works when the client sticks around to grind it. My therapist makes this all look easy. It's not — as Kyra and her therapist discovered when trying to navigate a new structure. ▼

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Ixtlan. By Christian Frausto Bernal (Flick.com). Wikimedia Commons

Bob Rosenblatt

Do All Roads Lead to Ixtlan?

When I was a young psychotherapist deeply engaged in my apprenticeship, my supervisor shared this nugget: There are three forms of communication in psychotherapy — semaphore, metaphor, and two-by-four. Throughout my 40-plus years of practice, I have relied heavily on the use and art of metaphor. The real beauty and depth of metaphoric communication in therapy is that it arrives in countless shapes, sizes, and colors.

Loving *almost* every moment spent in the company of my clients, I quickly realized that possessing a battery of communication styles was essential. The art of finding the form of communication that will impact the client is the challenge, puzzle, and excitement inherent in our work. My notion of change focuses on adjusting clients' view of their world. Change also comes from illuminating clients' awareness of their choices and the way they have constructed their lives. Impact and change are virtually imperceptible in the consultation room. If we pay exquisite attention to our clients' reactions, expressions and feelings, the impact and change is right in front of our eyes.

Stories, paradoxes, jokes, sarcasm, provocation, confrontation, movies, books, role-plays, and psychodrama are all typical items in a psychotherapist's toolbox. With the advent of the internet, a glut of YouTube videos, songs, movie clips, lyrics, quotes, and abundant poems and stories are just keystrokes away. Now, the therapist has a considerably larger toolbox, more numerous metaphoric interventions and the potential for greater creativity.

One of my favorite therapeutic strategies is borrowed from a Japanese story-writing technique called Morita

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Therapy (Reynolds, 1984). This method requires the therapist and client to co-create a story that illuminates the client's choices. This endeavor supports client narrative change facilitating the potential for healing. Morita Therapy has generated a spectacular collection of stories that are effective and powerful aids for any psychotherapist.

My books of Morita stories are in tatters, quite literally falling apart. What does this mean? Do clients enter our consultation room with universal themes? My experience has led me to believe in these recurring and common themes. These general themes are solidly attached to relationships. Clients' relationship tales usually reveal a history of dysfunctional relationships from their past or present. Future relationships are commonly feared and thus equally attributable to their difficulties. Many clients have been subject to violations and psychic injuries through repeated invalidations and disaffirmations in their significant relationships.

What is the value and purpose of these intervention strategies? For me, the answer is pretty straightforward. These communication gizmos are all in the service of battling the client's resistance. Clients are resistant to change because they embrace their ways of perceiving and responding to the world. Most learned these ways of reacting in their childhood and adolescence. These responses were, for the most part, appropriate at that time. However, as we become adults, these ways of responding may become inappropriate and less functional. Clients have become anchored to their ways of constructing the world and steadfastly resist change. How do we interrupt these patterns? How do we work around the client's resistance? That is where metaphoric communication becomes vital in the therapeutic process. It's rare for clients to have an epiphany and autocorrect when we tell them about the ineffectiveness of their ways of engaging others. To expand clients' awareness of their process, we can create contact with them via a story, film clip, or other form of metaphor.

In my work, I have divided these forms of metaphorical communication into three categories: direct, indirect and misdirect. Let me illustrate these three methods with some case material.

Let's start with a misdirect intervention. I was working with a male client with a chronic depressive quality. He was a long-time member in one of my groups. In this particular session, he was droning on about his relationship with his mother as he had done so often in the past. Ad nauseum, he was reciting his rendition of how deeply tormented he felt about this relationship. He felt tied to her and believed that he could never escape her clutches. It was easy to observe the group losing interest and disengaging as he told his story in his typical unemotional manner. The client was disconnected and his chronic loneliness was manifesting, once again, in the group process.

