

## In Memoriam: Rita V. Frankiel, 1933-2007

On July 16, 2007, Dr. Rita Frankiel died in New York City at the age of 74 after a determined and long battle with breast cancer. That stark sentence encapsulates so much for me, and does not at all do justice to the fierceness and expansive pleasures Rita took in living, the care and persistence in managing complex medical treatments and the commitment to life right to the last day. I think Winnicott is responsible for a memorable sentence; let me be alive right up to my death. Rita indeed was.

Two months later at her memorial, friends from overlapping and also different worlds gathered to remember her. It was striking to see how everyone was speaking really about the same person: strong, generous, intense, and filled with a passion for living deeply and expansively. And on matters of character, the picture of Rita that slowly took shape over the memorial was of a strong, incisive intelligence, a deep ethically bound concern for psychoanalysis and good care for patients and a clear honest judgment that could sting as well as illuminate.

While there are marvelous and loving memories of Rita on a personal level, I want to talk here more explicitly about her trajectory as an intellectual, a psychoanalyst and a teacher and writer. She had graduate training in Child Development at the University of Minnesota, a graduate degree from Columbia and analytic training at the William Alanson White Institute. Her early practice was with children adolescents and adults.

Sometime in mid-life she came into contact and into the world of the contemporary Kleinians in London. She became immersed and highly expert in Kleinian thought and practice and the experiences—intellectual, clinical and personal—she had with revered colleagues like Betty Joseph, Elizabeth Spillius, John Steiner and Michael Feldman and Edna O’Shaughnessy altered and shaped the next decades of work and writing. At her memorial these English colleagues sent a message of condolence and respect. They spoke of the courage in Rita’s work promoting and exposing Kleinian thought and technique to American students and colleagues. It may seem now like an odd term. But Rita was an early proponent of the modern turn in Klein’s thought in a time of many prejudices and rigidities.

Rigidities and narrow-mindedness was a decided *bête noire*. One of her last important professional tasks was to work on an extensive review of curriculum for the Freudian Society in NYC and Washington. At a conference on shame several years ago, she rose to comment on a paper on shame in analytic training to speak with great feeling of the need for senior analysts to address questions of training – both in regard to content and to the transmission of shame and self doubt in candidates. Her work as a teacher was work of which she was justly proud.

Our paths crossed about 15 years ago at a groundbreaking conference on Disorienting Sexualities in which for one of the first times, an institute fostered and produced a conference for out gay and lesbian analysts and for a consideration of homosexuality within the context of training and theory. Along with Roy Shafer, Rita’s husband, who gave the keynote, she was one of only a few senior faculty who came to support this meeting. Ironically, one might say, that event, with 500 people in attendance, was either an initiator or a harbinger of the sea changes in NYC institutes in regard to homosexuality and gay analysts.

I remember Rita speaking up at that meeting to denounce the many hurts and prejudicial actions by psychoanalytic institutions in the treatment of gay patients and analysts. This now so obvious idea was not widely accepted at that time.

One of Rita's special concerns was with object loss, a concern that shaped lots of her clinical listening with children and adults. She did an edited book, *Classic Paper on Object Loss* and she published two intriguing and creative and insightful papers on Little Hans. Interestingly, in those papers, Rita speculated on the role of the mother in that treatment, an approach to the case which is strongly confirmed by the evidence from newly de-restricted documents regarding the individuals in that case. She worked on the problem of envy, particularly between mother and daughter, work very shaped by her immersion Kleinian thought. For many of her close friends and me, her death came really in the middle of her evolution as a writer. It's not atypical for women to begin to write later in life and Rita, at the time of her death, had writing projects she was eager to do.

Her NYU course on object loss was much beloved and much sought out. Over a number of years, I heard from supervisors and students of how transformed both they and their practices had been by the experience of that course. Rita held the students in a careful and respectful process that nonetheless made the deep currents of grief visible and speakable at a personal level.

At the conclusion of the memorial for Rita, an amazing and very meaningful moment occurred. The invited speakers spoke, music had been played and with the invitation of open microphones, several patients of Rita's spoke. As one woman said, simply but eloquently. "She saved my life." What an epitaph.

#### Rita J Frankiel Bibliography

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