

# Following a Ribbon of Beauty

## Notes on a Psychoanalyst's Internal Workspace

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I'm grateful to Shahid for his stimulating invitation to contribute something to Psychoanalysis Downunder. Here is the question he posed: *Would it be possible for... you to try and articulate that background philosophy of life and the place that psychoanalysis has in it for you?* In response to this generous inquiry, I will offer a few inevitably incomplete personal thoughts.

### ***Intention***

I propose to describe, briefly and impressionistically, several facets of what I call “my internal workspace”. This is my way of reflecting upon my use of self as a psychoanalyst. Psychoanalytic training and practice contribute to the development of an internal workspace. I believe that the task of an analyst is to learn over time how to make professional use of personal experience. Becoming a psychoanalyst does not just involve performing a role or applying a method. It is an intimate and disciplined form of listening to yourself listening to another. We can refine this practice in our daily sessions as a psychoanalytic setting becomes established and a psychoanalytic process commences with each patient. Over time we may recognize the interdependent relationship between observation and intuition.

### ***Suffering***

To be born into a human body inevitably entails encountering the reality of suffering. A psychoanalyst must respect the complexity of this reality for each patient. There are causes and conditions for suffering. Those causes and conditions can be investigated. By learning about the causes and conditions of suffering, suffering can be lessened and perhaps in some cases largely eliminated. Psychoanalysis is one method for investigating and transforming the experience of suffering.

### ***An improbable conversation***

Change is constant whether noticed or not. Sickness, aging, violence, loss, vulnerability, and death are existential facts of life. *Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men* (John Donne). So much of human activity involves evasion of painful experience which creates deep patterns of emotional alienation. A psychoanalyst can create a situation to welcome the testimony of a singular embodied subject to help him or her to find a voice (or many voices) to express and explore experience. Psychoanalysis can help a person register, tolerate, become curious about and investigate the mystery of the

complexity of living. Psychoanalysis can become an improbable conversation that promotes turning toward and welcoming experience rather than evading it. Together a patient and analyst can become a symbolizing couple, finding embodied language for emotional experience.

### ***Animals and Symbols***

Unlike most other animals, as far as we know, we are the only symbol-making and symbol-using creatures. We live in a world of meaning as well as in a world of experience. We re-present our experiences to ourselves, especially through oral and written language. This gives us the possibility of reflecting on the past as well as planning for the future. The use of language and symbol-formation influences temporal experience. We can inhabit more than one place in time simultaneously. Memory (past) Desire (future) and Understanding (how we picture the present) coexist in complex ways. Often suffering arises from what we unconsciously ascribe to experience. Klein's idea of unconscious phantasy suggests that we suffer from *unconscious meaning-making*. A psychoanalytic process can help open the gates to psychic reality to explore the unconscious ascriptions that color experience.

### ***Process***

Three basic questions naturally emerge as a psychoanalytic process deepens. These questions can be stated as (1) what is the fate of pain? (2) what is a good life? and (3) how shall I live? These questions build on even more basic questions, such as (1) where have I been? (2) where am I now? and (3) who am I becoming?

### ***Transience***

As I age my experience becomes more dreamlike. Experience arises then disappears. It seems more important than ever to be a learner, rather than a knower. I want to share what I learn with others. Here is an example of something I have learned from Buddhist practice: (1) let experience in (2) let experience be and (3) let experience go.

### ***Dreamlife***

Several years ago, I had a significant dream. I was walking alone by the sea. There were giant boulders along the shore. A beautiful young dark-haired woman approached me as if we were long lost lovers. I felt overwhelmed by her beauty. We stood together face to face. She said to me "You must follow a ribbon of beauty and appreciate it, not try to possess it". This dream was an emotional event. Now, I often feel the preciousness of this life when I wake in the morning. Every day is an opportunity to follow a ribbon of beauty in whatever way a moment might reveal it and call it forth. How many dreams like this have we dreamt but failed to remember upon waking into the chaos of the outer world or because of the mindless habits that remain unquestioned?

