INSTITUTE SPOTLIGHT: NPSI

Interview With President Caron Harrang, LICSW, FIPA

Lisa Halotek: Caron, first off let me say what a pleasure it is to be interviewing you. We first met at a CIPS Conference in Los Angeles over five years ago when you were the Editor of the CIPS News Brief. Over the weekend conference we got to know each other and you invited me write an article for the News Brief about my experience at the conference. I soon became your Assistant Editor and we worked together on the News Brief for nearly four years until you left to become the President of NPSI. Maybe you could begin by telling our readers more about your journey to become a psychoanalyst and how you eventually came to your decision to run for President of NPSI.

Caron Harrang: Lisa, I recall very well our meeting at the 2012 CIPS Clinical Conference in our small group facilitated by John Lundgren. It was a very creative group experience resulting in, among other things, the opportunity to work with you on the News Brief. Those years of producing the News Brief gave me a way of getting to know you and other analyst colleagues throughout the United States. Being able to shift my view back and forth between the macro and micro level of operations helped me to understand what are common concerns within all psychoanalytic societies and what are the unique challenges within my local society. I suppose this is one meaning of what Bion referred to in his concept of “binocular vision” or that capacity to think about phenomena from more than one perspective. What I’ve discovered in the process is that psychoanalysts are a passionate group of men and women, intensely interested in their work and eager to share their thinking and, in most cases, open to learning from one another. This discovery of the nature of the profession as a group speaks to part of my motivation to run for President of NPSI. Before I say more about that, let me answer the historical part of your question as to my path toward becoming a psychoanalyst. A path, I might add, that continues to unfold in interesting and challenging ways.

During my adolescence I was keenly involved in equestrian activities and studied what’s called conformation or the relationship between a horse’s anatomy, movement, and temperament. As I learned about the link between physical structure and personality with my horses I could see that the same thing applied to humans. Later in college when I studied psychology and discovered Reich’s work on character analysis it made complete sense to me how unconscious aspects of emotional experience are reflected in how a person expresses him or herself verbally and in their movement signature. This orientation toward the interrelatedness of psyche and soma led me to train first as a bioenergetics therapist (New York Society for Bioenergetic Analysis). Interestingly, it was one of my bioenergetics supervisors, Vivian Guze, who recommended that I read Melanie Klein’s The Psychoanalysis of Children because she felt that Klein’s descriptions of unconscious mental life and the way she spoke to her patients was so oriented to the body. The other book Guze recommended as part of my training in bioenergetics was Countertransference by Harold Searles.
To show you what a profound influence these recommendations had on me, I’ll tell you that some years later Harold Searles became my first psychoanalyst supervisor. Furthermore, when I entered psychoanalytic training in 2003 it was at an institute oriented toward British object relations theory.

Getting back to your question about taking on a leadership role and becoming President, it is very much tied to my experience in CIPS. In 2008 Marianne Robinson put my name forward to then CIPS President Rick Perlman as someone who might serve as Recording Secretary. It was in the last year of my candidacy and I was thinking about how it would feel to graduate and all of a sudden have less contact with teachers, supervisors, and candidates. Anticipating that post-partum feeling even as I was eager to graduate motivated me to accept Rick’s invitation to join the CIPS Board as Recording Secretary. I will add that his warmth and welcoming attitude to my taking a more active role in the broader psychoanalytic community was also a key factor. I served in that role for two years (2008-2010) and then became a director on the NPSI Board. Working on the Board and attending monthly tele-meetings during Rick’s terms as President and then under Leigh Tobias’s leadership for another two terms followed by Randi Wirth’s term taught me a lot about different styles of leadership and how a healthy workgroup can function. It’s also a board where initiative and good ideas are always valued and this too gave me the hutzpah, if you will, to think I might be able to accept the responsibility of running a board meeting and making leadership decisions in my local Society. But how it actually came about at NPSI is that the now Past President, David Jachim, said when he accepted the nomination to serve that he’d only do it if someone else agreed to accept the nomination after his term was up. It was a politically savvy move on his part to ensure succession and I figured “why not” since I had two years to learn from him and warm up to task. So, that’s how it happened and I have to say, I’m very glad that events have unfolded as they have such that I can serve as President at NPSI and continue on the CIPS Board, which provides a cushion of continued collegial contact and support, actually, in both roles.

LH: Can you tell our readership about the history, membership and the culture at NPSI? I remember working on the spring issue of the News Brief and being most impressed when I saw in the NPSI News section just how many of your members were presenting at the IPA Conference in Boston!

CH: Lisa, I was impressed too when I realized that over half of our analyst members and quite of few of our candidates were giving individual or panel presentations at the 49th IPA/23rd IPSO Congress this past July. We were also proud that one of our senior candidates, David Parnes, received the 2015 IPSO Writing Award for North America with his paper, “On growth, a gift and goodbyes: initial thoughts on a termination.” One of the reasons we have quite a few good writers, in addition to individual interest and talent, is that we focus so much on writing in our psychoanalytic training. Beginning with infant observation and continuing in clinical seminar and supervision of control cases, candidates are expected to write-up detailed process notes on their observations for presentation to faculty and training supervisors. Graduation from the Institute includes
presentation of a major theoretical and clinical paper to NPSI colleagues and invited mental health professionals. We also sponsor monthly scientific meetings where analyst and candidate members present original papers or written commentary on landmark psychoanalytic papers. Then too many of our members submit and are chosen to present papers at our biennial International Evolving British Object Relations (EBOR) conference. Last, but not least, in the past few years we’ve developed a very good newsletter called Selected Facts (Maxine Nelson, Managing Editor) that gives members opportunities to write and publish their ideas. Taken together these activities seem to have created a psychoanalytic culture at NPSI in which expressing one’s ideas through writing is highly valued. Moreover, it is generally recognized among colleagues here that psychoanalytic writing and presenting is a means of finding out what one thinks and facilitates the ability to communicate ideas clearly.

