

Orientation 2011

On her album *Strange Angels*, Laurie Anderson, the American musician and performance artist has a song entitled *The Dream Before*. The song, which is dedicated to the philosopher Walter Benjamin, updates us on the current lives of Hansel and Gretel. In the song Gretel asks, “what is history?” Hansel says, “History is an angel being blown backwards into the future”. He says, “History is a pile of debris. And the angel wants to go back and fix things. To repair the things that have been broken. But there is a storm blowing from Paradise. And the storm keeps blowing the angel backwards into the future. And this storm, this storm is called Progress.”

As an artist Laurie Anderson is quick to adapt any electronic or technical innovation for the advancement of her art, but she is also quick to remind us that what we call **progress** can, in itself, be a blind and thoughtless force and that when we embrace it uncritically we might lose more than we gain. This prompts her to ask in another song on another album the simple question; “are things getting better or are they getting worse?”. I think it’s fair to say that the answer to that depends entirely on whom you ask.

In a feature article written for Harper’s Magazine last September by the psychologist Gary Greenberg, the author suggests that if you were to ask that question of the mental health professionals at an international conference on psychotherapy he had recently attended, the vast majority would say that things are getting better, at least in their profession. The article is entitled *The War on Unhappiness* and appears in an issue whose cover presents a drawing of Freud being tossed from a conference. In a large gathering of psychotherapists who have come together to hear about the most recent developments in “evidence based practice” there’s no place for Freud’s philosophical speculation or his European pessimism. From Greenberg’s description the atmosphere at the conference sounded rather like an Amway rally and its keynote speaker, the well-known psychologist Martin Seligman, who gave us the concept of “learned helplessness”, was in his own words, received “like a rock star”. According to Greenberg, Seligman’s description of the success his Cognitive-Behavioral approach was having in helping disabled vets of the Iraq war adjust to their “new normal” was greeted with cheers and thunderous applause. Greenberg acknowledged that he, on the other hand, was having trouble joining their collective “march towards happiness” because of his own thoughts of historic situations in which victims, “..of violence suffered at the hands of people unrestrained by self doubt”.

We can't blame Seligman and the military psychologists and psychiatrists for wanting to help physically and psychically traumatized soldiers make the best of a grim situation. Nor can we really blame the throngs of mental health practitioners for wanting new and effective techniques for easing the suffering of their clients and patients. We're drawn to these professions because we want to help and it's important to be open to fresh ideas and innovations. And the scientific method is invaluable for conducting studies on the efficacy of things such as medical developments. So the question seems to be around our ability to accurately evaluate **progress**. When is it, to put it in Laurie Anderson's terms, making things better and when is it a self-perpetuating **storm** that keeps "blowing the angel backwards into the future" and preventing him from repairing the things that have been broken? What criteria do we use for making these evaluations? As psychotherapists do we put our faith statistics and the experimental method to best develop our "evidence based practice" on our march toward happiness? How do distinguish false from true prophets?

What we do know is that **in** the history of the mental health field many bad ideas have managed to rule the day. So, for example, in March of 1947 Life Magazine features an article on the lobotomy celebrating it as the ultimate cure for severe mental illnesses that had resisted all previous treatments. Egas Moniz, the Portuguese neurologist who first developed the mind destroying procedure received a Nobel Prize for his efforts in 1949. At the same time many North American parents have their child-rearing practices shaped by the scientific expertise of Behavioral Psychologists. These experts had the experimental evidence to prove that when you did things like cuddle a crying baby you were, in your ignorance, reinforcing his crying by rewarding it with affection. And these experts were not a "flash in the pan"; they dominated academic psychology in North America for over 40 years. Their powerful ideas and methods influenced much of our daily lives, including how we raised our kids.