At some point, I also could not tolerate his repetitive soliloquy any longer. I asked him, out of the blue, about his sexual adventures/exploits during his college days. What was his first sexual experience like? I wanted all the details, play by play, as well as color commentary. Immediately, he sat up and said in an irritated voice, "Why would you ask me such an insensitive question in the middle of my heartfelt work about my relationship with my mother?" I told him that I was bored and was an insensitive psychotherapist. He was outraged, but he was also clearly derailed and immediately more present. I had interrupted his old, familiar narrative. I asked him to look around the room and see how others were affected by his tale and unemotional state. He detected the boredom and disinterest. He was able to comprehend the connection between the group and how

his wife, friends, and co-workers reacted to him. So, my client reluctantly decided to discuss his sexual exploits in college. The group tenor changed immediately and dramatically. The women all sat up in their chairs; they started to engage and play with him in ways that he could not have imagined. His affect changed and he looked at me and said, "I get it! I was stuck in my head as usual, and your irreverent question helped." This misdirect intervention worked because of the long and trusting nature of our therapeutic connection.

Next, an indirect intervention. I was working with a woman with serious difficulties getting involved in a relationship. It had been many years since she had been intimate with a man. She was attractive, talented, smart, athletic, successful and sexy. It made little sense to me that this woman was unable to initiate a serious relationship. We worked on this lack of trust and fear of intimacy during numerous sessions. Even the therapeutic relationship was one-sided. I was more expressive about my feelings towards her than she could locate or feel with respect to me. She had developed a system via her choices that shut her off from others. She had learned in her core to never trust another human being. Our work had been slow and painful.

During one session as I sat there frustrated, I decided to read her a story from my Morita Therapy book. It is a story about a royal princess who goes off alone to play in the forest away from her family and the castle. Why she felt the urge to leave her family and home is not addressed in the story. As the years pass, she ends up building a playhouse, which ultimately turns into a jailhouse, cloistering her away from others. Eventually, she lives by herself in the jail home she constructed with her own hands. As such, the locks are only on the inside. One day, as the royal princess sits alone in her jail home, another person approaches and attempts to engage and befriend her. At first, she is off-putting and resistant to the tactics of this stranger. The stranger remains persistent and hopeful that they can become friends. Over time, they talk and begin to take walks together in the forest. The princess slowly begins to see how her life has been diminished and how much there is to experience and feel. The stranger eventually convinces her to move out of her jail home and encounter the world. Hesitantly, she agrees. But, first she must disassemble her jail home. Lovingly, the princess takes it apart until the jail home is completely disassembled. At this point, she turns to her new friend and says, "There, I don't live there anymore."

After reading this story to the client, I asked her what the story's themes were, and how it related to her life. It led to a deeper discussion and greater self-awareness of my client's jail home and the very good reasons she built it in the first place. Her ability to digest and integrate the story and understand the impact of its meaning seemed connected to the opportunity to speak about her process in the third person. It was a safer and less vulnerable way to address her distrust, hopelessness, and fear of vulnerability. It also provided me a way to affirm the development of the road she had traveled.

My client and I have referred back to this story on numerous occasions. It has become a touchstone and has helped her to entertain more possibilities in her life. As of now, my client has not deconstructed her jail home. However, we slowly move closer to that possibility as she and I take more walks in the forest.

The last vignette is one that was unsuccessful and it was a highly direct intervention. I failed with this client because I had not established a deep enough relationship with her. Furthermore, I jumped the gun with my intervention. I stirred her up in a way that

was hurtful and that I did not see coming. She had just entered a local college. She was extraordinarily bright, was well versed in psychotherapy, and was quite articulate. She was definitive about wanting to become a psychotherapist. We spent a great deal of time talking about how unhappy she was at the college and that she knew she wanted to transfer after her freshman year. I felt the clock ticking and was caught by that dynamic.

This young woman was a perfectionist, adorable, and totally precocious. She appeared wiser and older than her 19 years. But something was clearly missing inside. I knew that, but I was fooled by the maturity of her persona. She talked about her closeness to her mother and the estrangement and contempt she felt for her father. It was all well presented, but it did not add up.

A recent article on mind wandering had some interesting conclusions. Here is the one that made the greatest sense to me. During mind wandering, we engage in what researchers call "creative incubation" (Davis, 2015). As I sat there recognizing something was amiss, I started to envision a scene from the 1997 film *Good Will Hunting*. In this scene, the psychotherapist makes it crystal clear to his client, Will Hunting, that the physical abuse that happened between his father and him was not Will's fault. He repeats these words over and over again. At first, Will does not believe it, but eventually he takes the message in and collapses into the arms of his therapist.

