

Comments in Honor of Neville Symington  
Australian Psychoanalytical Society  
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Thank you, Louise, for your kind introduction and especially for inviting me to join your Society for this conference in honor of Neville Symington. I learned this week that about half of us are online and the other half are with you in person. I would very much like to be with you in person since this event is hybrid in more ways than one. I am thinking of hybrid as a mix of ways to achieve connection. Today is a chance to *celebrate* Neville and the many contributions he made to our lives, professional and personal. We also have the chance to *mourn the loss* of a vital soul who enriched our field and ourselves in so many ways. The mourning is what I wish I could share with you in person. Neville personified creative communication. That is what mourning together generates.

Remembering Neville is both a sad and a joyous event. He was bigger than life in many ways and that seems to challenge ordinary measures of what makes an analyst. Analysts often seem to be somewhat modest, perhaps introverted types. Neville's adventurousness was a challenge – interestingly to him as much as to those around him. As he says in Joan Thompson's video interview, the experience of flying – something he took up after he moved to Australia – absolutely terrified him. But he had the unusual ability, explorer that he was, to discover new levels of freedom in his working through of his own terror.

I am sure many of us have very personal memories of Neville. I first met him in Berkeley California in 2003 when he was visiting his cousin, Lisby Mayer, a young and already eminent member of the then San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute and Society (SFPI&S) and a cousin of Neville's on the Symington side. She had an afternoon reception at her home to introduce him to colleagues and friends. He spoke to the group that day. I no longer have any idea what he said to us. But I remember clearly its impact on me. It inspired me to call him the next day to see if we might meet; I asked him for an organizational consultation. The year was 2003. I had just brought to a close the administrative response to boundary violation complaints against a beloved immediate past head of the SFPI&S Education Committee. I was the president of the Society at the time and in my role oversaw the process of adjudication together with the new head of the Education Committee, another good friend of the accused analyst. It was a devastating process for the organization, for the analyst himself, for his aggrieved patient, his analysts, students, colleagues, family, and friends.

As you know from reading such papers by Neville as *Healing the Mind: What is the Process? What is the Healer's Task?* (2003), he brought very challenging thoughts about psychoanalytic action into clear view through personal story telling. In thinking about my comments today I reread the *What is the Healer's Task* paper and for the first time wondered if that was what he had talked about the afternoon at Lisby's house. He delivered that paper in a formal setting the same year at the Annual Lecture of the Northern California Society for Psychoanalytic Psychology. He shows in that paper how internal and external stimuli interact to create a sense

of madness until a person finds their way to an integration of the two, to a realization they are part of the same tapestry of experience and substance of self. This was exactly the help I needed in my organizational experience at the time.

Neville writes with deceptive simplicity about madness, and about emotional pain. He speaks of the analyst's interaction with another person as an organic process of interrelated states of being that enables words to be put to what feels like madness. He shows how through the process of connected, creative communication the deepest states of disruption and confusion can enter a realm of representation that renders such experience more manageable.

The thing I want to emphasize is the way in which Neville makes his profound understandings of human psychology clear through such "everyday" examples as the making of a lemon cake or his five day visit at a cabin where he enjoyed a stay that was marked by a predictable schedule, the freedom to be and do what he chose, the presence of a generous and understanding friend/soul, and a sense of calm that allowed his mind to wander and become refreshed. His humor shines through when he unexpectedly writes: "That was the routine, and each of the five days was similar. I mention *five* days so that you will be assured that it was a true analysis. (Ibid, p.10)".

I suspect some very committed, serious analysts are not amused by the clear message that psychoanalysis is not a well-defined discipline that follows rules based on its clinical theory. In Neville's hands psychoanalysis becomes a relational experience enriched by the personal, scientific enquiry, compassion, and freedom. He uses the analogy of art-making, not just cake-making, to illustrate the many ingredients, levels of taste and texture, and careful attention to detail that go into the gradual creation of a new object – whether external or internal.

Back about 20 years ago, I – a relatively recent graduate – had the temerity to call Neville Symington at his San Francisco hotel to see if I could talk with him about the fact that the analyst who was being expelled from our Society for boundary violations had been invited to Lisby's party and was behaving as if nothing had happened. I was not conscious of the fact the encounter had created madness in me. I was naïve to Neville's frequent reference to his own madness, to his interest in narcissism, his immense intellectual breadth, and his clinical acumen. I was however clear that this was a person of immense integrity and humanity whom I could trust to help me sort out why this intersection of personal and professional worlds at the reception had seemed so wrong and impossible to manage.

I know my meeting with Neville was helpful, but it was not because of what he said. It was actually an experience of what he writes about in reference to Graham Greene's sketch of his most gentle friend Herbert Read (Symington, 2003), a man who had been through the worst of times in WWI where he carried along Robert Bridge's anthology *The Spirit of Man*, Plato's *Republic* and *Don Quixote*. Greene describes how, twenty years later, Read would come into a room full of people. No one noticed his coming, only that the whole atmosphere of a discussion had quietly changed. "No one any longer would be talking for effect, and when you looked

around for an explanation there he was – complete honesty, born of complete experience, had entered the room and unobtrusively taken a chair” (Greene, 1980, p.39).

Neville’s humanity was anchored in his fierce effort to understand his own madness, his insatiable desire to understand the pain and joys of others, and his extensive, deep “conversations” with philosophers, poets, historians, politicians, and psychoanalysts. He is known well in circles where he taught, supervised, and consulted. But I think many in the United States and perhaps elsewhere did not know him before he won the Sigourney Award in 2013. It was a fortuitous recognition of an inspiring representative of the value of divergent views to the advance of psychoanalytic thinking.

In conclusion I’d like to return to the way in which Neville makes deep understanding of human suffering and human potential, and the healing power of psychoanalysis, clear in everyday terms. As psychoanalysts we have a higher tolerance for uncertainty and unbearable affects than most caregivers. At this time in our history, psychoanalysis has never been more needed to understand the impact of malignant othering, violence, war, separation of families and children, social inequities, climate catastrophe, and resultant transgenerational trauma. Psychoanalysts who can speak about what we know in simple terms can help fellow citizens capture the nature of their experience. The opportunity of this conference and its focus on Neville’s manner, method, and contributions is a roadmap for psychoanalytic contributions to the well-being of individuals and groups, one that includes psychoanalysts’ greater freedom to move beyond silence in relation to our troubled world.

Thank you for listening. I wish you a fruitful time together.

#### References

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