

Shaping the New Normal

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One must try to learn something from every experience.
Sigmund Freud

In these pandemic times, psychoanalysts all over the world are engaging with new clinical challenges, and with conferences and lectures cancelled, we are more isolated from each other. Venues important to sustain the life of the mind – libraries, art galleries, cinemas, musical and art spaces – are closed. Outside the consulting room we share concerns with citizens the world over. The effects of the coronavirus pandemic stretch beyond a health issue; stressful aspects of governance strain some democracies.

Tele-analysis is not new but recently the number of psychoanalysts practicing in this way has soared. What to do? Do we long for pre-coronavirus days and rush back to do exactly what we did before? Or is there a new normal?

Here Freud is worth calling to mind. In 'Two Encyclopaedia Articles' he wrote

Psychoanalysis is not a system...having no room for fresh discoveries...it keeps close to the facts in its field of study, seeks to solve the immediate problems of observation, gropes its way forward by the help of experience. (Freud, 1923)

Like many analysts I experienced mental exhaustion switching to Zoom. I had used it for many years for supervision but clinical work is different. But as the initial shock wears off and I evaluate the experience I try to keep close to the facts, seek to solve the immediate problems of observation, grope my way forward.

In 1926, Freud in correspondence with Oscar Pfister discussed a young man he was treating. He was alarmed by his paranoia and delusions and considered a diagnosis of schizophrenia. But when the patient responded positively Freud said,

I propose to leave aside the academic question of diagnosis and go on working with the living material. So long as this remains plastic and we have success, I feel this is justified.' (Meng & Freud, 1963)

What we are not deprived of in time of coronavirus lockdown are our own books. As well as Freud I have also reached out to Ella Sharpe, an analyst in London from 1921 to 1947 and in particular to her seven papers on technique originally published in the IJPA in 1929/30. Sharpe stressed the importance of having clarity in our minds about who we are and what we do. She believed clinical practice was shaped by the internal contents of one's mind, and by the presence in that mind of the capacity for movement and elasticity. She wrote:

Psychoanalysis ceases to be a living science when technique ceases to be an art. The body of knowledge increases by increase of technical skill, not by speculative cunning. (Sharpe, 1950)

I think it important to refresh our minds on why we do this work and recall the central belief that the patient and the psychoanalyst are involved in an endeavour to communicate. And without humility in the presence of something far bigger than ourselves, the Unconscious, we go nowhere. Summing up the benefits of her life's work, Sharpe wrote,

From the limited confines of an individual life, limited in time and space and environment, I experience a rich variety of living through my work. I contact all sorts and kinds of living, all imaginable circumstances, human tragedy and human comedy, humour and dourness, the pathos of the

defeated, the incredible endurances and victories that some souls achieve over human fate.
(Whelan, 2000)

I am for reaching back and remembering where we have come from. Each of us in our analytic formation received much from others wiser than ourselves. At times like this we can't go it alone, separated from colleagues present and past.

The original inventors of platforms that enabled meetings and conferences via the Internet, did not market them as replacements for personal contact with clients and colleagues. For that there was no substitute. It was to be a useful adjunct to face-to-face contact.

What about all the experience gained by psychoanalysts working in a different way? What of the patient who kept on growing via Skype, Zoom or phone? What of the patient who discovered new aspects of his/her inner world in the new conditions? What of the analysts who experienced growth and development within themselves? What of those who adapted well and found something creative within themselves?

In London, within a ten-kilometre radius of the Freud Museum (once Freud's home) about 100 analysts work. Australia is roughly the size of USA or Europe. It has one Society and three Branches, between 1000 and 1300 kilometres apart. We have 67 working members. 'I have a long way to go', means different things to different people.

As we learn together from our experiences, what boundaries do we set on our research? Will it include psychoanalysts' attachment to place? The London Society (a forerunner of the British Society) was founded in 1913, but it was not until the 1980s that a systematic attempt was made to move beyond the capital. Are the habits, the attachments we form untouchable; to tamper with them akin to heresy?

In times when democracy is being weakened in some parts of the world, it is vital that discussions show an acknowledgment of and respect for democratic principles. For personal contact between analyst and patient there is no substitute. If we can go on working with the living material, where distance and the demands of life are excessive, would something be lost by combining sessions in person with sessions online? And would candidate seminars operate well in person and on line? One must try to learn something from every experience.

References

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