I ran with it and uploaded the movie segment for my client. I played it for her and we watched it together. She was clearly affected, but was unable to articulate her feelings. This inability to express herself was unusual and should have been my first clue. I started to feel uneasy about the effectiveness or appropriateness of my intervention. Sadly, this was the last time I saw her in therapy. I believe I struck the right nerve. However, I did not have a substantial enough therapeutic connection to present this material. So, we can be spot-on in our metaphoric intervention, and still fall flat on our faces.

These brief case examples demonstrate the agony and ecstasy of the work that we perform. If we are fully engaged and spontaneous in our consultation rooms, then who knows what will unfold? As enthusiastic as I am to fashion a successful intervention, the ones that do not work, whether I have hit or missed the mark, pain me. Metaphoric communication is only as good as your last successful intervention. What keeps me returning to my office every day? First, I want to connect with people in an intimate and vulnerable way. Second, I constantly seek approaches to enable people to outwit their resistance. Third, I want to help people expand their self-awareness by illuminating their choices and the way they have constructed their lives. How I arrive there with each individual is the joy and wonder of what I do each day. ▼

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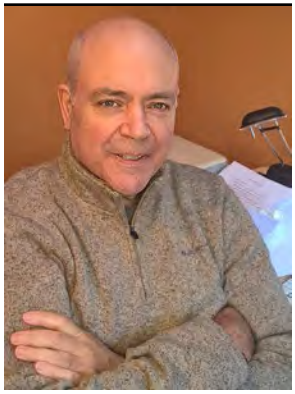
Derek Paar



Derek Paar has two grown children, Nick and Chelsea (who is married to another Nick). He has a very small private practice working primarily with older people and, for the past 30 years, has taught psychology — mostly counseling and psychotherapy — at Springfield College in Springfield, Massachusetts. At this point in his life walking has replaced running, golf has replaced baseball, joints are whispering to him but not yet shouting, and all in all he feels very lucky to have just received his Medicare card.
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The 16th Chair:
A 10-Day Retreat That Changed Pretty Much Everything

It's late winter 2003. My buddy Mike-the-writer and I are sitting at the bar in Theodore's in downtown Springfield. We meet every few weeks to drink beer, eat things that will eventually kill us, talk about women, our teenage kids, our jobs teaching in college, and argue about baseball (he loves the Yankees, I love the Red Sox). For the better part of a year now Mike has been holding something back. I can feel it. Then again I've been holding something back, too. Finally the ice cracks. Mike asks me how he should go about getting divorced. (I do divorce mediations along with a small private psychotherapy practice.) I tell him what I know. He seems scared but kind of relieved. "My turn," I say.

I ask Mike how he writes. He takes a sip of his beer. Pulls back his barstool. Readies his hands as if they were above a keyboard and begins wiggling his fingers. Then he stops. Looks in the air. Swivels his stool to the right, wiggles some more. Stops, looks up, pauses, swivels to the left, wiggles again... and this goes on for a few more rotations until I say, "I get it. You follow where the story goes."

And Mike says, "Right, but first you have to sit your ass down and do it."

The next thing I know it is late June and I'm driving into a parking lot at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. Mike has arranged for me to be a student at Stonecoast Writers Conference, a 10-day retreat that frightened me so much I never actually got around to applying. I do not belong here. I do not belong here. I do not

belong here. I write occasional academic junk no one ever reads. I write an every-other-week column about relationships for a weekly paper that people read for the supermarket ads. I am 52; these people look like children. I imagine that each of them has the great American novel in their book bag, an agent on speed dial, and publishers seducing them with sinful things. I fiddle with the stick shift — reverse and out of the parking lot wanting to go home, first gear and into the parking lot wanting to go all in. Back and forth, back and forth until I finally get out of the car and register.

