

A Tribute To Jacob A. Arlow, M.D.
May 21, 2008

Four years ago today the psychoanalytic community lost one of its most gifted and original authors, scholars, researchers, teachers, and lecturers. Jacob Arlow has left a permanent imprint upon our field. His almost uncanny ability to listen to the patient have advanced and elevated the understanding of theory and technique. His contributions do not stop here- they have also been applied to important interests outside the classic psychoanalytic situation as it is more commonly understood. He provide on both a microscopic as well as macroscopic level the views of the analytic enterprise. What he gave us did not stop here. He broadened our understanding of fantasy activity, conscious and unconscious, religion, film, myths, literature, and folklore. His prolific writings (with the number of unpublished papers greatly exceeding his five books, more than 150 papers and close to fifty book reviews).

Jack was a publicly more formal person but those who had the good fortune to know him privately found him to be a sensitive and witty comrade. I came to learn that his secular Jewish identity had a lasting and profound effect upon him. Born in East New York section of Brooklyn in 1912, he was one of three children of immigrant Eastern European parents. His marriage to his beloved Alice in 1936 that lasted sixty years and brought four sons into their home.

Since psychoanalysis was truly launched as a discipline in the last of the twentieth century, the self-proclaimed science of the mind, the interpretive art of making the visible a dependable guide to the invisible, has not only been troubled with internal squabbles and a proliferation of theories, methods, arguments and techniques, but an ever increasing band of critics from within and from without have been steadily chipping away at its edifice. So much so that in many circles the sentiment reigns that that psychoanalysis is dead in the water. Jacob Arlow devoted and enduring series of papers concerning the sharp conflicts that surround psychoanalysis. Most of these conflicts derive from differences of opinion concerning the process of pathogenesis and of normal development or alternately stated- "how the analyst understands why people fall ill as this invariably influences the nature of the specific techniques that are employed to help get the patient well"(Arlow, 1999). What is inexorable and unequivocal for Arlow is that intrapsychic conflict is the basic dimension of mental functioning in general and of psychopathology in particular (Arlow, 1985).

Arlow firmly believed that psychoanalytic methodology resembles the principles we employ in deriving meaning in ordinary conversation, but that it is a special kind of conversation with particular attention being paid to the context in which the patient's productions appear, the contiguity of the elements, lapses in continuity, and such special features as bizarre juxtapositions of elements, striking metaphors or the unusual choice of words (so many times he expressed to me how he was struck by analysts not responding to unusual chords, phrases, and thoughts, that they would very likely inquire further about if we were speaking with a friend for example.

For Arlow, psychoanalysis is a meticulous and painstaking investigation into human mental processes- imperfect, but acceptably scientific when governed by strict methodological procedures. A session conducted by Jacob Arlow was an opportunity for the analysand to appreciate mental life in a new way. The new way is psychoanalytic change.

I will close with a reverie he related to me when he was a candidate at The New York Psychoanalytic Institute in the 1940's. "Times were really better then. Almost every colleague did have a relatively complete practice of psychoanalytic cases, and I recognize things arte very different now. At least it is good to be able to look back to a happy past and try to anticipate a more hopeful future?"

Sheldon M. Goodman