Let's stay with that small example of a parent who, with the best of intentions, makes the decision to follow the advice of a popular child-rearing expert whose work is informed by Behavioral Theory. There is a crying infant who can't be hungry because he's just been fed. His diaper has just been changed, and he can't be too hot or cold because the room temperature is ideal. He doesn't have a fever and he was happily responsive while he was feeding, so he's not sick. Still he's crying and making quite a fuss. Something in the parent, let's call it a maternal instinct, prompts her to go to her baby and pick him up. But the expert whose book she's been reading has

warned about this and what he says seems to make a lot of sense. And her friends who followed his advice and now have quiet babies would agree. This is her first baby; what does she know? She likes to think of herself as a progressive person so she decides to go with the storm of **progress** and allow her recently acquired **knowledge** to over-ride her own feelings about the situation. She is aware of some inner conflict but can take comfort in the fact that the experts whose advice she's following certainly have a lot more knowledge than she has. And they probably do since they have dedicated their professional lives to the accumulation and advancement of **knowledge** in their field. However, there is an important turning point here that can easily be lost in the storm of **progress**. The experts actually have no direct knowledge of **her baby**.

If she, on the other hand, were to allow herself to trust in the relationship that's building daily between them she would learn all about him. But that would require her to listen to those parts of herself that she has just stifled in order to go with experts, and when she does this she can feel very much on her own. If she has been fortunate enough to have experienced good enough mothering herself or has otherwise done the psychological work that promotes honest self-reflection, her own self-knowledge will provide the grounding for experiencing her baby as the separate and unique being that he is. If neither has sufficiently happened she will be more susceptible to having her responses to him shaped by ideas that have little or no resonance with whom her baby actually is. When this happens repeatedly it can ultimately cause him to experience her, on some level, as an alien presence that he will carry forward in his life.

So what has this to do with training to be a psychotherapist you ask? Well, if you are studying to become a psychotherapist who is setting about to simply accumulate vast stores of theoretical knowledge and to master an array of techniques and clinical procedures, very little. But since you've signed up to try to become, let's say, an adequate psychodynamic psychotherapist, everything. For a child the development of a stable and authentic self requires that he be engaged in a stable and authentic relationship with an invested adult. The relationship enables what is there only as potential to come into being. According to Thomas Ogden something similar happens in a successful psychoanalysis. In **Subjects of Analysis** he says, "Analysis is not simply a method of uncovering the hidden; it is more importantly a process of creating the analytic subject who had not previously existed". (p.47) This is, of course, not to say that a therapist parents his client into

being, but rather that through the therapeutic relationship aspects of the client that have never been fully realized can gradually become accessible to him. But such existential events can't be brought about by technique or knowledge of theory any more than a mother can cause her child to become a loving and authentic individual through some intellectually driven methodology. It can happen **only** within the ongoing relationship. Referring to the parallels in these two processes, Ogden says in **This Art of Psychoanalysis**, "Any mother or father who has had more than one child has learned (with a combination of shock and delight) that each new infant seems to be only a distant relative of his or her older siblings. A mother and father must reinvent what it is to be a mother and father with each child and must continue to do so in each phase of the life of the child and the family. Similarly, the analyst must learn anew how to be an analyst with each new patient and in **each new session**. (p.6)

When you regard analysis in these terms it becomes absurd to think that all an analyst might require to prepare for such an undertaking is the thorough knowledge of an elaborate theory and the mastery of certain clinical methods. Of course, an analytic therapist does require these things and should continue to develop them throughout his or her career. But technical knowledge, no matter how vast it is, can't provide the basis for an analysis, or a psychodynamic psychotherapy. Those therapies rest upon something more fundamentally human that can't be acquired in the way we usually gain knowledge. Thomas Ogden insists that they are founded upon what his mentor, Hans Loewald, referred to as a "**differential**" between the emotional maturity of the of the therapist and client. And this is the central point I want to make this evening. Analytic methodology and psychodynamic therapy are founded upon the assumption, to quote Ogden, "...that the analyst has achieved a level of psychological maturity greater than that of the analysand- at least in the area of experience most troubling to the patient." He then adds that, "in addition, it is essential that the analyst be capable of growing emotionally as a consequence of his experience with the patient.." (p.7)

This is what Freud understood when he originated the psychoanalytic method and why he required all of its legitimate practitioners to undergo their own analysis. Much has changed as psychoanalysis has evolved but this central and unique feature still holds for analysis and analytically oriented therapy. The therapist's first and ongoing responsibility is to his or her own emotional development and psychological integration. In **The Question of Lay Analysis** Freud states it very clearly. He says that

practitioners “..must learn to understand analysis in the only way that is possible- by themselves undergoing analysis”. (p.97) This is the inconvenient truth that repeatedly puts psychoanalytically oriented therapy at odds with the “storm of progress” and why at least every couple of years someone who is determined to keep up with things writes about Freud’s irrelevance. Unfortunately what they don’t seem to realize is that dismissing Freud is a bit like dismissing Plato. Caught in “the storm of progress” they don’t realize how much they might gain if, instead of dismissing him, they were to have a conversation, or even a well-informed argument with him.