Son of a gun. The people are nice. Friendly. There are people my age. A couple of people even older. Everyone is scared, even the cool kids. My section, creative nonfiction, has 16 chairs in the room. All the other sections — poetry, fiction, popular fiction, short story — have 15 chairs. I say a small thank you to Mike for making the last-minute call.

Aside from wanting to feel like I somehow made a difference in the world, the biggest reason I wanted to become a psychologist was trying to figure out why we do what we do, what makes us tick. As it turns out, creative writers are after the same animal only they can use lots of descriptive language and long loopy sentences, or fragments, and interesting punctuation, and adverbs (but only occasionally). They also sit in chairs and talk with people, except that the people they talk with don't really exist. Or maybe they do. I'm still not sure.

It seems like every day at the conference the argument about "truth" comes up. James Frey's memoir, *A Million Little Pieces,* was just published and the whole question of whether or not the horrors of his life were really true is the conversation at most meals and nearly every cocktail hour. Some are adamant that a writer, especially when that writer writes nonfiction, should tell the truth. But then the question always pops up, "Whose truth?" To which someone answers, "You know... *the* truth. The stuff that's *real*." And then someone else chimes in, "What's real?" And the next thing I know I'm in the middle of a philosophy class but this time I'm having fun. And I begin to think about clients I've had who felt and imagined things that seemed, on the face of it, preposterous to me, but to the person experiencing them they were as real as this keyboard under my fingertips. I could try to talk them out if it, try to convince them that the bugs crawling on them were only pretend, but that never, ever worked. The only way to make any sort of difference with someone so convinced of something that seems so untrue is to withhold judgment of truth (or not truth) and simply accept the bugs as completely real to the person experiencing them. Somehow I have to join this truth that seems so untrue to me. But that's pretty much how I go about reading a good book. I enter the world of the character, swim around in it, don't question every little detail and go along for the ride.

I finally resolve the truth/not truth conundrum by replacing "truth" with "honesty." I can't ever know what truth is. I'm not sure there is a truth out there awaiting my discovery, but I am reasonably sure there is some kind of honesty among us. My client with the bugs crawling on her or the writer crafting a story that slides away from what I think is true might have something deeper to reveal in the honesty that lives in their imaginations.

My instructor says over and over again that we have to really become the characters we are writing about. I might be telling a story about a kid who was lonely and small and so desperate for friends and wanting to prove that he wasn't afraid that he didn't even flinch when a curveball hit him in the eye and left him half blind. This never happened

to me but for the story to live I have to become that kid and feel what he feels and see what he sees and let him wash around inside of me without forcing my sense of what he should experience. And again, just like the truth/not truth argument that has animated so many discussions this week, this idea about being *the other* for the moment brings me back to my profession. The person sitting in the chair across from me is not me, quite obviously, but for me to have any sort of impact I must imagine what it is like to be him, to be scared of things I might not be scared of, to love things I may not love, to hope for a life that I do not hope for. But as I think more about it, I begin to see that empathy, the coin of the realm in psychotherapy, is really an act of fiction. Rick is not Joe but if Rick wishes to have some sort of engagement with Joe then Rick must — to the best of his ability, knowing full well that he will ultimately fall short because Rick is not Joe — imagine what it is like to be Joe.

But there is one place where the world of creative writing and psychotherapy split. As I sit in a comfortable chair reading about a character so wildly different from me, and as I suspend judgment and crawl inside of her world and her experience and imagine being her, I don't have to communicate that understanding to anyone. The character doesn't care if I communicate to her that I genuinely and deeply get it, whatever it is. My kids and girlfriend don't care. The author might care that I get it but she'll never know. It only matters to me, and in this fundamental way, reading and counseling are worlds apart because my client absolutely, positively, has to understand deep in her bones that I understand her and the only way to do that is to communicate it in some manner so that she gets that I get it.

