

CHAPTER 15

PSYCHOANALYSIS TODAY: THE LONG HISTORY OF STORY TELLING

We humans love to tell stories, from Homer's *Iliad and The Odyssey* to the latest best selling novel(s) on the New York Times list. We yearn to understand our world – in its physical presence, its spiritual aspects and its psychological makeup, the drama of history. Who are we? Why are we? Where are we going? Philosophers and intellectuals as well as dramatists, poets and novelists have pondered such issues. Socrates' questioning – what is the well lived out life - resonates with our existential concern for the authentic. Marcus Aurelius' meditations are still a guide on how to live a productive, sensible life grounded in more than just material possessions. Psychoanalysis joined this enterprise of self-reflection, self-curiosity, self-awareness – now, over a hundred years ago.

If we want to know what contemporary psychoanalysis can contribute to this ongoing quest it would help to clarify a few of the misconceptions about it. Psychoanalysis is not about mathematics. That is, how many sessions an

individual has a week. Nor is it about furniture. That is, if one lies down or not. I am not questioning the possible benefit of an intense treatment or the choice of using a couch. What I am saying is that only if we understand the ever-present need to know our world and ourselves can we appreciate the story-telling quality and the helpful editing, so to speak, that psychoanalysis offers. The more formal aspects of psychoanalytic treatment are always subordinate to the goals of self-awareness and self-reflection, in the service of deepening our understanding of what it means to be human. Nor is such an encounter with one's history, one's feelings and one's hopes limited to the proverbial troubled patient. We all come injured into adulthood, in one way or another; that is simply the human condition. Life can be lived more deeply, however, with the kind of self-exploration that psychoanalysis can offer.

Contemporary analysts are not simply blank screens upon which a patient projects his or her needs and desires - a better description might be they are informed listeners. And by informed listeners I do not mean someone who does not respond. Gone are the days of the mute analyst quietly sitting behind a couch, while the patient wonders if their questions will ever be answered. If the couch does not work, for a variety of reasons, patients can use a chair. But the basic goals remain the same. An analyst carefully listens and sensibly responds so that a patient can experience and recognize what he or

she is feeling, thinking and/or possibly avoiding. What is the goal of such story telling? One essential goal is what the English analyst, Edward Glover addressed when he said that a goal of therapy is for a person to experience “freed will.” Freed, that is, from the hidden feelings, phantasies and/or memories that can warp one’s experience of the present. With freed will, individuals can take realistic ownership of their lives, their feelings and their hopes, no longer constrained by emotional conflicts.

In the ongoing mutual dialogue, which is the essence of psychoanalytic work, analysts also recognize that their task is not confined to interpreting the legendary transference. That is, the unrecognized interpersonal expectations an individual brings to the therapeutic relationships. As an analyst listens to a patient, he or she is writing his or her own autobiography as well. What clinical experience has confirmed is that in a productive therapy there is a deep resonance between both participants - a necessary resonance if any healing is to occur. Another way of saying this might be to note that humanity creates a level ground between therapist and patient; training and competence enables a therapist to use that level ground most effectively. This is not a new insight, it is newly remembered and appreciated. To say that we humans are all connected is not just an humanistic or spiritual aspiration, it is also confirmed by many of the conclusions of contemporary science.

Psychoanalytic insights have informed a great deal of our intellectual and academic traditions these past hundred years. Concurrently its clinical arm has continued to evolve as one of the major healing arts. It has, as any therapeutic endeavor dedicated to growth, corrected some of its mistaken theories, its position on homosexuality is a notable example. Psychoanalysis, sitting or lying down, whatever number of sessions per week, is basically about a personal journey or exploration. A pilgrimage, one might say, entailing all of the perseverance such an adventure requires. A pilgrimage to touch the center of one's being, so that a life can be lived with competence, joy and love.

