The View From The Couch

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The view from theouch

by Jeanne Mearzek


When Bonnie Friedman’s memoir about seven years of therapy, she follows Freud and the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis: communicate everything that comes to mind. Do not exclude any idea because it is too disagreeable, indiscreet, irrelevant, or nonsensical. The Thief of Happiness includes interchanges with her pseudonymous psychoanalyst Dr. Harriet Sing, a pastiche of childhood remembrances, assorted musings about love and life, and feverish fantasies. Friedman reports sundry details of meals, shopping trips, phone conversations and household chores. She puts readers in the position of the psychoanalyst who must locate what Freud called “precious metal” buried in the “many tons of ore” that free association produces. Those who prefer stories with discernible plots will throw up their hands. But there is method to Friedman’s madness: although she risks sounding self-indulgent, there is no more truthful way to tell a psychoanalysis. As it is a question of psychodynamic transference, the emotionally charged relationship between therapist and patient—was the pivot of the therapy. Dr. Sing was remote, austere and sparing in her words. Apart from her wardrobe—blue skirts, starched white blouses and riding boots—Friedman knew little about her. This left ample room for her unconscious to run free, which is precisely the effect Sing intended. Friedman was instantly propelled into a fascinating situation: “Little matter moved now besides Harriet Sing. Everyone else was merely metaphoric.” Sing encouraged this absorption: “If I say I feel repulsed, you respond, ‘You feel lonely for me,’ and I know she’s right. A journalist...writes with metaphoric love.”-Jeanne Mearzek

Readers may well ask what actually happened in Friedman’s therapy. Did she change because of her therapy or in spite of it? Her writer’s block—the problem for which she entered therapy—disappeared in two weeks. Why did she stay in therapy for seven additional years? Was analysis a trap that sidetracked her from productive and healthy living? Or did it ultimately enable her to write, live zestfully and rekindle a humdrum marriage? These questions have no easy answers. This is why scientifically-minded practitioners and cost-conscious managed-care companies are wary of psychoanalysis. Some will read The Thief of Happiness as a story of self-discovery, spiritual growth and healing. Others will read it as a grim tale of humbuggery. At one point, Friedman herself poses these questions, but adroitly sidesteps their answers, leaving them for the reader to ponder. Psychoanalysis, after all, implies that reality is never what it appears to be.

I must underscore that Friedman’s encounter with psychoanalysis is by no means atypical. Even among psychoanalysts, the orthodox form that Dr. Sing espoused has been on the wane for several decades. To keep up an individual practice, especially one who had no significant clinical psychopathology, in treatment for seven years is a dubious practice. And the alphabet of therapy has in the last fifteen years been largely given way to a more active, conversational, egalitarian one. In Friedman’s telling, Sing’s pronounce-ments are often stagey and her interpretations cryptic. Indeed, her remarks sometimes sound like a parody of therapeutic arrogance. One example: Friedman’s patient who was not getting pregnant until treatment was ended.

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tive answers, and offers bold analyses, that the book has largely given way to a more active, conversational, egalitarian one. In Friedman’s telling, Sing’s pronounce-ments are often stagey and her interpretations cryptic. Indeed, her remarks sometimes sound like a parody of therapeutic arrogance. One example: Friedman’s patient who was not getting pregnant until treatment was ended.

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over, she might be too old to conceive. "Have you and Paul considered adoption?" Sing responded.

It's difficult to see what Friedman offers to a feminist audience. The Audience of Happiness in a book about relationships among women—Friedman and her mother, sister, girlfriends and therapist. Friedman's difficulties with ambition, self-esteem, social isolation and invisibility all have gendered dimensions. But she does not draw on gender as a framework for understanding her experiences. Nor, evidently, was feminism a part of the social worlds she moved in.

Dr. Sing, it seems, slept through Friedman's poetic sensibility. Her language is sometimes loaded with clichés—"Oedipus complex" and "glamour"—and then she shrugs off the question of changing to another therapist, Sing's response was swift and succinct: "Switching therapists is like switching men." When she broached the topic of termination, she might be too old to conceive. "When will you ever let me leave?", Sing said, "Your very restlessness is a sign that you have more work to do."

Ivers of language may erode Friedman's poetic sensibility. Her language is sometimes loaded with clichés—"Oedipus complex" and "glamour"—and then she shrugs off the question of changing to another therapist, Sing's response was swift and succinct: "Switching therapists is like switching men." When she broached the topic of termination, she might be too old to conceive. "When will you ever let me leave?", Sing said, "Your very restlessness is a sign that you have more work to do."