After a couple of days of warming up we begin to "workshop" our stories. I begin to hate that workshop is a verb. One at a time we sit mute as each person in the group takes shots at what someone has written. The writer can only sit and take notes. When everyone is done with the target the instructor takes her turn. She is much smarter than we are. She sees things that so many of us don't. She speaks in a soft voice, a voice that the workshopee can actually hear. She isn't a pushover and she is not a fan of everything, but her comments can be embraced. Finally it's number 16's turn and I hand out my piece, a rambling, long winded thing about driving on a crazy commute to work and hearing my brain pop with new thoughts, none of which are at all coherent to my fellow baby-writers. Each person rips me. I sit and write down their comments as I try not to cry. I am so wishing I had kept the car in reverse and never registered for this damned conference. I so wish Mike, my so-called friend, hadn't done me this rotten favor. Then my teacher, my lovely beautiful teacher, says almost exactly the same things everyone else said but it feels different. I can actually hear what she has to say. Why am I able to hear her and not the others? I wonder. Maybe it's the way she speaks to me. That she is clear and direct but I don't feel the sting of a sharp edge against my tender skin. Her voice feels warm to me, like I want to hear more, like I can take what she says and actually use it.

And later that night I begin to think again how much this experience is reminding me of therapy. My client has to be able to actually hear what I'm saying for it to make a difference. I must speak in a way that can slip past the defense and fear and his wish that whatever is wrong would just — poof — go away. And I am reminded of the therapists I've seen over the years and how some felt too distant and aloof or too harsh and critical, and others felt like we "just need to get on with it." The therapists who I felt heard me and could speak to me with honesty, and yet in ways that didn't make me want to hide,

were rare and treasured.

Then again maybe I am able to hear what my instructor says is because I think she is beautiful and smart but dammit she's married to some Pulitzer Prize-winning poet who turns out to be a really nice guy. But this isn't transference. Not at all.

We have a lecture from some guy who has written a bunch of middling successful crime novels. I have no idea who he is but everyone else seems to think he is a big deal and maybe he is because every couple of days he has to rush down to Boston to meet with a guy named Clint (who turns out to be Eastwood) who is making a movie out of one of his books. This guy gives a very entertaining and passionate talk about just letting it rip. "Get those fingers moving," he says. "Let loose the thought, do not edit, just keep writing, and writing and don't wait for the muse to come, I said not to edit, right? Well, don't edit, type-type-type, it'll come out, trust me, trust yourself. And then... edit like crazy once you have it all there. Write and rewrite and rewrite again and again and then go back and let it rip and then rewrite. Rinse and repeat."

Another, less jazzed writer, a poet apparently with great credibility in a world I know nothing about, tells us pretty much the same thing the crime novelist said only she says it with less caffeine. She tells us to "trust your unconscious." She says it in other more poetic ways but the gist of her message was that inside of us is the story waiting to emerge. We just have to trust it and get out of its way.

And over drinks at Joshua's Tavern that night I feel like I'm in grad school again eating pizza and drinking cheap beer at Buddy's. Everyone is talking about the unconscious and if it exists, and if it does exist does it work to our advantage, and if so does it work to our advantage all the time? The general consensus is that each one of us has been surprised that an idea or feeling or character popped up from what seemed like nowhere. "So where does that come from, huh? You tell me. It has to be the unconscious, right?"

And just to be a jerk I ask if anyone can actually say what the unconscious is and every answer is something to the effect of, "Ummm, ummm, I can't actually say what it is but I know it's there." And I say, "Precisely, because if you could say what it was, it wouldn't be unconscious, would it?" But I think they are liking me in spite of my being a jerk.

Near the end of the 10 days, over lunch, there is a discussion about how much of the writer is in the character she creates. Some of us resist because we don't want to believe that some of the crazy-violent people we are writing about with such gusto are in any way connected to ourselves. But we know that they are. Where else could they come from? There are dark spots aren't there? Spots that only get a chance to come out at night in our dreams or on the blank page.

All through the 10 days there is talk about some smoky, cloud-like thing I do not quite understand — Voice. Our instructor wants us to develop this thing I do not yet grasp. She wants us to let it out. Let what out? I mean, sure, all of the stories we've read have had a different feeling to them. Some were sharp and clever, and others were languid, and others were dark as hell. Is that Voice? No, apparently not. So says our instructor who is now bothering me and frustrating me and maybe she isn't as beautiful as I thought she was. So what the hell is it?