## ***Tattoo***

In recent years I have played with the idea of getting a tattoo. I have imagined many different images and phrases. I settled on one phrase that means a lot to me. In Latin it is: *Esse Quam Videri*. It means “to be, rather than to seem”.

## ***Curiosity***

I grew up in a semi-rural part of Washington state near woods, creeks, large open horse pastures, and within easy walking distance to a rocky beach on the coast of Puget Sound. From the shore of the beach, I could see the distant jagged snowcapped peaks of the Olympic Mountains on a clear day. I was accompanied by the sound of gulls and wild geese in the morning and in the evening. I wandered in the woods, alone or with friends. I watched ducks build nests in the tall grass and swim with their ducklings in the pond. I studied spiders building webs and how they interacted with their prey. I looked at many kinds of colored fungus growing from rotting tree trunks and sprouting from the damp earth. I saw bald eagles nesting high in the trees. And much more. So many wordless experiences never described to anyone.

Here is a memory: One spring day, when I was quite young, I left recess and walked beyond the school playground up a little hill. There was a deep drainage ditch overgrown with tall grass. In the grimy sunlit water, I found dozens of tiny tadpoles swarming and swimming. I had no language at that age for the state of being this discovery evoked. Natural curiosity, with no outcome in mind, sponsors an unselfconscious sense of wonder. This is how I try to listen as a psychoanalyst.

## ***Compassion***

Hatred of vulnerability can be intense. Compassion for suffering is evidence of strength, a willingness to face pain and to get to know it. You can develop compassion by bringing curiosity to experience. Compassion involves a genuine willingness to welcome experience. By welcoming experience, you notice a caesura between experience and the meaning attributed to it. In Buddhism we speak of a space between two thoughts. That space, once recognized, can widen. Awareness and compassion can become one experience. I have witnessed some patients discover how to gradually soften into strength by welcoming experience. We can train our minds to widen our capacity for compassion, starting with noticing how we reject or judge our experiences. Reverie *is* an avenue of compassion, personified as a mother’s love and curiosity about whatever state her infant might be experiencing.

### ***Discipline***

I never met Bion. But his example and writings inspire me. His advice to eschew memory, desire, and understanding was, I think, an instruction on how to practice freeing attention to discover a more open focus of awareness. Bion was concerned with creating conditions to recognize whatever a moment might call forth. The discipline of this practice involves letting the moment stay open and evolve without an expectation of what *should* happen. I like the metaphor of treating the moment like a blank page, not trying to predict what could appear. One of the benefits of this practice is to see all the ways that we habitually open and close and how our attention becomes narrowed and trapped. There is a rhythm of movement between preference, aversion, and distraction. Discipline helps us take a second look, and to come back to the instruction to welcome whatever the moment calls forth.

### ***Courage***

It takes courage to find out what you are thinking, feeling, and experiencing. It takes work to represent that experience to yourself. It takes more courage to express yourself sincerely to others or to a group. Bion viewed a person as influenced by the twin poles of narcissism and the impact of group life. A self is also moved by the innate impulse to seek. This seeking is initially objectless (without memory, desire, or understanding). With curiosity, discipline, and compassion, at some point we might experience what Bion called an evolution. An evolution is a sudden recognition (an intuition) of a pattern that connects. Something surprisingly arises out of the choiceless awareness of immersion in the details of the moment. It takes courage to welcome a thought in search of a thinker.

### ***Becoming a welcoming object***

I am proposing that several qualities combine to promote a welcoming function and to constellate a matrix of contact with both inner and shared experience. The complexity of the relationships between curiosity, compassion, discipline, and courage combine to welcome the dreamlike evolutions of intuition based on an immersion in the details of any experience. Continuing realizations promote the expansion of an internal workspace for creative living in the face of the complex challenges of survival, adaptation, and thriving.