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The View From The Couch

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The view from the couch
by Jeanne Marie

In Bonnie Friedman's memoir about seven years of therapy, she follows the first step of what she calls the fundamental 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 pseudonym psychoanalyst Dr. Harriet Sing, a pastiche of childhood remembrances, asorted musings about love and life, and fervid 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 no method to Friedman's madness: although she risks sounding self-indulgent, there is no more truthful way to tell a psychoanalysis.

At the narratives of psychodynamic therapy, transference—the emotionally charged relationship between therapist and patient—was the pivot of the therapy. Dr. Sing was remote, austate 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 relationship: "Little mattered now besides Harriet Sing. Everyone else was merely metaphoric." Sing encouraged this absorption: "If I say I felt drawn to you, you respond, 'You felt lonely for me,' and I know she's right. A journalist...writes a metaphor." Sing encouraged this absorption: "If I say I felt drawn to you, you respond, 'You felt lonely for me,' and I know she's right. A journalist...writes a metaphor."

As the years wore on, Friedman's feelings for Dr. Sing grew more complicated and volcante, careening from slavish admiration to resentment to disillusion. Nonetheless, she remained besotted. Even when Friedman came to see Sing and thought "chief of happiness," the psychoanalyst's hold remained tenaciously and the attachment difficult to sever. In the century since Freud proposed transference love, psychoanalysis has rechristened 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 an intricate 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 psychic life. Like tor-nados, they seemed to touch down without warning. They took their 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 mysteri-ous and unwell. She says, for example, "I'm not surprised, I turned into a person who could think lucidly." In her view, psychoanalysis is akin to witch-craft, and she sums up the experience as "a supremely useful...spiritual appren-ticeship." But attributing so much power to psychoanalysis keeps her from credit-ing her own agency.

Readers may well ask what actually happened in Friedman's therapy. Did she change because of her therapy or is it 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 com-panies) 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—a humbug—"the Great Gatsby of Psychoanalysis," the "Wizard of Oz." Was Dr. Sing brilliant or inept? Was she deluded by her patient? Friedman poses these questions, but adroitly sidesteps their answers, leaving them for the read-er to ponder. Psychoanalysis, after all, implies that reality is never what it appears to be.

I must underscore that Friedman's enthusiasm with psychoanalysis was not at all typical. Even among psychoana-lysts, the orthodox form that Dr. Sing espoused has been on the wane for sev-eral decades. To keep an individual who has largely given way to a more active, conversational, egalitarian one. In Friedman's telling, Sing's pronounce-ments often strike her as "dogmatic and interpretation's cryptic. Indeed, her remarks sometimes sound like a parody of therapeu-tic arrogance. One example: Friedman writes that she got pregnant during treatment until was...
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L
ike many other North Americans and other "internationalistas" 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 huge number of American lesbian and gay activists, flood- ed 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 the first euphoric moment. With the autumn of 1979, the United States government, led by Jimmy Carter, began its project to banish the Sandinistas and to restore Somocismo in Nicaragua. I started to feel like a dessert cart had toppled over on me. Some are strained: "Switching therapists is like switching doctors," said the New York Times. Others are didactic, such as Ann France’s I began to feel like a dessert cart had toppled over on me. Some are strained: "Switching therapists is like switching doctors," said the New York Times. Others are didactic, such as Ann France’s "What good therapy is like." According to Friedman’s difficulties with ambi- tion, she might be too old to conceive. Better, she responded. "Have you and Paul considered adop- tion?"

Belli is so open, truthful and generous in spirit in her memoir that reads like the best fiction. I deny that the US-sponsored Contra war was a brutal, obnoxious campaign, complete with rock and roll music. While many somo-mourned young kids who had died in war, while they endured hunger and terrible hardships, the FSLN’s propaganda of the self-sacrificing and otherworldly fighting spirit under their powerful leadership... and other "internationalistas" 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 huge number of 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.

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