I think about this idea on the four-hour drive home and for weeks later and then it hits me. I hear a Stevie Wonder song and I know what Voice is. I hear a Neil Young song or a Joni Mitchell song and I know what Voice is, and it's a little like that trick question about the unconscious or what Justice Stewart said about pornography, "I can't really

define it but I know it when I see it." There is a distinct sense of Joni that Joni gives me. I get the same click when I read Hemingway or my friend Mike. I know there is a real person on the other side, someone who has mastered his craft and has earned the freedom to be who he is on the page.

And I think about learning this craft of psychotherapy and how much I wanted to do it well and how I learned all of the "things" I thought I needed to know. And then how I still felt wooden and kind of stilted. I aped Carl Rogers for years until it dawned on me that I was not born in 1902, that I was less patient than he was, and that I could be funnier than Carl (which might be like saying that I was a better baseball player than Julius Caesar). Eventually I became enamored with Milton Erickson for a time and did some training and worked on induction and story telling with my clients but I never felt all that comfortable with the manipulations (though no Ericksonian would say that manipulations are going on). But I did like the story telling even without the trance.

Eventually I think I found my therapeutic voice. It has a little Carl and a little Milton and some of my father and some things from others, too, but mostly it is me. The core of what I do is try not to judge, try not to give much advice and to put myself into the world of the other — as best I can –swim around for a while and report back what it felt like. At this point in my career I can't really say I am any one specific kind of therapist. I know I'm not a behaviorist or a cognitive behaviorist or someone who does psychoanalysis old or new. My best guess is that someone might place me in the humanistic/existentialist slot but I'd resist that as well. I am one person trying to understand and engage with another person who is not me, who never will be me, and who has her own story to tell, one that is most likely better than anything I will ever read.

I suppose the purpose and aim of psychotherapy is to help people be happy because at the root of life is the pursuit of happiness, isn't it? And if this is the case I can think of nothing better than this 10-day experience I had at Stonecoast trying to figure out how to sit in a chair, wave my fingers over a keyboard, adjust my direction again and again, and follow a story. So far, following stories has taken me back and forth across the country more than a few times and deep inside myself. I have gone on writing benders for a few years and have suffered through fallow periods where I wondered if I'd ever have another idea. I have been in a monthly writing group in Maine for three or four years with excellent friends I made in those wonderful days at the retreat. I have been in writing groups with excellent friends at my college. I read at open mic nights in local bars and art galleries. (I'm big at the North Quabbin Garlic Festival.) I've published a little, hope for more, but am satisfied that when I put pen to page I feel a me that I like a lot: more open, honest, questioning, curious, less judgmental. I've met people on my travels who scare the hell out of me and other people who I felt as if I'd known forever. I've had to come to grips with fears and shadowy edges in myself that I've always tried to hide. And when I was horribly mugged four years ago, writing about the bastards who did it helped me get to a point where I wanted to send the sons of bitches thank-you notes because, while I can't recommend getting bones broken and money stolen and having a long knife held to your eye as a pathway to happiness, the experience seemed to work for me to help shake off a lifelong affliction of taking precious things for granted. Spilling the experience out on paper in a mad rush of feeling and thought and then spilling more and more and more and then editing it all (over and over again) into something that brought some order to the chaos surely felt like therapy because, for me, it was. ▼

Call for Papers

Awe in Psychotherapy
Voices, Spring 2016

Deadline for submission: January 15, 2016

Submissions of articles, poems, photography, or art should be directed to editors Kristin Staroba *kristin.staroba@gmail.com* and Penelope Norton *psynorton@aol.com*. See Submission Guidelines on the AAP website: **www.aapweb.com.**

Goosebumps! Only a very few experiences produce piloerection: terror, sexual arousal, and awe. There are volumes of literature in psychotherapy devoted to terror and its after- effects, and a still greater number devoted to sex. What about awe?

