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A Candidate’s Perspective

By Lynn Cunningham, LCSW PhD

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Now that the heat of Prague has cooled and the excitement of attending an overseas IPA conference has ebbed, I realize that this beautiful city has left a mix of impressions on me. In this far away place, I was reminded how seasoned architecture, where surfaces have weathered and sharp edges are softened by time, nourishes my soul — from the red tiles crowning exquisite buildings to the artful sidewalks crafted from small black-and-white granite squares. Juxtaposed with this splendid grandeur and spirited dynamism were the synagogues, cemeteries, and cultural artifacts of a Jewish people no longer living. As a personal homage to this lost humanity, I visited Terezin where I experienced, among other distressing sights, the echoes of prisoners and poignant drawings by fated children, all slaughtered before fruition. Here, I was offered a second hand, not even a primary, exposure to atrocity. It was unavoidable that the contrast between the intense beauty of Prague and the remains of abject horror would radically affect my emotional equilibrium. The internal jostling set off by these contrary intentions was a brusque reminder of how the human capacity to create hovers over both ends of the spectrum.

Then, on opening the conference catalog, “Facing the Pain,” I encountered the anticipated array of intellectual delights. Right away, I felt a strong sense of obligation to the candidate who has much to learn about listening to her patients’ unconscious but, at the same time, I wanted to indulge the less disciplined part of me who is lured by a curious title, the promise of an innovative clinical or theoretical attitude, or the chance to listen, in person, to a creative psychoanalytic thinker and writer. And so, I did attend a number of sessions with analysts, such as Virginia Unger and Evelyne Schwaber, who offered their insights into close listening, and instructed me on attending to emotions tied to language and deliverance, and gestures large and small, all of which add nuance to shared discovery. Both analysts emphasized how countertransference, sometimes palpable, sometimes subtle, can be experienced, given thought, and become informing. I came away from these sessions feeling encouraged that I can learn, I am learning to allow the patient’s narrative to form a metaphor in my mind and to notice something but, perhaps, say nothing at all. I am learning to open my mind to the motivated communicative content of the patient’s unconscious wish to have the analyst join in a concordant model of the world and to recognize together where reality lies.

I also attended interviews with two esteemed psychoanalysts. Over the years, I’ve heard Glen Gabbard speak a number of times on psychoanalysis and ethics, and as a consultant psychoanalyst to the TV series, \textit{The Sopranos}. On this occasion, however, I was as curious about Dr. Haydée Faimberg, the interviewer, as I was about Dr. Gabbard. What could she elicit from
this popular and published analyst that was fresh? It quickly became clear that Gabbard would transform the interview into a didactic opportunity. For instance, in describing the work of analysis, he spoke about how, “We hate complexity. We want to zero in on theory which sometimes results in listening ‘for’ instead of listening ‘to’.” He warned us that “theory seems to place us on firm ground; but it turns out to be a ‘false floor’, because analysis is about the idiosyncratic” and “theory tends to break down eventually, especially with complex clinical situations.” When Faimberg asked, “How do we become an analyst?” Gabbard answered the question by saying, “It’s as we develop a style that we figure out who we are. The risk is to become stale and fixed.” He reminded us that we can’t “make anyone do anything” and to “keep our limits in mind.” Around suicidal cases, Gabbard pointed to our common desire to alleviate and restore our patient, “we have a need for a narrative that cures them and will enable them to live happily ever after, but there’s a thin line between the wish to help and a wish to cure. Some patients just need us to help them think about suicide.” (IPA Congress, Prague, CZ, 8/2/13).

Weeks later, as I reflect back on this interview, what I heard freshly put was actually delivered in the form of a plea: Discover for yourself a way to preserve a welcoming space in your mind for engaging creatively with the idiosyncratic that each analysis brings.

I had pre-conceived ideas about the “live” John Steiner. In our NPSI course on Perversions and Psychosomatics, I was introduced to his concept of pathological organizations of the personality, or psychic retreats. In his work, Steiner explores the idea that the mind can create a place of relative peace and protection “when meaningful contact with the analyst is experienced as threatening” (Steiner, 1993, p.1). I used to wonder where his interest in the subject came from. How many patients did he work with before he could make book-worthy arguments about this place of safety where the patient can retreat and function relatively well? While listening to Steiner that day, I tried to imagine how he integrated, mentalized, and externalized the influences of his analysts, supervisors, and life experiences. He seemed to imply that he gained both vertical and horizontal dimensions for understanding the human condition from his analytic work: the deep unconscious from Hanna Segal and the ‘to and fro’ dynamic between patient and analyst from Betty Joseph.

During a brief moment of inattention, I set the beauty of my Prague experience against the concept of psychic retreat. “A perverse relation to reality,” says Steiner “is a feature of most psychic retreats” (Ibid, p. 100). In his most recent book, Seeing and Being Seen (2011), he quotes from Daniel Paul Schreber, whose memoirs, and Freud’s paper based on them, offer us such a stirring description of a pathological organization.

*In this way a plot was laid against me, the purpose of which was to hand me over to another human being after my nervous illness had been recognized as, or assumed to be, incurable, in such a way that my soul was handed to him, but my body — transformed into a female body — ...was then left to that human being for*
sexual misuse and simply forsaken, or other words left to rot...Always the main idea was to forsake me, that is to say, abandon me;...to allow my body to be prostituted like a female harlot, sometimes by killing me and later by destroying my reason.

(Schreber, 1903, p. 63)

Schreber refers to the worst suffering as “soul murder.” Although this term is not clearly defined, Steiner has interpreted that “it seems to involve the deepest humiliation and misuse that a person can undergo, in which an attempt is made to undermine his sense of worth and to destroy the very essence of his identity for someone else’s benefit”... “Suffering then is not simply a confrontation with pain or danger but something imposed with the intention to hurt and ultimately destroy” (Steiner, 2011, p. 7).

I don’t want to accept that cruelty is also a product of the creative imagination, a complementarity bent on destroying a person’s identity, and operating from “a perverse justification for retaining contradictory views that affords it a way out” (Steiner, 1993, p. 96). A psychic retreat is an enacted perversion, Steiner tells us. I wonder if the perversion of creativity enacted at Terezin might be understood as a kind of collective psychic retreat that was brutally relied upon by the perpetrators of that atrocity. I am reminded, in the bleakest manner, of the fundamental oppositions found in nature.

On the sunny Saturday afternoon of this prestigious conference, I listened to my friend, Barb Sewell, present a portion of her NPSI graduation paper on ‘countertransference.’ As a candidate, who is currently many footsteps behind her, I listened with great admiration to this beautiful work delivered with passion and humor that I so enjoy about her. I fantasize about when I might possess a similar body of psychoanalytic knowledge that I know comes only from the experiences of working hard, learning, and time. Meanwhile, I am marinating in the inspiration Barb offered me that day.

References

Glen Gabbard interviewed by Haydée Faimberg. Meet the Analyst. IPA Congress, Prague, CZ, August 2, 2013.

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