

Familiar Faces - Hidden Lives

Howard Brown, M.D.

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Dr. Brown, former health administrator of New York City under the Lindsay administration, has written a book janus faced in its task; not only does it look to the past at the oppression of homosexuality and all the effects of that oppression - but it also clearly looks to the future and a new consciousness among both gays and straights. The author weaves his personal story throughout the text, homosexual all his life he underwent psychoanalysis - three times a week - in his early twenties. This experience, as well as many others, seems to have deepened his convictions about homosexuality. That is his belief that he, as well as other homosexuals, were living in a society where the church, the law, and the psychiatric establishment are the enemy. The work is something of a political treatise and consequently the reader easily identifies with the author in his fight against any cruel suppression of homosexuality at the hands of loving parents, spiritual pastors, or therapeutic psychiatrists.

But, the inevitable "but" in any work dealing with so complex an issue, the situation seems more complicated, at least to this observer, than the author portrays it. Yet I have a momentary hesitation in following upon this "but" since too many psychoanalysts have mouthed an abbreviated party line in regard to homosexuality which in its abbreviatedness and unexamined orthodoxy can easily become a hindrance to the therapeutic goals which the profession imposes upon its practitioners. (The book is replete with examples.) And if we, as analysts, perpetuate hindrances in dealing with patients, we keep quiet for a while in order to hear what we may have previously been blocking out. Dr. Brown suggests that psychiatrists and analysts keep quiet for a while; a stance, we might add, which would indicate the needed receptivity upon which any solid knowledge is built.

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Although this writing may violate the letter of Dr. Brown's injunction I trust not its spirit; also, I hope that my apologetic comments be understood as a necessary backdrop to my critical remarks.

The authors premise throughout the work is that most homosexual acts are not vehicles of unconscious conflict but simply of love. In effect what he states is that men and women are what they are, and the concept of unconscious conflict is seen as a strategic ploy of the analytic community to justify its oppression of homosexuals. I believe I understand Dr. Brown's anger, but I do not agree with his conclusions. Because human sexuality is such a profound force in personal experience, its expression can easily become a symbolic locus for numerous aspects of the human situation. If Freud has taught us anything it is how to read the script of dreams and the script of symptoms so that we do not reductionistically equate neurotic conflicts with physical acts.

Dr. Robert Stoller in his recent book Perversions has drawn a sensitive and also, I believe, a clinically accurate distinction between homosexuality as a symbolic manifestation of an unconscious neurotic conflict and what he classifies as simply aberrant sexual acts - for example between two consenting adults of the same sex. In cases where a thorough analysis reveals "post factum" that the homosexual acts or fantasied acts are a vehicle for unconscious neurotic aggression and/ or for symbiotic merging and/or any other of the more serious psychic pitfalls the human animal has a propensity for, then we can speak of the neurotic dimension of homosexuality. And then we can use our collective accumulated psychoanalytic know-how to try to work through, to a satisfactory resolution, what our investigations have clearly shown to be damaging to the patient.

Homosexuality is not as arbitrary and as definitively given as, for example, a person's foot -size. Only physical sexual acts taken out of the context of their human psychic meanings and counter-meanings are that pristinely innocent. Perhaps Dr. Brown's understandably bruised integrity at the hands of his silent analyst might have been less had his analyst been able to convey to him

the script of his life in a wider context than neurotic and non-neurotic physical acts. The author's painful life forces him, in effect, to deny the unconscious, the conflictual and to only see the oppressed and the cry of the oppressed for freedom. Perhaps before people can read the literature of their lives or see the art of their actions they must be free, and if one had to make a choice between understanding homosexuality and political and social freedom, then, I suspect, one chooses freedom first. Yet the dichotomy is misleading - certainly political freedom must be won but, after that, one can learn to read the meanings of his acts; and if they portray conflicts, then resolving those conflicts is also a freedom worth striving for. And if at a given time and place homosexual acts seem not to portray emotional conflicts, keeping Dr. Stoller's distinctions in mind, then they do not - and presumably analysts would take note.

Freud's reading of homosexuality came not because it was a possible leftover from his Jewish religious background, as Dr. Brown mentions -- in fact his family was non-religious, his father was a free thinker -- but rather from his encounter with these experiences in his patients and his struggling to decipher their meanings. That there was and maybe still is an "always and everywhere neurotic" tone to the analytic community's speaking of homosexual acts is unfortunate. We obviously need more analysts and scholars of Stoller's stature. Yet the obverse of this analytic stance can be equally damaging to human lives; namely, that always and everywhere homosexuality is an alternate route, along with heterosexuality, for the expression of human affection.

Notwithstanding this major criticism of Dr. Brown's work it can teach its readers. It details ecclesiastical and legal oppression that has no place in a humane society. It shatters lingering myths, such as, that all homosexuals are effeminate or child molesters or hopelessly promiscuous - all of which need shattering. Politely and with dignity Dr. Brown excoriates the psychiatric and psychoanalytic establishment and, as I have indicated above, there is something to be learned even here.

Man has forever, it seems, dedicated himself, with all his complexity, to self-deciphering. There is no one easy and universally true answer or solution to that task and everyone, sooner or later, gay or straight, analyst or patient must come to terms with that.

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