Like many other North Americans and other "internationalists" from Latin America, Japan and Western Europe, I spent a lot of time during the Reagan years, either in Nicaragua or organizing solidarity against the Contra war. Following the July 1979 Sandinista Revolution that dislodged the Somoza dictatorship and its cruel National Guard from power, activists from the sixties movements along with a new generation of anti-imperialists, including many American lesbian and gay activists, flooded Nicaragua in response to the Sandinistas' call for international brigades to assist with a literacy program and help rebuild the war-torn and impoverished nation of 2.5 million people. I didn't get to experience this first euphoric moment. With a year at United States government, led by Jimmy Carter, began its project to banish the Sandinistas and to restore Somoctismo without ceremony. I spent most of my Paraguayan exile in June 1980. By the time I visited the new Nicaragua in May 1981, three months into the Reagan administration, huge numbers of former Sandinista leas and Zimbabwe won their freedom through guerrilla warfare during the second half of the 1970s. The Iranian, Afghan and Granadine revolutions took place at the same time that the FSLN came to power in Nicaragua. But the FSLN was the first successful revolutionary force to recruit and incorporate self-proclaimed feminists into its ranks. Women like Gioconda Belli, Nora Astorga, Sofia Montenegro, Daisy Zamora and dozens of others attribute their powerful potential. Perhaps more than anything else, the FSLN was the companion of Henry Ruiz Berni, the press secretary, writes that it's "not real- ly an insider's account... No woman will ever be able to write such an account, because no woman was ever admitted to the Sandinista elite." I agree with that view. Before the FSLN came to power and for three years after, Bell was the companion of Henry Ruiz Berni, written as, in his book, The Magic Daughter, a depiction of multiple personality disorder. But Friedman takes a different path, and for this she is praised. After all, is not one of the main reasons for the success of the Sandinistas' project to banish the Sandinistas, and without ceremony, the dictionary and self-destructive affair that one forgets or finds it hard to recognize? The only insurgent to a tiny country that simply tried to do things its own way, even if this meant making its own mistakes," Bell writes. The saddest section of the book is Chapter 55, in which Bell recalls her grief at the Sandinistas' electoral defeat. She had been disgusted with the FSLN's electoral campaign.

I watched the advertising on television in disbelief, wondering how such a beautiful people could hide under such an incredibly tacky, obnoxious campaign, complete with rock and roll music. While people seemed to mourn so many boys who had died in the war, while they endured hunger and terrible hardships, the FSLN's program appeared rather like a strong and positive campaign... (p. 358)

Belli, like most Sandinistas, believed the FSLN would win, and that with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Reagan out of office, perhaps the Cold War rationale for outing the Sandinistas was lost. When I visited the new Nicaragua in May 1980, I felt they were dying again, dying of a cancer that had plagued their lives. So many lives had been lost. And now there were more. With the counterrevolutionary death toll was up to fifty thousand. And it had to end like this... (p. 358)

The Country Under My Skin is the ultimate insider's view of a rev- olutionary process. In his rave review of the New York Times correspondent Stephen Kinzer, who covered the FSLN, said, "Belli convincingly argues that there would not have been a triumphant revolutionary struggle in Nicaragua... that without the fundamental consciousness (anti-imperialist and pro-working class) to Sandinistas, they would have been defeated. Men and women..." (p. 494)

Of course, in Nicaragua, the women were on the front line, and specifically without a feminist consciousness. Perhaps more than anything else, the FSLN was the companion of Henry Ruiz Berni, the press secretary, writes that it's "not really an insider's account... No woman will ever be able to write such an account, because no woman was ever admitted to the Sandinista elite." I agree with that view. Before the FSLN came to power and for three years after, Bell was the companion of Henry Ruiz Berni, written as, in his book, The Magic Daughter, a depiction of multiple personality disorder. But Friedman takes a different path, and for this she is praised. After all, is not one of the main reasons for the success of the Sandinistas' project to banish the Sandinistas, and without ceremony, the dictionary and self-destructive affair that one forgets or finds it hard to recognize? The only insurgent to a tiny country that simply tried to do things its own way, even if this meant making its own mistakes," Bell writes. The saddest section of the book is Chapter 55, in which Bell recalls her grief at the Sandinistas' electoral defeat. She had been disgusted with the FSLN's electoral campaign.

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