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The View From The Couch

Jeanne Marecek
Swarthmore College, jmarece1@swarthmore.edu

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In Bonnie Friedman's memoir about seven years of therapy, she follows the psychoanalytic and the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis: communicate everything that comes to mind. Do not exclude any idea because it is too disagreeable, indescribable, or non-sensical. 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 at other clinics of psychodynamic therapy, 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 an intense infatuation: "Little matters now changed besides Harriet Sing. Everyone else was merely metaphoric." Sing encouraged this absorption: "If I say I feel a certain way, you respond, 'You felt lonely for me,' and I say, 'All right. She knows me.'" Sing, she advises, "It's meant for me."

As the years wore on, Friedman's feelings for Dr. Sing grew more complicated and volatile, careening from lavish admiration to resentment to disillusion. Nonetheless, she remained besotted. Even when Friedman came to see Sing as "the thief of happiness," the psychoanalyst's hold remained tenacious and the attachment difficult to sever. In the century since Freud proposed transference love, psychoanalysts have not recoined it in a number of ways. Transference is now broadly construed to encompass the full range of emotions that come into play in 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 through daily living. Many theorists no longer focus narrowly on the patient's emotional baggage: instead they view the therapist-patient relationship as a process in which both parties 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 tornadoes, they seemed to touch down without warning. They took their toll on her marriage, friendships, psychic equilibrium, 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, "To my surprise, I turned into a person who could think judiciously." In her 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 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—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.

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 professes that Dr. Sing was a humbug—the "Great Gatsby of Psychoanalysis," the "Wizard of Oz." Was Dr. Sing brilliant or inexpert? Was she defrauding her patients? 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 are 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 above story is not typical. Friedman herself has largely given way to a more active, conversational, egalitarian one. In Friedman's telling, Sing's pronounce- "a feminist treatise sprung from the marriage, friendships, psychic equi- lizers, the orthodox form that Dr. Sing presided over. Friedman herself pronounces Dr. Sing a "Wizard of Oz." Friedman herself pronounces Dr. Sing a "Wizard of Oz." Friedman herself pronounces Dr. Sing a "Wizard of Oz."
Inside the revolution
by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War
by Gioconda Belli, translated by Kristina Cordero


L
ike 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 sixteen movements along with a new generation of anti-imperialists, intellectuals and American lesbian and gay activists, flooded Nicaragua in response to the Sandinista's 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 the first euphoric moment. With a year at the United States government, led by Jimmy Carter, began its project to banish the Sandinistayers. When I visited the new Nicaragua in May 1980. By the time I visited the new Nicaragua in May 1981, three months into the Reagan administration, huge numbers of Americans—men, women and children of all ages—had flown into the 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 modest, essentially unpretentious country could happen together an incredibly tactless, obnoxious campaign, complete with rock and roll music. While people mourned so many young people, the US ambassador to the United Nations, (including foreign supporters like 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 Americans—men, women and children of all ages—had flown into the country that simply tried to do things its own way, even if this meant making its own mistakes," Bell writes.

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