

Towards an Engaged Psychoanalysis – presentation for the Crisis and Responders  
Outreach panel discussion 8/10/2023

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As a preamble, I think this is the last panel discussion for our conference. I feel that what I have to say has already been said over the course of the last 4 days of conference and to some extent, am reluctant to read it. However, it is so interesting that none of us had read each other's papers before the conference, yet they have proven themselves to be so interwoven. This is ultimately comforting to me, that in our different ways we're very connected in our thoughts about the future of psychoanalysis.

I'd prepared to talk a little bit broadly about what I am calling engaged psychoanalysis. When I say, "engaged" I mean intentionally and specifically "engaged" with addressing some of the deep collective suffering in our world, and extending an analytic hand, an analytic presence into basically trying to make it better. Why would we intervene at all, if it were not in the hope of making something a bit better, more resolved, a bit more at ease? You've seen an extract from a documentary film, "*The Village*" (Rose Palmer, 2018) depicting a therapeutic community where psychoanalytic thinking sits respectfully, side by side, with other supports in a mutually enriching dialogue. You've heard through Gloria Blanco's paper about what it means to engage analytically during periods of immense social upheaval and anxiety for both analyst and patient. I'd like this brief piece to add to the conversation by exploring this idea of engaged psychoanalysis.

Engaged psychoanalysis is about the application of psychoanalytic work, psychoanalytic thinking in the wider community. It is about seeing psychoanalysis as

so much broader than a treatment very few can afford, using 4-5 sessions a week and using a couch. It addresses a question about what can psychoanalytic thinking offer, what can it *do*. We have outreach programs within APAS that are practicing engaged psychoanalysis. In Sydney for a decade there has been our Psychodynamic Psychotherapy Course, PPC that offers a short course in applied contemporary analytic thinking - mostly to practitioners working at the pointy end of health and human services. We have in Melbourne and Sydney the Winn Clinic that offers assessment and referral to those who might not ordinarily be able to afford a consultation with a psychoanalyst. We have recently had the "Two Way" series promoting dialogue between analysts and indigenous ways of thinking. Please see Psychoanalysis Downunder issue 20 for more on that. In our Adelaide branch regular outreach programs offer analytic thinking to mental health clinicians.

So the Crisis and Responders Outreach is another dimension of this work, and fits under what I prefer to call "engaged psychoanalysis" rather than "outreach" for reasons I hope I will make a bit clearer as we go.

Right now, I see an opportunity to gather up the many varied initiatives around the world, including books on psychoanalysis and climate change, or the refugee and asylum seeker crisis and put them all under the umbrella of a new engaged psychoanalysis. This would be a powerful way of stating; this is our intentional and deliberate application of psychoanalysis to address these massive social challenges. In my mind it is taking the unique offerings of psychoanalysis back to its radical heart.

I recall a sensitive and seasoned analyst of over 45 years, I don't want to name names, and so I'll just tell you her initials - Margaret Berkovic. Oops! She told me once that if she had to, she could practice psychoanalysis while walking in Centennial Park with a patient. Because what she meant, tongue in cheek of course,

was that our analytic practice room is internal. Building the inner-analytic room, or I like to say, inner analytic **home** for our associations, reveries, feelings, dreaming and thinking while in the storm of an intimate connection, is a central analytic task. So engaged psychoanalysis is really just taking that analytic home with us out of the consulting room and into other contexts where analytic ways of thinking and understanding can help heal.

I should say that I stole the term engaged-psychoanalysis from the practice of Engaged Buddhism, developed by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Teacher who died last year. Motivated by the horrors of the American War in Vietnam, he actively sought to promote deep listening as a non-violent solution to conflict, and sought to raise awareness of the inter-connectedness of all elements in life. As a result, Buddhist practice was enlarged from a somewhat cloistered, rather individual pursuit of enlightenment in monasteries. Monks and nuns were inspired to engage with social and humanitarian issues and **live** their spiritual commitments. As he said in 1966,

*“Once there is seeing there must be acting....we must be aware of the real problems of the world.”*

I like to think he wouldn't mind me appropriating his terminology today to help us all think about articulating a similar trajectory for psychoanalysis. Thich Nhat Hanh articulated Engaged Buddhism through 14 precepts that members of the community make a commitment to uphold. I'd like to share them all, but I only have space today to share a slightly edited few, pertinent to an engaged psychoanalysis.

*Precept one – Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology....systems of thought are guiding means, not absolute truth.*

*Precept two – Do not think that knowledge you possess is changeless absolute truth. Avoid being narrow minded and bound to present views. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and observe reality in yourself and the world at all times.*

I think Bion would agree with these first two precepts, especially, *truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge*. A state of mind of negative capability, a state of mind practising no memory and desire will find truth in life more readily than a state of mind of conceptual knowledge. You don't have to be Buddhist to follow these inspiring precepts. They can act as ethical reminders to any profession that wants to make a positive impact on the world.

There is much an engaged psychoanalysis could offer, perhaps with its own articulated precepts, at this point in history where we are facing massive humanitarian disasters through persecution, war, poverty and climate change. But the idea of psychoanalysis going out of the consulting room and into the community is not new. The analyst, Florence Guignard, gave a recent talk (June 2023). She stressed that while some schools of psychoanalytic thought believe psychoanalysis has to split from the social in order to attend to the individual and their inner world, this is a very old story. There have always been analysts who have practised in their consulting rooms at the same time as being engaged in social issues *as analysts*. Hannah Segal for one protesting about the Atom bomb. Many years ago psychoanalysts in Brazil would travel in a team to remote tiny villages to offer psychoanalytic sessions to people at home. Closer home in Melbourne, Dr Viv Elton's work with survivors of the genocide in Rwanda assisting gathering witness testimonies, is also an example of engaged psychoanalytic work.

We know there are pathological splits in our collective mind. I'm talking about the splits that say "us" and "other", "deserving and undeserving", "queues and queue jumpers" and as Harriet Wolfe noted in her talk our public conversations are beset by a "toxic polarisation". In a post-truth world, denial and disavowal take charge. To those among us who believe only in a purist psychoanalysis, 4-5 sessions a week, and use of a couch, I say respectfully, *Really? Really?* Can we really continue arguing that our role as analysts is only to pursue individual freedoms and ignore the social injustice, hostility and attacks on otherness in our society?

*Precept five.*

*Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth. Live simply and share time, energy and material resources with those in need.*

One of our conference themes has been about memory and I'd like to finish by remembering our ancestors, names everyone knows, Freud, Karen Horney, Erik Erikson who in the 20s and 30s envisioned psychoanalysis as a challenge to conventional political and social traditions. They set up *free clinics* believing that psychoanalysis should be available to those who could not afford it. They really saw psychoanalysis as having the potential to broker social change. I think we can honour them by continuing a conversation and commitment to an engaged psychoanalysis; that while moving with the times we are in, can stay true to its radical heart.

Further reference:  
<http://www.roseacpalmer.co.uk/documentary>  
The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. Plumvillage.org.