Which takes us to the project that some of you are just now formally embarking upon. You’ve chosen CTP so you know that you will be exposed to lots theory and be involved in lots of conversations about the ongoing psychodynamic discourse. An in-depth knowledge of psychodynamic theory and its history is invaluable to a therapist. And the fact that fresh voices and new perspectives are constantly appearing means that the pursuit of this knowledge need never bottom out; it’s a career-long activity. This is exciting for those of us who love ideas. But as important and interesting as that pursuit is, it alone can’t prepare us to do this work with any depth. Without the thorough and on-going personal psychological work that provides the foundation of our practice, more information does nothing to help us in our attempts to truly understand our clients and form authentic relationships with them. This is why CTP places such emphasis on your individual therapy and requires you to have a minimum of four years of group therapy. As imperfect as it inevitably is, nothing trumps self-knowledge when it comes to doing this work. Without an ample amount of it the **“differential”** in emotional maturity that Leowald and Ogden refer to as the basis of a therapeutic relationship can’t be established in a genuine way. In its absence, what commonly takes its place is a relationship between an “expert” information cannon and his unfortunate target. This might make for amusing T.V. but not good therapy.

The expert who doesn’t have the perfection of his technical knowledge counterbalanced by the imperfect weight of self-knowledge will tend to arrive at conclusions about his clients that undermine the possibility of true and spontaneous discovery. He comes with a map of a territory he can’t possibly know because it has not yet been discovered, but he lacks the wisdom to understand and accept that he doesn’t know. Not only does he not really know what the meaning of a client’s troubling experience is until they mutually discover it, he might well not know that his own real motivation for being with a client in the first place is to be admired, or to feel important,

or to escape his own feelings of vulnerability; just to mention a few possibilities. Sometimes we do good for the wrong reasons but being aware of even that will help us be more real with our clients and with each other. William S. Burroughs, the author of **Naked Lunch**, among other things, put it quite succinctly when he said, “never be such a shit that you don’t know you are one”.

Several years ago a moment with my mother expressed this very poignantly for me. She had been ailing and virtually bed ridden and in chronic pain for a number of years. While I was visiting the phone rang and I answered it. The caller was this decent but very tiresome man who had originally had a professional relationship with my parents but had gradually become something of a friend. He would visit periodically, and though my parents would never be what you could call “excited” about the prospect of a visit from Roy, they were always welcoming and generous hosts. What made Roy tiresome was that he was something of an “information cannon”. He tended to go on endlessly about whatever it was that was interesting him at a given time and was quite oblivious to the interpersonal fact that who he was talking at might have no interest at all in what he was saying. He was a professional man and very well educated, so he had lots of “knowledge”, just not much reflective knowledge about himself and the mind-numbing effect he had on others. I was tempted to tell him that my mom wasn’t up for a visit but I knew that she would consider that rude and unkind. When I hung up the phone I told that it was Roy who had called and that he was popping over for a little visit. She responded with a roll of her eyes and said, “Oh Kenny, he’s as dumb as my arse”.

And so I ask you to keep this in mind to remind yourself of the unchanging paradox about training to do this work. That which is most fundamental to it cannot be taught. This is why you can study psychoanalytic theory at a university but you can’t train to do it there because the kind of emotional and psychological work that takes place in individual and group therapy can’t really happen in a formally academic setting. And it’s that work which you have the opportunity to do while you’re training and studying at CTP. I hope you are willing and able to give yourself all the time it takes to do it as honestly and thoroughly as possible. Be open to and excited by new ideas and developments but be aware of the “storm of progress”. Maybe think of Freud as that angel who wants to go back to fix things that have been broken, to repair them by integrating them, but that storm keeps blowing him backwards into the future.