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The View From The Couch

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The view from the couch by Joanna Mayack


In Bonnie Friedman's memoir about seven years of therapy, she follows Freud's rule of psychoanalysis: communicate everything that comes to mind. Do not exclude any idea because it is too disagreeable, indiscernible, irrelevant, or nonsensical. The Thief of Happiness includes interchanges with her pseudonymous psychoanalyst Dr. Harriet Sing, a pastiche of childhood reminiscences, 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 in the majority of psychoanalytic transactions, transference—the emotionally charged relationship between therapist and patient—was the pivot of the therapy. Dr. Sing was remote, austere and sparring 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 another world of unfettered and voluble exchanges: "Little mattered now besides Harriet Sing. Everyone else was merely metaphoric." Sing encouraged this absorption: "If I say I feel I don't respond, 'You felt lonely for me,' and I know she's right. A journalist...writes a flirtatious reply. 'Don't send it to him,' she advises. 'It's meant for me.'"

As the years wore on, Friedman's feelings for Dr. Sing grew more complicated and volatile, careering from slavish admiration to resentment to disillusion. Nonetheless, she remained besotted. Even when Friedman came to see Sing as a "thief of happiness," the psychoanalyst's hold remained tenacious and the attachment difficult to sever.

In the century since Freud proposed transference as a vital part of psychoanalysis, a number of psychoanalysts have reconceived it in a number of ways. Transference is now broadly construed to encompass the full range of emotions that come into contact with self-other relationships inside and outside therapy. Many analysts now understand it not only as the residue of early childhood but also as continually reshaped throughout daily living. Many theorists no longer focus narrowly on the patient's emotional baggage: instead they view the therapist-patient relationship as an essentially process in which both psyches mutually influence each other.

Friedman's notions of transference, in contrast, hew closely to Freud's early formulations. She portrays her years in treatment as a time when mysterious forces gripped her psyche like terror; too overwhelming, they seemed to touch down without warning. They took toll on her marriage, friendships, psychic equilibria and even physical health, while she felt powerless to curb them. Then, unaccountably, the forces dissipated. Friedman seems to find the gains she made in psychoanalysis equally mysterious and unverified. She says, for example, "[T]o my surprise, I turned into a person who could think judiciously." In her profession, psychoanalysis is akin to witchcraft, and she sums up the experience as a "supremely useful...spiritual apprenticeship." But attributing so much power to psychoanalysis keeps her from crediting her own agency.

Readers may well ask what actually happens 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—dissipated 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.

We 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 perhaps reads Dr. Sing as a humbug—the "Great Gatsby of Psychoanalysis," the "Wizard of Oz." Was Dr. Sing brilliant or inept? Was she deluded by her own theories? Was she just fleecing her patient? Friedman 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 encounters with psychoanalysis were not at all typical. Even among psychoanalysts, the orthodox form that Dr. Sing espoused has been on the wane for several decades. To keep an individual, especially one who had no significant clinical psychopathology, in treatment for seven years is a dubious practice. And the therapist's stage persona has largely given way to a more active, conversational, egalitarian one. In Friedman's telling, Sing's pronounce- ments cryptic. Indeed, her remarks sometimes sound like a parody of therapeu- tic arrogance. One example: Friedman wrote that she was pregnant until treatment was

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The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War

Bell, like most Sandinistas, believed the FSNL would win, and that with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Reagan out of office, perhaps the Cold War rationale for ousting the Sandinistas would finally die. Bell knew that the ultimate insider’s view of a revolutionary process was not always a happy and joyous story. But by 1979, before the revolution, she knew her life would never be the same again.

Belli takes seriously the feminist slogan, “The personal is political,” and moves through her coming to consciousness, revolutionary ventures and feminist failures. Belli is a woman who critically rarely found in revolutionary memoirs—Emma Goldman and Elaine Brown being notable exceptions, although neither claimed to be a great writer. She exhibits no bitterness, no vindictiveness or self-righteousness. Nor does she apologize for the revolution or regret her historical role in it.

I n some ways, Belli’s story is a collective memoir, reflecting the experience of thousands of professional and upper-class young women and men who abandoned their privileged lives to join what was, at its base, a mass peasant movement. It resonates with the experiences of the critical mass of women who became Sandinistas—nearly half the combatants and clandestine activists by the time the war was over. The Sandinista Revolution was not the only national insurgency to coin the Women’s Liberation Movement. In Nicaragua, the insurgents—women who became Sandinistas—half the combatants and clandestine activists by the time the war was over. Belli demonstrates this effectively in Nicaragua was well under way. On my trip to Nicaragua in December 1981, I asked Belli if she was going to write a book about the Sandinista Revolution. She replied that her book was a memoir, reflecting the experiences of all her dead friends, including rock and roll music. While she mourned so many young people who had died in the war, she was more with. The counterrevolution’s death toll was up to fifty thousand. And it had to end like this” (p. 358)

The saddest section of the book is Chapter 55, in which Belli recalls her defeat at the Sandinistas’ electoral defeat. She had been disgusted with the FSNL’s electoral campaign.

Belli watched the advertising on television in disbelief, wondering how they could have put together such an incredibly tactless, obnoxious campaign, complete with rock and roll music. While people mourned so many young kids who had died in the war, they endured hunger and terrible hardships, the FSNL’s programs were not even a feeble attempt to address these fundamental needs.

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