

AN EDUCATION IN THINKING

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When I spoke at the conference, I had notes which I used mostly as an aide to memory. I hope this written text of my presentation conveys as far as possible a sense of what I spoke on the day.

Neville Symington

Is a living presence

In my mind

Some people glance off the surface of your mind

Some crash-land.

Neville was a welcomed guest.

Frequently stimulating

Occasionally exasperating

Often generous.

I met the man in 1980

I was one in a crowded lecture room at the Tavistock Clinic in London.

I observed him for a year.

What he said became his first book, *The Analytic Experience*.

I started out learning things *from* him

Then, when I came to Sydney 30 years ago

I began to learn things *with* him.

That learning with him

Was what I would call an education in thinking.

I shall try to show you what I mean.



To do this I need your help. I need you to use a faculty Neville valued highly, your imagination. There are two things I will ask you to imagine.

This is the first. Imagine you are on a street. Imagine you are in front of a building that has a large sign which reads: MUSEUM OF SCIENCE. If we go inside, we find countless extraordinary items and displays, inventions from the wheel to COVID 19 vaccines. There are plenty of helpful educators. You could spend your life in here. In one lifetime you would only learn a fraction of what there is to know.

We are back on the street now. On the other side we are in front of a building that has a large sign which reads: MUSEUM OF THE UNCONSCIOUS. If we go inside, we find, nothing. Nothing. No items. No displays. No names. No guides. Psychoanalytic heresy? If you think that, the person you need to talk to is Sigmund Freud who said: That while we may infer the existence of an unconscious, we can only describe it negatively. In one attempt at description Freud said, 'It is the dark inaccessible part of the personality; what little we know we have learned from the dream work...we approach it with analogies'.

We are back out on the street. The rest of what I have to say about an education in thinking presumes you will stand on the street. That you keep what is on both sides in your line of sight. Do not rush into and spent too much time on either side. And wherever you are located on the street know where you are.

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I am interested in what people say, the ideas people express. *I am equally interested in the mind that creates the ideas.* On the face of a mechanical clock, you can find the time. To open the back of the clock, to peer inside, to examine all the working parts, is of great interest to me. I call it a generous act if someone reveals *how they think*. That is why earlier I called Neville generous.

Looking inside a mind it is interesting to see how a person moves from one side to the other, from the internal mental space that the MUSEUM OF SCIENCE represents to the internal mental space that the MUSEUM OF THE UNCONSCIOUS represents.

Observing Neville what I saw was this. He paused, stopped, spent a lot of time half-way between the two, becoming a person. His own life, his own mind with all its twists and turns was what he was drawing on. He did this all his life and wrestled with it as he faced death.

The poet John Keats challenging religious orthodoxy said words to the effect:
You are not born with a soul. You have a potential. *You create your soul* by the life you live.

Every time we concretise the unconscious, populate the MUSEUM OF THE UNCONSCIOUS with things, we change it. We damage it. The damage is damage to our minds, our capacity to think. As indeed minds in the MUSEUM OF SCIENCE are damaged when superstition, when fake-news, post-truth, double-speak gain ground in society, culture and in politics.

Psychoanalysis is a cerebral, imaginative, emotional, scientific, intuitive, bodily, spiritual, dream-like activity.

The combination and the interpenetration of all those features are psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis legitimatises the presence of all those features in a person's mind.

And it is successful as a practice to the extent that it promotes those features within a relationship between two people; a patient and an analyst.

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Earlier I said there are two things I would ask you to imagine. This is the second. The second is a deconstruction of the first. There are no buildings. There is no street. (*Our revels now are ended.*) I, and you, imagined them. But there is a *space* inside my mind, inside your mind. We have the choice, the freedom, to make, to inhabit that space, to create what John Keats called, our own soul.

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In the 1990's Neville, Joan and I and a few other analysts set up a poetry reading group at the Sydney Institute for Psychoanalysis. We met about once a month for many years under the guidance of literature academic Jane Adamson. Some years ago, Neville and I spoke about the meetings. We fondly recalled the pleasure of receiving by fax the poems chosen by Jane. Neville said it was one of the most enjoyable and creative activities he had been involved in, enjoying the freedom that poetry offers when you plunge yourself into it. These meetings were for us another form of an education in thinking.

In the group we were aware Freud had said he did not discover the unconscious. It was the poets and philosophers who discovered the unconscious. And we were also aware of a reviewer of *Studies in Hysteria* who in 1887 wrote: 'We do not know how science will judge the theories of Breuer and Freud, but they have the poets on their side, and that means a great deal. For us yet the poets have been those who knew best about the secrets of the human soul'.

One of the poets we read was the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. In his Nobel speech *Crediting Poetry*, Heaney said, 'Poetry...has...the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being'.

Poetry, psychoanalysis, philosophy, art, all the humanities, all the explorers of the mind, explore our human being. We are all hunters and gatherers of values. Neville would say, if he was here with us now, a life well spent is a life spent as a hunter and a gatherer of human truth.

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As a living presence in my mind Neville, sends me to all parts of the universe. I would need 20 hours rather than 20 minutes. But being guided by Bion who said, 'If we want to make a scientific communication, we shall also have to make a work of art,' in the hope of conveying the essence of the man and perhaps conjuring his spirit I will read this poem of 8 lines. I called it

What I Do

Some rush headlong. Some stand and wait. Some will kneel
And reach under the surface of the great reservoir,
And slowly, moved first by instinct, then by music
And by mind, raise up their hands, liquid full, overflowing.

Practising my art, my craft, that is what I do.

Then I pour a liquid mirror; offer it to you. I trust

My thoughts and words, your heart and mind align.

I hope my hands rise up with water turned to wine.

A poem does not attempt to possess the unconscious. It is the metaphor. Analogies and allegories within the poem allow us to approach the unconscious, to cast a small ray of light into a dark, mysterious place. Like all good art it never tells the full story. Completion awaits the reader, the listener.

Back to the man. Forty years after meeting him for the first time, two days before he died in hospital, I met him for the last time.

First Words and Last

I sat and I listened forty years ago,
To your weekly lectures, your words,
Stepping stones to traverse the universe
Of mind. Space stations of the past
Discovered. Infinity beckoned.

I sit and again I listen,
To your breathing, laboured.
Your red pullover and canvas
Hold-all laid down upon a chair.
You'll not be needing them again.

For a brief time your eyes
Open, a final space invites
Words, thank you, to which
You smile as you drift away,
And away and away and away.