"Awe is the emotion of self- transcendence," writes Jonathan Haidt in his (2006) book *The Happiness Hypothesis.* Awe may be evoked in response to natural wonders, art, beauty, talent, virtue, or the supernatural. Awe is often associated with what are considered to be spiritual experiences, with or without specific religious framework. Awe may evoke experiences of: loss of a sense of self and gaining a sense of Self, altered time perception, opening and warmth in the chest, goosebumps, gratitude, humility, tears or epiphany. Haidt and his colleague Dacher Keltner further define awe by the experiential features of vastness and accommodation (Keltner and Haidt, 2005): *Vastness* refers to being in the presence of that which is experienced as much larger than the self, requiring *accommodation*, the creation of new mental structures or frames of reference. These new frames of reference often include increased humility, curiosity, generosity and feeling of connection to others and to the world, according to Keltner (Abrahamson, 2014).

Psychotherapy can be described as the craft of self-transcendence, for both therapist and client, in the quest for development and healing. Do awe and psychotherapy co-occur, do they dance together? If "awe inducing events may be one of the fastest and most powerful methods of personal change and growth" (Keltner and Haidt, 2003), how do we develop our own capacity to experience awe to better midwife it in our clients?

Are we as therapists, witnesses to, or participants in moments of awe? Can we, in our work, *evoke* awe, or be closed to awe? Do we cause a client to be closed to it as well? When have we known awe in our own work or lives? How have we known the experience of self-transcendence as the fruit of awe?

The spring 2016 issue of *Voices* will address awe and psychotherapy.

References

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What's Love Got To Do With It?
Voices, Summer 2016

Call for Papers

WHAT IS LOVE IN THE THERAPY RELATIONSHIP? Does love transform us and our patients? Does love conform to or confound our concepts of connection and boundary, healing and teaching?

Arguably a universal ideal, love — including the love felt in the psychotherapy relationship — remains fraught with shame and taboo. As therapists, we may feel embarrassed by our passionate feelings or by our lack of love toward our patients. In the tangle of transference and countertransference, patients also struggle to parse their feelings toward us.

In the Summer 2016 issue of *Voices*, we'll delve into the foundations of love, including nurturance, empathy, vulnerability, repair, and intimacy. The shadow side — ill will, sadism, anger, apathy — may also illuminate our understanding of love. We'll consider how ethics shapes our choices regarding boundaries, dual relationships, disclosure and aspects of transference/countertransference.

How does love in its myriad aspects and guises shape your practice or your experience in the work? What do you need? What have you learned? What have you shared and taught?

Deadline for submission: April 15, 2016

The editors of *Voices* welcome your submissions in the form of personal essay, research-based inquiry, art, poetry, and photography. Direct inquiries and submissions to editor Kristin Staroba *kristin.staroba@gmail.com* See Submission Guidelines on the AAP website: **www.aapweb.com.**

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Each issue has a central theme as described in the call for papers. Manuscripts that fit this theme are given priority. Final decision about acceptance must wait until all articles for a particular issue have been reviewed. Articles that do not fit into any particular theme are reviewed and held for inclusion in future issues on a space available basis.

Articles. See a recent issue of *Voices* for general style. Manuscripts should be double-spaced in 12 point type and no longer than 4,000 words (about 16 to 18 pages). Do not include the author's name in the manuscript, as all submissions receive masked review by two or more members of the Editorial Review Board. Keep references to a minimum and follow the style of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th ed.*

Submit via email, attaching the manuscript as a Word document file. Send it to Kristin Staroba *(kristin.staroba@gmail.com).* Put "Voices" in the email's subject line, and in the message include the author's name, title and degree, postal address, daytime phone number, manuscript title, and word count. Please indicate for which issue of *Voices* the manuscript is intended.

If a manuscript is accepted, the author will be asked to provide a short autobiographical sketch (75 words or less) and a photograph that complies with technical quality standards outlined in a PDF which will be sent to you.

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Poetry. We welcome poetry of high quality relevant to the theme of a particular issue or the general field of psychotherapy. Short poems are published most often.

Book and Film Reviews. Reviews should be about 500 to 750 words, twice that if you wish to expand the material into a mini-article.

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- Balancing confrontation and compassion
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Full Membership in the Academy requires a doctoral or professional degree in one of the following mental health fields: psychiatry, clinical or counseling psychology, social work, pastoral counseling, marriage and family therapy, counseling, or nursing, and licensure which allows for the independent practice of psychotherapy.

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