

In Remembrance of James Grotstein: Friend, Colleague and Bionian Scholar

by Joseph Aguayo, PhD FIPA



Our small psychoanalytic universe was disturbed recently with the passing of our long cherished friend, mentor and colleague, Jim Grotstein on May 30th, 2015. It will take years to measure not only what Jim gave us by way of his many contributions to our field, but also what we have lost by his no longer being here. Here I recall past experiences about what his work has meant—and continues to mean—to me.

First, a psychic travel advisory: like the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who said you could not step into the same river twice, Jim Grotstein never sounded the same the next time you heard him speak. The reason was simple: he was simply too caught up in how truly oceanic is the experience of working with the Unconscious. Of Jim's personality, Daniel Stern, the world-renowned infant developmentalist, once said: Jim maintains constant contact with the phantoms of the Underworld, always enthusiastic to relay to us what he found there.

Over the years that I had the pleasure of knowing, consulting with Jim and discussing ideas regarding clinical research in our field, I usually left Jim's house feeling uplifted, and feeling that I could breathe the fresh air of new ideas and concepts, as if for the first time. Jim truly had and never lost the beginner's attitude: he felt fascinated by what he was privileged to hear, see and think in relation to others.¹

We all know about Jim's orthodox Freudian, Fairbairnian, Kleinian and Bionian background—how else could it be otherwise? There were simply many different rooms in Jim's psyche and they all merited attention. Jim embraced difference, or how else could he have survived so well during the “Time of Troubles” in 1970s and 80s, when Kleinians and Freudians fought for analytic supremacy in Los Angeles?

What emerged from this crucible was that it was never in Jim's nature to espouse one theory to the exclusion of all others—he was not an either-or thinker. Like Will Rogers, he never met a theory he didn't like, but always in his particular way. While it was true that Jim's passion for Bion and Klein was at the root of his analytic thinking, it was also his genuine receptivity to the ideas of other analysts that led to his being sought after as a lecturer at all sorts of theoretically diverse institutes around the world. And right next to him for this odyssey was Sue Grotstein, wife, graceful muse and life partner. Without her loving dedication—and that of their children, Laurie and Josh—we would not have had these abundant analytic riches from our friend and colleague.

Two remembrances: Jim's contributions were honored at the IPA Congress in Mexico City in 2011. My friend Larry Brown and I chaired the meeting, at which colleagues around the world came to tell of their experiences with Jim—among them, Antonino Ferro of the Italian Psychoanalytic Association, who wrote one of the longest and laudatory book reviews in praise of Jim's *A Beam of Intense Darkness* in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (Ferro, 2006: 89:869-884).

And yet Jim's analytic odyssey was long and circuitous. Like Odysseus himself, Jim had challenging stops along the way. With the publication of his first book in 1981, *Splitting and Projective Identification*, he helped to introduce Kleinian clinical thinking to an entire generation of primarily American analysts trained in ego psychology. This important and defining book helped to turn the tide of American analytic opinion, primarily influenced by the work of Anna Freud, towards a reconsideration of the work of Melanie Klein.

Even more radical was when Jim edited *Do I Dare Disturb the Universe*, a volume of collected essays on behalf of his analyst and mentor, Wilfred Bion. Also published in 1981, Jim demonstrated how forward thinking his ideas were, because when he introduced Bion's thought to the United States, he was like Bion, decades ahead of his time. No wonder Jim was also honored at the “Bion in Boston” conference in 2009 as that year's plenary speaker.

Jim's enduring dedication as a passionate Kleinian/Bionian to see both sides now represented his tireless desire to maintain a Bionian sense of binocularity to the analytic terrain he surveyed. So, to those of you familiar with Jim's work—characterized by clinically useful aphorisms such as: ‘Establish the adaptive context,’ ‘What is your definitory hypothesis?’ ‘Listen to the patient at the point of his greatest, most anxious urgency,’ ‘There is never not a transference on the patient's part,’ and ‘How is the patient's same material different today?’—and to those of you who are new to his work—

I wholeheartedly commend and advise you to listen to your own personal reactions as you read the work of our dear colleague and friend, Jim Grotstein.

¹There were two recorded interviews done with Jim Grotstein on August 13 and 27, 2009. During the course of these interviews, much of the early material about how he became involved in psychoanalysis was discussed in greater detail.

References

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