In terms of our roots, NPSI was founded in 1999 by a small group of psychoanalysts interested in establishing a training program for individuals seeking advanced education in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis from a British object relations perspective. The initial Board of Directors, when it began as an IPA sponsored study group, included Maxine Anderson, Austin Case, Elie Debbane, Theodore Dorpat, Kenneth King, Sid Perzow, Marianne Robinson, and Stephen Rush. The initial study group was named the Center for Object Relations (COR). As the group continued, two distinct directions for growth emerged. In time, these visions for growth evolved into separate organizations. COR continued to educate psychotherapists focusing on the application of psychoanalytic ideas to work with families. The training center for future psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic psychotherapists developed into NPSI.

As is customary with groups seeking IPA affiliation, the early years of NPSI’s development (1999-2004) were overseen by a sponsoring committee consisting of training analysts Brian Robertson (Chair), Theodore Jacobs, and Ernest Lawrence. In 2001, while NPSI was still a study group, it also formed national alliances by joining CIPS (then called the Coalition of Independent Psychoanalytic Societies). These efforts were richly rewarded when NPSI was granted full component society status by the IPA at its biennial congress in Berlin (2007).

So, as you can see NPSI is a relatively young, small Society. Nevertheless, it enjoys a unique position in North America being one of only two Institutes in the United States, PCC being the other, specializing in psychoanalytic education from a British object relations perspective.

LH: How many members and how many candidates does NPSI currently have?

CH: It might surprise readers to learn that we have currently just 22 full members and 10 candidates. We also have 30 community members comprised of psychoanalysts living in other parts of the world, psychotherapists, and the general public who support our mission and want to participate in our community through attending scientific meetings, workshops, and our biennial International Evolving British Object Relations (EBOR) conference.
LH: What do you see as the biggest challenge NPSI faces in the coming year?

CH: There is one big challenge NPSI faces and it touches every aspect of the Society and Institute. Our 2014-15 strategic plan identifies growth of the organization as our number one priority. This means growth on the Board of Directors by cultivating succession and identifying a President-Elect and adding at least one full member director and one community member director. In the Institute we have a capable new Director of Training, Dana Blue, who needed to step down from several other positions when she was elected to her office including Dean of Students and co-chair of Admissions. To date both of these positions are unfilled. In a small Society (and maybe in larger ones too) a handful of people do most of the work of running the organization and the danger is always fatigue, no matter how much passion and enthusiasm some individuals bring to the table. This shortage of individuals willing to roll up their sleeves and pitch in, and the misperception on the part of some members that their input is not needed for us to thrive, affects the ability of the organization to conduct effective outreach and attract new candidates to psychoanalytic training, which is the heart of our mission.

On the other hand, I am very proud to be able to say that NPSI applied for and has been granted provisional one-year accreditation by ACPE or the Accreditation for Psychoanalytic Education. This is a huge accomplishment for any institute, and one we hope to convert to full accreditation within in 2016 by requiring board certification and providing a means to achieve it for all of our training analysts.

In the past year I have also formed an Advisory Council whose mission it is to provide non-binding informed guidance to the Board of Directors for the purpose of enhancing the organization’s development and governance. In September the Council met with the Board for the first time and discussed strategies for working together in the year ahead. Members of the Council have expertise in non-profit tax accounting, mental health law, educational policy and management, financial planning, social media, distance learning technology, and development. It is the sort of collaboration we’ve not sought before and I am inspired by the talent we have on the Council and hopeful that we’ll be able to move forward on key projects with this additional support. For example, we are starting to research and develop the capacity for distance learning so that our instructors can effectively co-teach with colleagues from other institutes throughout the country. In time we’d like to be able to record non-confidential portions of our scientific meetings and workshops making them accessible to colleagues via podcasts and audio or video recordings. Of course all of this takes financial resources and human resources, both of which are valuable commodities. At the same time, being a small Society leaves plenty of room for innovation and creativity for those who do step forward and contribute. For example, some months ago it was uncertain if we would be able to continue producing our biennial International Evolving British Object Relations Conference (EBOR) until one of our members, Rikki Ricard, after reading Mark Solms’s paper on “The Conscious Id” was motivated to see if he would agree to be one of our plenary presenters. When Solms accepted our invitation that was all she needed to quickly form an organizing committee full of enthusiasm for the EBOR 2016 theme (“The Feeling Mind and Lived
Experience: Clinical Transformations in Psychoanalysis”) and continuing one of our most successful outreach efforts.

So, in spite of the considerable challenges we face, I’m encouraged by the efforts of those who are working hard at NPSI to transform our small Society into a healthy sustainable organization devoted to supporting our members, offering outstanding psychoanalytic training to mental health professionals, and educating the general public about psychoanalysis.

LH: I think our readers will be inspired after learning about all that NPSI is involved with especially given your size. Your EBOR Conference is growing in recognition and so is your Society. I can imagine that you’re also an inspiring President, Caron. All the best to you and your colleagues at NPSI!

CH – Thank you Lisa for your well wishes and for taking the time to conduct this interview. In terms of inspiration, I’d like to end with a quote from Vaclav Havel that sums up my attitude toward leadership when he says, “Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good.” This sentiment described Havel’s attitude toward his work with and for the Czech people after the fall of Communism as they struggled to regain a meaningful democracy. It also describes my feeling about working to foster the growth and development of our relatively young psychoanalytic society and institute.

Finally, I’d like to invite any CIPS member who’s curious about what we’re doing or who wants to join our community to contact me at caron@caronharrang.com.